

On the Ancient Mirror

(*Kokyō*)

Translator's Introduction: In this discourse, Dōgen explores a number of metaphorical references to mirrors as they appear in various writings from Zen Buddhism and Shintō, the native religion of Japan. In particular, he identifies three types of mirror—the Great Round Mirror, the Clear Mirror, and the Ancient Mirror—and discusses how these three are interrelated, while still distinguishable from each other.

It may be helpful to keep in mind that *kokyō* can be rendered not only as the Ancient Mirror but also as the Mirror of Old and the Mirror of Former Buddhas.

Further, Dōgen's references to physical mirrors are to those made from metal that was cast in a flat, circular mold and then highly polished on one side. It was not uncommon for such mirrors, in time, to be broken up and recast into Buddhist statuary, which was left unpolished.

As with a few of Dōgen's earlier discourses, some readers may find it useful to read this one, in particular, more than once, since there are a number of places where the import of what Dōgen is saying only becomes clear when later passages are encountered. I have refrained from making explanatory comments at these places, lest such remarks undermine the effects of Dōgen's particular 'alogical' manner of presentation.

What all Buddhas and Ancestors accept, preserve, and individually pass on is the Ancient Mirror. It is Their same view and Their same face: It is Their same image and Their same casting, for They have done the same training and have realized the same Truth. When foreigners come, foreigners appear in It, be they eight thousand or a hundred thousand; when Han come, Han appear in It, be it for a single moment or for all of time.¹ When things of the past come, things of the past appear in It; when things of the present come, things of the present appear in It. When a Buddha comes, a Buddha appears in It; when an Ancestor comes, an Ancestor appears in It.

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1. This statement is based on one made by the Chinese Zen Master Seppō, which Dōgen discusses later in this discourse. 'Han' is the name that the Chinese use to refer to themselves, as distinct from 'foreigners'. In Zen texts, it is also used as a term for those who are enlightened to their Buddha Nature, as well as for Buddha Nature in general. In addition, 'Han and foreigner' carries the connotation of what we consider to be part of us and what we view as separate from ourselves. 'A hundred thousand' is often used to express the idea of one hundred percent of all the various kinds of something; 'eight thousand' would, by contrast, convey the notion of a small sampling of those things.



The Eighteenth Ancestor, the Venerable Kayashata, was a person from the state of Magadha in the western region of India. He was of Udraka's clan.² His father's name was T'ien-kai and his mother's was Fang-sheng.³ His mother once saw in a dream what she described as a great deity who was carrying a large mirror and who had come to greet her. She associated this with her being pregnant. Seven days later, she gave birth to the Master. At the time of his birth, his body was like lustrous porcelain. Before he had even been bathed, his body was sweet smelling and clean. From his earliest days, he was fond of quietude, and his way of putting things differed from that of ordinary children.

From the time he was born, a clear and bright round mirror naturally appeared along with him—the round mirror being the Completely Perfect Mirror—a rare occurrence in any generation. Saying that the round mirror appeared along with him does not mean that the mirror was born from his mother. The Master was in her womb, and then, at the same time that he emerged from her womb, the round mirror showed up, spontaneously manifesting itself right near him, as if it were some everyday household object. The significance of this term 'round mirror' goes beyond the conventional meaning. Whenever the child approached anyone, it was as if he was holding a round mirror up in front of him with his two hands—yet it did not conceal the child's face. As the child departed, it was as if he was leaving with the round mirror carried upon his back—yet it did not conceal the child's body. When the child was sleeping, the round mirror hung above him, resembling a canopy of flowers. When the child was sitting upright, the round mirror was right before his face. In sum, the two accompanied each other, regardless of his demeanor or his behavior, whether he was active or still.

Not only that, but by looking into this round mirror he was able to see all the activities of Buddhas past, present, and future. Also, at no time were any of the everyday doings of either ordinary people or those in lofty positions clouded from his sight as they floated across the round mirror. For example, by looking in this mirror, he could clarify what had been illumined both in the past and in the present better than others could by resorting to Scriptural texts or secular writings. Nevertheless, when the child left home to be a monk and took the Precepts, the round mirror ceased to manifest before the eyes of others from that time on.⁴

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2. Udraka Ramaputra was one of Shakyamuni Buddha's teachers before His enlightenment.
 3. Tien-kai means 'He Who is a Heavenly Canopy of Light'; Fang-sheng means 'She Who is Saintly in All Ways'.
 4. That is, he ceased to appear as someone different or special.

Thus it was that people in nearby villages, as well as those from a considerable distance, all praised this manifestation as something rare and wondrous, for truly, its like is rarely encountered in this everyday world of ours. Even so, we should be prudent and not be surprised if there are similar offspring in families elsewhere. Beyond doubt, we should recognize that there are passages from the Scriptures that have been transformed into such things as trees and stones, and that there are spiritual friends who are spreading the Teaching through field and town. These too must surely be round mirrors. And the Scripture scrolls we have today, with their yellowed paper and their red spindles, are also round mirrors.

Then one day, while he was out and about, Kayashata came upon the Venerable Sōgyanandai. He immediately stepped forward and went up to the Venerable Sōgyanandai. The venerable one asked the child, “That which you have in your hands, is it truly what the What shows?” Once you realize that he is not asking, “What does that which you have show?” you should examine his remark carefully. Kayashata replied in verse:

*The Great Round Mirror of all Buddhas
Is neither flawed within nor beclouded without.
We two can see It the same way,
For we are alike in both Mind and Eye.*

Since what he said is so, how could the Great Round Mirror have been born at the same time as Kayashata? Kayashata’s life, from the time he was born up to that very moment, was the brightness of the Great Round Mirror. All Buddhas train alike and see alike: all Buddhas are cast images of the Great Round Mirror. The Great Round Mirror is not sagacity, nor is It intellectual reasoning; It is not one’s True Nature or Its outer form. Although the term ‘the Great Round Mirror’ exists within the Teaching of the ‘thrice wise and ten times saintly’,* it is not the same as ‘the Great Round Mirror of all Buddhas’ that he just spoke of. Because all Buddhas are unquestionably beyond sagacity, all Buddhas have wise discernment, and wise discernment is not to be taken as what all Buddhas are.

Talking about wisdom is not the best way to voice what the Buddha taught. You need to realize this by investigating it through your training and practice. Even if we experience the Great Round Mirror of all Buddhas as having been born at the same time that we were, there are the following facts. This Great Round Mirror of which we are speaking might not be experienced in your life or in the life of another. It is not a mirror made from jewels, or a mirror made from copper, or a

* See *Glossary*.

mirror made from flesh, or a mirror made from marrow. Was the poem what the Round Mirror voiced, or was the poem what the child spoke? The child's giving voice to this four-line poem was not something that he had ever learned through scholarly study with anyone, or through perusing works of Scripture, or through following a spiritual friend: he spoke as he did whilst holding the Round Mirror aloft. From the time he was a child, he was always accustomed to facing the Mirror. It was as if he had been born with the knowledge of how to put wise discernment into expression. Was the Great Round Mirror born at the same time as the child, or was the child born at the same time as the Great Round Mirror? Surely it is possible that one was born before the other. The Great Round Mirror is neither more nor less than the meritorious actions of all Buddhas.

When we say that this Mirror is unstained both within and without, we mean that It is not an inside that depends upon something outside, or an outside blurred by something inside. It has never had a front and a back: both perspectives can be viewed alike, for the Mind and Eye of Sōgyanandai and Kayashata resembled each other. 'Resembling each other' means that 'a person' has encountered another 'person'. Even the forms and images within have minds and eyes, and can likewise see: even the forms and images without have minds and eyes, and can likewise see. Both their outer, objective world and their inner, subjective being, as they now appeared, resembled each other within and resembled each other without. They were beyond 'I', beyond 'other'—this is just two 'persons' looking at each other, two 'persons' being alike. The one who is 'other' also speaks of himself as 'I', and your 'I' is also his 'other'.

In his statement "We are alike in both Mind and Eye," the Mind of the one was like the Mind of the other, and the Eye of the one was like the Eye of the other. The likeness was of Mind and Eye.⁵ It is, for instance, as though Kayashata had said that both the Mind and the Eye of each of them were alike. What does it mean that the Mind of one is like the Mind of another? It is in the sense of the Third Ancestor and the Sixth Ancestor.⁶ What does it mean that the Eye of one is like the Eye of another? It is in the sense of an Eye for the Way being hindered by one's eyes.

5. That is, their understanding and view of things were the same.

6. Not only were the Third Ancestor and the Sixth Ancestor of like mind spiritually, their religious names were also connected. The former was called Kanchi, 'He Who is the Mirror's Wise Discernment', and the latter Daikan, 'He Who is the Great Mirror'.

Such is the import of what Kayashata was now enunciating. This was the fundamental means by which he first paid his respects to the Venerable Sōgyanandai. When you undertake to express what the import of this is, you should examine through your training the face of Buddhas and the face of Ancestors in your Great Round Mirror, for They are akin to the Ancient Mirror.



Once while the Thirty-third Ancestor, Meditation Master Daikan Enō, was training hard in doing seated meditation in the monastery on Mount Ōbai, he composed a poem for his Master, Daiman Kōnin, which he wrote on the wall:

*Enlightenment really has no tree it abides in,
Nor is the Clear Mirror a mirrored dressing-stand.
From the first not a single thing exists,
So from where is dust or dirt to arise?*⁷

We need to explore what this is saying. People in his generation called Great Ancestor Enō the Old Buddha. Meditation Master Engo said, “The Old Buddha Daikan Enō is the one I bow to in deepest respect.” Thus, you need to recognize that Great Ancestor Daikan Enō displayed the Clear Mirror through his saying, “From the first not a single thing exists, so from where is dust or dirt to arise?”

“Nor is the Clear Mirror a mirrored dressing-stand.” This statement contains the very lifeblood that we should strive hard to comprehend. All that is clear and bright is the Clear Mirror; thus it is said, “When a bright-headed one comes, a bright-headed one responds in kind.” Because It is beyond being any ‘where’, there is no ‘where’ for It to be in. What is more, can there possibly be a single dust mote anywhere in the universe that is not in the Mirror? Can there possibly be a single dust mote on the Mirror that is not of the Mirror? Keep in mind that the whole universe is beyond being merely ‘lands as numerous as dust motes’. As a consequence, the universe is the face of the Ancient Mirror.

7. The allusions in this poem are to another poem written by Daiman Kōnin’s chief disciple, whom monks at the monastery thought would be Kōnin’s Dharma heir:

*Our body is a bodhi tree,
Our mind like a dressing-stand with its clear mirror;
Time upon time let us strive to wipe it clean
And let not dust or dirt abide thereon.*



A monk once asked Meditation Master Nangaku Ejō, “Just as with a mirror that has been melted down and recast into a religious statue, where does a monk’s previous brightness go to?”⁸

The Master replied, “Reverend monk, after you left home to become a monk, where did your various facial expressions go off to?”

The monk responded, “After someone has fully realized the Truth, why does he not shine like a mirror?”

The Master said, “Although he may not shine like a mirror, he cannot in the least deceive anyone as to what he has realized.”

If you are not clear about what these myriad images now before us are, you would do well to inquire into the matter. Should you do so, you have the words of the Master about realizing the brightness that has already been cast into the Mirror. The Mirror is not of gold or of jewels, and It is not Its brightness or Its images, yet no sooner is Its form cast than the Mirror is, beyond doubt, completely clear.

“Where does a monk’s previous brightness go to?” is a way of saying that it is a form like that of a recast mirror in the monk’s remark, “It is like a mirror that has been melted down and recast into a religious statue.” In other words, images go back to the place of images, and casting can make a mirror.

Asking where the facial features of the reverend monk went off to after he left home to become a monk was the Master’s holding up of the Mirror and letting his Face shine. Right now, from among all the faces, which is your own True Face?

When the Master said, “Although he may not shine like a mirror, he cannot in the least deceive anyone as to what he has realized,” he meant that he cannot force the Mirror to shine and that he cannot deceive others about Its shining. You need to inquire into the saying that, even were the ocean to dry up, it would not reach the state where its bed is completely exposed. Do not attempt to shatter It; do not let yourself be agitated by It. Even so, you need to inquire into the principle of ‘picking out images and casting mirrors’. At this very moment, within the hundreds of myriad shining facets of the Mirror, one may be deceived by bit after bit.

8. That is, someone whilst still in lay life may exhibit a spontaneous brightness which dissolves after the person begins to train as a monk, as was the case with Kayashata. The monk’s question, however, implies a distinction between ‘us monks’ and ‘those lay people’.



Great Master Seppō Shinkaku once told his assembly, “If you want to understand this matter, our here-and-now existence is just like one face of the Ancient Mirror. When a foreigner comes, a foreigner appears in It; when a Han comes, a Han appears in It.”

Gensha Shibi then came forth and asked, “How about when you suddenly encounter a Clear Mirror coming towards you?”

The Master replied, “Both foreigner and Han disappear.”

Shibi commented, “It is not that way with this one.”

Seppō asked, “How is it with you?”

Shibi replied, “Please put my question to me, Reverend Monk.”

Seppō said, “How about when you suddenly encounter a Clear Mirror coming towards you?”

Shibi answered, “It is shattered into hundreds of pieces!”

‘This matter’ of which Seppō is speaking in the present instance should be examined through your training and practice as ‘this matter of the What’.⁹ Let’s begin by looking at and investigating Seppō’s ‘Ancient Mirror’. In his saying that our here-and-now existence is just like one face of the Ancient Mirror, ‘one face’ means that boundaries have long been eliminated and that ‘within and without’ have also been passed beyond; it is our being as a pearl rolling about on a flat board.

Now, “When a foreigner comes, a foreigner appears in It” is an allusion to one of the red beards.¹⁰ As to “When a Han comes, a Han appears in It,” although the Han have been so called since primeval times—that is, after the time of P’an-ku, when they first showed up in a physical form¹¹—the ‘Han’ of which Seppō is now speaking is the Han who appears through the functioning of the Ancient Mirror.

9. Buddha Nature is sometimes referred to in Chinese Zen texts as ‘the What’. It is called this because all specific names tend to limit That Which is Beyond All Limits to something that the intellect can handle.

10. All those who are not of Han descent have long been considered by the Chinese to be foreigners and red-bearded barbarians, regardless of their actual physical appearance or how long they or their ancestors have lived in China.

11. P’an-ku is the Chinese legendary ‘first human’, born from primordial chaos. Upon his death, other humans came into being, and were considered to be either Chinese (Han) or barbarians.

Since ‘Han’ in the present instance does not refer to the Han people, he speaks of ‘the Han coming’. One might add to Seppō’s statement, “Both foreigner and Han disappear,” that the Mirror also disappears from one’s sight. Although Shibi’s statement, “It is shattered into hundreds of pieces,” is the very way it should be put, what he meant was, “When I previously asked you to hand me back a concrete fragment, why did you give me your Clear Mirror?”



In the time of the Yellow Emperor,¹² there were twelve mirrors. A traditional explanation is that Heaven bestowed them on him. It is also said that they were given to him by the Taoist hermit Kuang-cheng-tsu on Mount Kung-tung. The procedure for using these twelve mirrors was that one was used for each of the twelve two-hour periods of a day. Also, one was used for each of the twelve months of every year, and they were used, one after the other, for each year in a twelve-year cycle. It is said that the mirrors were Kuang-cheng-tsu’s scriptural texts.¹³ In bestowing these texts on the Yellow Emperor, the twelve two-hour periods and so forth became mirrors. In this way, they illumined the past and illumined the present. If the twelve two-hour periods of a day were not mirrors, how could they possibly illumine the past? If the twelve periods were not mirrors, how could they possibly illumine the present? ‘The twelve two-hour periods’ are twelve surfaces; the twelve surfaces are twelve mirrors. What is called ‘past and present’ are reflected by the twelve time periods, and they display this principle. Although this is a mundane explanation, the Han appears within the twelve periods of each day.

The Yellow Emperor Hsien-yüan climbed Mount Kung-tung on his hands and knees to ask Kuang-cheng-tsu about the Tao. At the time Kuang-cheng-tsu said, “Mirrors are the source of yin and yang; they are ever what regulate the body. By nature, there are three kinds of mirror: one called ‘the Mirror of Heaven’, one called ‘the Mirror of Earth’, and one called ‘the Human Mirror’. These ‘mirrors’ are invisible and inaudible. When you become calm by being self-possessed, your body will naturally be upright. Beyond question, they will quiet you and purify you, so that nothing will trouble your body

12. The legendary third emperor of China.

13. That is, they were not actual mirrors but writings that the Emperor could look into in order to help him see how to handle various aspects of ruling.

and nothing will perturb your spirit. Thus, you will be able to live a long life.”

In the distant past, emperors used these three mirrors to govern the people and attend to the Greater Path. Someone who was clear about this Greater Path was considered Lord of Heaven and Earth. A secular work says, “The T’ang dynasty Emperor T’ai-tung regarded people as mirrors, whereby he illumined and comprehended situations, so that he might defuse what was dangerous and regulate what was disorderly.” He was using one of the three mirrors. Hearing that he treated people as mirrors, you may think that, by his consulting highly literate persons about matters past and present, he was able to know how and when to make use of wise and sage ones, as, for example, in his procuring the services of ministers like Wu-cheng and Fang-hsüan-ling. To understand the situation in this manner is far from the principle enunciated by the statement “T’ai-tung regarded people as mirrors.” ‘To regard people as mirrors’ means to regard a mirror as a mirror, to regard oneself as a mirror, to regard the five elements as a mirror,¹⁴ and to regard each of the five Confucian virtues of justice, politeness, wisdom, fidelity, and benevolence as a mirror. The principle of the Human Mirror is used in looking at the comings and goings of human beings, and is said to be, “Of their coming, there is no trace; of their departing, there is no quarter to which they go.” This principle encompasses all the myriad thoughts and deeds of the clever and the inept: it is like the ever-changing conditions in the sky. Truly, it is the very woof and warp of things. It is the face of humans and the face of the Mirror, the face of the sun and the face of the moon. The vitality of the five peaks and the vitality of the four long rivers have cleansed the four seas for ever so long, for this is the custom of mirrors.¹⁵ To be clear about human beings and to evaluate the woof and warp of things is said to be T’ai-tung’s way. And it did not merely consist of consulting persons of learning.



Ever since the Age of the Divine Beings, Japan has had three mirrors which, along with the sacred jewels and the sacred sword, have been passed on up to the present day. One mirror is in the Great Shrine at Ise, one is in the Hinokuma Shrine in Kinokuni, and one is in the Imperial Sanctuary of the Emperor’s Palace.

14. The five elements are earth, water, fire, wind and space.

15. The five peaks are Mount Heng in the north, Mount Ho in the south, Mount Tai in the east, Mount Hua in the west, and Mount Sung in the center. The four rivers are the Yangtze, the Yellow, the Huai, and the Chi.

It is clear that all nations pass down and preserve a mirror. Those who possess the mirror possess the country. We have inherited what people have passed on to us, namely, that these three mirrors have been handed down along with the Imperial Divine Throne, and that they were introduced by the Heavenly Deity Amaterasu-Ōmikami. Even so, their finely tempered copper is also something wrought from materials partaking of yin and yang.¹⁶ When the present comes, the present may well appear in them; when the past comes, the past may well appear in them. The mirror that illumines and commands a view of past and present, this will be the Ancient Mirror.



The principle that Seppō recounted earlier can also be stated as, “When a Korean comes, a Korean appears in It; when a Japanese comes, a Japanese appears in It,” and as, “When a lofty being comes, a lofty being appears in It; when an ordinary person comes, an ordinary person appears in It.” Through our training and practice, we explore the matter of their coming and appearing in this manner, but even so, it is beyond us to know, at present, the cause of these appearances; it is simply a matter of their coming into view. Undoubtedly, you are not to explore comings and appearances as something to be known about, something to be comprehended. Is the principle that is now being expressed saying that the foreigner who comes is the foreigner who appears? The coming of a foreigner will be one instance of a foreigner coming, and the appearing of a foreigner will be one instance of a foreigner appearing. And yet, such a one does not come for the sake of appearing. This is what you should have for your investigation, even though the Ancient Mirror may be for you the Ancient Mirror.

When Shibi came forth and asked, “How about when you suddenly encounter a Clear Mirror coming towards you?” what he was saying is something that we need to inquire into and clarify. How much weight should we give to the term ‘clear’ that he is using at present? We might put it this way, “In that its coming is not necessarily that of a foreigner or of a Han, it is a Clear Mirror; further, it need not manifest before our very eyes as either a foreigner or a Han.” The coming of the Clear Mirror is simply the coming of the Clear Mirror, and it is not a matter of there being two Mirrors, one Clear and one Ancient. Although there are not two Mirrors, ‘the Ancient Mirror’ refers to the Ancient Mirror, and ‘the Clear Mirror’ refers to the Clear Mirror. Directly experiencing that there is the Ancient Mirror and that there is the Clear Mirror is what Seppō and Shibi were

16. That is, despite their legendary origin, these sacred shrine mirrors are physical objects, unlike the Ancient Mirror that Dōgen has been discussing.

expressing through words. According to the Buddha's Way, we should consider these mirrors respectively as the True Nature and how the True Nature manifests. Shibi's speaking of a Clear Mirror coming should be understood as being totally penetrating and as clear as a bell. In meeting someone, he would probably display It forthwith; by the directness of his displaying It, he would probably have a positive influence on the person. So, are the 'clear' of the Clear Mirror and the 'ancient' of the Ancient Mirror the same, or are they different? Does the Clear Mirror have the nature of being ancient or not? Does the Ancient Mirror have the nature of being clear or not? Do not understand from the words 'the Ancient Mirror' that It must be clear. The main point is that the principle of "I too am like this, you too are like this, and all the Indian Ancestors are also like this" should be quickly cultivated. In the words of Shibi's disciple, Ancestral Master Kinkazan Kōtō, "The Ancient Mirror is polished." Might it also be so for the Clear Mirror? We should by all means have as our investigation through training and practice an exploration that broadly spans the sayings of all the Buddhas and Ancestors.

Seppō's statement, "Both the foreigner and the Han disappear," means that foreigner and Han will both disappear the moment that the Clear Mirror has appeared. What is the meaning of this principle of 'both disappearing'? Since the foreigner's and the Han's having already come and appeared does not get in the way of the Ancient Mirror, why should they both disappear now? Even though, from the perspective of the Ancient Mirror, "When a foreigner comes, a foreigner appears in It; when a Han comes, a Han appears in It," from the perspective of the Clear Mirror, the foreigner and the Han that appeared in the Ancient Mirror both disappear because of the natural coming of the Clear Mirror. Thus Seppō's statement also implies that the Ancient Mirror has Its face and the Clear Mirror has Its. You definitely need to be clear about the principle that when the Clear Mirror duly comes, It will not impede either the foreigner or the Han that appeared in the Ancient Mirror. The function of the Ancient Mirror about which we are now speaking, such that "When a foreigner comes, a foreigner appears in It; when a Han comes, a Han appears in It," is not saying that they come and appear upon the Ancient Mirror, or within the Ancient Mirror, or apart from the Ancient Mirror, or along with the Ancient Mirror. We need to listen carefully to what is being said here. At the time of the foreigner and the Han coming and appearing, the Ancient Mirror is causing foreigner and Han to appear. If you were to say, "At the time when both foreigner and Han disappear, the Mirror will continue to remain there," you would be in the dark about 'appearing' and would not be paying attention to 'coming'. Even calling you confused would not reach the mark.

Shibi commented, “It is not that way with me.”

Seppō asked, “How is it with you?”

Shibi replied, “Please put my question to me, Reverend Monk.”

Do not idly stumble past the words, “Please put my question to me,” which Shibi is now uttering. Were there not full and sweet accord between ‘parent’ and ‘child’, how could the coming forth of the reverend monk’s question and the request for the reverend monk to ask the question in turn take the form they did? At the time when Shibi was saying, “Please put my question to me, Reverend Monk,” he would surely have been ‘such a person’* and thus would have already reached the place from which his Master’s question arose. When there is a thundering forth from the place of the question, there is no time to escape from it.

Seppō asked, “How about when you suddenly encounter a Clear Mirror coming towards you?”

The place of this question is the one Ancient Mirror which both ‘parent’ and ‘child’—that is, Master and disciple—are mastering together.

Shibi replied, “It is shattered into hundreds of pieces!”

This statement shatters It into hundreds of myriad bits. “When you suddenly encounter a Clear Mirror coming towards you” is equivalent to Its being shattered into hundreds of pieces. That which experiences being shattered into hundreds of pieces is the Clear Mirror, because when you give expression to the Clear Mirror, It is shattered into hundreds of pieces. What the shattered pieces are dependent on is the Clear Mirror. Do not take the narrow view that there was an earlier time when It was not yet shattered and there will be a later time when It will no longer be shattered. It is, simply, shattered into hundreds of pieces. When someone comes face-to-face with any of these hundreds of fragments, it will be with just one isolated fragment. Despite this, do you describe the hundreds of shattered pieces that we are speaking of now as the Ancient Mirror or do you describe them as the Clear Mirror? You should ask again for a single word of clarification to turn things around for you. At the same time, such a word will be beyond your describing these pieces as the Ancient Mirror, and beyond your describing them as the Clear Mirror. Even though Shibi was able to bring forth the question about the Ancient Mirror and the Clear Mirror, when we discuss his way of putting the Matter,* might it be that the words which come to the tip of our tongue to describe that which manifests before our very eyes simply as ‘walls and fences with their stones and tiles’* probably was, for him, ‘hundreds of shattered pieces’?

And what form do the shatterings take? Myriad deep pools the color of antique jade, with the moon in the realm of unbounded space.



While Great Master Seppō Shinkaku and Meditation Master Sanshō Enen were traveling together, they saw a group of red-faced apes, whereupon Seppō said, “Each of these red-faced apes is carrying the Ancient Mirror upon its back.”

We need to consider these words of his very carefully. The term ‘red-faced apes’ customarily refers to a particular type of monkey. The red-faced apes that Seppō saw, of what sort would they have been? You need to inquire in this manner, and make further diligent effort to understand. Pay no attention to how long it takes.

His words “Each of them is carrying the Ancient Mirror upon its back” mean that, even though the Ancient Mirror is the face of all the Buddhas and Ancestors, the Ancient Mirror is the Ancient Mirror, even from Their higher perspective. His saying that all the red-faced apes were carrying mirrors on their backs means that there were no larger or smaller mirrors, but that each was the one Ancient Mirror. The phrase ‘carrying on their backs’ means ‘being backed by’ in the sense, for instance, of the backing material used behind pictures and statues of the Buddha. When the backs of the red-faced apes are backed, they are backed by the Ancient Mirror. “What kind of glue have they come to use?” you may ask. To try to put it into words, “The back of the apes is backed by the Ancient Mirror. But is the back of the Ancient Mirror backed by red-faced apes? It is we who back the back of the Ancient Mirror with an Ancient Mirror. It is we who back the back of the ape with an ape.” The phrase ‘one mirror for each back’ will not be an empty teaching, for it is a statement that fully expresses the Truth.

So, which is it, red-faced ape or Ancient Mirror? Ultimately, how should we put it? Are we just red-faced apes? Are we not red-faced apes? To whom are we to put the question? Whether we are red-faced apes is beyond our own knowledge and beyond the knowledge of others. Whether we are ourselves is beyond our ability to discover.

Enen replied, “For eons beyond measure, It has been nameless, so why are you expressing It as ‘the Ancient Mirror’?”

This is one aspect, one facet, whereby Enen certified his realization of the Ancient Mirror. His phrase ‘for eons beyond measure’ means ‘before any single moment of consciousness, any single thought, has sprouted up’; it means ‘within any span of time, nothing has exposed its head’. His term ‘nameless’ means ‘the face of the Sun, the face of the Moon, and the face of the Ancient Mirror for eons beyond

measure'. If the Nameless were not truly nameless, the eons beyond measure would not yet be for eons beyond measure. If the eons beyond measure were not entirely eons beyond measure, Enen's expression could not express It. Even so, the phrase 'before any single thought has sprouted up' means 'today'. So, cultivate yourself, without letting yourself stumble past today. Truly, the fame of this epithet 'nameless for eons beyond measure' has been heard on high.

And what do I call the Ancient Mirror? The Head of the Dragon, the Tail of the Snake!

At this time, Seppō might have turned to Enen and said, "The Ancient Mirror! The Ancient Mirror!" but that is not how he replied.

Seppō responded, "A flaw has emerged!"

What he meant by this was that a scratch has appeared. We may think, "How could a flaw have possibly been produced in the Ancient Mirror?" but the Ancient Mirror's yielding a flaw must mean that Enen's saying "It is nameless for eons beyond measure" is indeed a scratch. 'The Ancient Mirror's yielding a flaw' refers to the whole Ancient Mirror. Enen had not yet emerged from the dark realm of "Oh, the Ancient Mirror has produced a flaw!" so the understanding that he expressed through his words was neither more nor less than a flaw in the Ancient Mirror. Thus, we examine through our training and practice that flaws appear even in the Ancient Mirror, and that even those things from which flaws are produced are also the Ancient Mirror; this is our learning through our practice what the Ancient Mirror is.

Enen responded, "What has such deadly urgency? Besides, I don't even know what the topic of our conversation is."

The main point of what he said is "What is so deadly urgent?" You need to apply yourself unremittingly and investigate through your training and practice whether 'deadly urgency' refers to today or to tomorrow, to oneself or to others, to the whole universe or to some place within the land of Great T'ang China. As to the topic alluded to in the phrase 'not even knowing what the topic of our conversation is', there is the topic that is being expressed, the topic that has not yet been expressed, and the topic that has already been completely expressed. The principle of these topics is ever manifest before our very eyes. For instance, the topic is also one's realizing the Truth simultaneously with the great earth and all its sentient beings. It is beyond being 'mended brocade'.¹⁷ This is why it is 'not

17. Being beyond 'mended brocade' is a metaphor for the Truth being seamless, as It is not something composed of bits and pieces of this and that sewn together.

known'. It is 'the one who faced His Imperial Majesty and said that he did not personally know That One'.¹⁸ It is our not knowing That which is right before our face. It is not that the Topic does not exist, it is simply that It is beyond our knowing. His 'not knowing It' is a manifestation of his sincerity; it is also his not seeing his own brightness and clarity.

Seppō said, "The old monk has made a blunder."

This turn of phrase is usually said with the meaning of "I have put it badly," but it need not have this intent. 'The old monk' refers to the Old One who is Lord of the House. Do not undertake to study other matters; just examine 'the Old Monk' through your training. Though He has a thousand changes and ten thousand transformations, be they the face of a god or the countenance of a demon, what you examine is the Old Monk's 'just one move at a time'. And though He comes as a Buddha or comes as an Ancestor, be it for a single moment or for all of time, what you examine is the Old Monk's 'just one move at a time'. 'Making a blunder' refers to the One who is Master of the Temple having lots to do. When you think about it, Seppō was an outstanding disciple of Tokusan, and Enen was a wondrous supporter of Rinzai. Neither of these two venerable veterans sprang from humble lineage: the former was a distant descendant of Seigen, the latter was in the long line from Nangaku. How they came to reside in, and keep to, the Ancient Mirror is as given above. They should be paragons for trainees in later ages.



Seppō, in addressing his assembly, once said, "When the width of the world is ten feet, the width of the Ancient Mirror will be ten feet; when the width of the world is one foot, the width of the Ancient Mirror will be one foot."

At that time Shibi pointed to the hearth and said, "Can you tell us just how wide our charcoal burner is?"¹⁹

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18. An allusion to Bodhidharma's interview with Emperor Wu of Liang. When the emperor asked him who it was that was facing His Imperial Majesty, Bodhidharma replied, "I do not personally know that one," because he was already rid of any false, socially conventional sense of a self.
19. On a literal level, the charcoal burner is a cauldron-shaped brazier around which monks customarily sat to warm themselves. It was also sometimes used in preparing such foods as rice and dumplings. The term is also sometimes used to refer to the hara, i.e., the belly, as the furnace for heating up our training, so that we are able to dissolve the ice-like hardness of our egoistic desires and to make palpable what spiritually sustains us.

Seppō replied, “It resembles the width of the Ancient Mirror.”

Shibi responded, “The venerable Han has not let even a heel touch the ground!”

If we say that the width of our world is ten feet, our world will be ten feet wide; if we treat the width of our world as one foot, our world will be one foot wide. Moreover, the ‘ten feet’ we are speaking of now and the ‘one foot’ we are speaking of now are not some arbitrary linear measurements in feet. In examining this dialogue, people customarily speak of the width of the world as being ‘the three-thousand great-thousandfold worlds, immeasurable and boundless’ or as being ‘the world of inexhaustible thoughts and things’, but this is like our own self of small measure pointing to other villages in our vicinity. When worlds like these are proposed, they measure ‘ten feet’. This is why Seppō said, “When the width of the Ancient Mirror is ten feet, the width of the world is ten feet.” In examining this ‘ten feet’, you will catch a glimpse of one part of ‘the width of the world’.

Further, in hearing the term ‘the Ancient Mirror’, one may envisage a sheet of thin ice, but It is not so. Although Its width of ten feet is at one with the width of the world being ten feet, does It necessarily stand shoulder-to-shoulder in form and likeness with the limitlessness of the world? Or are the Ancient Mirror and the world’s limitlessness like fellow trainees, side by side? You should make a diligent effort to consider what this is saying.

What is more, the Ancient Mirror is not like a single pearl. Do not view It as being bright or dark; do not visualize It as being square or round. Even though the whole universe in all ten directions is the One Bright Pearl, this is not to be equated with the Ancient Mirror. Accordingly, the Ancient Mirror does not depend on the comings and appearances of foreigners or Han, for It is every single thing’s being as unobstructed as a bell’s clear resounding in all directions. It is beyond being many, beyond being large.

‘Width’ refers to Its measurements, and the term goes beyond what is meant by ‘broad’ or ‘narrow’. That latter use of ‘width’ is like conventionally speaking of ‘two inches’ or ‘three inches’, or counting ‘seven things’ or ‘eight things’. In the Buddhist way of counting, we use the term ‘two ounces’ to describe those who have had a great awakening and ‘three ounces’ to describe those who have gone beyond having awakened.²⁰ In counting Buddhas and Ancestors, we express the matter as their being of the ‘fifth generation’ or ‘tenth generation’ from

20. To paraphrase, those who have had a great awakening have realized a bit of the Truth; those who have gone beyond having awakened have realized a bit more of the Truth.

Shakyamuni Buddha. Ten feet is the width of the Ancient Mirror; the width of the Ancient Mirror is one span.

Shibi's asking about the width of the charcoal burner is an expression that is out in the open; you should explore it till you are a thousand or ten thousand years old. In looking at the charcoal burner now, from what perspective do we view it? When we look at the charcoal burner, it is not something that is 'seven feet' or 'eight feet'. This question of his was not posed during the time when he was still wavering and attached. It was his way of displaying, from his new perspective, what is meant by the statement, "What is It that comes like this?" When he came out with the words 'how wide', the 'how' that he had employed up to that time to refer to quantity is not his current 'how'. We should have no doubts about the fact that he had already realized liberation at that time. We should listen to Shibi's words as to the fundamental point that our 'charcoal burner' is beyond form and measure. Do not idly let the dumpling that is now right before you fall on the ground! Tear it open! This is what diligent effort is!

We need to reflect on and illumine Seppō's statement, "It is like the width of the Ancient Mirror." He put it this way because the situation was beyond the point where he could state that the width of the charcoal burner was ten feet. It is not the case that his answering 'ten feet' would have expressed the situation more accurately than his saying 'like the width of the Ancient Mirror'. We need to consider the daily activities of 'being like the width of the Ancient Mirror'. Many people consider his omitting to say that the width of the charcoal burner is ten feet to be an inaccuracy in his expressing the Matter. Such folks need to consider the freedom of his 'width', to reflect on the undiluted nature of the Ancient Mirror, and to not stumble past the day-to-day operating of That Which is Real. In the words of Meditation Master Kyōgen Chikan, they need to advance along the ancient path with a smiling countenance, without lapsing into periods of despondency.

The intent behind Shibi's response, "The venerable Han has not let even a heel touch the ground!" is that whether he said 'venerable Han' or 'venerable monk', it is certainly not 'Seppō', since Seppō must surely be 'a Venerable Han'.²¹ You also need to ask in what place his heel is; you need to investigate thoroughly what 'heel' means. What I mean by 'investigating thoroughly' is asking yourself, "Is 'heel' an allusion to the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, or to

21. The term 'venerable Han', like 'venerable monk', would have been understood conventionally as a polite expression for 'you'. In Zen, 'Venerable Han' was also used to refer to someone who had dropped off the false self, to a Buddha, to 'such a one'. Seppō, having already awakened, was no longer 'Seppō' in a conventional sense, but was 'such a one'.

unbounded space, or to the whole of the great earth, or to the clear and bright life stream of the Buddhas and Ancestors?” And you need to be diligent in your exploration of just how many heels could be involved: is it just one heel, or half a heel, or hundreds of thousands of myriad heels?

In his phrase ‘not yet touched the ground’, what sort of thing is this ‘ground’ he is talking about? The ground that we nowadays refer to as the great earth, some provisionally call ‘the ground’ in conformity with one way of looking at things. Again, among these various ways, there are some that see ‘the ground’ as the mind-boggling Dharma Gate to liberation, and some that see it as what all Buddhas do and say. So, what sort of thing is this ‘ground’ that one should touch one’s heel down upon? Is this ‘ground’ our real being? Or is it beyond our real being? Further, in sum, can even the tiniest bit of that which we call ‘the ground’ not exist within the Great Way? Let the question arise, let the question pass; talk about it with others, talk about it with yourself. Is the heel touching the ground the way it should be, or is the heel not touching the ground the way it should be? Since “Why?” is the question, why did Shibi state that not even a heel had touched the ground? When there is not the tiniest bit of ground on the Great Earth, then, of necessity, neither ‘touching the ground’ nor ‘not yet touching the ground’ will come about. Thus, “The venerable Han has not let even a heel touch the ground!” is the Venerable Han’s very breathing in and breathing out, the very functioning of His heels.



Meditation Master Kinkazan Kōtō of Kokutai-in Temple in the Wu-chou district was once asked by one of his monks, “What is the Ancient Mirror before It has been polished?”

The Master answered, “The Ancient Mirror.”

The monk then asked, “What is It after It has been polished?”

The Master answered, “The Ancient Mirror.”

You need to recognize that even though there is a time when the Ancient Mirror, as now spoken of, is being polished, a time when It has not yet been polished, and a time after It has been polished, It is one and the same Ancient Mirror. Thus, when we are polishing It, the Ancient Mirror polishes the whole Ancient Mirror. We do not polish It by adding something that is not the Ancient Mirror, such as quicksilver. This is neither ourselves polishing ourselves nor the self doing the polishing, but our polishing the Ancient Mirror. Before we have polished ourselves, the Ancient Mirror is not dull. Even though some may describe It as being black, It will never be dull, for It is the living Ancient Mirror. Generally speaking, in polishing a mirror, we may make it into a mirror, and in polishing a

roof tile, we may make it into a mirror, and in polishing a tile, we may make it into a tile, and in polishing a mirror, we may make it into a tile. There are times when we polish something and make nothing, and there are times when we can make something, even though we are not able to polish it. The traditional activities of the Buddhas and Ancestors are all the same as this.



A long time ago, when Baso of Kiangsi Province was training under Nangaku, Nangaku on one occasion privately imparted the Mind seal* to him. This occurred just before the incident concerning the polishing of the roof tile. While staying in Chuan-fa Temple, Baso had been doing seated meditation day in and day out for some ten years or more. We can imagine what his thatched hut was like on a rainy night, and it is said that he never abandoned its freezing floor even when it was enveloped in snow.

One day when Nangaku came to Baso's hut, Baso stood up to receive him. Nangaku asked him, "What have you been doing recently?"

Baso replied, "Recently I have been doing the practice of seated meditation exclusively."

Nangaku asked, "And what is the aim of your seated meditation?"

Baso replied, "The aim of my seated meditation is to achieve Buddhahood."²²

Thereupon, Nangaku took a roof tile and began rubbing it on a rock near Baso's hut.

Baso, upon seeing this, asked him, "Reverend monk, what are you doing?"

Nangaku replied, "I am polishing a roof tile."

Baso then asked, "What are you going to make by polishing a roof tile?"

22. The translation may not clearly convey the contradiction in Baso's statement. The particular practice of seated meditation he specifically mentions is *chih-kuan ta-tsuo* (J. *shikan taza*), a Chinese colloquial phrase that literally translates as 'just control yourself and sit there'. This implies sitting in meditation without deliberately thinking of anything, or holding on to anything that naturally arises, or pushing away anything that naturally arises, and without trying to suppress any thoughts from arising. However, in reply to Nangaku's question, Baso indicates that, in fact, he has something he is deliberately holding in his mind, namely, the goal of realizing Buddhahood, literally 'making himself into a Buddha'.

Nangaku replied, “I am polishing it to make a mirror.”

Baso said, “How can you possibly make a mirror by rubbing a tile?”

Nangaku replied, “How can you possibly make yourself into a Buddha by doing seated meditation?”

For hundreds of years now, many people have held the view that, in this story, Nangaku is earnestly endeavoring to encourage Baso in his practice. This is not necessarily so, for, quite simply, the daily activities of the great saintly teacher were far removed from the realm of ordinary people. If great saintly teachers did not have the Dharma of polishing a tile, how could they possibly have the skillful means to guide people? Having the strength to guide people is the Bones and Marrow of an Ancestor of the Buddha. Even though the tile was the thing that came to hand, still, it was just an everyday, household object.²³ If it were not an everyday object or some household utensil, then it would not have been passed on by the Buddha’s family. What is more, its impact on Baso was immediate. Be very clear about it, the functioning of the True Transmission of Buddhas and Ancestors involves a direct pointing. We should truly comprehend that when the polished tile became a mirror, Baso became Buddha. And when Baso became Buddha, Baso immediately became the real Baso. And when Baso became the real Baso, his sitting in meditation immediately became real seated meditation. This is why the saying ‘polishing a tile to make a mirror’ has been preserved in the Bones and Marrow of former Buddhas.

Thus it is that the Ancient Mirror was made from a roof tile. Even though the mirror was being polished, it was already without blemish in its unpolished state. The tile was not something that was dirty; it was polished simply because it was a tile. On that occasion, the virtue of making a Mirror was made manifest, for it was the diligent effort of an Ancestor of the Buddha. If polishing a tile did not make a Mirror, then even polishing a mirror could not have made a Mirror. Who can surmise that in this act of making, there is the making of a Buddha and there is the making of a Mirror?

Further, some may wonder, “When the Ancient Mirror is polished, can It ever be polished into a tile?” Your state of being—your breathing in and breathing out—when you are engaged in polishing is not something that you can gauge at other times. And Nangaku’s words, to be sure, express what is expressible. As a result, in the final analysis, he was able to polish a tile and make a Mirror. Even we

23. This is a reference to the common practice among Zen Masters of employing everyday objects to help their disciples realize the Truth.

people of the present time should try to pick up today's 'tile' and give it a polish, for ultimately it will become a Mirror. If a tile could not become a Mirror, people could not become Buddha. If we belittle tiles as being lumps of clay, we will also belittle people as being lumps of clay. If people have a Heart, then tiles too will have a Heart. Who can recognize that there is a Mirror in which, when a tile comes, the Tile appears? And who can recognize that there is a Mirror in which, when a mirror comes, the Mirror appears?

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Recopied in the Sandalwood Grove²⁴ on the thirteenth day of the first month in the fourth year of the same era (February 3, 1243).

24. The nickname for a Zen monastery in which the monks are doing outstanding training.