

On What the Mind of an Old Buddha Is

(*Kobusshin*)

Translator's Introduction: The Japanese term '*kobutsu*', rendered herein as 'an Old Buddha', occurs often in Zen writings. It refers to one who has fully realized his or her True Nature and therefore has the Mind of an Old Buddha.

In the succession of the Dharma in our Ancestral tradition, there were forty Ancestors from the Seven Buddhas* down to Daikan Enō, and from Daikan Enō back to the Seven Buddhas there were forty Buddhas.¹ Because the Seven Buddhas equally had the merit of having realized enlightenment and of having turned back to help the world, the inherited Dharma extended forward to Enō and was traceable back to the Seven Buddhas. Because Enō had the merit of having realized enlightenment and of having turned back to help the world, It has been genuinely Transmitted from the Seven Buddhas, and It has been genuinely Transmitted from Enō, and It has been genuinely Transmitted to later Buddhas. It is not merely a question of who has preceded or has followed whom; the time of Shakyamuni Buddha is that of all the Buddhas in the ten quarters. During Seigen's time there was Nangaku, and during Nangaku's time there was Seigen. And during the time of Seigen's heir Sekitō, there was Nangaku's heir Baso. They did not stand against each other, nor was it a matter of their not standing against each other. You need to thoroughly explore through your training that there was such meritorious behavior as this.²

* See *Glossary*.

1. Dōgen goes only as far as the Sixth Chinese Ancestor, Daikan Enō, because he was the first to have two Dharma heirs, Seigen Gyōshi and Nangaku Ejō. Dōgen's Sōtō lineage derives from Seigen, whereas the other Zen lineages, such as the Rinzai, trace their ancestry back to Nangaku.
2. That is, it goes beyond a matter of choosing between the pairs by thinking that one is right and the other wrong, or of not choosing between them by not committing oneself to one of the two traditions.

Their having passed away long ago and Their not having completely passed away are both the meritorious deeds of Old Buddhas. Through our training with our Master, we explore the words and ways of Old Buddhas so that we may awaken to the Truth of Old Buddhas, for They are Old Buddhas for generation after generation. Even though the ‘old’ of ‘Old Buddhas’ is the same as that in ‘new and old’, such Buddhas have gone beyond what is past and what is present; They stand squarely in both the past and the present.



My late Master once said, “I had an encounter with the Old Buddha Wanshi.”³ Clearly recognize that there was an Old Buddha residing under Tendō’s roof, and there was a Tendō residing under the roof of an Old Buddha.



Meditation Master Engo once said, “I fully prostrate myself before Daikan Enō, a true Old Buddha.” You need to know that you too should do a full prostration to Daikan Enō, our Ancestor of the thirty-third generation from Shakyamuni Buddha, for he is indeed an Old Buddha. Because Meditation Master Engo had the splendorous brightness of an Old Buddha, he had an encounter with an Old Buddha, which is why he made such a respectful bow. Accordingly, you need to know that when he relied on Enō’s being a Buddha from head-to-toe as spiritual ‘fodder’, this was the Old Buddha’s way of getting hold of the water buffalo’s nose ring, for anyone who has hold of this nose ring is an Old Buddha.⁴



Sozan once said,⁵ “Atop Daiyū Peak there is an Old Buddha. The radiance that He emits illumines this place of ours.” You need to realize that what Sozan is

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3. Wanshi, who was once the Abbot of Mount Tendō, had died five years before Dōgen’s Master, Tendō Nyojō, who was also an Abbot of Mount Tendō, was born. ‘To have an encounter’ with a Master refers to the mutual recognition between two people that each is ‘such a person’, that is, someone who has spiritually awakened.
 4. ‘Getting hold of the water buffalo’s nose ring’ is a reference to getting a handle on one’s spiritual question, and is an image found in the classic Zen Buddhist *Ten Ox-herding Pictures*.
 5. Sozan Kōnin, not to be confused with Sōzan Honjaku, both of whom were disciples of Tōzan Ryōkai.

saying is that he had already had an encounter with an Old Buddha. He did not have to seek elsewhere, for the place where his Old Buddha resided was atop Daiyū Peak. Those who are not an Old Buddha cannot recognize the place where an Old Buddha resides. Those who know the place where an Old Buddha resides will be an Old Buddha themselves.



Seppō once exclaimed, “Jōshū, the Old Buddha!” Keep in mind that even though Jōshū was an Old Buddha, if Seppō had not also experienced the abilities of an Old Buddha for himself, it would have been difficult for him to fully comprehend how to pay homage to an Old Buddha. Well, Seppō was an Old Buddha himself. In his daily conduct, he depended upon his spiritual abilities as an Old Buddha while he did his explorations into ‘an Old Buddha’. And in doing so, he did not need to go looking for answers from others nor did he engage in conversing about such things. In other words, that old fellow Seppō was just fine! The day-to-day customs of an Old Buddha and the everyday behavior of an Old Buddha do not resemble those of someone who is not an Old Buddha, for the latter are simply not first class. As a consequence, you should explore through your training from start to finish just what sort of conduct Jōshū found to be good, and you should explore through your training what the lifetime of an Old Buddha is.



The National Teacher Echū of Kōtaku-ji Temple in the Western Capital was a Dharma heir of Daikan Enō.⁶ He was respected and esteemed by both worldly and celestial emperors alike. Even in China, to encounter or hear of the likes of such a one was truly rare. Not only was he the teacher of four imperial generations, but the emperors themselves pulled his carriage to the imperial court with their own hands. And what is more, having been invited to the celestial palace of Lord Indra, he ascended far into the Trayastrimsha Heavens where he gave voice to the Dharma for the sake of the celestial emperor and others of the celestial multitudes.

The National Teacher was once asked by a monk, “Just what is an Old Buddha?”

He replied, “The tiles* and stones of His walls and fences.”

In other words, the question is stating, in effect, “I am ‘such a one’* and you are ‘such a one.’” The monk has taken this statement of the Truth and turned it into

6. Although National Teacher Echū was a Dharma heir of Daikan Enō and had two Dharma heirs of his own, his line ultimately died out.

a question. And this question has become an assertion of the Truth far and wide, in both the past and present.⁷

Consequently, a response such as, “The myriad trees and the hundreds of sproutings are blossomings of the Flower” is an assertion of the Truth by an Old Buddha. And the response, “The nine mountains and eight oceans that are the arising of our world” is the face of the Sun and the face of the Moon for an Old Buddha, just as Bodhidharma’s response, “You have my Skin, Flesh, Bones, and Marrow,” is also the countenance of the Sun and Moon for an Old Buddha. Moreover, there will be ‘the Mind of Old’, which is a Buddha doing His practice, and there will be ‘the Mind of Old’, which is His realizing Buddhahood, and there will be the ‘oldness’ of a Buddha, which is what is in His mind.⁸ We call it ‘the Mind of Old’ because of the ‘oldness’ of the Mind. Because Mind and Buddha are positively ‘old’, the Mind of Old is synonymous with a chair, as well as with bamboo and trees.⁹ It is synonymous with the saying, “It is impossible to find anyone who understands one bit of the Buddha Dharma, even though one may search the whole of the great earth.” And it is synonymous with a Master calling It ‘the What’ in response to a monk asking, “What is It?” The causes and conditions of this very moment, as well as the various lands and empty space, are nothing other than the Mind of Old, for they maintain and depend on the Mind of Old, and they maintain and depend on Buddhas of old. They maintain and depend upon two heads having one countenance and on having two heads in one picture.¹⁰

The National Teacher replied to the monk, “The tiles and stones of his walls and fences.”

In other words, his main point is that there is a way of proceeding that is expressed as ‘the tiles and stones of one’s walls and fences’, and there is a way of

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7. That is, what the monk said could be understood not merely as a question but also as a statement: it is the ‘What’ that is what an Old Buddha is. This double use of the word ‘what’ has already occurred in several kōan stories that Dōgen presented earlier.
 8. What is in the mind of an Old Buddha is His or Her accumulated wisdom based on spiritual experience.
 9. In Dōgen’s day and even earlier in China, the only chair in a Zen monastery or temple was that which served as the Dharma seat from which the Master gave the Teaching. Bamboo and various trees are also often used as metaphors for the Buddha Mind.
 10. Two heads having one countenance refers to a picture of Shakyamuni Buddha which depicts Him as being seated in meditation with another head appearing atop His own. The second head represents That upon which Shakyamuni Buddha is meditating, that is, it represents Vairochana Buddha.

proceeding that is the tiles and stones of one's walls and fences. And there will be yet another way of putting forth the Truth. And there is a way of pulling back whereby the tiles and stones of the walls and fences speak from within the tiles and stones of our walls and fences. In the full perfection and completeness from which these ways of expressing the Matter* fully manifest before our very eyes, there are walls rising up a thousand or ten thousand feet, and there are fences rising up that encircle the earth and encircle the heavens, and there is the covering up of the tiles all the way or half the way, and there are the sharp edges of the stones, both big and small. What exists like this is not only our minds but also our bodies, including both our innate tendencies and our external conditions.

Thus, you should ask, “What, pray, are the tiles and stones of my walls and fences?” and you should also state what they are. And if you should enter into a colloquy with your Master about this question, the reply should be “The Mind of an Old Buddha.” In maintaining and depending on the Matter in this way, you should also thoroughly explore through your training with your Master just what your walls and fences are, what you acknowledge your walls and fences to be, and just what forms and stages they are taking now. The following questions also need to be thoroughly explored, and in detail. Do you produce your walls and fences by building them up, or do your walls and fences bring forth their own building up? Are they deliberately built up or not? Do you treat them as something sentient, or as something non-sentient? Do they manifest before your very eyes or not? When you make an effort to explore the Matter through training in this way, the Mind of the Old Buddha—whether It exists in the celestial worlds above or among humankind, or has manifested Itself in this land or in other lands—will be the tiles and stones of your walls and fences. Not a single mote of dust has ever yet stuck out its head to taint It.



Great Master Zengen Chūkō was once asked by a monk, “Just what is the mind of an old Buddha?”

The Master responded, “His mind's world has caved in.”

The monk then asked, “Why has his mind's world caved in?”

The Master replied, “Would you prefer that I put the Matter as ‘he no longer has a self of his own?’”¹¹

11. What this kōan story and Dōgen's subsequent commentary point to is that becoming an Old Buddha means letting the ‘world’ that one's intellect (lower case ‘mind’) has created collapse, which includes letting go of the notion of a separate, unchanging, permanent ‘self’,

As to the ‘world’ of which he spoke, the ten directions all together comprise the world of a Buddha. And there has never yet been a world devoid of Buddha. As to the form and stages of caving in, you should explore the whole of this world in all ten quarters. Do not study ‘the world’s caving in’ as being yourself, because in the course of training you do not explore it as your self.¹²

As to the very moment of your caving in, will you experience it as one thing or two things, or as three, four, or five things? It is inexhaustible things! Whatever these things may be, the Matter will be one that Zengen preferred to put as ‘not having a self of one’s own’. A ‘self’ is what an Old Buddha prefers not holding on to. Do not selfishly begrudge this very moment and fail to transform your own self into the Mind of an Old Buddha.

Truly, prior to the Seven Buddhas, the Mind of the Old Buddha stood erect as a wall; after the Seven Buddhas, the Mind of the Old Buddha put forth sprouts. Prior to all the Buddhas, the Mind of the Old Buddha blossomed; after all the Buddhas, the Mind of the Old Buddha bore fruit. Prior to the Mind of the Old Buddha arising, ‘the mind of an old Buddha’ has dropped off.

*Delivered to the assembly on the twenty-ninth day of the fourth lunar month in the first year of the Kangen era (May 19, 1243) at the Temple of the Six Paramitas.*¹³

Copied by me on the twelfth day of the fifth lunar month in the second year of the Kangen era (June 18, 1244) in the office of the Abbot’s assistant in the hermitage below Kippō Peak.

Ejō

as one lets go of a sense of being separate from one’s Buddha Nature. In the story, the monk is apparently a novice who has not yet clarified the difference between mind (intellect) and Mind (one’s Buddha Nature) or between an old Buddha (a long-dead historical figure) and an Old Buddha (one who has realized Truth).

12. That is, to explore it as your ‘self’ is simply a matter of the intellect exploring the concept of a self, a concept which the intellect has created in the first place.
13. This temple is in Kyōto near the government office of one of Dōgen’s chief supporters.