

On the Vines That Entangle: the Vines That Embrace

(*Kattō*)

Translator's Introduction: The term '*kattō*' literally means 'the kudzu and the wisteria', and it refers to two vines that grow by wrapping themselves around, say, a tree or a post. While the term serves as a common metaphor in both secular and Buddhist writings with the negative connotation of 'complications', 'difficulties', and 'that which we get entangled with', Dōgen extends its meaning in this discourse to describe, in a positive sense, the complex and complicated intertwining of the Master-disciple relationship.

Shakyamuni Buddha, who experienced the great, unsurpassed enlightenment, passed on the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching only to Great Master Makakashō from amongst all of the assembly on the Divine Vulture Peak. Successor after successor experienced this genuine realization of the Truth, and It ultimately came down to the Venerable Bodhidharma in the twenty-eight generation. Following the example of the Ancestors, whilst Bodhidharma was in China he passed on the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching to our Great Ancestor Eka, the fully awakened Great Master of the genuine lineage, thereby making him the Second Chinese Ancestor. The Twenty-eighth Ancestor, who was the first in China to act in accord with the behavior of the Ancestors, is called the First Chinese Ancestor, whereas Eka, as the Ancestor of the twenty-ninth generation, is called the Second Chinese Ancestor, as is the custom in the lands east of India.

After Bodhidharma had spiritually awakened, he received the Transmission of the very Marrow of the Buddha's instructions from the Venerable Hannyatara. Bodhidharma subsequently came to recognize the roots of his delusions because of these very roots, which he had previously used as the foundation for the proliferation of his delusions.

Generally speaking, the saintly all devise some method of training whereby they sever the roots of whatever vines are entangling them. But they might not explore how to cut off entangling vines by using the very vines themselves, for they may not have used these embracing vines as the means to understand their being entangled. So how could they possibly understand the inheriting of vines and the succession of vines by means of these embracing vines? It is rare for any to

recognize that the inheritance of the Dharma is synonymous with embracing vines, and, since none of them have heard about it, none have yet expressed it this way. Surely, there could not possibly be many who have experienced it!

My former Master, an Old Buddha, once said, “The vines of the bottle gourd embrace the bottle gourd itself.” This teaching that he gave to his assembly is something that had never been encountered or heard of anywhere in the past or present. The vines of the bottle gourd intertwining with the vines of the bottle gourd is the Buddhas and Ancestors thoroughly exploring what Buddhas and Ancestors are. It is the Buddhas and Ancestors realizing that there is no difference between the awakening of a Buddha and the awakening of an Ancestor. It has been referred to as the direct Transmission of the Dharma from Mind to Mind.



In speaking to his disciples, our Twenty-eighth Ancestor Bodhidharma said, “It seems that my time is near at hand, so why don’t you express what you have realized?”

His disciple Dōfuku then said, “As I now see things, I am not attached to words nor have I given up words. I just make use of them.”

The Ancestor replied, “You have realized what my Skin is.”

The female monk Sōji said, “As I now understand things, it is like Ananda’s catching sight of Akshobya’s Buddha Land. Once seen, it is not seen again.”

The Ancestor replied, “You have realized what my Flesh is.”

Dōiku said, “The four elements,* from the first, are empty of any permanent self-nature, and the five skandhas* lack permanent existence. So, from my perspective, there is not one single thing to be realized.”

The Ancestor replied, “You have realized what my Bones are.”

Finally, Eka respectfully made three prostrations before the Ancestor and then silently stood in his place.

The Ancestor said, “You have realized what my Marrow is.” As might be expected, he made Eka the Second Chinese Ancestor, Transmitting to him the Dharma and the kesa.*

* See *Glossary*.

What you need to explore through your training is that our First Chinese Ancestor's statement, "You have realized my Skin, Flesh, Bones, and Marrow," is what the Ancestor said. Each of his four disciples, respectively, expressed what they had realized; each demonstrated what they had learned. What they all had realized is the Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow which sprang forth from their own body and mind. It is the Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow of 'dropping off body and mind'. This is beyond anything that someone can gather from an Ancestral Master by means of intellectual understanding based on observation, which is simply comparable to one move in a game of *Go*. Likewise, it is not something that fully manifests before one's eyes as subject and object, or as this and that. At the same time, folks who have not experienced the genuine Transmission fancy that there were relative degrees of intimacy in what each of the four disciples comprehended, so that what the Ancestor was saying was that skin, flesh, bones, and marrow are not the same in their profundity. They think that skin and flesh are coarser than bones and marrow, and they say that the discerning thought of the Second Ancestor had surpassed that of the others, so that he alone obtained the certification of knowing what the marrow was. Those who talk like this have still not explored through their training what the Buddhas and Ancestors are, nor have they experienced the genuine Transmission of which the Ancestors speak.

You need to recognize that the Skin, Flesh, Bones, and Marrow of which the Ancestor spoke are beyond being characterized as shallow or deep. Even though people's intellectual abilities may be superior or inferior, what the Ancestor said is simply a matter of the disciple's having realized 'what I truly am'. The fundamental principle here is that, in his saying to one disciple "You have realized what my Marrow is" while saying to another "You have realized what my Bones are," these statements are both beyond a matter of adequacy or inadequacy when it comes to giving spiritual guidance to people, or when 'pulling up one's weeds and then letting go of them'. For instance, it is like the Buddha's raising the flower or passing on His kesa.¹ What was uttered for the sake of the four disciples was, to begin with, essentially one and the same thing. And even though what the Ancestor said to each was essentially one and the same thing, this does not necessarily mean that their four understandings were essentially one and the same. Even though their

1. The first reference is to the Transmission of Makakashō, wherein the Buddha raised a flower and Makakashō, realizing the deeper meaning behind the gesture, broke into a smile, which set the Buddha's eyes to twinkling in recognition. The second reference is to the Buddha's passing on His kesa to Makakashō when confirming him as His Dharma heir.

four understandings were individually distinct, what the Ancestor said is simply what the Ancestor said.

Generally speaking, what is said and what is understood may not necessarily be identical. For instance, in expressing the Matter* to his four disciples, the Ancestral Master was asserting, “You have realized me as ‘Me in the flesh.’” Even if there were a hundred thousand disciples after the Second Ancestor, there would be a hundred thousand ways of stating It, for the ways are inexhaustible. Since there were only four disciples to hear what he said, there were, for the moment, just the four expressions of ‘Skin’, ‘Flesh’, ‘Bones’, and ‘Marrow’, but there remain ways that were not yet expressed, for there are many ways to express the Matter.

You need to realize that even though Bodhidharma expressed the Dharma in the way he did for the sake of the Second Ancestor, he could also have expressed It as “You have realized what my Skin is.” Even if he had said to Eka, “You have realized what my Skin is,” the First Ancestor would have been Transmitting the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching to him as the Second Ancestor, since ‘realizing what the Skin is’ and ‘realizing what the Marrow is’ are not based on either being superior or inferior.

Also, in expressing the Dharma in the way he did for the sake of Dōfuku, Dōiku, Sōji, or anyone else, he could have stated, “You have realized what my Marrow is.” Even though he may say ‘what my Skin is’ to them, he will still be Transmitting the Teaching to them. The Body and Mind of the Ancestral Master is the Ancestral Master along with his skin, flesh, bones, and marrow. This is beyond considering the marrow to be an intimate part of him while viewing the skin as something distant from him.

Now, when someone who has an eye for exploring the Matter through training with a Master receives the certification of “You have realized what my Skin is,” it is the result of that person’s taking their training to the utmost, which ‘gets’ him or her the Ancestral Master. There are Ancestral Masters whose whole being is Skin, and Ancestral Masters whose whole being is Flesh, and Ancestral Masters whose whole being is Bones, and Ancestral Masters whose whole being is Marrow. And there are Ancestral Masters whose whole being is Mind, and Ancestral Masters whose whole being is Body, and Ancestral Masters whose whole mind is Mind, and Ancestral Masters who are Ancestral Masters through and through, and Ancestral Masters whose whole being ‘has realized my You’, and so

on.² If there were a time when these Ancestral Masters appeared simultaneously and expressed the Dharma for the sake of a hundred thousand disciples, they might voice It as “You have realized my Skin.” Even if their hundred thousand ways of voicing It were ‘Skin, Flesh, Bones, and Marrow’, bystanders and onlookers will vainly assume that these Masters are literally talking about skin, flesh, bones, and marrow. If an Ancestral Master were to have six or seven disciples within his assembly, he might employ some expression such as “You have realized what my Mind is” or “You have realized what my Body is.” Or he might employ an expression like “You have realized what my Buddha Dharma is,” or “You have realized what my Eye is,” or “You have realized what my realization is.” There are times when this so-called ‘you’ is the Ancestor and times when it is Eka. Thoroughly explore in detail the principle underlying the words ‘you have realized’.

You need to realize that there will be a ‘you having realized Me’, and a ‘me having realized You’, and a ‘realizing me being You’, and a ‘realizing you being Me’. In delving into the Body and Mind of the Ancestral Master, if you say that what lies within him and what lies outside him cannot be all of a oneness or that his whole Body cannot be his whole being, you are not in the land where Buddhas and Ancestors manifest. To have realized what the Skin is means to have realized what Bones, Flesh, and Marrow are. To have realized what Bones, Flesh, and Marrow are is to have realized what Skin, Flesh, and Countenance are. How could such a state as this be anything other than an understanding, as clear as a full dawning, of Master Chōsa Keishin’s saying, “The whole universe in all directions is our Real, True Body?” Moreover, It is skin and flesh, bones and marrow. Consequently, It is ‘realizing what my kesa is’ and ‘your having realized what the Dharma is’. Accordingly, even saying the words is a series of instances of ‘springing out from delusion’: Master and disciple harmonize and are equal. Even hearing the words is a series of instances of ‘springing out from delusion’: Master and disciple harmonize and are equal. The thorough harmonizing and equalizing of Master and disciple is the complicated, embracing kudzu and wisteria vines of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Shakyamuni’s raising aloft the flower, His eyes atwinkle, is none other than the vines of kudzu and wisteria: Makakashō’s breaking out into a smile is none other than Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow.

2. The phrase ‘has realized my You’ expresses the oneness of Master and disciple from the perspective of the Master, just as “you have realized what my Skin is” expresses it from the perspective of the disciple towards the Master. Both expressions refer to the transcendence of ‘self and other’.

Moreover, you should thoroughly explore through your training that, just as the offspring of entangling vines have the capacity to drop off self, so also do branches and leaves, flowers and fruit appear, which all follow along with kudzu and wisteria vines. And because the offspring may be seen as dependent and, at the same time, independent of the vines, Buddhas and Ancestors manifest and our spiritual question appears before our very eyes.



Great Master Jōshū Shinsai, in instructing his assembly, once said, “Makakashō gave the Transmission to Ananda. Right now, say to what person did Bodhidharma give the Transmission?”

Thereupon, a monk asked him, “Well, what about the Second Ancestor, didn’t he get the marrow?”

The Master replied, “Do not engage in slandering the Second Ancestor.”

The Master said further, “Remember what Bodhidharma also said, that someone who is located on the outside realizes what the Skin is, whereas someone who is located on the inside realizes what the Bones are. Right now, say what someone who is located even further within realizes!”

A monk asked, “What is this ‘realizing what the marrow is’ really about anyway?”

The Master replied, “Just keep your focus on the Skin. For an old monk like me, the question of marrow doesn’t even arise.”

The monk asked, “But what is the marrow?”

The Master replied, “If that’s the way things are for you, then you’re still groping about for the Skin.”

Accordingly, keep in mind that when you are still groping about for the Skin, you are still groping about for the Marrow, and in realizing what the Skin is through your groping, you also realize what the Marrow is. You should work diligently on the principle of “If that’s the way things are for you, then you’re still groping about for the Skin.” In the monk’s skeptically asking, “What is this ‘realizing what the marrow is’ really about anyway?” there emerged Jōshū’s response of “Just keep your focus on the Skin. For an old monk like me, the question of marrow doesn’t even arise.” When someone focuses on the Skin, the marrow’s not even coming up is what ‘having realized what the Marrow is’ really is. The doubting question of, “What about the Second Ancestor, didn’t he realize what the marrow is?” arose because the monk was not focusing on the Skin. When we simply look at the

occasion when Makakashō gave the Transmission to Ananda, it involved Ananda ‘concealing His Body’ in Makakashō and Makakashō ‘concealing His Body’ in Ananda.³ Even so, at the time when the two ‘see’ each other within the giving of Transmission, they do not escape from their everyday behavior, which alters their countenance and their skin, flesh, bones, and marrow. This is why Jōshū made the remark, “Right now, say It! Bodhidharma gave the Transmission to a person of What!”⁴ At the time when Bodhidharma gave the Transmission, he was Bodhidharma, and when the Second Chinese Ancestor realized the Marrow, he was Bodhidharma. As we thoroughly explore this principle, we see that the Buddha Dharma, right up to this very day, is still the Buddha Dharma. If this were not so, the Buddha Dharma would not have come down to us today. Through exploring this principle carefully and diligently, we should learn how to express it ourselves and we should teach others how to express it.

Jōshū also said that Bodhidharma remarked, “Someone who is located on the outside realizes what the Skin is, whereas someone who is located on the inside realizes what the Bones are. Right now, say what someone who is located even further within realizes!” The essential meaning of the ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ spoken of here is extremely straightforward. When we discuss ‘outside’, then Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow have their outside: when we discuss ‘inside’, then Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow have their inside. Accordingly, his four disciple Bodhidharmas, all together, had thoroughly explored, instance by instance, hundreds of thousands of myriad spiritually awakened states of Skin, Flesh, Bones, and Marrow. Do not imagine that there cannot be states above and beyond that of Marrow, for there are three or maybe even five states above and beyond that.

The Old Buddha Jōshū was pointing out to his assembly just precisely what the Way of the Buddha is. This is beyond what others like Rinzai, Tokusan, Isan, and Ummon attained. It is something that they had never even dreamt of, much less expressed. It is something that present-day monastic ‘old-timers’ who are given to wild talk do not know even exists, and if we were to explain it to them, they would be startled and grow fearful.

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3. ‘To conceal His Body in someone else’ is a Zen Buddhist expression for someone’s recognizing the Buddhahood of another.
 4. Jōshū’s remark contains a play on words often found in Zen kōan stories. The phrase *jūmo no hito*, rendered earlier in its conventional meaning as ‘what person’ (thus making Jōshū’s remark a question), is understood in a Zen context as ‘a person of What’, that is, a person whose state is beyond the ability of words to convey. This latter meaning changes Jōshū’s remark into an assertion for his disciple to respond to.

Meditation Master Setchō Jukēn once said, “The two Masters—Jōshū and Bokushū—are examples of what it means to be an Old Buddha.” Accordingly, the words of Old Buddhas are Their awakened experience of Buddha Dharma and Their own personal ways of putting the Matter which They uttered in the past. Great Master Seppō Shinkaku once exclaimed, “Jōshū, the Old Buddha!” A previous Ancestor of the Buddha also praised Jōshū by eulogizing him as an Old Buddha, and a later Ancestor of the Buddha eulogized him as an Old Buddha as well. Obviously, they are saying that he is an Old Buddha who has gone beyond any spiritually awakened state attained by others of the past or present.

Consequently, the fundamental principle is that Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow embrace us like the vines of kudzu and wisteria. This is the standard of the statement “You have realized what I truly am,” which Old Buddhas point out to Their assembly. Explore this criterion thoroughly and diligently.

Also, some say that the First Ancestor returned to the West, but through our training we learn that is inaccurate. Undoubtedly, what the monk Sōun saw could not have been literally real.⁵ How could Sōun possibly have encountered the goings and comings of the Ancestral Master? Simply take as the correct study that after the parinirvana of the First Chinese Ancestor, his ashes were consigned to Bear’s Ear Mountain.

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Ejō

5. The monk Sōun, upon his return to China from an imperially supported visit to India for the purpose of collecting Buddhist writings, claimed to have met Bodhidharma upon the Silk Road. This event occurred three years after Bodhidharma’s death. Crown Prince Shōtoku spoke of a similar encounter with Bodhidharma in Japan. These encounters may have occurred in some sense other than a literal one.