

On Expressing One's True Nature by Expressing One's Intent

(*Sesshin Sesshō*)

Translator's Introduction: This title contains an ambiguity that is lost in translation. The term *sesshin* can be rendered either as 'expressing one's intent' or as 'expressing one's mind'. However, Dōgen refers to the phrase 'expressing one's mind' as a misinterpretation, especially if 'expressing' is taken to mean 'talking about', implying an intellectual discussion about the nature of mind. *Sesshō*, 'expressing one's intent', refers specifically to actively expressing one's spiritual intention to help all sentient beings reach the Other Shore. This is the way in which someone expresses his or her True Nature, which Dōgen identifies as one's Buddha Nature. And the expression of one's True Nature takes the form of expressing one's spiritual intent.

Once when Meditation Master Shinzan Sōmitsu was out on a walk with Great Master Tōzan Ryokai, the latter pointed to a nearby temple and said, "Within that temple, there is one who is expressing his True Nature by expressing his intention."

Shinzan, his elder brother in the Sangha, asked, "And who is that one?"

Tōzan replied, "With your asking this one question, my elder brother in the Sangha, that one has forthwith succeeded in completely passing away into death."

His elder brother Shinzan then asked, "Then who is it that is expressing his intention and expressing his True Nature?"

Tōzan replied, "He has revived from within death."¹

The statement "To express one's intention is to express one's True Nature" is the foundation of the Buddha's Way from which Buddha after Buddha and Ancestor after Ancestor have emerged. Were it not for Their expressing Their True Nature by expressing Their intent, the wondrous Wheel of the Dharma would never have turned, the intention to realize Buddhahood would never have arisen, and training and practice would never have manifested. And the Truth would never have been

1. This dialogue has a deeper meaning which Dōgen will reveal later. In the meantime, this dialogue can be understood as a reference to the dropping off of the illusory self.

realized simultaneously with the great earth and its sentient beings, for there has never been any sentient being who lacked Buddha Nature. Shakyamuni's raising of the flower, His eyes atwinkle, was His way of expressing His intention as an expression of His True Nature. Makakashō's face breaking out into a smile was his way of putting it. Our Second Chinese Ancestor Eka's respectfully bowing to Bodhidharma and then standing quietly in his place was his way of putting it. Our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma's entering China during the Liang dynasty was his way, and Daiman Kōnin's Transmitting the kesa* to Daikan Enō was his way. A certain Master's holding up his traveling staff* was his way, and another Master's laying down his ceremonial hossu* was his way of expressing his intention as an expression of his True Nature.

Generally speaking, every single meritorious action of Buddha after Buddha and Ancestor after Ancestor has been, through and through, Their expressing Their intention as an expression of Buddha Nature. There are ways of doing this in a normal, everyday manner, and there are ways of expressing it as 'the tiles* and stones of one's walls and fences'. And thus the principle described as "The arising of intentions is what gives rise to all the various thoughts and things" fully emerges, as does the principle described as "The dying away of intentions is the dying away of all the various thoughts and things." Nevertheless, one's intention is being expressed on such occasions, as is one's True Nature.

At the same time, run-of-the-mill folks have not penetrated into what intention means and they have not mastered what True Nature means, therefore they are in the dark as to what 'expressing intention' and 'expressing True Nature' really mean. Being ignorant of the profundity of what is being talked about and of the wonders that are being discussed, they say—and teach—that such things cannot possibly exist in the Way of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Because they do not know that 'expressing mind and expressing nature' means 'expressing one's intention and expressing one's True Nature', they think of it as 'talking about the mind and talking about the nature of things'. This is because they have not made an effort to critically examine whether they have indeed penetrated the Great Way.



A certain monk called Meditation Master Daie Sōkō,² once said:

* See *Glossary*.

2. Daie was in the Rinzai Zen tradition, and is credited with having instituted the practice of focusing on deliberate penetration into classic kōan stories, rather than keeping to themeless

Folks today are fond of talking about mind and talking about nature, and because they are fond of talking about profundities and talking about wonders, they are slow to realize the Way. Since mind and nature form a duality, once these folks have discarded this duality, and have forgotten all about the profound and the wondrous as well, then dualities will no longer arise, and they will experience the Truth that the Buddha promised them.

These remarks of his show that he was still unaware of the silken thread that binds the Buddhas and Ancestors together, nor had he comprehended what the lifeline of the Buddhas and Ancestors is.³ Accordingly, he only understood 'mind' to refer to discriminative thinking and consciousness, so he spoke this way because he had not learned that the various functions, such as discriminative thinking and consciousness, are what the intellective mind is. He wrongly viewed 'nature' to mean something that is abundantly clear and peacefully inactive, and did not understand whether Buddha Nature and the nature of all thoughts and things existed or did not exist. And because he had not seen his True Nature as It is, not even in his dreams, he had a false view of what Buddha Dharma is. The 'mind' that the Buddhas and Ancestors spoke of is the very Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow. And the 'nature' that the Buddhas and Ancestors have preserved is a monk's traveling staff and the shaft of a bamboo arrow.⁴ The Buddhas and Ancestors have profoundly realized the Buddhahood promised Them by the Buddha, and this is what is meant by being a pillar* of the temple or a stone lantern.* How wondrous it is that the Buddhas and Ancestors hold up and offer to us Their wise discernment and understanding!

From the first, the Buddhas and Ancestors who are really Buddhas and Ancestors have always learned that this 'mind' and this 'nature' refer to 'intention' and 'Buddha Nature', and have given expression to them, and have put them into practice, and have awakened to them. They have preserved and kept to this profound and wondrous Teaching, exploring It through their training with their Master. We call those who are like this the Buddha's descendents who are truly

meditation. Dōgen, in a rare criticism of specific monks, held Daie responsible for what he considered a perversion and betrayal of the pre-Daie Rinzai tradition.

3. The particular silken thread that is mentioned here was used to bind Scriptural texts together and, as a metaphor, refers to the 'thread of Transmission' that runs through, and binds together, the Buddhas and Ancestors.
4. A monk's traveling staff and the shaft of a bamboo arrow are common metaphors for what a Zen Master uses to point a disciple to the truth.

studying the Buddhas and Ancestors. Those who are not like this are not really studying the Way.

Thus, Daie, your 'attaining the Way' does not attain the Way, and when it is time to go beyond attaining the Way, you are unable to do so. You stumble your way through both the times of attaining and the times of going beyond attaining. As you would have it, Daie, since mind and nature form a duality, we ought to discard them. This is your little attempt to explain 'mind', an effort that can only explain one-hundred-thousand-millionth of it! To say that the profound and the wondrous are both to be discarded is but one small aspect of it, and yet it is the only aspect that you bring up for discussion when talking about them. Without learning what the key point to all of this is, you foolishly speak of forgetting all about them, having considered them to be things that have left your own hands and departed from your own being. You have not yet discarded the narrow views of the Lesser Course,* so how could you possibly penetrate the inner depths of the Greater Course,* to say nothing about understanding the key point of what is above and beyond Buddhahood! It is difficult to say that you have ever tasted the tea and rice of the Buddhas and Ancestors.

Simply, to earnestly explore this Matter* under a Master is to thoroughly experience, at this very moment of our existence, the expressing of our intention as the expression of our True Nature. This is how it was in the past and will be in the future. We should thoroughly explore this Matter for ourselves, since there is nothing that stands second or third to this.⁵



There was that time when our First Chinese Ancestor Bodhidharma gave instruction to his disciple Eka, saying, "If you simply bring to a halt all entanglements with things outside yourself and do not let your mind pant after things, then, with your very mind that is like walls and fences, you will thereby be able to enter the Way."

Eka tried in various ways to express his intention as well as his True Nature, but he did not succeed in realizing the Buddhahood that the Buddha had promised. Then, one day, he suddenly realized the Truth.

As a result, he said to our First Ancestor, "This time, for the first time, your disciple has brought his entanglements to a halt."

5. That is, it is unique and not simply one thing among many.

Our First Ancestor, already knowing what Eka had become aware of, did not probe further into the nature of his disciple's experience.

He simply asked him, "You haven't realized total cessation of these entanglements, have you?"

Eka replied, "No."

The First Ancestor then asked, "What is it like, then, for you?"

Eka replied, "As I am constantly recognizing It, I realize that words do not come near It."

The First Ancestor then remarked, "That is precisely the substance of Mind which has been Transmitted by all the Buddhas and all the Ancestors of the past. Since you now have It, you yourself must guard It well."

There are those who have doubts about this story, and there are those who take it up and expound upon it. Well, this is just one story among a number of stories on how Eka trained under Bodhidharma and served him. Eka repeatedly tried expressing his intent and his True Nature. At first he did not succeed in realizing what the Buddha had promised, but, little by little, he accumulated merits and piled up virtues until he finally realized the Way that our First Ancestor had spoken of. Those who are slow of wit have considered this to mean, "When Eka first attempted to express his intention and his True Nature, he had not yet awakened to what the Buddha had promised. The fault lay in his trying to express his intention and his True Nature, but later he let go of 'expressing my intention and expressing my True Nature', and thereby realized what the Buddha had promised."⁶ They are speaking in this way because they have not yet penetrated the saying, "With your very mind that is like walls and fences, you will thereby be able to enter the Way." They are especially in the dark about how to go about studying the Way. And, should you ask why this is so, well, from the time when you first give rise to the intention to spiritually awaken and incline your steps towards training and practice of the Buddha's Way, you will be heartily putting into practice a difficult course of training. And, though you put it into practice, you may not hit the bull's-eye even once in a hundred tries. Even so, you will ultimately hit the target, sometimes by following the advice of your spiritual friend and sometimes by following Scriptural texts. The one hit today is due to the strength of a hundred misses in the past. It is the fulfillment of those hundred misses. Your listening to what is taught, training in the Way, and awakening to the Truth—none

6. That is, they viewed Eka as treating his intention and his True Nature as a duality, whereas they are really two aspects of the same thing.

of these are any different from this. Although yesterday's efforts to express your intention and your True Nature were equivalent to a hundred misses, yesterday's hundred misses become today's suddenly hitting the bull's-eye. When you first begin to practice the Buddha's Way, it may be said that you have not yet thoroughly penetrated the Truth due to lingering attachments. You cannot attain the Buddha's Way by abandoning It in favor of other ways. Folks who have not yet penetrated the training and practice of the Buddha's Way from start to finish find it difficult to clarify what this principle of penetration is.

The Buddha's Way is the Buddha's Way even when one first gives rise to the intention to train, and It is the Buddha's Way even when one fully realizes the Truth: It is the Buddha's Way—beginning, middle, and end. It is comparable to someone's walking for thousands of miles. When walking ten thousand miles, all that one can do is to take one step at a time, and within ten thousand miles are tens of thousands of steps. Even though the first step and the ten-thousandth step are different, all of it is still simply the act of walking ten thousand miles. At the same time, folks who have reached the height of folly believe that during the time when one is studying the Buddha's Way, one has not yet reached the Buddha's Way, for only when one has gone beyond Buddhahood is It really the Buddha's Way. They are like this because they do not know that the whole Way is our expressing the Way, that the whole Way is our practicing the Way, and that the whole Way is our realizing the Way. Those folks talk the way they do because they have been taught that only deluded people experience the great realization through their training and practice of the Buddha's Way. As a result, they do not realize that non-deluded people also experience the great realization through their training and practice of the Buddha's Way.

Even before we have realized what the Buddha promised, expressing our Buddha Nature by expressing our intent is already the Way of Buddhas. At the same time, it is through our expressing our True Nature by expressing our intent that we realize what the Buddha promised. We must not explore through our training that 'realizing what the Buddha promised' is restricted to the first great realization of a deluded person. The deluded have their great realization, and the enlightened have their great realization, and the unenlightened have their great realization, and the undeluded have their great realization, and all those who have realized what the Buddha promised have actually realized what the Buddha promised.

Consequently, expressing one's intention as an expression of one's True Nature is being straight and true within the Buddha's Way. Not having thoroughly comprehended this principle, Daie advises us that we should express neither our intention nor our True Nature, but this is not a principle of the Buddha Dharma.

And, alas, things are so bad today in Great Sung China that there is no one who can even come up to gentleman Daie's low level of understanding.



Our Founding Ancestor, Great Master Tōzan Ryokai, who was uniquely venerated among our Ancestors, had thoroughly penetrated the principle that 'expressing one's mind' and 'expressing one's nature' are comparable, on a deeper level, to expressing one's intention as an expression of one's True Nature. An Ancestral Master who has not thoroughly penetrated this principle cannot have an expression comparable to the one Tōzan made in the account I told at the beginning of this discourse.

Once when Meditation Master Shinzan Sōmitsu was out on a walk with Great Master Tōzan Ryokai, the latter pointed to a nearby temple and said, "Within that temple, there is One who is expressing His True Nature by expressing His intention."⁷

From the time when our Founding Ancestor set up his temple, his Dharma descendants have, without exception, correctly Transmitted our Ancestral tradition. It is something that those in other traditions have not even dreamed of. How much less could they know, even in a dream, how to understand it! Only his authentic heirs have correctly Transmitted it. Had they not correctly Transmitted this principle, how could anyone penetrate to what is fundamental in the Buddha's Way? The principle that we are now talking about, whether we plumb its depths or merely scratch its surface, is that of some human being expressing his or her intent and True Nature. The mind expressing itself, both on the outer surface and deeply within, is the True Nature expressing Itself both on the outer surface and deeply within. You need to do your utmost to thoroughly explore this. There is no expression that lacks True Nature, and there is no intention that lacks an expression.

What we call 'Buddha Nature' means that all things are expressing It, and what we call 'lacking a Buddha Nature' also means that all things are expressing It. Though we may explore through our training that Buddha Nature is what is meant by 'nature', if we should fail to explore through our training that we have Buddha Nature, it would not be the way to study the Way. And if we should fail to explore through our training that we lack a Buddha Nature, it would also not be the way to

7. This change in rendering the dialogue that Dōgen presented in the opening of this discourse presents a deeper, spiritual meaning behind this exchange.

explore the Matter through our training.⁸ When we explore the Teaching that expressing our intention through our training is synonymous with our True Nature, we become a Dharma heir of an Ancestor of the Buddha; when we trust that our True Nature is expressing Itself, we become an Ancestor of the Buddha for our Dharma heirs.

To state that “One’s mind is ever restless, whereas one’s nature is steady” is an assertion of non-Buddhists. To state that “The innate nature of things is profoundly clear, whereas their forms are ever shifting” is also an assertion of non-Buddhists. The way that Buddhists study ‘mind’ and ‘nature’ is not the way those folks study it. The way that Buddhists put their intentions into practice so as to put their Nature into practice is in no way like the behavior of non-Buddhists. The way that Buddhists clarify what Mind and Nature are finds no equivalent in what non-Buddhists teach.

In the Buddha’s Way, there is an expression of intention that is personal and an expression of True Nature that is also personal, and there is an expression of both of them that goes beyond the personal. Also, there is a way of not expressing them that is personal, and there is a way of not expressing them that goes beyond the personal. When we have not yet studied the expressing of intention that goes beyond the personal, then this will be an expressing of intention which has not yet reached fertile ground. When we have not yet studied the expressing of intention that is personal, this too will be an expressing of intention that has not yet reached fertile ground. We study the expressing of intent that goes beyond any person, we study That which goes beyond the personal in expressing Its intent, we study a personal expressing of intention, and we study that there is someone who expresses his intention.

The strongest way that Rinzai phrased it was merely as ‘a real person who is beyond rank’; he still had not phrased it as ‘a real person who has a rank’. He had not yet displayed any other ways of exploring this through his training or any other ways of putting it. Thus, we must say that he had not yet reached the field of the Ultimate. Because expressing one’s intention and expressing one’s Nature is synonymous with expressing Buddha and expressing Ancestor, we and our Master may encounter each other through hearing, and we may encounter each other through seeing.

Shinzan, Tōzan’s elder brother in the Sangha, said, “And It is Who.”

8. The meaning of ‘lacking a Buddha Nature’ is thoroughly explored by Dōgen in his Discourse 21: On Buddha Nature (*Busshō*).

Elder brother Shinzan, in letting this way of expressing It emerge, could have put it this way earlier and he could put it this way later as well. 'It is Who' is his expressing his intention and his Buddha Nature right there at that moment.⁹ Accordingly, at the time when it is put as "Who is It?" and at the time when it is put as "It is Who," this will be Its expressing Its intention and Its expressing Its True Nature. This expressing of Its intention and of Its True Nature is something that folks throughout the ten quarters have never known. Because they have lost sight of their Child and take It to be a thief, they likewise judge a thief to be their child.

Tōzan replied, "With your asking this one question, my elder brother in the Sangha, that One has forthwith succeeded in completely passing away into death."

Many who are middling in their training, upon hearing these words, think, "Someone who is expressing his mind and expressing his nature is saying, 'Who is it?' and must be able forthwith to completely pass away into death." As a consequence, they are not conscious of its other meaning—"it is Who"—and never succeed in having an encounter with a Master, so it must be for them a dead and meaningless phrase. It isn't necessarily dead and meaningless. Those who have penetrated what this 'expressing True Nature by expressing intent' means must surely be few. To completely pass into death does not mean just being ten or twenty percent dead, for it means passing into death one hundred percent.¹⁰ At that very moment, who can say that this is not some limiting of the heavens and some covering up of the earth? It will be our letting go of trying to shed light upon our past, our present, our future, and, indeed, it will be our letting go of trying to shed light upon this very moment of now.

His elder brother Shinzan then said, "And It is Who that expresses His intention and expresses His True Nature."

Although the name referred to by the previous "Who is it?" and the present "And It is Who" is a veritable 'third son of a Mr. Chang', the One being referred to is actually 'the fourth son of a Mr. Lee'.¹¹

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9. Shinzan's response can be taken both as a question and as an answer: "Who is It that resides within?" and "It is Who (one's Buddha Nature) that resides within."
 10. 'Passing into death one hundred percent' refers to completely and absolutely letting go of the false self.
 11. That is, in both cases these two phrases seem to be exactly the same, but they are actually completely different in meaning.

Tōzan replied, "He has revived from within death."¹²

This phrase, 'within death,' points to having been able to pass directly into death. And Shinzan's saying "It is Who," which was not a casual remark, points directly to the condition of expressing his Nature by expressing his intent. This 'Who' directs the person who is expressing His intention and expressing His True Nature. Something to explore through your training is the assertion that we do not necessarily anticipate a one hundred percent passing away into death. The Great Master's statement, "He has revived from within death," refers to the manifesting of sounds and forms before one's very eyes, which expresses both intent and True Nature. And yet, even this will only be some ten or twenty percent of the entirety of passing away into death. Life, even though it is the totality of life, is not something wherein death is transformed and manifests as life. It is simply our letting go, from start to finish, of the notion of our 'possessing' life.

In sum, in the words and ways of the Buddhas and Ancestors, there is an expressing of one's intent and of one's True Nature like that described above, which is to be thoroughly explored through one's training. And to take this further, when we die a one hundred percent death, we have lived our life to the full.

You need to realize that from the T'ang dynasty to today, there have been many pitiable creatures who have not clarified that expressing intention and expressing one's True Nature is what the Buddha's Way is about. Further, they have been going around in the dark about the Teachings, practice, and direct experience, and have therefore made reckless remarks and unfounded assertions. We need to help them overcome what they have been and to realize what they can be. For their sake, we say that expressing Their True Nature by expressing Their intent has been the essential function of the Seven Buddhas* along with our ancestral Masters.

Delivered to the assembly in the first year of the Kangen era (1243) in Japan, at Kippō-ji Temple in the Yoshida Prefecture of Echizen Province.

Copied by me on the eleventh day of the first lunar month in the second year of the same era (February 20, 1244) while at the office of the Abbot's assistant.

Ejō

12. Whereas Dōgen begins by discussing this dialogue from the standpoint of the dropping off of self, he now discusses it from the point of view of dropping off 'dropping off'. In other words, since the concept of self is an illusion, there is nothing to be dropped off. However, we cannot know this until the time when the false ego has been let go of. At that time, we discover that 'That Which Is' is the One who has actually done the dropping off, for It has ever been the only true reality.