

On the Great Realization

(Daigo)

Translator’s Introduction: The great realization of which Dōgen speaks in this discourse does not refer to an intellectual understanding of what the Buddhas and Ancestors have taught but to the direct experience of one’s True Nature, hence his describing it as being ‘great’. In a few contexts, the more familiar words ‘enlightenment’ and ‘awakening’ have been used to render the term *go* in the title, which in Japanese fashion is read as *satori*, the colloquial equivalent for the more technical term *kenshō*, ‘the encountering of one’s True Nature’, both words referring to a knowing that arises only from direct experience.

The Great Way that Buddha after Buddha has Transmitted has continued on without interruption, and the merits of training that Ancestor after Ancestor has revealed have spread far and wide. As a result, having fully manifested the great realization and having attained the Way without necessarily realizing that They have done so, They reflect on what They have realized and take delight in it. Then, emerging from Their realization, They let go of it and act freely, for this is what the everyday life of Buddhas and Ancestors is. They have the twenty-four hours of the day, which They use for whatever needs to be taken up; They have the twenty-four hours of the day, which They use for whatever needs to be laid aside. And They take delight in mudballs, as well as in Their heartfelt and spirited commitment, which this skeleton key has opened.¹ From the time of Their great realization on, Buddhas and Ancestors invariably go to the ultimate in Their spiritual training and exploration, which fully manifests in this manner. At the same time, the full attainment of the great realization is not to be construed as what a Buddha or an Ancestor is, nor is one’s fully being a Buddha or an Ancestor to be construed as attaining the great realization in full. The Buddhas and Ancestors spring forth from

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1. A mudball is often used in Zen Buddhist texts as a metaphor for one’s Buddha Nature, whereas ‘taking delight in Their heartfelt and spirited commitment’ refers to single-minded practice.

Kanreisu, translated here as ‘skeleton key’, refers to a special key that is used to open a gateway (here, the gateway to spiritual liberation and freedom) or to a device for resolving the fundamental spiritual question (namely, the matter of life and death). In the present context, it alludes to someone using the key as a device for accessing spiritual delight.

the bounds of the great realization, and the great realization is one's Original Face that springs forth from a place above and beyond 'Buddha' and 'Ancestor'.

At the same time, the inborn abilities of human beings are of many kinds. For instance, there are those who innately know what life really is. Once born, they free themselves from the sufferings and delusions of living. That is, through their own bodily existence they thoroughly master what life really is, beginning, middle, and end. And there are those who realize the Truth through learning. They undertake study and ultimately master themselves. In other words, they thoroughly exhaust the skin and flesh, bones and marrow of learning. And there are those who know what Buddha is. They go beyond those who realize the Truth through living and those who realize the Truth through learning. They transcend the bounds of self and other, are unbounded in the here and now, and are beyond having opinions when it comes to knowing self and other. That is to say, they have a knowledge that has no teacher. They are not dependent on a good spiritual friend, nor on Scriptural writings, nor on the nature of things, nor on external forms; they do not try to open up and turn themselves around, nor do they try to be interdependent with others; rather, they are completely transparent, with nothing hidden. Of these various types, do not conclude that one is smart and another dull. Each type fully manifests the merits from their training.

As a consequence, you would do well to explore through your training whether there are any beings, sentient or non-sentient, who cannot come to know the Truth simply by living their daily life. Any who have come to know the Truth through living life will have come to realize that Truth as the result of their living an everyday life. Once they have awakened to the Truth, they will reveal It in their everyday lives as they do their training and practice throughout their lives. Thus, the Buddhas and Ancestors, who are already Trainers and Tamers of Human Beings,² have come to be called 'Those who have fully realized what life really is' because They have fully grasped what realization means. It will be your realization of what life is that leads you to partake of the great realization, because it will manifest from your study of Their realization.

Accordingly, They have experienced the great realization by accepting the three worlds of desire, form, and beyond form; They have realized the great realization by accepting all the hundreds of things that sprout up; They have realized the great realization by accepting the four elements;* They have realized

2. 'Trainer and Tamer of Human Beings' is one of the ten epithets by which Shakyamuni Buddha is known.

* See *Glossary*.

the great realization by accepting the Buddhas and Ancestors; They have realized the great realization by accepting Their own spiritual question. All of Them, altogether, have accepted the great realization, and experienced the great realization as well. The very moment when realization occurs is ‘the now’.



Rinzai Gigen once said, “Were we to search great T’ang China for a single person who was not enlightened, it would be difficult to find that one.” Now what Great Master Rinzai is saying here is the very Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow of the genuine lineage, so there is no reason to expect that it is erroneous. What he calls ‘in great T’ang China’ means ‘everywhere his eyes can see’. And it has no connection with ‘the whole universe’, nor is it limited to some tiny bit of land. If we seek in any concrete place for a single person who is not enlightened, it will be difficult to find that one. The self that was one’s self yesterday was not unenlightened, and the self that is another’s self today is not unenlightened. Should you seek among the mountaineers or fisherfolk of past or present, ultimately you will still not find any who are unenlightened. Should you trainees explore Rinzai’s words in this manner, you will not have spent your time in vain.

Even so, you should also explore through your training the intentions of the Ancestors of our Sōtō Zen tradition. In short, just for the moment, I would like to discuss something with Rinzai: If you, Rinzai, know only that an unenlightened person is hard to find and do not know that an enlightened person is also hard to find, this is still not enough to be affirmed, and it is difficult to say that you have thoroughly explored even the matter of an unenlightened person being hard to find. Even though, in seeking for someone who is not enlightened, it is hard to find even one, did you ever encounter a person who was half-enlightened, and whose countenance and genial demeanor were impressive in their openness? Even though, in your seeking for one person in great T’ang China who was unenlightened, you found it difficult to find even one, do not consider this to be the end of the matter. You should have tried looking for two or three great T’ang Chinas within a single person or within half a person. Is such a one difficult to find? Is such a one not difficult to find? When someone is in possession of the chief purpose for which we train, that person can be trusted as a thoroughly enlightened Ancestor of the Buddha.



Kegon Kyūjō was a Dharma heir of Tōzan. Kyūjō was his personal name. A monk once asked him, “What is it like when a

person who has experienced the great realization returns to being deluded?”

The Master replied, “A broken mirror does not shed its light again: it would be difficult for a fallen blossom to climb back up on the tree.”

This question is indeed the essential question, and it provides an excellent opportunity for giving Teaching to one’s community. Had this question not been raised in the assembly at Kegon Monastery, it would not have been expounded, and had it not been answered by one of Tōzan’s Dharma heirs, the response would not have been so inspired. This must truly be the training monastery of a fully enlightened Ancestor of the Buddha.

As to a person who has experienced the great realization, we cannot say that the great realization has been with that person from the outset, nor has that person, upon experiencing the great realization, stored it up somewhere outside or apart from himself, nor is the great realization something encountered in the human world only by those who are in the last stages of old age. Such a person does not forcibly drag it out of himself, yet, without fail, such a one experiences the great realization. Such a one does not treat merely an absence of delusion as the great realization. Neither does such a one aim at becoming a deluded person first so that he may then plant and sprout the seeds of the great realization. Moreover, although a person of great realization experiences the great realization, a person of great delusion also experiences the great realization. Just as there are persons of great realization, so there are Buddhas of great realization, and there is earth, water, fire, wind, and space in the great realization, and there are pillars* of the temple and stone lanterns* in the great realization. We are now raising questions about those who have experienced the great realization. The question about those who have experienced the great realization being capable of reverting to delusion is asking something that truly needs to be asked. And Kegon does not shun the issue, for he cherishes the old ways in monastery life, since they are the meritorious ways of the Buddhas and Ancestors.

Let us focus for the moment on the following questions: When one who has experienced the great enlightenment reverts to delusion, will that person be exactly the same as one who has not experienced the great realization? At the time when one who has experienced the great enlightenment reverts to delusion, does that person take the great realization and make it into something delusory? Does the person revert to delusion by taking some delusion from within someone or someplace else and then use it to cover up his great realization? Also, does the person who has experienced the great realization as a whole person, then destroy his great realization when he reverts to delusion? And also, does what is called ‘the

reversion to delusion of a person who has experienced the great realization' treat the holding onto an instance of great realization as being a reversion to delusion? You need to explore these questions thoroughly, one by one. Further, is it the great realization on the one hand and a reverting to delusion on the other hand? Be that as it may, you need to know that, in your commitment to your spiritual exploration through training, you will learn that a person who has experienced the great realization has reversions to delusion. You need to know that the great realization and reversion to delusion are intimately connected matters.

Accordingly, 'taking a thief to be our child' does not describe 'reverting to delusion', nor does 'taking our child to be a thief' describe 'reverting to delusion'. The great realization will be 'taking a thief to be a thief', whereas reverting to delusion is 'taking our child to be our child'. 'Adding a bit too much to what is large' is the great realization, whereas 'taking a bit away from what is little' is what reverting to delusion is. As a consequence, when we search for and try to comprehend a person who has reverted to delusion, we will encounter someone who has experienced the great realization. We need to carefully scrutinize, right now, whether we ourselves are deluded or not, for it is by this that we humbly encounter the Buddhas and Ancestors.

The Master said, "A broken mirror does not shed its light again:
it would be difficult for a fallen blossom to climb back up on the tree."

This instruction to his assembly applies to the very moment when the mirror shatters.³ However, it is not helpful to devote one's mind to the time when the mirror has not yet been shattered and then focus on exploring the phrase 'a broken mirror'. Now, some of you may understand the main point of Kegon's remark about a broken mirror not shedding its light again and it being difficult for a fallen blossom to climb back up on the tree as his asserting that someone who has experienced the great realization does not revert to delusion again. And you may express this by saying that someone who has experienced the great realization does not lose his light again and that someone who has experienced the great realization finds it difficult to climb back up on the tree of self. But Kegon's assertion goes beyond your exploring the Matter* in this manner. And some of you may think that the monk is asking something akin to, "What is the everyday life of a person who has experienced the great realization like?" to which the reply might be, "There are times when one reverts to delusion." But the original account is not like this.

3. That is, we are now to understand the phrase 'a broken mirror' as 'a mirror breaking' and 'a fallen flower' as 'a flower falling'.

What the monk is asking is, “What is it like at the time when a person who has experienced the great realization reverts to delusion?” and therefore he is asking for clarification about the very moment of reverting to delusion. The Master’s remark that “a broken mirror does not shed its light again: it would be difficult for a fallen blossom to climb back up on the tree” fully expresses such a moment as this. When a fallen blossom is just a fallen blossom, even though it may have floated up to the top of a hundred-foot pole, it is still a fallen blossom. Because a broken mirror is just a broken mirror right here and now, even though it may reflect a bit of life, it will be not be able to shed its light again. Taking up the points expressed as ‘a broken mirror’ and ‘a fallen blossom’, you should explore the moment when someone who has experienced the great realization reverts to delusion. At that moment, the great realization is like becoming Buddha, and reverting to delusion is akin to being an ordinary human being. And this statement is not something that we should study as if we were speaking of ‘returning to being an ordinary human being’ or speaking of ‘leaving behind traces whilst submitting oneself to the Source’.

Others may assert something to the effect that, when people act contrary to their great realization, they become ordinary human beings, but we are not saying here that their great realization is violated, or that their great realization has vanished, or that delusion has arrived. We must not let ourselves think the way these ordinary people do. Truly, the great realization is boundless, and the reversion to delusion is boundless. There is no delusion that obstructs the great realization; for every three instances of the great realization that come along, we may create half an instance of slight delusion. On account of this, there are snow-capped mountains that undergo the great realization for the sake of snow-capped mountains, as well as trees and stones undergoing the great realization by borrowing from trees and stones.⁴

The great realization of all Buddhas is Their attaining the great realization for the sake of sentient beings: the great realization of sentient beings is their attaining the great realization of all Buddhas. This realization will not be connected with what came before or with what will come after. The great realization at this very moment is beyond self and beyond other. It is not something that comes to us from somewhere outside, yet it fills in the ditches and fills up the valleys

4. ‘Snow-capped mountains’ is often used in Zen Buddhism as a reference to those who have been successfully training for a long time. Similarly, ‘trees’ are trainees who have not yet cut down the tree of self, and ‘stones’ are trainees who are now unresponsive to the arising of defiling passions.

everywhere. It is not something that departs from us, yet it is incompatible with any pursuit after some ‘other’. And why is that? Because it has departed from chasing after whatever is ‘other’.



The monk Keichō Beiko had a monk go ask Kyōzan, “Do people nowadays even attempt to make use of the great realization?”

Kyōzan replied, “While spiritual realization is not nonexistent, the question is how can we avoid relegating it to a matter of secondary importance?”

The monk went back and reported this to Beiko. Beiko committed himself to exploring this deeply.

The ‘nowadays’ of which the monk spoke is the ever-present now. Although we think in terms of past, present, and future thousands of myriad times, all such thoughts arise only in the present moment. Unquestionably, each person lives in the now. And sometimes it is their Eye that arises in the present, and sometimes it is their Nose that arises in the present.

“Do people nowadays even attempt to make use of the great realization?”

We need to examine these words slowly and carefully, allowing them to penetrate our feelings and our thoughts. In present-day Great Sung China, shaven-headed dolts, among others, go around saying, “The path to spiritual realization is my fundamental aim.” Talking like this, they vainly wait around for spiritual realization. But they are not illumined by the Light of the Buddhas and Ancestors. They indolently stumble about instead of going and training under a genuine good spiritual friend. Even when the ancient Buddha was in the world, they would not have freed themselves from suffering and delusion.

The present question as to whether people attempt to make use of the great realization is not saying that spiritual realization does not exist, nor is it saying that it does exist, nor is it saying that it comes to one from elsewhere. It is saying, “Do they attempt to make use of it?” It was as though he had said, “The spiritual realization of people nowadays has somehow been realized.” For instance, had he said that someone has attained a spiritual realization, it would sound as if it had not continually existed. Had he said that a spiritual realization had come to someone, it would sound as if that spiritual realization had continually existed somewhere else. Had he said that someone had become spiritually awakened, it would sound as if spiritual realization had a beginning. He did not speak of it like this and it is not

like this. Even so, when he spoke of what spiritual realization is really like, he asked whether one attempts to make use of spiritual realization.

On the other hand, in speaking of spiritual realization, Kyōzan said, “While spiritual realization is not nonexistent, the question is how can we avoid relegating it to a matter of secondary importance?” In so saying, he is stating that even that which is of secondary importance is still spiritual realization. His saying that it has become of secondary importance is as if he had said, “You have become spiritually awakened!” or “You have realized a spiritual awakening!” or “A spiritual realization has come to you!” Even to say “You have become it” or “It has come to you” states that it is a spiritual realization. As a consequence, while regretting the fact that it has been relegated to a matter of secondary importance, he seems to be denying that a matter of secondary importance exists. A matter of secondary importance which springs from spiritual realization may be taken to be genuinely of secondary importance. Accordingly, even if it were of secondary importance, even if it were one among hundreds of thousands of matters of importance, it would still be a spiritual realization. It is not true that when it is of secondary importance, it is necessarily left over from something that previously existed as a matter of primary importance. For example, while we treat the ‘I’ of yesterday as our ‘I’, yesterday we spoke of our ‘I’ of today as if it were a second person. Kyōzan is not saying that the spiritual realization of this very moment did not exist yesterday, nor is he asserting that it is something that just began now: this is how we explore the Matter through our training. Accordingly, the heads of some who have experienced the great realization are black, and the heads of some who have experienced the great realization are white.⁵

Given to the assembly at Kannon-dōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple at springtime, on the twenty-eighth day of the first lunar month in the third year of the Ninji era (March 1, 1242).

Copied by me on the twenty-seventh day of the first lunar month in the second year of the Kangen era (March 7, 1244) in Echizen Province at the old temple of Kippō-ji where I had hung up my traveling staff, and presented it in writing to the great assembly of ordinary people as well as those in lofty positions.

I recopied this in the spring of the same year, on the twenty-first day of the third lunar month (April 29, 1244), whilst serving in the inner recesses of the training temple of Kippō-ji in Echizen Province.

Ejō

5. That is, youth (black hair) and old age (white hair) are of no relevance when it comes to experiencing the great realization.