

On Life and Death

(*Shōji*)

Translator’s Introduction: In this text, Dōgen plays with various nuances of the word *shōji*. As ‘living and dying’, it refers to ever-flowing, ever-changing conditions that have no permanency, whereas ‘life and death’ refers to the delusion of static, unchanging conditions that are created by a judgmental mind. ‘Birth and death’ refers to specific moments within the flow of ‘living and dying’.

“Because there is Buddha within living and dying, life and death do not exist.” And in response, the following was said, “Because the Buddha did not exist within life and death, He was not infatuated with living and dying.” These words are the very heart of what was said by the two Meditation Masters Kassan and Jōzan. Since they are the words of persons who had realized the Way, we can certainly profit by them, and not in vain.

Anyone who wishes to be freed from life and death should clarify this principle. Should you seek for Buddha outside of living and dying, you are like the one who pointed his cart north and drove off to the country of Etsu in the south, or like someone who faces south, hoping to see the North Star. It would be your piling up more and more causes of life and death while missing the path to liberation. Simply put, living and dying is what nirvana is, for there is nothing to despise in living and dying, nor anything to be wished for in nirvana.

At this very time, there is a distinction that frees us, right off, from life and death. It is a mistake to think that we go from being alive to being dead. Being alive is a position at one moment in time: it already has its past and it will have its future. Therefore, within the Buddha Dharma, we say that life is beyond just the act of being born. Death is also a position at one moment in time, and it too has its past and its future. Accordingly, we say that death is beyond the act of just dying.

In the time we call ‘living’, there is nothing except life, and in the time we call ‘dying’, there is nothing except death. Thus, when life comes, it is simply life, and when death comes, it is simply death. When facing up to them, do not say that you want to cling to the one or push away the other. This living and dying is precisely what the treasured life of a Buddha is. If we hate life and want to throw it away, that is just our attempt to throw away the treasured life of Buddha. And if we go no farther than this and clutch onto life and death, this too is our throwing away

the treasured life of Buddha by limiting ourselves to the superficial appearance of Buddha. When there is nothing we hate and nothing we cling to, then, for the first time, we enter the Heart of Buddha.

However, do not use your mind to measure this and do not use your voice just to mouth it. When we simply let go of and forget all about ‘my body’ and ‘my mind’, relinquishing them to the Life of Buddha and letting them be put into operation from the vantage point of Buddha, then, when we rely on this—following where It leads—without forcing the body or laboring the mind, we free ourselves from life and death, and become Buddha.

And who would want to become stuck in their own mind? There is an extremely easy way to become Buddha. Simply, do not adhere to any evil whatsoever; do not become attached to life or death; have compassion for all sentient beings; respect those who are spiritually above you and have pity on those who are spiritually less advanced than you; rid yourself of the mental attitude that deplores the ten thousand things as they sprout up and the mental attitude that craves them; let your mind be free of judgmentalism and free of worry, for to do so is what we call being a Buddha. And do not seek after anything else.