

On ‘The Mind Cannot Be Held Onto’

(*Shin Fukatoku*)

ORAL VERSION

Translator’s Introduction: The *Shōbōgenzō* contains two versions of this discourse. The present one is based on a talk Dōgen gave to his disciples. The second, which follows this one, was composed as a written document. While the overall theme and some of the passages are the same, the two versions are sufficiently different to justify including both.

The title and opening line come from the *Scripture on the Diamond-Sharp Wise Discernment That Leads One to the Other Shore*, often referred to simply as the *Diamond-Cutting Scripture*. As with other phrases that Dōgen takes from the Scriptures and from the remarks or writings of Zen Masters, he often expands on their meaning so that no single translation suitably fits all contexts. In the present instance, the meaning of the title phrase shifts from a concern with the transiency of the mind (‘the mind cannot be held onto’), to the inability of the intellect to comprehend Buddha Mind (‘the mind cannot grasp It’), to the intangible nature of the all-encompassing Mind (‘Mind cannot be grasped’). In this translation, where the word *shin* appears in the original, it is rendered as ‘Mind’ when the reference appears to refer to the Buddha Mind (Buddha Nature), and as ‘mind’ when referring to the conventional functioning of the intellect. The phrase *fukatoku* is rendered in a variety of ways depending on what seems relevant to the context.

Shakyamuni Buddha once said, “The mind of the past cannot be retained; the mind of the present cannot be held onto; the mind of the future cannot be grasped.” This is what the Buddhas and Ancestors have thoroughly explored through Their practice. From within this ‘cannot be held onto’, They have fashioned the niches and baskets of Their own past, present, and future. Even so, They have made use of the niches and baskets of others in Their tradition.¹ What I call ‘Their tradition’ is synonymous with Their ‘being unable to hold onto the mind’. Our cogitating and discriminating at this very moment is synonymous with our ‘being unable to hold onto the mind’. The whole of our physical existence which we use every hour of the day is indeed synonymous with our ‘being unable to hold onto the mind’. Once we have entered the private quarters of an Ancestor

1. That is, They have structured Their daily lives from within That which is ungraspable, and They have sometimes borrowed from Their predecessors’ ways of spiritually fashioning Their lives.

of the Buddha, we comprehend what 'not being able to hold onto the mind' refers to. But before we have entered the quarters of an Ancestor of the Buddha, no questions about 'Mind cannot be held onto' arise, nor have we made this 'Mind' manifest, nor is It anything we have personally seen or heard about. Those fellows who are engaged in the worldly teaching of texts and the scholarly study of commentaries, as well as those folks who hear but do not apply the Teaching and those who are only interested in their own awakening, exist here and now, without having encountered It even in their dreams. Evidence of this is near at hand, as the following narrative illustrates.



Before Meditation Master Tokusan Senkan's awakening, he used to brag about his skill in elucidating the *Diamond-Cutting Scripture*, even boasting sometimes about his being the Fully Perfected Lord of that Scripture (since his family name Chou meant 'fully perfected'). He claimed to be particularly well up on the commentaries on this Scripture composed by the Chinese scholar Ch'ing-lung. What is more, he had made compilations of a ton of books. And there was no lecturer who could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the likes of him. But at the same time, he was one of the last in line among those purely academic teachers who were concerned only with analyzing written texts word by word.

One day, he heard that there was an unsurpassed Buddhist Teaching in the South that was being passed on from successor to successor. Inflamed with indignation and armed with Scriptures and other doctrinal texts, he went forth to the South, crossing mountains and rivers. As it happened, he heard about the assembly of Meditation Master Ryūtan Sōshin (who had been Transmitted under Sekitō Kisen). Whilst on his way to this assembly with the intention of joining it, he stopped by the wayside to catch his breath. At that moment, an old woman came up beside him, also stopping by the side of the road to rest a bit. Lecturer Tokusan casually asked her who she was.

The old woman replied, "I'm just an old woman who sells rice cakes."

Tokusan asked her if she would sell him some for his personal use.

The old woman replied, "Reverend monk, what use would you have for buying them?"

Tokusan said, "I want to buy them to refresh my mind."

The old woman then remarked, "Reverend monk, that load you're carrying with you is really something!"

Tokusan replied, “Have you not heard of me? I am the Fully Perfected Lord of the *Diamond-Cutting Scripture*. I have so mastered this Scripture that there is nothing in It that I do not understand. What I am carrying with me are my commentaries on the *Diamond-Cutting Scripture*.”

Upon hearing him say this, the old woman asked, “Reverend monk, would you permit an old woman like me to put a question to you?”

Tokusan replied, “You now have my permission to ask whatever you may wish.”

The old woman said, “I once heard the part in the *Diamond-Cutting Scripture* where it says, ‘The mind of the past cannot be held onto; the mind of the present cannot be held onto; the mind of the future cannot be held onto.’ Which mind do you think you will refresh with these rice cakes? If the reverend monk is able to say, I will sell you some rice cakes. If the reverend monk is unable to say, I will not sell you any.”

Tokusan, at this moment, was so flabbergasted that he did not recall how he would have customarily responded, whereupon the old woman dismissed him with a flick of her wrist and departed without selling Tokusan any of her rice cakes.

How regrettable that a commentator on hundreds of documents, one who has been a lecturer for decades, was seen through by a poor old woman and could not come up with a response when posed one measly question. It is like the vast difference between, on the one hand, meeting a true teacher, paying heed to a true teacher, and being able to hear the True Teaching and, on the other, not yet having heard the True Teaching nor having encountered a true teacher. This was the occasion when Tokusan first said, “A rice cake painted in a picture cannot satisfy one’s hunger.” Nowadays, he is admired as one who inherited the Dharma from Ryūtan.

When we reflect deeply upon what is going on in this encounter between the old woman and Tokusan, what Tokusan had not clarified in the distant past can be clearly heard today. Even after he met Ryūtan, he still must have had nightmares about this old woman. He was a latecomer to learning through practice and not some ancient Buddha who had gone beyond being enlightened. Although the old woman had, on that occasion, succeeded in shutting Tokusan’s mouth up, it is difficult to establish whether she was, in fact, ‘such a person’.* The reason is that,

* See *Glossary*.

upon hearing the phrase 'the mind cannot be held onto', she may have thought simply that the mind is not something to be obtained or something to be possessed, and therefore spoke to him as she did. If Tokusan had been a solid fellow, he would have had the ability to see through to what the old woman was really getting at. Had he seen through to that, it would have been clear whether she was truly 'such a person'. But Tokusan had not yet become the awakened 'Tokusan', so he was not yet able to know whether she was 'such a person' or not.



In Great Sung China today, among the novices garbed in the patched robes and broad sleeves of monks, there are those who laugh at Tokusan's inability to respond appropriately and who esteem what they take to be the old woman's sharp wit. This is something that is surely quite pitiful and befuddled, since there are reasons for us to have doubts about the old woman. For instance, at the very moment when Tokusan was unable to speak, the old woman could have turned to him and said, "The reverend monk is unable to respond now, so he should go on and put the question to this old woman, and she, in response, will say something for the reverend monk's benefit." By speaking in this manner, it would be evident that the old woman was what we call 'such a person' if, in response to Tokusan's question, she spoke true. Even though she had a question for him, she had not yet expressed the Matter* herself. Ever since ancient times, no one has been called 'such a person' who has not uttered at least a single word to express It. We can see from Tokusan's past that there is no benefit in constantly bragging about oneself. We can realize by means of the old woman that a person who has not yet expressed It cannot be acknowledged as having realized the Truth.

As an experiment, let us say something in Tokusan's stead. Were the old woman really posing her question from 'that frame of mind', Tokusan might have said to her, "If you are in 'that frame of mind', do not sell me any rice cakes."² Had Tokusan spoken in this way, he might have been someone of sharp wit who had learned something through the practice of spiritual training.

Tokusan might have asked the old woman, "The mind of the past cannot be retained; the mind of the present cannot be held onto; the mind of the future cannot be grasped; so which mind do you propose to refresh with your rice cakes?" Were she asked in this way, then she might have responded to Tokusan by saying, "If the

2. 'That frame of mind' is a non-literal rendering of the Japanese *immo* (C. *jen-mo*), a term used in Zen Buddhist writings in relation to someone who is operating from the spiritual certainty of an awakened mind.

reverend monk only knows that rice cakes do not refresh the mind, then he does not know that Mind refreshes the rice cakes or that Mind refreshes the mind.”

Were she to speak thus, Tokusan would definitely have had the doubt arise.³ Then, at that very moment, she should select three rice cakes and hand them over to Tokusan. Just as Tokusan is about to take them, the old woman should say, “The mind of the past cannot be retained; the mind of the present cannot be held onto; the mind of the future cannot be grasped.” On the other hand, if Tokusan does not reach out to take them, she might take one of the rice cakes and hit him with it, saying, “You gutless wonder, don’t be such a ninny!” Were she to speak like this, should Tokusan respond, then well and good. If he were still unable to say anything, the old woman should say something more for Tokusan’s sake. But she only gave him a flick of her wrist and left. Maybe there was a bee in her sleeve.

Tokusan, for his part, does not even say, “I’m unable to say anything. Old woman, will you say something in my stead?” So, not only did he fail to say what he should have said, he also did not ask what he should have asked. What a pity! The old woman’s and Tokusan’s questions and answers concerning the mind of the past and the mind of the future are merely their mind of the present being unable to grasp It.

Although Tokusan afterwards succeeded in bringing about his awakening to the Light, he did not give the appearance of one who had done so; he was simply someone whose outward demeanor was consistently gruff.⁴ Since he trained under Ryūtan for some time, the horns on his head must surely have gotten knocked off, and the pearl from under the dragon’s chin would have been authentically Transmitted to him. To merely see the blowing out of a paper candle⁵ is insufficient for the Transmission of the Torch.⁶

So, novices who are learning through their training should, beyond doubt, be diligent in their explorations. Those who have treated their training lightly are not right. Those who have been diligent in their explorations are Ancestors of the

3. That is, he would have doubted that what he had been able to comprehend intellectually was all that there is to realizing spiritual Truth.

4. One effect of a kenshō in an erudite person is their becoming humble and modest.

5. A reference to the account of Tokusan’s spiritual awakening, which Dōgen retells in another of his writings called the *Shinji Shōbōgenzō*. Written entirely in a Japanese form of Chinese, it consists of three hundred kōan stories. A translation of Tokusan’s story (from Book 2, Kōan 4) is given in the Addendum which follows at the end of this discourse.

6. That is, to be a true Ancestor of the Buddha takes more than having a kenshō; it also requires ceaseless spiritual training and practice.

Buddha. In sum, saying that ‘the mind cannot grasp It’ is the same as saying that someone has bought a painting of a rice cake, then chewed it all up in one mouthful, savoring its flavor.

Delivered to the assembly during the summer retreat in the second year of the Ninji era (1241) at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple, Uji Prefecture, Yamashiro Province.



**Translator’s Addendum from
Book 2, Kōan 4 of Dōgen’s Chinese *Shinji Shōbōgenzō***

For a long time, the monk Tokusan had made a career of lecturing on the *Diamond-Cutting Scripture*. Later on, having heard that the Zen tradition had begun to flourish widely in the South, he could not let the matter rest. Finally, he stopped lecturing and, dismissing his students, headed for the South, armed with manuscripts. For a start, he proceeded to Ryūtan Monastery. He had barely crossed the threshold of the monastery when he said, “For a long time, I have looked for Ryūtan. Now that I have finally arrived, the Abbot himself is nowhere in sight.” Ryūtan said, “My child, you have arrived at Ryūtan in person.” Tokusan then bowed in respect and withdrew.

When night came on, Tokusan entered the Abbot’s quarters, intent on attending upon the Abbot. As the time had grown late, Ryūtan said, “My child, why don’t you retire?” At length, Tokusan, setting great store in the Abbot, raised the bamboo curtain and went out. Seeing how dark it was outside, he returned and said, “It is pitch black outside.”⁷ Ryūtan then took a paper candle and proffered it to Tokusan. Just as Tokusan touched it, Ryūtan blew out the flame, whereupon Tokusan suddenly had a great awakening and immediately bowed in respect. Ryūtan asked, “My child, upon seeing such a thing as this, why did you immediately bow?” Tokusan replied, “From now on, I will not doubt the tongue of our country’s venerable monk again.”

The next day, Ryūtan said in the Lecture Hall, “You have here this ‘real person’. His teeth are like swords; his mouth resembles a basin of blood. Though

7. That is, Ryūtan encourages Tokusan to go (‘retire’) into meditation (‘raise the bamboo curtain’). Deep in meditation (‘going out’ of the intellectual mind), Tokusan confronts his spiritual ignorance (“It is pitch black outside [of my intellect].”), which is what he reports to Ryūtan.

you may strike him with a stick, he does not turn his head. At a later time, he will turn towards the peak of the solitary mountain and leave here to establish my Way.”

At length, Tokusan took his manuscripts before the Dharma Hall and made a bonfire of them, expressing the matter by saying, “Though I have penetrated all manner of obscure ways of speaking, it has been like sending a single hair into the great void of space. Although I have fully done what the world considers important, it has resembled letting a single drop of water fall into a vast canyon.” As he put the manuscripts into the fire, they were forthwith consumed. Thereupon, he made a respectful obeisance.