

On the Udumbara Blossom

(*Udonge*)

Translator's Introduction: The udumbara tree is said to bloom once every three thousand years. It is used to illustrate how rare it is for a Buddha such as Shakyamuni to appear in the world, though many other Buddhas will arise as a result of Shakyamuni's awakening. Although there is a Buddhist tradition that understands His holding the udumbara blossom aloft as a literal fact, there is another tradition which understands this as His holding aloft the flowering of His Buddha Nature for all to see, and that His disciple Makakashō's breaking into a smile of recognition was his way of displaying his own Buddha Nature. All the others who were present on that occasion apparently assumed that only Shakyamuni Buddha could have Buddha Nature, whereas no one else could possibly have It.

Before an assembly of millions on Vulture Peak, the World-honored One held aloft an udumbara flower, His eyes atwinkle. At that time, Makakashō's face broke into a smile. The World-honored One then said, "I have the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, which is the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana, and I bestow It on Makakashō."

Just as all other Buddhas have done, the Seven Buddhas* have likewise held aloft the Flower. Through Their practice and awakening, They too have manifested the raising and holding aloft of Their Flower.

Thus, Their holding the Flower aloft encompasses the picking up of all Flowers by all Buddhas together, regardless of whether the Flowers are being raised or lowered, whether done in recognition of one's own Buddha Nature or of other's, whether pointing within or pointing without. This is the measure of the Flower, the measure of a Buddha, the measure of a mind, the measure of a body. No matter how many times the Flower has been held aloft, each instance has been a Transmitting of Truth to each and every genuine Dharma heir, for this is the very essence of Transmission. Once the Buddha held His Flower aloft, He never parted from It. And once the Flower held aloft the World-honored One, at that moment the World-honored One became the Flower's Dharma heir. Because the time when one's Flower is held aloft is the whole of time, the whole of time is in harmony both with the World-honored One and with the holding aloft of one's Flower.

* See *Glossary*.

‘The holding aloft of one’s Flower’ is the Flower holding the flower aloft; it is represented by such things as the plum blossom, the spring blossoms, the snow-covered blossoms, and the lotus blossom. The five petals displayed by the plum blossom are the more than three hundred and sixty other assemblies wherein He voiced the Dharma, the five thousand and forty-eight volumes of the Scriptures, the Three Vehicles,* the twelve divisions of the Canon, and the bodhisattva* stage of being ‘thrice wise and ten times saintly’.* Accordingly, it is beyond the stage of just being thrice wise and ten times saintly. The Great Treasure House with Its extraordinary wonders exists, about which it is said, “When the Flower comes into bloom, the whole world arises.” We call the effects of the five petals which open together as one flower ‘the natural realization of the Truth’, for it is the whole of oneself already being adorned with the whole of one’s Self. Reiun Shingon’s losing his worldly eyes upon seeing peach blossoms and Kyōgen Chikan’s having his worldly hearing disappear at the sound of a pebble striking against a cane of bamboo are instances of their holding the Flower aloft. Great Master Eka’s standing waist deep in snow and ‘cutting off’ his arm, and then later doing prostrations after having realized what Bodhidharma’s Marrow is, was the natural opening of his Flower.¹ Enō’s pounding rice in a stone mortar until it was purely white and then receiving Daiman Kōnin’s kesa* in the middle of the night demonstrated his having already held the Flower aloft. Examples such as these are the roots of Life itself being held within the hands of the World-honored One.

Speaking more generally, holding the Flower aloft already existed before the World-honored One had realized the Truth, and it existed at the same time as the World-honored One’s realizing the Truth, and it continues to exist even after the World-honored One’s realization of the Truth. Accordingly, the Flower is the realizing of the Truth. The holding of the Flower aloft goes far beyond these divisions of time. The Buddhas’ and Ancestors’ giving rise to the intention to realize the Truth, Their taking a first step, Their practicing until They awoke, and Their preserving the Truth well have all been instances of Flowers being held aloft, dancing like butterflies on the breezes of spring. Thus, because the World-honored Gautama put His Body into a Flower and concealed His Body within Space, we call His ability to grab hold of His Nose and to grab hold of Unbounded Space ‘His holding aloft His Flower’. Holding aloft the Flower is holding It aloft with one’s Eye, holding It aloft with the consciousness of one’s mind, holding It aloft with one’s Nose, and holding It aloft by one’s holding aloft a flower.

1. This reference to Eka’s cutting off his arm may refer to giving up one’s attachments rather than to a literal, physical act.

Generally speaking, the great earth with its mountains and rivers, as well as the sun, moon, wind, and rain, along with humans and animals, grasses and trees, are all being held aloft. Namely, they are the holding aloft of the udumbara flower. Birth and death, coming and going, are also varieties of the Flower. Indeed, they are the brilliant radiance of the Flower. When we explore the Matter* in this way, we continue to hold our Flower aloft.



The Buddha once said, “It is like the udumbara flower, which All of Us love and delight in.” His saying ‘All’ refers to Buddhas and Ancestors, both those who reveal Themselves and Those who do not. Theirs is a presence of brilliant radiance, one which grasses and trees, insects and bugs inherently possess. All of us who love this radiance and delight in it describe it as the Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow of all beings as they go about like fish freely disporting in the water. Hence, each and every one of us is ultimately an udumbara blossom, a condition that some call ‘being rare indeed’!

‘His eyes atwinkle’ describes the occasion when the Buddha was sitting in meditation at the base of the Bodhi tree and He exchanged His worldly eyes for the brightness of the Morning Star. And there was the occasion when Makakashō’s face broke into a smile. He had already broken into the smile, exchanging it for the face of one who was holding his Flower aloft. At that moment when the Tathagata’s eyes twinkled, we quickly lost our worldly eyes. This twinkling of the Tathagata’s eyes was His holding the Flower aloft. The udumbara blossom signifies the natural opening up of one’s heart.

At the very moment of the flower being held aloft, all Gautamas, all Makakashōs, all sentient beings, all of us, all together, are extending our hands and holding our Flower aloft, and this practice has not ceased even to the present day. Further, because we are in a meditative state in which our whole being keeps itself within our hands, we call this ‘being’ the four elements* and the five skandhas.*²

The Buddha’s ‘what I have’ refers to what He bestows on others and what He confers becomes their ‘what I have’.³ Of necessity, what is given is restricted to what it is that He has.

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2. ‘Our whole being keeps itself within our hands’ refers to our focusing our consciousness within our hands, which are being held in the traditional manner while doing seated meditation.
 3. Namely, the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, which is the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana.

Your ‘what I have’ is your crowning glory. When you hold your ‘what I have’ aloft and exchange it, in turn, for ‘what I give you,’ you are keeping to the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching. Bodhidharma’s coming from the West was his coming to hold the Flower aloft. His holding the Flower aloft is called his delighting in single-minded pursuit of the Way. Delighting in single-minded pursuit of the Way means just control yourself and sit there, dropping off body and mind. Becoming a Buddha or an Ancestor is called delighting in single-minded pursuit of the Way, and putting on one’s clothes and eating one’s meals is also called delighting in single-minded pursuit of the Way. In short, the most important matter for Buddhas and Ancestors is, without doubt, delighting in single-minded pursuit of the Way.

When those in the Buddha Hall mutually encounter each other spiritually and when those in the Monks’ Hall also encounter each other spiritually, they all become more and more endowed with variety in their flowerings, and these flowerings become ever more intense in their hues.⁴ And what is more, within the Monks’ Hall the wooden *han* is now taken and struck, reverberating to the clouds, while in the Buddha Hall the bamboo *shō* is now blown, reverberating to the bottom of the water.⁵ At just such times, my late Master might inadvertently begin to recite a melodious poem about plum blossoms, such as the following:

*When Gautama lost his worldly eyes,
Only a single branch of plum blossoms appeared amidst
the snow.
Now everywhere new branches have sprung up
And, laughing, I delight in the spring wind’s scattering
petals in wild disarray.*

The Tathagata’s worldly eyes have inadvertently become a Plum Blossom, while the plum blossoms have now become thorny twigs, sprouting up everywhere. The Tathagata keeps His True Self hidden within His Eye, and His Eye keeps Its True Self hidden within the plum blossom, and the plum blossoms keep their True Self

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4. The Buddha Hall is the place in the monastery where ceremonies are performed, with senior monks doing the performing. Thus, ‘those in the Buddha Hall’ is associated with senior monks and ‘those in the Monks’ Hall’ is associated with novices.
 5. A *han* is a wooden plate, or block, that is struck like a gong, whereas the *shō* is an organ-like wind instrument, producing dense, reedy chords. The clouds (J. *un*) and water (J. *sui*) refer to novice monks, who are commonly called *unsui*. Such reverberant, penetrating instrumental sounds are employed in monasteries to aid trainees in shaking themselves free from holding onto body and mind.

hidden within the thorny twigs. The plum blossoms, in response, are now blowing in the spring breeze. Even though this is how things are, it is in peach blossoms that my Master took his delight and joy.



My late Master, the Old Buddha Tendō, once said in verse,

*What Reiun saw were peach blossoms opening:*⁶

What I see are peach blossoms scattering.

Keep in mind that the opening of peach blossoms is what Reiun saw. He expressed it in his poem as, “And straightaway—at that very moment—I arrived, never again to be in doubt.” The falling of the petals of the peach blossoms is what Tendō himself saw. The opening of peach blossoms is aroused by the breezes of spring. These winds abhor the scattering of the blossoms’ petals. Even though the spring winds abhor the peach blossoms scattering thus, this scattering may well equate with the dropping off of body and mind.

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6. The reference to Reiun Shigon is to his poem that capped his kenshō:

*Thirty years I sought for Him, the Good Friend with His Sword of
Wisdom:*

*For so many rounds have the leaves fallen and the branches burst
anew with blooms!*

But just one glance at those peach blossoms

*And straightaway—at that very moment—I arrived, never again to
be in doubt.*