

## On Karmic Retribution in the Three Temporal Periods

(*Sanji Gō*)

**Translator’s Introduction:** In this discourse, Dōgen discusses the good or ill recompense we receive immediately in this lifetime, in our next lifetime, or in some later future lifetime as a result of our deliberate acts. He gives the Buddhist perspective on why people who seem to be doing good deeds may experience misfortune and why people who are continually committing wrongful acts may seem to be enjoying good fortune.

When our Nineteenth Ancestor, the Venerable Kumorata, arrived at a country in Central India, there was a virtuous monk there named Shayata who raised a question with him, saying, “My parents have always had faith in the Triple Treasure, but they have continually been subject to illnesses and all their endeavors have come to naught, whereas our neighbor, who persists in behaving like Chandala the Outlaw, has always been fit and healthy and his illegal undertakings successful. How come he has had such good fortune and where have we gone wrong?”

The Venerable One responded, “Why do you entertain such doubts? The karmic\* effects of good and bad actions will come to fruition in one of three temporal periods. In general, people see that the benevolent may suffer untimely or violent deaths whilst the cruel may live long, or that the wicked may be fortunate whilst the morally upright meet with misfortune. As a result of this, they say that there is no cause and effect and that ‘vice’ and ‘good deeds’ are meaningless words. Above all, they do not understand that consequences inevitably follow upon even the slightest actions, that even were hundreds of thousands of myriad eons to elapse these consequences would still not be wiped away, and that cause and effect are, of necessity, in accord with each other.”

Once Shayata heard these words, he was immediately freed from his doubts.

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\* See *Glossary*.

The Venerable Kumorata was the nineteenth in line from the Tathagata to receive the Dharma. The Tathagata had personally mentioned his name and prophesied his future Buddhahood.<sup>1</sup> Not only had Kumorata clarified what the Dharma of the Venerable Shakyamuni Buddha was and received the authentic Transmission, he had also fully realized the Dharma of all Buddhas in the three temporal periods.

Having profited from his present question, the Venerable Shayata became a follower of the Venerable Kumorata and undertook the study of the authentic Dharma, ultimately becoming our Ancestral Master of the twentieth generation. Here, too, the World-honored One had prophesied much earlier that our Twentieth Ancestor would be Shayata. So, above all, you need to learn what our Ancestral Masters knew by studying their comments on the Buddha Dharma. Do not join in with the flock of that present-day worldly bunch with false opinions, who are ignorant of cause and effect, who are in the dark about karmic retribution from deliberate acts, who know nothing of the three temporal periods, and who do not know the difference between good and evil.

What we call the three temporal periods are the three time periods in which we receive the retribution from our good and evil acts. These are, first, the retribution experienced in one's present life; second, the retribution experienced in one's next life; and third, the retribution experienced in some later future life. Through your practice of the Way of the Buddhas and Ancestors you learn, first off, to clarify what the principle of karmic retribution in these three time periods is. If you do not do so, you will make many errors and fall into false views. You will not just fall into false views, you will also give rise to evil ways and undergo suffering for a long time. By failing to continue developing your good roots, you will lose much spiritual merit and will have long-standing obstructions on your path to enlightenment.

The karmic retribution experienced in these three temporal periods comes from both good and evil acts.

## II

In the first temporal period, the retribution is experienced in one's present lifetime. That is to say, when we engage in karmic activities in this lifetime and then, according to the seeds we have sown, receive the fruits thereof in this lifetime, we call this 'retribution experienced in one's present lifetime'.

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1. That is, the Buddha had predicted that someone in the future would be called Kumorata, 'The Youthful One', and that he would realize Buddhahood in his lifetime.

In other words, when there is someone who fashions his life by good or by evil actions, and then receives the consequences of those actions in this lifetime, we call that ‘retribution experienced in one’s present life’.

## II

The following story is an example of creating evil and receiving the consequences therefrom in this present life.

There was once a woodcutter who had gone off into the mountains when he encountered a blizzard and completely lost his way. It was at that time when the day was coming to an end. The snow was so deep and it was so freezing cold that he knew he would certainly be dead before long. He made his way onwards and had just entered a dense, dark patch of woods when he saw a bear. There it was, right before him in the woods. Its body was a deep blue-black, and its eyes were like two glowing coals. The man was filled with terror, certain that he would lose his life, but the creature was, in truth, a bodhisattva\* who had manifested in the form of a bear.

Seeing the man’s dreadful fear, it then spoke in a consoling manner, counseling him, “Now you must not be afraid. Though one’s parents may sometimes harbor wrong intentions towards their child, I do not harbor evil thoughts towards you.” It then came forward, lifted the man onto its back, and carried him into a cave where it warmed him with its own body until it completely resuscitated him. Gathering some roots and berries, it encouraged him to eat what he would. Fearing lest the woodcutter should die, it lay down and held him in its arms. In this way it kindly tended him until six days had passed. On the seventh day, the sky cleared and the pathway became visible. The bear, having realized that the man desired to return home, again gathered sweet berries to satisfy his hunger and sustain him. It accompanied him out of the woods, and ever so politely bade him farewell. The man fell to his knees and said, “How can I ever repay you?” The bear replied, “I seek no recompense now. I only pray that, just as I protected your body these past days, you will also do the same with my life.” The man respectfully agreed.

As the man was coming down the mountain shouldering his firewood, he encountered two hunters, who asked him, “What kind of creatures have you encountered on the mountain?” The woodcutter replied, “I haven’t seen any creatures apart from just one bear.” The

hunters begged him, “Can you show us where?” The woodcutter replied, “If I can have two-thirds of your prey, I will gladly show you.” The hunters agreed and they all went off together, ultimately slaying the bear. They divided the meat into three parts. As the woodcutter was just about to pick up the bear’s flesh with his two hands, he lost the use of his arms, as if they were a string of pearls that had been cut or a lotus root that had been sliced off. The hunters were startled by this and, in their concern, asked him what had happened. The woodcutter, feeling deeply ashamed, gave a detailed account of what he had done. The two hunters upbraided the woodcutter, saying, “That bear had such great compassion for you! How could you possibly have carried out such a wicked act of betrayal now? It is truly a wonder that your whole body hasn’t rotted away!” Thereupon the hunters, in company with the man, gave the meat in charity to a monastery.

At that time, the elderly and virtuous abbot, one who had the wondrous ability to fathom what others desired, had entered a state of deep contemplation, thereby knowing that it was the flesh of a great bodhisattva who had created benefits and joy for the sake of all sentient beings. Coming out from his meditative state, he then spoke to his assembly concerning this matter. The assembly, hearing the story, was appalled and saddened. Together, they gathered fragrant wood and cremated the bear’s body. They then collected what bones remained, placed them in a stupa,\* and made prostrations and offerings to them.

The karma from an evil act, such as the one in this story, will inevitably incur its recompense, regardless of whether its effects are received immediately or come to fruition in a future life.

Effects such as these are called ‘misfortunate recompense experienced in one’s present life’. To generalize, when receiving a kindness, we should intend to repay it. In doing kindnesses for others, do not seek for recompense. As in this story, one who would turn against a kindly being and thereby bring harm to such a one will inevitably receive evil karma. O my fellow beings, may you never have a heart like that of this woodcutter! Once out of the woods, he took his leave of the bear, and even though he asked how he could possibly repay the bear’s kindness, when he reached the foot of the mountain and met the hunters, he greedily sought two-thirds of the meat. Being dragged by his avarice, he slew one who had shown him great kindness. May you, both laity and monks, ever have a heart that does not fail to

recognize kindness. The power of evil karma to sever both your hands strikes faster than any sword could cut them off.

## II

Long ago, King Kanishka of the nation of Gandhara had a eunuch—one born lacking normal male genitals—who supervised the affairs of the court. While momentarily departing from the city, he encountered a herd of cattle, at least five hundred in number, being led in through the city gate. He asked the herdsman, “What kind of cattle are these?” The herdsman replied, “They are bulls being taken to be castrated.” Upon hearing this, the eunuch thought to himself, “Due to evil karma in a past life, I received a body lacking normal male genitals. I shall now use my wealth to rescue these bulls from just such a hardship.” He ultimately paid their price and then set them all free.

Because of the power of this good karma, the eunuch’s body was fully restored to that of a normal male. Filled with profound joy, he went back into the city and, standing at the palace gate, sent a messenger to ask the king’s permission to enter for an audience. The king had him summoned, wondering why he had asked for an audience. Thereupon, the eunuch presented the above in great detail. Upon hearing it, the king was surprised and delighted. He generously bestowed on his servant great treasure and, in turn, promoted him to a high office, making him privy to the external affairs of state.

Good karma like this inevitably receives its fruits, either immediately or in a future life.

Clearly you need to realize that to rescue animals, even though their lives may not be treasured, earned the man good fruits. How much more so, by our honoring the kind and the virtuous, shall we garner all manner of good.<sup>2</sup> Effects such as these are called ‘fortunate recompense experienced in one’s present life’. There are many stories like these, which arise from either good or evil deeds, but there is not time enough to quote them all.

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2. An allusion to the four cultivated fields of merit: that derived from being kind to animals, to the needy, to one’s parents, and to the saintly ones of the Three Vehicles.

## II

In the second temporal period, retribution is experienced in one's next lifetime. That is to say, when we engage in karmic activities in this lifetime and then, according to the seeds we have sown, receive the fruits thereof in our next lifetime, we call this 'retribution experienced in one's next lifetime'.

In other words, when there are people who have committed any of the five most treacherous deeds, they will inevitably fall into a hellish state in their next lifetime. 'The next lifetime' means the lifetime that follows this lifetime. For other wrongdoers, there are those who will fall into a hellish state in their next lifetime, and there are those who would sink into a hellish state in their next lifetime were it not for some intervening good karma. For these five most treacherous deeds, however, people invariably fall into a hellish state along with whatever karma they carry with them into their next lifetime. 'The next life' is also called 'one's second life'.

## II

The five most treacherous deeds are, first, killing one's father; second, killing one's mother; third, killing an arhat;\* fourth, shedding the blood of a Buddha; and fifth, destroying the harmony within the Sangha.

With these five most treacherous deeds, those who commit just one of them will invariably fall into a hellish state in their next lifetime. There have been those who have committed all five of the most treacherous deeds, such as the female monastic Utpalavarna during the time of the Kashō Buddha.<sup>3</sup> And there have been those who have committed just one of them, such as King Ajatashatru who killed his father during the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha. And there have been those who committed three of these most treacherous deeds. During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha there was Ajita, who killed his father, his mother, and an arhat. This Ajita committed these acts while in home life. Later, he was permitted to leave home life behind and become a monk. The monk Devadatta committed three of the most treacherous deeds, namely, creating a schism in the Sangha, shedding the Buddha's blood, and killing an arhat. He was also called Daibadatto, which translates as Tennetsu (He of Celestial Passion).

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3. Utpalavarna's story is told in several discourses, with the most extensive account being given in Discourse 84: On the Spiritual Merits of the Kesa (*Kesa Kudoku*).

The story of Devadatta's creating a schism in the Sangha is as follows:

Devadatta induced five hundred monks who were either foolish or new to the training to follow him atop Mount Gaya where he promoted five false teachings, thereby splitting his followers away from the rest of the Sangha who kept true to the Buddha's Teaching. Shariputra, being weary of this, caused Devadatta to fall into a deep sleep, while Moggallana roused Devadatta's assembly and attempted to get them to return. When Devadatta awoke and saw what was happening, he gave rise to a vow that he would make the two disciples pay for their actions. Lifting up a boulder that was thirty hastas high and fifteen hastas wide, he hurled it at the Buddha.<sup>4</sup> A mountain spirit intercepted the stone with its hand, shattering it into shards, one of which wounded the Buddha's foot, causing it to bleed.

According to this account, Devadatta's splitting of the Sangha came first and the spilling of blood happened later. According to other accounts, it is not clear which came first, the splitting of the Sangha or the spilling of blood. Also, Devadatta beat to death with his own fists the female monk Utpalavarna, who was, by that time, an arhat. These are his three most treacherous deeds.

In his wicked attempt to split the Sangha, he tried to spread false teaching and to split himself off from the monks who kept to the Teaching of the Buddha. Attempting to spread false teaching can only occur in three of the continents, the northern continent being excluded.<sup>5</sup> These attempts to spread false practices began while the Tathagata was still alive and will continue to occur right up to the time when the Dharma has disappeared. False teachings such as these occurred throughout all three of these continents only while the Tathagata was still alive. After His death, they appeared only in the southern continent of Jambudvīpa\* and not in the other continents. Expounding such false teachings is the most wicked act of all.

As a result of his committing these three treacherous deeds, Devadatta fell into a hellish state of constant suffering in his next lifetime.<sup>6</sup> There are people who

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4. A hasta is an Indian unit of measurement equivalent to roughly 18 inches.

5. The northern continent is excluded because it is inhabited only by blissful celestial beings, who would be impervious to what monks were up to.

6. This state of constant suffering is known as the Avichi Hell and is the lowest hellish state among the six worlds of existence. Though the length of time someone may be in such a state is unpredictable, in Buddhism it is not a place of eternal damnation.

have gone to great lengths to commit all five of these treacherous acts, and there are people who have committed only one of them, and there are those who, like Devadatta, have committed three of them. All of them fall into hellish states of continual suffering. Those who have committed just one treacherous deed will spend one eon in some hellish state of continual suffering as recompense. Those who have committed all five of them may receive five types of recompense within a single eon or they may receive them one after the other.

An ancient worthy once said, “It says in the *Āgama Scriptures* and in the *Great Scripture on the Buddha’s Parinirvana* alike that such a one resides for an eon in various types of fire.” Furthermore, these Scriptures also state that the suffering varies according to the seriousness of their treacherous deeds. Now, Devadatta committed three treacherous acts, one after the other, and therefore will have three times the suffering which a wicked person receives from committing just one treacherous act. But Devadatta, upon reaching the end of his life, recited the word ‘homage’, which gave his wicked heart a bit of relief. Regretfully, he died before he could complete the phrase ‘Homage to the Buddha’. Though he had fallen into the state of continual suffering, Devadatta continued to take refuge in Shakyamuni Buddha, even though He was far away, and was thus able to resume doing good deeds.

There were four other monks similar to Devadatta who had fallen into a hellish state of continual suffering. A monk named Kokālika was one among the thousand from the Shakya clan who left home life behind to become monks. When Devadatta and Kokālika were going out the city gate, the horse that they were riding suddenly stumbled, and the two fell off, their hats falling off as well. All those who saw this at the time said, “These two will not receive the benefits from the Buddha’s Teaching.” This monk Kokālika was also called Gukari. During his lifetime he slandered Shariputra and Moggallana, accusing them of committing acts that warranted expulsion from the Sangha. Although the World-honored One tried at the time to dissuade him, Kokālika did not stop, and even Lord Brahma came down to dissuade him, but again he did not stop. Due to his slandering the two venerable monks, he fell into a hellish state in his next lifetime. Even now, he is not provided with the conditions for developing good spiritual roots.

When the monk who had attained the fourth meditative state reached the end of his life, he fell into a hellish state of continual suffering for having slandered the Buddha, even though he died in the intermediate world associated with the fourth



meditative state.<sup>7</sup> Such a condition is called ‘retribution experienced in one’s next life’.

## II

We characterize the effects of the five most treacherous deeds as being without interruption, and for five reasons:

First, because the effects that such deeds produce occur immediately. That is, no sooner has such a wicked one performed such a deed than he immediately falls into a hellish state without experiencing any intervening state.

Second, because the suffering that this person experiences from these effects is continual. For any of these five most treacherous acts, the wicked one falls into the Avichi Hell and, within the temporal space of a single immeasurable eon, experiences suffering that constantly streams on without the least moment of relief. Thus, we describe such an effect as being without interruption in accord with the suffering that it produces.

Third, because the length of time during which any being is in this hellish state is not set and is beyond our ability to calculate. Hence, we speak of the effects of these five most treacherous deeds as being incessant because one who commits any of them will fall into the Avichi Hell and, within a single span of time, will experience suffering that streams on indefinitely without the least moment of relief.

Fourth, because the span of that wicked one’s life while in the Avichi Hell is equally unlimited and beyond our ability to calculate. When someone falls into the Avichi Hell due to any of these five treacherous deeds, that person remains fully awake for an immeasurable eon, knowing no diminishing of suffering. Thus, we describe this hellish state as being without interruption in accord with the effects that it produces.

Fifth, because while in the Avichi Hell, one’s very existence appears to be unlimited and immeasurable, filling the hell completely. This hell is eighty-four thousand *yojanas*\* in length and breadth.

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7. The story of this monk is the subject of Discourse 91: On the Monk in the Fourth Meditative State (*Shizen Biku*). The intermediate world refers to the period after death and before rebirth.

When someone enters that hell, his existence completely fills the space and then, when any other person comes to enter it, that person's existence also completely fills the space, and without the two obstructing each other.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we speak of the effects of the five most treacherous deeds as being without interruption in accord with the effects these deeds produce.

## II

In the third temporal period, the retribution is experienced in some future lifetime. That is to say, when we promote or entertain karmic deeds in this lifetime and then, according to the seeds we have sown, fall into a hellish state in our third or fourth lifetime, or even hundreds of thousands of eons beyond, we call this 'retribution experienced in some future lifetime'.

In other words, there are those in this lifetime who have done good deeds and those who have done evil deeds. Even if they have ceased perpetuating such deeds, they will experience their good or evil karma in their third life, or their fourth life, or even after a hundred thousand future lives. This is what we call 'the retribution experienced in some later future lifetime'. Most of a bodhisattva's merit is the retribution that he or she experiences in a future lifetime from deeds accumulated over three asamkhyeya eons.<sup>9</sup> Not knowing such an underlying principle, trainees entertain ever so many doubts, like the Venerable Shayata in the opening story did whilst he was still in home life. Had he not met the Venerable Kumorata, he would have had a difficult time clarifying his doubts.

When a trainee's thinking is good, his evil thoughts disappear, and when his thinking is evil, his good thoughts immediately disappear.

## II

Long ago in the country of Shravasti there lived two men. One was always doing what was good and the other was always doing what was evil. The trainee who was always doing what was good was

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8. That is, for any person in the Avichi Hell, nothing other than that hellish state seems to exist.

9. An asamkhyeya eon is a period of time that is experienced as being interminably long. A bodhisattva experiences these endless-seeming stretches of time just before entering Buddhahood.

always practicing good deeds with his whole being, never entertaining what was harmful. The trainee who invited evil was always doing bad things with his whole being, never practicing what was good.

When the one practicing good deeds approached the end of his life, a hellish intermediate world appeared before him, due to the strength of evil karma from several lifetimes earlier. Thereupon, he thought, “In my whole life I have always practiced good deeds and have never entertained evil. Surely, I should have been reborn in some celestial world. What conditions have caused this hellish intermediate world to appear before me?” Then the thought arose, “I must surely be receiving some bad karma from earlier lifetimes which has now become ripe, and therefore this hellish intermediate world has appeared.” He then remembered the good karma from his practice throughout his present lifetime, and a profound joy arose in him.

Due to the thoughts of his good deeds appearing before him, the hellish intermediate world disappeared and a celestial intermediate world suddenly appeared in its place. After this, when his life had completely ended, he was reborn in a celestial world.

This person who was always doing good not only thought, “This body of mine is, no doubt, receiving retribution from wicked deeds done in several past lifetimes,” but he also had a further thought, “For the good that I have practiced throughout my life, I shall surely receive recompense in the future.” This was why he was so deeply filled with joy. Because these thoughts of his were true, the hellish intermediate state disappeared and a celestial intermediate state immediately appeared before his eyes, and when his life completely ended, he was reborn in a celestial world. If this person had been a wicked one, and at the end of his life a hellish intermediate world appeared before his eyes, he might well have thought, “My practice of good throughout my whole life has brought me no merit. If good and bad karma exist, how come I am seeing a hellish intermediate world?” At this moment, he would be denying cause and effect, and would be slandering the Three Treasures. Should he be like this, then when he reached the end of his life, he would fall into some hellish state. Because this person was not like this, he was reborn in a celestial world. You need to grasp this fundamental principle and be clear about it.

When a trainee who does wicked things reaches the end of his life, he may unexpectedly see before his eyes a celestial intermediate world of existence, due to the strength of his good deeds in former past lives. He may then think, “Throughout my life I have always

done wicked practices and failed to ever practice what is good. By all rights, I should be reborn in some hell. What circumstances could there possibly have been that this intermediate world has appeared before my very eyes?”

Thus, a false view has arisen, and he denies the existence of good and evil, as well as the fruition of much earlier good seeds, because he had sown only harmful seeds in his present life. Hence, when his life came to an end, he was reborn in some hellish world.

As long as he lived, this person had consistently committed evil acts, and further, he had not practiced even one good deed. Not only that, when his life came to an end, he saw before his very eyes a celestial intermediate world, but he did not know about recompense from distant former lives. Thus, he thought, “During my whole life I committed evil acts, but I am about to be reborn in a celestial world. It is clear to me that good and evil karma have never existed.” Because of the strength of his false views, he denied the existence of good and evil karma in this way, so that the celestial intermediate world that appeared fell away and a hellish intermediate world quickly appeared before him and, ending his life, he fell into some hell. It was due to this false view of his that the celestial intermediate world disappeared. So, you trainees, by all means do not hold to false views! Learn which views are false and which are true until your bodily life has exhausted itself.

First off, to deny causality, to slander Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and to deny both the three temporal worlds and liberation from them are all false views. You need to keep in mind that, in this lifetime, you will not have two or three bodies. Were you to vainly fall into false views and experience evil karma to no avail, how regrettable that would be! When someone, while engaged in some evil act, thinks that it is not evil simply because they hold to the erroneous belief that such an act does not produce retribution for wrongdoing, this does not mean that this person will not experience recompense for their evil deeds. According to their wrongful thinking, the recompense for good that comes may turn around and come back at them as recompense for evil.

## II

The Imperial Chaplain Kōgetsu once asked the venerable monk Chōsa Keishin, “An ancient worthy once said, ‘After we have fully understood, we see that our karmic hindrances have been empty all along. When we have not yet fully understood, then we must, by all means, pay off all our old debts.’ So, how were those like the

Venerable Shishibodai and our great Master Eka, the Second Chinese Ancestor, able to pay off all their old debts?”<sup>10</sup>

Chōsa replied, “O my virtuous one, you have not yet experienced their being empty all along.”

Kōgetsu then asked, “What, pray, is this ‘being empty all along?’”

Chōsa responded, “It is what karmic hindrances are.”

Kōgetsu then asked, “Just what are karmic hindrances?”

Chōsa replied, “What has been empty all along.”

Kōgetsu was at a loss for words. Chōsa then gave him the following poem:

*What conditionally exists, from the first, is not  
That which truly exists,  
And the disappearance of the conditioned is not  
a case of there being nothing.  
The meaning of “Nirvana is the paying off of  
old debts”  
Is that our one True Nature is free from the  
discriminatory.*

Chōsa Keishin was Meditation Master Nansen Fugan’s foremost disciple. He had a reputation for having explored the Matter\* with his Master over a long period of time. Be that as it may, in the present story he was not able to fully grasp the fundamental principle. For instance, he did not understand what Yōka Genkaku was talking about,<sup>11</sup> nor had he clarified what Kumorata’s compassionate instructions to Shayata were. Far and away, it was as if he had not encountered even in his dreams what had been voiced by the World-honored One. Since all that the Buddhas and Ancestors have been expressing had not been Transmitted to you, Chōsa, who could esteem and respect you?

There are three type of spiritual hindrances: karmic hindrances (which arise from our deliberate deeds), compensatory hindrances (which arise as recompense for our past deeds), and defiling hindrances (which arise from our pursuit of our passions). What we call the ‘five most treacherous deeds’ are an example of karmic

10. Shishibodai and Taiso Eka were both executed and were, therefore, unable to complete their full natural life span.

11. An allusion to Genkaku’s famous poem, “The Song that Attests to the Way”. One translation of this is found in *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice*, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1994), pp. 223-241.

hindrances. Although this was not at the heart of what Kōgetsu was asking, what he was saying concerning the past was based on the assumption that karma never disappears but tends to arise as karma from some distant past life. Your error, Chōsa, was that when you were asked, “What, pray, does ‘being empty all along’ mean?” you responded that it refers to karmic hindrances. But how could ‘karmic hindrance’ mean ‘something that has been empty all along’? Since karmic hindrances are something created by our actions, how can something we have created be ‘empty all along’? ‘Created’ and ‘non-created’ exist only in relation to each other. If we did not create them, they would not be karmic hindrances, and if they are something that is created, they would not be something that has been empty all along. It is a non-Buddhist view that karmic hindrances are empty when their true nature has not yet been stirred up. If, as you say, karmic hindrances are ‘empty all along’, then human beings who indulge in creating karma would have no chance of liberating themselves. If they had no way of liberating themselves, then Buddhas could not have come forth in the world. If Buddhas had not come forth in the world, then our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma could not have come from the West. If our Ancestral Master had not come from the West, there could not have been a Nansen. If there had not been a Nansen, who would you have exchanged the Eyes of training with?

Further, when Kōgetsu asked, “Just what, pray, are karmic hindrances?” you replied, “What has been empty all along.” This resembles the old ‘tethering the horse’ response.<sup>12</sup> Even so, it would appear that, due to your weak abilities, you did not fully understand the Matter and were not the equal of the shrine priest who was long in training. This must have been why you gave rise to silly words like those in this dialogue.

Afterwards, you gave him your poem, with the lines:

*The meaning of “Nirvana is the paying off of  
old debts”  
Is that our one True Nature is free from the  
discriminatory.*

As to the one True Nature of which you spoke, just what is that ‘True Nature’? Pray, which among the three natures do you consider It to be?<sup>13</sup> Would it be fair to

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12. That is, when someone asks, “Who tethered the horse?” the one asked replies, “The owner of the horse,” and when then asked, “Who is the owner of the horse?” the one asked replies, “The one who tethered the horse.”

13. A reference to the nature of our deliberate acts. That is, they are good, bad, or neutral.

say that you do not know that ‘our True Nature’ refers to ‘nirvana being our having paid off our old debts?’ When you speak of nirvana, what is this nirvana of yours? Would it be the nirvana of the shravakas?\* Or the nirvana of the pratyekabuddhas?\* Or the nirvana of the Buddha? No matter which, yours cannot equal the meaning of ‘paying off old debts’. What you are expressing is not what the Buddhas and Ancestors expressed. Further, you need to buy some straw sandals and go off hunting for a true Master. Those like the Venerable Shishibodai and our great Master Eka, the Second Chinese Ancestor, have suffered personal injury for the sake of wicked people. Why would you want to resemble those transgressors who caused such harm? This is not your final body, nor is it a body that will not have an intermediate world, so why would you not experience retribution in some future lifetime? If the time is already ripe for you to receive recompense in the future, it will not be something for you to doubt now. Obviously, you need to recognize that Chōsa had not yet clarified what the effects of karma in the three temporal worlds are.

Those who are truly serious in their training must clarify what the effects of karma in the three temporal periods are. Then they will undoubtedly be like the Venerable Kumorata. This is already the activity of those in our Ancestral tradition, so it should not be discarded or neglected. Besides that, you need to explore extensively through your training all eight kinds of karma, which includes such things as temporally unfixed karma.<sup>14</sup> Those who have not yet understood karmic retribution cannot have received the genuine Transmission of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Those who are not yet clear about the principle of karmic retribution in the three temporal periods should not go about recklessly calling themselves teachers and spiritual guides for ordinary people and those in lofty positions.

## II

The World-honored One once said: “Even were hundreds of thousands of eons to pass, the karmic consequences from what we have created do not disappear. When dealing with causes and conditions, we naturally receive the fruits therefrom as karmic recompense. By all means, you should all know that if your moral acts are completely impure, you will get completely impure results when the recompense from this matures. And if your moral acts are

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14. The eight kinds of karma are good karma that acts within each of the three temporal periods, plus good karma that is not limited to just one of these periods, and misfortunate karma within each of these three periods, plus unlimited misfortunate karma.

completely pure, you will get completely pure results when the recompense from this matures. And if your moral acts are a mix of impure and pure, you will get mixed results when the recompense from this matures. Therefore, by all means, you should avoid acts that are completely impure or a mix of impure and pure. You should make every effort to explore through your training with your Master what completely pure deeds are.”

Then, having heard what the Buddha voiced, all in the great assembly rejoiced and received it in trust.

As the World-honored One has taught, when the members of the assembly have ceased to create mixed good and bad karma, even were hundreds of thousands of myriad eons to pass, they will not let our practice die out. Whenever any of them encounter causality, invariably they immediately become aware of it. Thus, when we feel remorse for our evil deeds and, in repentance, bring them to a halt, that will alter our heavy misdeeds, causing us to receive lighter consequences. If we take joy in good deeds—be they one’s own or another’s—we will want to increase them more and more, which is what I mean by ‘not letting the practice die out’. And there is, indeed, recompense for that!

*Copied on the ninth day of the third lunar month in the fifth year of the Kenchō era (March 8, 1253) whilst in the Chief Junior’s quarters at Eihei-ji Temple.*

*Ejō*