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On the Spiritual Question as It Manifests Before Your Very Eyes

(*Genjō Kōan*)

Translator’s Introduction: *Genjō Kōan*, composed by Dōgen for a lay disciple, resembles in form and style a type of essay popular in medieval Japan. Highly evocative, often seemingly ambiguous, rich with imagery, resonant in tone, heavily endowed with phrases and sentences based on Chinese syntax, this discourse is akin to a prose poem. In content, however, it is clearly Buddhist in intent. That is, the focus is not on intellectual constructs and logical progressions of thought, but on lived experiences and what our relationship is to them. For instance, his remarks about time are not intended to be studied as if they were part of some philosophical or scientific discourse, but to be viewed as a way of talking about how we experience time while we train upon the path to Buddhahood. This can be seen, for instance, in the opening paragraph of Dōgen’s discourse, where the first sentence refers to the span of time which a trainee perceives as a period of ‘undergoing training’, and the second to the span during which this trainee experiences his ‘being enlightened’.

In that period of time when Buddhas give voice to the Teachings on existence in all its variety, there is talk of ‘delusion and enlightenment’, of ‘practice and training’, of ‘birth’, of ‘death’, of ‘Buddhas’, of ‘ordinary beings’. In that period of time when it is no longer relevant to speak of an ‘I’ along with its ‘whole universe’, there is no delusion or enlightenment, no Buddhas or ordinary beings, no being born, no extinction.¹

Because the path to Buddhahood naturally springs forth from a feeling that there is ‘too much’ of one thing or ‘not enough’ of another, there is ‘birth and

1. This opening paragraph is an allusion to the two ‘states’ of ‘being engaged with doing one’s training’ and ‘experiencing the realization of Truth’. While someone is consciously engaged in the former, talk employing terms which the intellect can grasp is common and helpful, but when someone is living in the direct experience of one’s True Nature, all such terms lose their relevance. Dōgen’s statement here and in later, similar passages may suggest that when someone realizes enlightenment, training stops. He clarifies the error of such an interpretation in Discourse 11: On ‘Just for the Time Being, Just for a While, for the Whole of Time is the Whole of Existence’ (*Uji*). Prior to delivering the present talk, he had already taken up the question of the relationship between training and enlightenment with his monks in his work, “Rules for Meditation” (*Fukan Zazengi*), written in 1233.

extinction’, there is ‘delusion and enlightenment’, there are ‘ordinary beings and Buddhas’. Yet, even though this is the way things are, still, we feel regret at a blossom’s falling and we loathe seeing the weeds envelop everything.

To undertake enlightening the whole universe through one’s training while carrying the burden of a self is a delusion: to enlighten oneself through training while urging all things onward is an awakening from delusion. To have a great awakening to one’s delusion is to be as all Buddhas are: to be greatly deluded within one’s enlightenment is to be as ordinary people are. Moreover, there are those folks who realize enlightenment on top of their enlightenment: there are those folks who are deluded within their delusion.

When Buddhas are truly Buddhas, They need not perceive that They Themselves are Buddha. Even so, having awakened to Their Buddha Nature, They will carry along with Themselves Their confirmation of Their Buddha Nature.

Since we are provided with both a body and a mind, we grasp onto the physical forms we see: since we are provided with both a body and a mind, we cling to the sounds we hear. As a consequence, we make ourselves inseparable from all things, yet we are not like some shadowy figure ‘lodging’ in a mirror or like the moon in water.² Whenever we witness what is on the one side, its opposite side will be in darkness.³

To learn what the path to Buddhahood is, is to learn what the True Self is. To learn what the True Self is, is to forget about the self. To forget about the self is to become one with the whole universe. To become one with the whole universe is to be shed of ‘my body and mind’ and ‘their bodies and minds’. The traces from this experience of awakening to one’s enlightenment will quiet down and cease to show themselves, but it takes quite some time for all outer signs of being awake to disappear.

When someone first begins to search for the Dharma, he is very far from the realm of the Dharma: once he has had the Dharma passed on to him, he will quickly become one who abides in his Original State.⁴

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2. Here, Dōgen uses the image of ‘the moon in water’ to refer to something that is only a reflection of the actual object; the phrase is not used in the sense of the common Buddhist metaphor for the Buddha Nature reflected in all things.
 3. That is, when we are still clinging to things, we do not see the duality inherent within our own thinking and thus we perceive only one side of the duality.
 4. Dōgen’s point is that not knowing the Dharma impedes one’s arriving at Truth. That is, the passing on of the Dharma helps the trainee to realize his Original State, but it does not necessarily cause him to realize It simply upon hearing the Teachings.

When someone riding in a boat turns his gaze towards the shore, he misjudges the shore to be moving: when he fixes his eye firmly upon the boat, he will recognize that the boat is plowing on. Likewise, should you let your mind and body run riot, going along with what you perceive the world to be, you will make the mistake of thinking that you have a permanently abiding self-nature within your body and mind. If you commit yourself fully to traveling the Way and you then return to that Place within, the reason why there is no personal ‘self’ within the whole universe will become clear.

A stick of firewood, once reduced to ashes, cannot once again revert to being a stick of firewood. Nevertheless, you should not hold onto the opinion that the ashes are the future of that which the stick was the past. What you need to understand is that, when firewood is persisting in the physical state of being firewood, there will be a before and there will be an after. Although there is a before and an after, there is a now which is cut off from ‘before’ and ‘after’. While ashes persist in the physical state of being ashes, they will have their ‘after’ and their ‘before’.

After a stick of firewood has turned to ashes, just as it does not once again become firewood, so after someone dies, he does not come back to life again. Even so, as was the customary way the Buddha taught, we do not speak of life becoming death, which is why He spoke of things ‘not arising’. The Buddha also passed on through His turning of the Wheel of the Dharma that death does not become life, which is why He spoke of things ‘not perishing’. Life is the situation at one time, and death is the situation at another. For example, it is like winter and spring: do not imagine that winter ‘becomes’ spring, or speak of spring ‘becoming’ summer.

When someone has spiritually awakened, he resembles the moon’s ‘residing’ in water: the moon does not get wet nor is the water shattered. Although the moon is a great, broad light, it lodges in the tiniest bit of water. The moon at its fullest, as well as the whole of the heavens, lodges within the dewdrop poised on a blade of grass, just as it lodges in any single bit of water. Spiritual awakening does not tear a person asunder; thus, it is like the moon’s not making a dent in the water. A person no more impedes his spiritual awakening than a dewdrop impedes the moon in the heavens. The deeper the reflection, the higher the light: how long the period of your spiritual awakening will last depends on how large your drop of water is and how full your moon is seen to be.

When the Truth has not yet completely filled someone’s body and mind, he is apt to think that his knowledge of the Dharma is already sufficient. When the Truth sufficiently fills his body and mind, he feels sure that some aspect is still lacking. By way of analogy, when you go out in a boat to the middle of the ocean, beyond the sight of any land or mountain, and look around you, all you see is the

vast encircling water. Or, as another might put it, there is nothing to be seen. Be that as it may, this great Ocean is not a vast circle, and how we perceive It does not depend on what direction we look in. It is simply that we cannot exhaust what the rest of this Ocean's nature is, though some have likened it to a dragon's splendid palace or its jeweled necklace. Although this Ocean extends as far as our eye can see, after a while It will seem to be simply 'a vast encircling'—indeed, even the whole universe will seem to be just the same.

Whether we are caught up in the dust of the world or have removed ourselves from it, we are involved with many doings, yet we only realize what our eyes can see through practicing meditation and studying the Way, for we are limited by what we can see and comprehend at the present moment. Taking our spiritual tradition's viewpoint of the universe as your model, you will realize that, apart from appearing angular or round, the remaining attributes of the ocean and the mountains are vast and limitless, and that the world exists on all sides of us. But it is not only as if It were just on all sides. You must realize that It is what is beneath your very feet and within every drop of water.

A fish in the ocean, wherever it swims, finds the water limitless; a bird in the sky, wherever it flies, finds the air unbounded. Nevertheless, fish and birds, from the very beginning, have always been one, respectively, with the water and the sky. To put it simply, when their need is great, their use is great; when their need is small, their use is small. Acting in this manner, they never fail to make the fullest use of their environs at all times, nor do they ever reject what they may find there. Even so, if a bird is pulled out of the air, in short order it will perish; if a fish is pulled out of the water, it will quickly die. You must have realized by now that 'the water' signifies 'life', just as 'the sky' signifies 'life'. 'A bird' refers to 'a life', just as 'a fish' refers to 'a life'. 'Being alive' should be taken to mean 'the bird', as well as 'the fish'. Moreover, this should be taken one step further, since the situation is no different for spiritual practice and realization, or with the flow of life and the life in that flow. Nevertheless, after someone has thoroughly explored what 'water' is and what 'sky' is, if 'the bird' or 'the fish' should remain so that they stand in contrast to 'water' or 'sky', then he will not find his way in either Ocean or in Space: he will not arrive at the Place.

When you arrive at this Place, you will have been spiritually questioning what is before your very eyes by traveling the Way of the Buddhas and Ancestors. When you locate the path you have been following, you will discover that it is the spiritual question that has been before your very eyes as you have traveled the Way. This path and this Place are neither large nor small, neither 'self' nor 'other', nor something from the past, nor something revealed in the now: It is just as It is. Thus, when someone spiritually practices and realizes the Way of the Buddhas, it is

a matter of his having received some Teaching and penetrated into that Teaching, a matter of his having received some sentence of instruction and put into practice what that sentence says. Here is where the Place is. Accordingly, as we penetrate deeper and deeper into the Way, our spiritual surroundings, which we should have known, we clearly do not know, but because we are living together with our ever-deepening investigation of Buddha Dharma and training with It, we have what we need.

To be sure, having once realized the Place, you must not analyze It in order to understand It through discriminatory thought and, thereby, reduce It to fit your own opinions. When you have bored through to certainty, It all at once manifests before your very eyes, yet That which is the most intimate will not necessarily take some visible form. ‘Manifesting before your very eyes’ may or may not have a literal meaning.

Meditation Master Mayoku Hōtetsu, one summer day, sat fanning himself when a monk came up to him and said, “It is said that the nature of the wind always abides and that there is no place where it does not circulate, so why does my reverend monk fan himself?”

The Master replied, “You are merely aware that the Nature of the Wind always abides, but you have not yet grasped the principle that there is no place where It is not present and active.”

When the monk then asked, “What is this underlying principle of Its being universally present?” the Master simply continued to fan himself. The monk respectfully bowed to the Master.

Unequivocal and genuine experiences of the Buddha’s Dharma, which is the living Path of the genuine Transmission, are just like this. Since It always abides, the Master did not need to use a fan; yet, even when it is not used, the Sound of the Wind—that is, the voicing of the Dharma—can be heard. Not to know That which is ever-abiding is not to know the Nature of the Wind. Because the Nature of the Wind is always abiding, the winds of training for our Buddhist family bring about the manifesting before one’s very eyes of That which is the True Gold of the Great Earth, and bring to maturity the nourishing waters of the Greatest River.

This was written around mid-autumn—that is, the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month—in the first year of the Tempuku era (September 20, 1233), and given to my lay disciple Yanagi Kōshū of Kyūshū.

Included in 1252.