

On the Great Practice

(Daishugyō)

Translator's introduction: 'The Great Practice' refers to the training and practice of someone who is following the Greater Course and is functioning as a morally good spiritual friend and guide for others, a fully perfected Master who is doing the Great Practice. By contrast, 'a wild fox' refers to someone who gives false teaching.

This discourse is one of the more difficult ones to follow, in part because Dogen spends a considerable amount of time in refuting the many ways in which others have interpreted the story that he is commenting on. In addition, he calls into question the accuracy of various aspects of the story.

This particular story has been the center of much controversy. The core question is whether or not someone who has realized fully perfected enlightenment and is doing the Great Practice is freed from causality or is still subject to cause and effect. Dogen will ultimately argue that both views, though seemingly contradictory, are accurate. That is, someone who has realized fully perfected enlightenment is not subject to causality because such a person is living in total accord with the Precepts, and at the same time, such a person, as a sentient being, is subject to the causal consequences of being a sentient being.

Something that is not explicitly stated but is implied by Dogen's commentary is that the old man in the story may be one of Hyakujō's past lives, the karma from which Hyakujō cleanses by helping the old man turn his thinking around.

Hyakujō Ekai was a Dharma heir of Baso. Whenever people came to hear him give a public Dharma talk, there was an old man who always came into the Dharma Hall immediately following those in the monastic assembly. He always listened to the Dharma talk and then, when the monks would leave the hall, he would leave at the same time. Then one day, he lingered behind. Thereupon, the Master asked him, "You who are standing here, who are you?"

The old man replied, "To speak truly, I am a non-human being. Long ago during the eon of Kashō Buddha,¹ I dwelt upon this mountain as Abbot. Then, one day, a trainee asked me, 'Is even the one who does the Great Practice still subject to cause and effect?' I

1. Among the Seven Buddhas, the One whose eon directly preceded that of Shakyamuni Buddha.

replied that such a one is no longer subject to cause and effect. After that, as a consequence, I was reduced to being reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lives. I now beseech you, O Venerable Monk, say something that will turn me around, for I long to rid myself of this wild fox's attitude of mind."

Thereupon, he asked the Master, "Is even someone who does the Great Practice subject to cause and effect?"

The Master replied, "Such a one is not blind to causality."

Upon hearing these words, the old man had a great awakening. Prostrating himself before the Master, he said, "Since I have already shed the outer trappings of a wild fox, I have taken to dwelling on the far side of this mountain. Dare I ask the Venerable Abbot to perform for me a monk's funeral service?"

The Master had the senior monk who supervises the Meditation Hall strike the wooden gong to signal the monks to assemble so that he might tell them that, after their meal, there would be a funeral service for a deceased monk. The whole assembly was at ease with this, though they wondered about it, since there was no sick person in the temple infirmary. After the meal, the Master simply led the assembly up to the base of a rock on the other side of the mountain, where they saw him use his traveling staff to point out the corpse of a wild fox. They cremated the remains in accordance with the appropriate procedure.

At nightfall, the Master went to the Dharma Hall where he gave the monks a talk on the preceding events. His Dharma heir Ōbaku then asked him, "In the past, the man said the wrong thing to turn his disciple around and, as a consequence, was reduced to being a wild fox for five hundred lives. Suppose he had not made this mistake, what would have become of him?"

The Master said, "Come up close and I will tell you."

Thereupon, Ōbaku went on up and gave the Master a slap. The Master clapped his hands and laughed, saying, "I've always thought that the beards of foreigners were red, and here is a red-bearded foreigner."

The spiritual question that is arising here in this story is precisely what the Great Practice is all about. Just as the old man had said, during the eon of Kashō Buddha there was an Abbot of Mount Hyakujō in Hungchou Province, and in the eon when Shakyamuni Buddha existed there was an Abbot of Mount Hyakujō in

Hungchou Province. These are key phrases in describing what has occurred. Although this is the case, the Abbot of Mount Hyakujō in the past during the eon of Kashō Buddha and the Abbot of Mount Hyakujō during the present eon of Shakyamuni Buddha are not one and the same person, nor are they different from each other, nor are they ‘three and three before that, or three and three after that’.² The one who became the Abbot of Mount Hyakujō in the past did not become the Abbot of Mount Hyakujō later on, any more than the later Abbot of Mount Hyakujō was the preceding Abbot of Mount Hyakujō during the eon of Kashō Buddha. Even so, there is the old man’s spiritual question of ‘having dwelt upon this mountain as Abbot’. What he said for the benefit of his disciple is like what Hyakujō was now saying for the benefit of the old man. And the question that the disciple asked is like the question the old man was now asking. While setting forth one explanation, we cannot set forth a second, for if we let pass what is primary, we will get all involved with what is secondary.

The trainee in the long past is asking, “Is even ‘that one’ on Mount Hyakujō who is doing the Great Practice still subject to cause and effect?”³ Truly, this question cannot be readily or easily grasped. And what is the reason for that? For the first time since the Buddha Dharma advanced eastwards during the Chinese Yung-p’ing era in the Later Han dynasty,⁴ and since our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma came from the West during the Chinese P’u-t’ung era of the Liang dynasty, we are now able to hear the question of that trainee of the past due to what that old wild fox said. It is a condition that did not exist previously. So we can assert that it was rarely heard of.

When we search for, and find, the Great Practice, this will be the Great Cause and Effect. Because this Cause and Effect is invariably the full perfection of the cause and the complete fulfillment of the effect, there is nothing to debate concerning ‘being subject to’ or ‘not being subject to’, and there is nothing to discuss concerning ‘being blind to’ or ‘not being blind to’. If ‘not being subject to cause and effect’ is a mistaken view, then ‘not being blind to cause and effect’ might also be a mistaken view. Even if we were to say that this is adding a mistake atop a mistake, still there was the old man’s being reduced to the life of a wild fox and there was his dropping off of the life of a wild fox. It may appear reasonable

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2. That is, instances of people fully realizing their Buddha Nature are beyond count, so awakened people can only see just so many around them, just so many having come before them, and just so many coming after them.
 3. ‘That one’ refers to the enlightened Abbot of Mount Hyakujō in the long past.
 4. This time period is concurrent with the introduction of Buddhist Scriptures into China.

that, even though ‘not being subject to cause and effect’ may have been a mistaken view in the past during the eon of Kashō Buddha, it may not be a mistaken view in the present during the eon of Shakyamuni Buddha. And it may also appear reasonable that, even though ‘not being blind to cause and effect’ during the present Shakyamuni Buddha’s eon may have rid the old man of the attitude of a wild fox, it would not necessarily have done so during Kashō Buddha’s eon.

In the old man’s saying that he had been reduced to being reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lives, how, pray, did such a thing come about? There is no evidence that there was a wild fox who was enticing the earlier Abbot of Hyakujō and thereby causing him to be reduced to such a state, nor could there have been a former Abbot of Hyakujō who was a wild fox all along. It would be non-Buddhist to assert that the spirit of the former Abbot of Hyakujō came out and jumped into the skin bag* of a wild fox. And a wild fox could not have come along and swallowed up the former Abbot of Hyakujō. If we were to say that the former Abbot of Hyakujō had once more become a wild fox, he would have had to rid himself of the body of a former Abbot of Hyakujō, so that he could subsequently reduce himself to the state of a dead wild fox. An Abbot of Mount Hyakujō cannot turn himself into the body of a wild fox! How could ‘cause and effect’ possibly be like that? Cause and effect is not something inherent, nor is it something that someone initiates, nor is cause and effect something idly awaiting the action of some person.

Now, let’s deal with the old man’s response, “Such a one is no longer subject to cause and effect.” Even though he was mistaken, he would not necessarily have been reduced to the state of a wild fox for that. If being reduced to the state of a wild fox was the inevitable consequence of answering a trainee’s question inaccurately, then how many thousands of myriad times would the Rinzaïs and Tokusans of more recent times, along with their disciples, have been reduced to being wild foxes as a consequence? And apart from them, senior monks who have made mistakes over the past two or three hundred years would certainly have become innumerable foxes. Yet, we have not heard of their having been reduced to being wild foxes as a consequence. If there had been many, then there would have been more than enough for us to encounter or hear about them. Even though you might well say that they have not made such a serious mistake, there are many indeed who have given even more dubious responses than “Such a one is not subject to cause and effect.” And there have been many monks whom we cannot place even on the outskirts of the Buddha Dharma. You need to spot them

* See *Glossary*.

by using the Eye of your training and practice, for if your Eye is not yet functioning, you may well not be able to discern them. So, you need to know that we cannot assert that someone who answers badly turns himself into a wild fox, whereas someone who answers well is not reduced to being a wild fox. In this story, it does not say what it is like after someone has rid himself of the attitude of a wild fox, but no doubt it will be that of a real gem of a trainee doing his best within a bag of skin.

As a rule, those who have never encountered or heard about the Buddha Dharma say, “After he had completely rid himself of the wild fox, he returned to the ocean of his Original Nature. Even though he was reduced to being a wild fox for a while due to his delusion, after he had had a great awakening, he shed being a wild fox and returned to his Original Nature.” They mean by this that he returned to some innate, unchanging self which non-Buddhists speak of. Furthermore, this is not the Buddha Dharma. If they were to say that a wild fox is devoid of Original Nature or that a wild fox has no innate enlightenment, such would not be the Buddha Dharma. Were they to say, “When a person has a great awakening, such a one has let go of the mental attitude of a wild fox and has rid himself of it,” then it would not have been the wild fox’s great enlightenment, and being a wild fox would have served no purpose. So, do not assert such things.

You need to be clear about the point that the wild fox, which the former Abbot of Hyakujō had been for five hundred lives, forthwith dropped off being a wild fox by virtue of the triggering words concerning causality spoken by the later Abbot of Hyakujō. If you were to say, “When someone who was a bystander spoke a triggering phrase concerning causality, that freed another from the mind of a wild fox,” well, the great earth with its mountains and rivers has already been giving forth innumerable triggering expressions concerning causality and is continually doing so. But even so, the old man had not yet dropped off the mind of a wild fox in the past, and he only dropped it off due to the later Abbot’s triggering words concerning causality. This was the old man’s killing off his doubt. If you were to say that the great earth with its mountains and rivers has never yet given expression to the triggering words concerning causality, then the later Hyakujō ultimately might not have been able to open his mouth.

Further, there are many old worthies who have contended that saying ‘not being subject to’ and ‘not being blind to’ are essentially the same, but they have not yet directly experienced how ‘not being subject to’ and ‘not being blind to’ are related. Consequently, they have not explored through their training the skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of falling into the body of a wild fox, nor have they explored through their training the skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of dropping off the mind of a wild fox. If you don’t get the beginning right, you’ll never get the end right. In

the old man's remark, "I was reduced to being reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lives," what is it that was reborn and what was that reduced to? At the very moment when he was reborn as a wild fox, what form did his previous universe now take on? How is the phrase 'not being subject to causality' related to his being reborn five hundred times? And where did the pelt that was now lying beneath a rock on the other side of the mountain come from? He was reborn as a wild fox for giving another the phrase 'not subject to causality' and he dropped off the mind of a wild fox upon hearing the words 'not being blind to causality'. Even though there was a 'being reduced to' and a 'dropping off of', they were still the causal consequences of his being a wild fox.

At the same time, some of old have said, "Because the old man answered, 'Not subject to causality', he seemed to be denying causality." This assertion is beside the point and is something that people who are in the dark say about causality. Even if there had once been a former Abbot of Hyakujō who said that he was not subject to being a wild fox, he could not possibly deceive someone of the Great Practice, since such a one will not deny causality. On the other hand, there are those who say, "Not being blind to cause and effect means not being blind to causality, and because the Great Practice is transcendent Cause and Effect, such a trainee has dropped off the mind of a wild fox." This is truly eighty or ninety percent of the Eye for exploring the Matter.*⁵ Be that as it may, the old man might well have said in verse:

*In the eon of Kashō Buddha
I dwelt on this mountain,
In the eon of Shakyamuni Buddha
I dwell there now.*

*My former self and my present self,
Face of Sun and face of Moon,
Intercept the wild fox's ghost
And reveal the wild fox's spirit.*



How could a wild fox have possibly known of its five hundred lives? If you say that it knew of its five hundred lives by using the wiles of a wild fox, well, the

5. This is Dogen's way of confirming the validity of someone's statement. Such statements are described as being eighty or ninety percent, which means that there are still other ways of saying exactly the same thing, since there is no single, absolute way of stating the Truth.

wiles of a wild fox did not yet fully know the whole of the wild fox's life, and its whole life had not yet been stuffed into a wild fox's hide. The wild fox certainly knew that he had been reduced to being reborn for five hundred lives, because those lives were the manifesting of his spiritual question. But it did not fully know the whole of its life: there is that which it knew and that which it did not know. Unless what it knew arose and departed simultaneously with its body, it could not have calculated what 'five hundred lives' was. Since it could not make such a calculation, the words 'five hundred lives' must be a fabrication. Were you to say that the wild fox knew it by using information other than what the wild fox knew directly, then it would not have been something that the wild fox personally knew to be so. But over the generations, who could have known this on the wild fox's behalf? Without having any clear path through what we know and what we don't know, we cannot say that the old man was reduced to being a wild fox. If he was not reduced to being a wild fox, there could not be any dropping off of the mind of a wild fox. If there were neither a 'being reduced to' nor a 'dropping off of', there could not have been a former Hyakujō, and if there were no former Hyakujō, there could not be a later Hyakujō. Do not treat this lightly, for it needs careful study. Grasping this underlying principle, you need to see through and expose the mistaken opinions which have been voiced over and over again throughout the Liang, Chen, Sui, T'ang, and Sung Dynasties.

To return to the story, the old non-human being said to the later Hyakujō, "Dare I ask the Venerable Abbot to perform for me a monk's funeral service?" He should not have spoken like this. Since Hyakujō's time, a number of virtuous spiritual friends and guides have had no doubt about these words nor have they been surprised by them. But the main point is this: how could a dead fox become a dead monk, since it has never taken the Precepts, or attended a summer retreat, or kept to the everyday behavior of a monk, or held to the principles of a monk? If such a creature may arbitrarily undergo the funeral ceremony for a dead monk, then any dead person who has never left home life behind would have to be accorded the funeral rites of a dead monk too. If there were any male or female lay Buddhists who had requested it upon their demise, they, like the dead wild fox, would have to be accorded the funeral rites of a dead monk. When we look for an example of someone being accorded these rites, there is none, nor do we hear of one. Such a rite has never been Transmitted in Buddhism. Even if we thought we should do it, it should not be done.

Now there is the statement that Hyakujō cremated the remains in accordance with the appropriate procedure. This is not clear. Perhaps it is a mistake. You need to keep in mind that all the funeral rites for a dead monk are prescribed, from our efforts upon entering his sick room to our practicing the Way upon reaching the

burial garden—nothing is done arbitrarily. Even though the former Hyakujō referred to himself as a dead fox at the base of a rock, how could this possibly be the usual way great monks behave? How could it have been the bones and marrow of an Ancestor of the Buddha? Who is there to prove that it was the former Hyakujō? Do not treat with arrogance the Dharma standards of the Buddhas and Ancestors by vainly taking as real the transformations of the spirit of some wild fox. As offspring of the Buddhas and Ancestors, you should treat with importance the Dharma standards of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Never leave matters up to what others request, as Hyakujō did. It is hard enough encountering the One Great Matter and the whole of the Dharma. Do not be hauled about by worldly desires or dragged hither and yon by human sentimentality.

As for here in our nation of Japan, it has been difficult to encounter the standards of the Buddhas and Ancestors or even to hear of them. Nowadays, hearing about them or encountering them is rare indeed, so we should prize them more deeply than the jewel that the king of old took from his topknot.⁶ Those who lack our good fortune have hearts that are irreverent and shallow in their trust. Sad to say, this is due to their never having known what is or is not important in their affairs. They lack the wise discernment of the past five hundred years or so. Be that as it may, we should be industrious with ourselves and should help others go forward. If you receive the genuine Transmission of even one prostration or one meditation period from an Ancestor of the Buddha, you will feel such joy at having encountered that which is difficult to encounter. Folks lacking this attitude of mind will not be able to obtain any merit or even a single benefit, though they may have encountered a thousand Buddhas after having left home life behind. They will simply be non-Buddhists who have vainly latched onto the Buddha Dharma. Although they may claim to be learning the Buddha Dharma, they cannot genuinely expound the Buddha Dharma in their own words.

So, if someone who has not yet become a monk—even if it were a ruler of a nation or one of his ministers, even if it were Brahma or Indra—comes and requests that you perform the funeral rites of a deceased monk for his sake, do not permit it. Tell him that he should come back after he has left home life behind, accepted the Precepts, and become a full monk. Those in the three worlds of desire, form, and beyond form who so crave rewards for their deeds that they do not seek

6. An allusion to a passage in the “Conduct That Eases the Way” chapter of the *Lotus Scripture*, in which a king bestows upon his servant the Jewel of the Dharma. One translation of this can be found in *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice*, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1994), pp. 18-20.

after the venerable status of the Triple Treasure of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, may come bringing you a thousand corpses to bury as monks, thereby seeking to defile and act contrary to the funeral rites for deceased monks, but such an action on their part would merely be a serious transgression. It would certainly not produce any merit. If they wish to form good links to the merits of the Buddha Dharma, then, in accord with the Buddha's Teaching, they will need to be quick to leave home life behind, to accept the Precepts, and thereby to become full monks.



At nightfall, the Master went to the Dharma Hall where he gave a talk on the preceding events.

The underlying principle of this account is extremely dubious. Just what is it getting at? Hyakujō seems to be saying that the old man had already brought five hundred lives to an end and had now rid himself of his former body as a fox. Are the five hundred lives that are being spoken of here to be reckoned as they would be in the world of humans, or should they be counted as a wild fox would experience them, or are they to be counted as a Buddha would refer to them? And what is more, how could the eyes of an old wild fox possibly have caught sight of what a Hyakujō is? Those who have been spotted by a wild fox must have the spirit of a wild fox; those who have been spotted by a Hyakujō are Ancestors of the Buddha. This is why Meditation Master Koboku Hōjō composed the following verse:

*Hyakujō once had a face-to-face encounter with a wild
fox
Who sought instruction from him because the Master was
one with a tough-talking mind.
So now I dare ask each of you trainees,
“Have you also spit out all of your fox drivel?”*

So, the wild fox was the Eye with which Hyakujō had his face-to-face encounter. Even if you spit out half your fox drivel, it will be your sticking out your long, broad tongue to say a word that will transform others.⁷ At the very moment when you do this, you will get free of the body of a wild fox, free of the body of a Hyakujō, free of the body of an old, non-human being, and free of the body of the whole universe.

7. A long, broad tongue is one of the thirty-two distinguishing marks of a Buddha.



Ōbaku then asked Hyakujō, “In the past, the man said the wrong thing to turn his disciple around and, as a consequence, was reduced to being a wild fox for five hundred lives. Suppose he had not made this mistake, what would have become of him?”

Now, this question is a manifestation of what Buddhas and Ancestors ask. Among the venerable senior monks in the lineage of Nangaku, there is none like Ōbaku, either before or after him. At the same time, the old man never said that his response to his disciple was inaccurate, nor did Hyakujō ever say that the old man’s response was inaccurate. So, why did Ōbaku arbitrarily say that the old man gave the wrong response which produced this transformation? If Ōbaku is asserting that Hyakujō is saying that it all depends on what the mistake is, then Ōbaku has not yet been able to grasp Hyakujō’s greater intent. It would be as if Ōbaku had not thoroughly explored not only responses that are wrong but also responses that go beyond being right or wrong, which are what the Buddhas and Ancestors articulate. You need to learn through your explorations with your Master that in this particular story neither the former Hyakujō nor the later Hyakujō said that it was an inaccurate response.

Rather, by using five hundred wild fox pelts, each three inches thick, he kept dwelling on this mountain, speaking for the sake of his disciples. In that the stubble of a wild fox’s coat had fallen away, the later Hyakujō had the stinking skin bag of a human being, which, when we take the measure of it, is half a wild fox’s skin striving to get free. There is the former Hyakujō’s being reduced to a certain mental state and there is the later Hyakujō’s getting free of it. And also, there is the cause and effect that comes about through a Master’s words turning things around for others, and doing so without making a mistake. Beyond question, these are the Great Practice.

Were Ōbaku to come here now and ask, “Suppose he had not made a mistake and was able to turn things around for his disciple, what would have become of him?” I would reply, “He would still have been reduced to being reborn as a wild fox.” If Ōbaku were then to ask, “Why so?” I would reply, “O you embodiment of a wild fox’s ghost!” And even then, it would not be a matter of Ōbaku having made a mistake or not having made a mistake. Do not concede that Ōbaku’s question is the correct one to ask. And also, when Ōbaku asked, “What would have become of him?” I could answer, “Are you able to grope about for your hide and face yet?” And also, I could say, “Have you been reduced to being reborn as a wild fox yet?” And also, I could say, “Would you have replied to that disciple that you are not subject to cause and effect?”

However, Hyakujō's saying, "Come up close and I will tell you," already embraces the issue of what would have become of him. Ōbaku came up, dead to the past and oblivious to the future.⁸ His giving Hyakujō a slap is his doing a bit of foxy transformation.

The Master clapped his hands and laughed, saying, "I've always thought that the beards of foreigners were red, and behold, here is a red-bearded foreigner."⁹

This way of putting It does not capture the spirit one hundred percent, but is, in effect, a mere eighty or ninety percent of it. Even if we were to concede that it was eighty or ninety percent of it, it would still not be eighty or ninety percent accurate. And even if we were to concede that it was a hundred percent accurate, still it is something that is not eighty or ninety percent accurate.¹⁰ Though this is the way things are, I would express it as follows:

*What Hyakujō said permeates the whole universe.
And even so, he had not yet left the wild fox's den.
Ōbaku's feet were on solid ground,
And even so, he still seems attached to the mantis's
way.¹¹
With a slap on the face and a clap of the hands there
is the one of them, not the two of them:
The beards of foreigners are red, and a red-bearded
one is a foreigner.*

Delivered to the assembly at the old temple of Kippō-ji in Echizen Province on the ninth day of the third lunar month in the second year of the Kangen era (April 17, 1244).

Copied by me in the quarters of the Abbot's assistant in the same temple on the thirteenth day of the third lunar month of the same year (April 21, 1244).

Ejō

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8. That is, Ōbaku had dropped off everything and was living fully in each moment.
 9. That is, 'the beards of foreigners are red' and 'there are red-bearded foreigners' are two ways of saying the same thing.
 10. That is, even if a way of putting the Matter is right on target one hundred percent, it is not the only way of putting the Matter, and hence is less than one hundred percent, or even eighty or ninety percent.
 11. That is, Ōbaku has his feet on the ground, but he still tended to be cautious—like the movements of a praying mantis preparing to strike—as if fearful of making a mistake.