

On Leaving Home Life Behind

(Shukke)

Translator's Introduction: The term *shukke*, 'leaving home life behind', has a double meaning. Figuratively, it refers to letting go of worldly values; literally, it refers to someone entering a monastery to become a monk.

Some of Dōgen's readers have taken this discourse as evidence that he had completely rejected the idea of lay discipleship. But if that were the case, it is difficult to explain why he would be giving this talk to his assembly of monastic disciples rather than to the relatively few lay disciples who were present at Eihei-ji. It seems more likely that some of his monks were having difficulties with the harshness of monastic training in such an isolated locale, and Dōgen was trying to get some starch into their backbones by insisting that only through sticking with their commitment to leave home life behind, in both senses of the term, and to live in accord with the Precepts could they realize That which they had come there to find.

In the *Procedures for Cleanliness in a Zen Temple* it says the following:

All Buddhas in the three temporal worlds—past, present, and future—affirm that to leave home life behind is to realize the Truth. The twenty-eight Indian Ancestors and the six Chinese Ancestors, all of whom Transmitted the Buddha's Mind seal,* were, each and every one of them, monastics. Most likely, it was because they strictly observed the monastic regulations that they were able to become outstanding models for those in the three worlds of desire, form, and beyond form. Thus, in practicing meditation and inquiring of the Way with their Master, they made the Precepts and the monastic regulations foremost. Had they not distanced themselves from their faults and guarded against misdeeds, how could they have realized Buddhahood and become an Ancestor?

As to the method for doing the ordination ceremony of Taking the Precepts, three types of kesas* and a set of mealtime bowls, along with fresh, clean robes, are provided for the one to be ordained. If new

* See *Glossary*.

robes are not available, be sure to launder old ones, but you must not use borrowed kesas or a borrowed bowl set to put on the altar when doing the ceremony of Taking the Precepts. Concentrate wholeheartedly and take care not to get distracted by side issues. Assuming the form of a Buddha, being provided with the Precepts and the monastic regulations, and acquiring what the Buddha received and made use of are, by no means, small matters, so how could you possibly treat them lightly? Were you to borrow someone's kesas or bowl set, and then go up to the altar to take the Precepts, you would not really be obtaining the Precepts. Should you never receive the Precepts, you will be a person devoid of the Precepts for the whole of your life as you vainly cross over the threshold of empty scholasticism, meaninglessly accepting alms given in good faith. Those entering the path with a beginner's mind may not as yet have memorized the rules and regulations. Should their Master offer no guidance, they will lapse into error. What I am saying here is stern advice indeed. Dare I hope that you will engrave it on your heart? If you have taken the monastic Precepts, by all means you should also take the Bodhisattva* Precepts, for They are foremost for those who would enter the Teaching.¹

Clearly understand that the full perfecting of the innate enlightenment of all the Buddhas and all the Ancestors has been nothing other than Their leaving home life behind and Their accepting the Precepts. And the vital line of Transmission of all the Buddhas and Ancestors is nothing other than Their leaving home life behind and accepting the Precepts. Those who have not yet left home life behind are also not Buddhas or Ancestors. Meeting up with a Buddha and meeting up with an Ancestor is what leaving home life behind and accepting the Precepts is all about.



Makakashō, in following the World-honored One, was intent on leaving home life behind, as he desired to help all beings to cross to the Other Shore. The Buddha said, "Welcome, good monk." Thereupon, the hair on Makakashō's head naturally came off and a kesa enveloped his body. When someone learns what a

1. The Bodhisattva Precepts can be found in the *Scripture of Brahma's Net*. One translation of this appears in *Buddhist Writings on Meditation and Daily Practice* (Shasta Abbey Press, 1994), pp. 55-188

Buddha is and drops off whatever that person is holding onto, such a one is, in this way, an excellent example of leaving home life behind and accepting the Precepts.



In the third fascicle of the *Great Scripture on Wisdom* it says the following:

The World-honored Buddha once said, “If a bodhisattva-mahasattva* were to think thus: ‘Were I, at some time, to abandon my position in our nation, then on the very day that I realized supreme, fully perfected wisdom I would, also on that day, turn the Wheel of the Wondrous Dharma in order to help sentient beings beyond count to distance themselves from their defiling passions and to depart from their delusions, as well as help them bring to life their pure Eye for the Dharma. I would also help sentient beings beyond count bring their delusive, evil deeds to an end, and help them set free the Wisdom within their heart. And I would also help sentient beings beyond count realize the state where they neither regressed nor turned away from their supreme, fully perfected Wisdom.’ If this bodhisattva-mahasattva were to desire such things, then he or she should, by all means, study the *Great Scripture on Wisdom*.”

Generally speaking, our supreme enlightenment is fulfilled at the time of our leaving home life behind and accepting the Precepts. Were there no day on which we left home life behind, then it would not be completely fulfilled. Thus, making use of the day on which we leave home life behind, we bring about the day on which we realize supreme enlightenment, and we pick out the day on which we will realize supreme enlightenment, which is the day on which we leave home life behind. This leaving home life behind turns us upside down. It is the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma. Accordingly, leaving home life behind helps innumerable beings keep from regressing or turning away from supreme enlightenment. Keep in mind that what is meant by fulfilling ‘what benefits oneself benefits others’ and by not regressing or turning away from fully perfected enlightenment is leaving home life behind and accepting the Precepts. On the other hand, the day of leaving home life behind is the day of realizing what Wisdom truly is. And beyond doubt, you need to realize that the day of leaving home life behind goes beyond sameness or difference.

On the day of leaving home life behind, we experience through our training innumerable eons of time. And on the day of leaving home life behind, we dwell within an unbounded ocean of time, turning the wondrous Wheel of the Dharma. And the day of leaving home life behind should not be thought of as comparable to

‘a time to eat’, nor is it sixty seconds, but it goes beyond the three periods of past, present, and future, for one has dropped off temporal boundaries. The day of leaving home life behind transcends ‘the day of leaving home life behind’. Be this as it may, when we have broken open the nets and cages of our delusions, the day of leaving home life behind will be our day of leaving home life behind. The day for manifesting the Truth will be our day of manifesting the Truth.



In the thirteenth section of Nāgārjuna’s *Commentary on the Great Scripture on Wisdom*, there is the following:

Once when the Buddha was at Jetavana Park, an intoxicated Brahman came to where the Buddha was and asked to become a monk. The Buddha requested that some of his monks shave the Brahman’s head and clothe him in a kesa. After the effects of the liquor had worn off, the Brahman was astonished and frightened upon seeing that his bodily form had changed into that of a Buddhist monk, whereupon he ran away forthwith. The monks respectfully asked the Buddha why He had allowed the drunken Brahman to become a monk only to have him run back home. The Buddha answered, “For eons beyond measure, this Brahman did not have the heart to leave home life behind, but now, while under the influence, he gave rise to a bit of courage. Due to this, he will, later on, leave home life behind.”

There are all sorts of stories like this one. The breaking of the Precepts by one who has left home life behind is far better than the keeping of the Precepts by one who has remained in home life, because others do not rid themselves of their delusions and spiritual suffering due to a lay person’s keeping of the Precepts.

The principle underlying the Buddha’s instructions concerning the Brahman is quite clearly recognizable. Within the Teaching being given here by the Buddha, what is fundamental is simply leaving home life behind. Not yet freeing oneself from home life is not the Buddha’s Way.² While the Tathagata was in the world,

2. This sentence has been understood in different ways. Some believe that Dōgen is saying everyone must become a monastic, whereas others assert that Dōgen’s view is that everyone needs to free oneself from worldly values and worldly ways of thinking and behaving. Perhaps the deciding question is for whom did Dōgen intend this talk? Was he trying to encourage the lay Buddhists who were working at Eihei-ji or otherwise supporting the

whenever non-Buddhists discarded their false views and took refuge in the Teaching of the Buddha, invariably they sought, first off, to leave home life behind. Either the World-honored One Himself would personally greet such persons, saying, “Welcome, good monk!” or He would have His monks shave them, and then have them formally leave home life behind and take the Precepts. In either case, the means for leaving home life behind and taking the Precepts were immediately supplied.

You need to keep in mind that once the Buddha’s Teaching envelops our body and mind, the hair on our head naturally falls away and a kesa clothes our body. If the Buddhas had not yet given Their approval, our hair would not have been shaved off, nor would a kesa have been wrapped around our body, nor would we have been able to take the Buddha’s Precepts. So, our leaving home life behind and accepting the Precepts is our personally receiving from the Buddhas and the Tathagata the affirmation of our ultimate enlightenment.



In the *Lotus Scripture*, Shakyamuni Buddha once said the following:

My virtuous sons! Upon seeing sentient beings who are low in moral character and sunk deep in delusion taking pleasure in trivialities, I, the Tathagata, instruct them by saying, “While still young, I left home life behind and realized supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. And the time since I truly realized Buddhahood has been ever so long.” I give instruction in this manner, but only as a skillful means for teaching sentient beings that they too may enter the Buddha’s Way.

So, His realizing the Truth long ago was synonymous with His having left home life behind while still young, and His realizing supreme, fully perfected enlightenment was also synonymous with His having left home life behind.

By the Buddha’s putting forth the statement, “While still young, I left home life behind,” those human beings who are low in moral character and sunk deep in delusion, and who therefore take pleasure in trivialities, also come to realize that they too, though still young, may leave home life behind. At any point where we can encounter, or hear about, and learn through practice the Teaching contained in “While still young, one may leave home life behind,” we encounter the Buddha’s

monastery to let go of such values, thinking, and behaving? Or was he upbraiding monks who were disinclined to give up their pursuit of worldly interests?

supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. When He rescued those human beings who were taking pleasure in trivialities, He taught them, “While still young, I left home life behind and realized supreme, fully perfected enlightenment.” Though He expressed the Essential Matter* like this, were someone ultimately to ask me, “Just how much merit is there in leaving home life behind?” I would reply, “It is worth your very head!”

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