

## On the Eight Realizations of a Great One

(*Hachi Dainingaku*)

**Translator's introduction:** According to the postscript, this text was the last that Dōgen prepared before his death. It consists mainly of passages from the *Scripture of the Buddha's Last Teachings*.<sup>1</sup>

The term 'a Great One' refers not only to a Buddha, but also to virtuous monks and bodhisattvas. The term 'realization' refers not only to an intellectual understanding, but also to the act of putting the Teachings into practice, that is, making Them real.

All Buddhas are enlightened people, and because of this, we call what They discern 'the eight realizations of a Great One'. When someone discerns what this Dharma of Theirs is, It brings about nirvana, which is freedom from suffering. On the night when our Shakyamuni Buddha entered nirvana, He gave these eight realizations as part of His final Teaching.

The first is 'having few desires'. What He called 'having few desires' means not chasing far and wide among those objects of the five senses which one has not yet experienced. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, recognize the person who has many cravings. His misery and troubles are many because he seeks for many benefits, gains, and advantages. The person of few cravings is free from seeking after things or yearning for them. Hence, he is free of such sufferings. He desires little, only esteeming what is fitting for his spiritual training and practice. By desiring little, so much more is he able to bring forth fine merits and virtues. The person of few desires is free of flattery and fawning when searching out the intentions of others. The heart of someone who behaves with few desires is, as a consequence, even-tempered and free from gloom, anxiety, sorrow, or fear. When coming in contact with things, he finds a surplus, for he knows no insufficiency. The one who has few desires experiences nirvana, for this is the name for 'having few desires'.

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1. One translation of this is found in *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice*, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1994), pp. 247-260.

The second is ‘being content’. What He called ‘being content’ means limiting what you take to those things that you already have available to you. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, if you wish to be free from miseries and woes, look into contentment, which is synonymous with knowing what is enough. The Teaching of contentment is none other than the location of true wealth, ease, security, and peace. The person who is contented, though he sleeps upon the bare ground, is still at ease and satisfied. Someone who is discontented, even if he were ensconced in a celestial palace would still not find this tallying with his ideas and tastes. The one who is discontented, though rich, is poor. The person who is contented, though poor, is rich. The one who is discontented always does what his five desires latch onto. He does that which causes grief to, and arouses the compassionate pity of, one who is contented. This is what I mean by ‘being content’.

The third is ‘enjoying the tranquility of nirvana’. What He called ‘enjoying the tranquility of nirvana’ means leaving behind all the noise and hubbub for the solitude of the open country. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, if you seek to be tranquil and quiet, liberated from the insistence of the defiling passions, at ease and content, then you should part company with confusion and bustle, and dwell at your ease in some solitary place. The person who dwells in quietude continually forsakes what those in the heavens esteem so highly amongst themselves. Therefore, withdraw from those about you, as well as from other crowds and, in a place of solitude apart from them, reflect on the source of the eradication of suffering at your leisure. If you are one who enjoys the company of others, then you will take on the woes of their company, just as with a flock of birds that gather in some huge tree, there is the lament of dead branches breaking off under their weight. When the world binds itself around us, we drown in the suffering of such company just as an old elephant, sunk down in mire, is unable to drag himself out. This is what I call ‘distancing yourself from those about you’.

The fourth is ‘being devoted to progress’. He called this ‘being devoted to progress’ because of His ceaseless devotion to performing good acts—a devotion undiluted and a progression without regressing. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, if you are diligent in your devotion to progress, training will not be difficult for you. Therefore, be diligent and devote yourselves to progress, just as a small stream, ever flowing, can bore holes in rocks. If the mind of the trainee is often inattentive and remiss, it will be just the same as making a fire by friction and blowing on it before it is hot enough to catch fire. Although your desire to train can blaze up, the fires of training are hard to arrive at. This is what I call ‘being devoted to progress’.

The fifth is ‘not neglecting mindfulness’. He also called it ‘keeping to Right Mindfulness’. What He called ‘keeping to the Dharma without losing sight of It’ means keeping to Right Mindfulness. It is also called ‘not forgetting to be mindful’. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, seek fine understanding, search out good assistance, and do not neglect mindfulness. If you are one who does not neglect mindfulness, the thieves of passion defilement will not be able to enter. Therefore, you monks, always keep your minds alert, for the one who loses his mindfulness loses his merits and virtues. When the strength of your mindfulness is constant and vigorous, though the five desires would break in to rob you, they will do you no harm. You will be as one who puts on armor before entering a battle and will have nothing to fear. This is what I call ‘not neglecting mindfulness’.

The sixth is ‘doing meditation’. What He called ‘doing meditation’ means abiding in the Dharma undisturbed. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, when your mind is kept alert, then you are in meditation. Because your mind is in meditation, you are able to know the world, birth and death, as well as the characteristics of all things. Therefore, you monks should always study and practice the ways of meditation with finest diligence. When you achieve meditation, your heart is not in turmoil or your mind scattered. Just as a household that would be frugal with water arranges dikes and pond banks carefully, so a trainee does similarly. Therefore, for the sake of the water of discriminate wisdom, practice meditation well that you may prevent the loss of that water through leaks caused by the defiling passions. This is what I call ‘doing meditation’.

The seventh is employing ‘wise discernment’. What He called employing wise discernment means letting one’s hearing, thinking, and practice naturally arise from one’s realization of Truth. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, when you have wise discernment, you will not be attached to desires. By constant self-reflection and watching what you do, you will not bring about any loss through the defiling passions. Within My Teachings, this is what can bring you to liberation. If someone denies this, not only is he not a person of the Way, he is also not an ordinary, everyday person either. Indeed, there is no name for such a one. Genuine wise discernment is the sturdy craft that ferries others across the sea of old age, disease, and death. It is also a great, bright lamp for the darkness of ignorance, a wonderful curative for all disease and suffering. It is a sharp axe for felling the trees of defiling passions. Therefore, you monks should improve yourselves by means of this wise discernment, which you attain through hearing, thinking about, and putting into practice My Teachings. When someone has the radiance of this wisdom then, though he be blind, he will clearly see what people are. This is what ‘wise discernment’ is.

The eighth is ‘not playing around with theories and opinions’. What He called ‘not playing around with theories and opinions’ means letting go of dualities and judgmentalism that one may experience. Fully realizing the True Nature of all things is what ‘not playing around with theories and opinions’ means. As the Buddha said:

O you monks, if your mind plays around with all kinds of theories and opinions, it will be confused and in disorder and, though you have left home to become a monk, you have still not realized liberation. Therefore, O monks, quickly abandon your disordered mind and your playing around with your theories and notions. If you wish to enjoy the pleasure that comes from calmness and the extinction of defiling passions, thoroughly eliminate the affliction of playing around in your head. This is what I mean by ‘not playing around with theories and opinions’.

These are the eight realizations of a Great One. Each and every Great One is equipped with all eight. When extended, they are immeasurable; when abbreviated,

they are sixty-four.<sup>2</sup> They are our Great Master Shakyamuni's final voicing of the Dharma, His last instructions on the Great Course, His ultimate song in the middle of the night on the fifteenth of the second lunar month. After speaking the following, He did not give voice to the Dharma again, and at last, entered His parinirvana.

O you monks, with wholehearted devotion always seek to get back on the path. Everything in all worlds, both the movable and the immovable, works to defeat and destroy all signs of uncertainty. Cease for a moment and do not ask Me to say more, for the time is nigh when I would pass and I wish for my parinirvana. These are My last Teachings and instructions.

Therefore, disciples of the Tathagata, by all means, set yourself to study these instructions of His and do not neglect to study them, for if you do not know them, you are not a disciple of the Buddha. These are the very Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, which is the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana.

Even so, there are many today who do not know them, for there are few who have encountered or heard of them. That they do not know them is due to devilish disturbances. Those who have planted few good spiritual roots have also not heard or encountered them. During the long past days of the genuine Dharma and the superficial Dharma, disciples of the Buddha knew them, studied them, and explored them through their training with their Master. Nowadays only one or two among a thousand monks know the "Eight Realizations of a Great One". Sad to say, there is nothing to compare to the degeneration of the Dharma in these decadent times of ours. While the Tathagata's True Dharma is still circulating in the great-thousandfold world and His immaculate Dharma has not yet disappeared, you should hasten to learn It. Do not be slack and neglect It.

To encounter the Buddha's Dharma is difficult even in immeasurable eons. To obtain a human body is also difficult. And even if you do obtain a human body, to obtain a human body on one of the three continents is better.<sup>3</sup> Among these

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2. These two sentences that begin Dōgen's commentary are interpolations in the manuscript. 'When extended' means that there are innumerable ways in which these eight may be realized. 'The sixty-four' means that each of the eight may be coupled with each of the eight, that is, for example, one should keep to mindfulness when doing any of the eight, including keeping to mindfulness.
  3. A reference to three of the four continents said to lie around Mount Sumeru. Of these three, the southern continent of Jambudvīpa is considered the most favorable, since those born there can more readily experience the transiency of human life. The fourth continent is a

three, being a human on the southern continent is best, because there one can encounter Buddha, hear the Dharma, leave home life behind to become a monk, and realize the Way. Those who died prior to the Tathagata's entering His parinirvana had not heard of the eight realizations of a Great One, much less studied them. That you now have encountered and heard of them, and are studying them, is due to the strength of the good roots you planted in the past. In your studying them now, in your developing them in life after life and thereby arriving, without fail, at the supreme awakening to Truth, and in your giving expression to them for the sake of sentient beings, you may well be the equal of Shakyamuni Buddha. May there be no difference between the two of you.

*Written at Eihei-ji Temple on the sixth day of the first lunar month in the fifth year of the Kenchō era (February 5, 1253).<sup>4</sup>*



*Now, on the day before the end of the summer retreat in the seventh year of the Kenchō era (August 3, 1255), I had my clerical officer Gien finish copying this text.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, I have proofed his copy.*

*This was our Master's last discourse, drafted when he was already ill. Among other things, I heard him say that he wanted to rework all of the Shōbōgenzō that had previously been written in Japanese script<sup>6</sup> and also to include some new manuscripts, so that he would be able to compile a work consisting altogether of one hundred discourses.*

*This present discourse, which was a first draft, was to be the twelfth of the new ones. After this our Master's illness worsened. As a result, he stopped working on such things as the drafts. Therefore, this draft is our late Master's final teaching for us. Unfortunately, we will never see His full draft of the hundred chapters, which is something to be greatly regretted. Those who love and miss our late Master should, by all means, make copies of this twelfth chapter, and take care to preserve it. It contains the final instructions of our Venerable Shakyamuni and is the final legacy of our late Master's Teaching.*

*I, Ejō, have given this final account.*

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place where beings are enjoying too much bliss to be willing to listen to the Buddha's Teaching.

4. Dōgen is said to have died on August 28, 1253.
5. Gien began his training under Dōgen. Upon the latter's death, he trained with Kōun Ejō, ultimately becoming one of his Dharma heirs and the Fourth Abbot of Eihei-ji.
6. As distinct from his collection of three hundred kōan stories, which were written in Chinese and are without any commentary. That collection is called Dōgen's *Chinese Shinji Shōbōgenzō*.