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*Published by Shambhala Publications

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RATIONAL ZEN

The Mind of Dōgen Zenji

TRANSLATED AND PRESENTED BY
THOMAS CLEARY



S H A M B H A L A

Boston & London

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1993

1

The years of a lifetime are a flash of lightning; who clings to objects? They are empty through and through. Even if you care for the nose hung in front of your face, still be careful and value every moment to work on enlightenment.

This a statement for people in meditation; what about a statement for the seasoned adept on the mountain?

*The autumn colors of the thousand peaks
are dyed with seasonal rain;
How could the hard rock on the mountain
follow along with the wind?*

2

The saying that having no mind is Buddha originated in India, the saying that mind itself is Buddha began in China.

If you understand accordingly, you are as far off as the sky is from earth.

If you do not understand accordingly, you are just a common sort.

Ultimately, what is what?

*In the third month of spring
the fruit is full on the enlightenment tree;
One night the flower blooms
and the whole world is fragrant.*

3

A seeker asked a Zen master, "What are you thinking of so intently?"

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The Zen master said, "I am thinking of what does not think."
The seeker asked, "How can you think of what does not think?"
The Zen master said, "It is not thought."

*Minding already gone,
"mindless" does not quite describe it.
In this life,
purity is foremost.*

4

Supreme enlightenment is not for oneself, not for others, not for fame, not for gain. **To** nevertheless seek unexcelled enlightenment wholeheartedly and singlemindedly, persevering without regressing, is called "awakening the mind for enlightenment."

Once you get this mind to appear, it is not even for the sake of enlightenment that you seek enlightenment; this is the true mind of enlightenment. Without this mind, how can you really practice the way to enlightenment?

Those who are **singlemindedly** seeking the mind of enlightenment must not weary of this quest; they must not give up. Those who have not yet attained the mind of enlightenment should pray to the Buddhas of former ages, and should also dedicate their good works to the quest for the mind of enlightenment.

Someone once asked a great Zen master, "All things return to One. Where does the One return?"

The Zen master said, "When I was living in such-and-such a place, I made a cloth shirt that weighed seven pounds."

This is how an ancient illuminate spoke. If someone asked me, "All things return to One; where does the One return?" I would say it returns to transcendence.

If asked why I say this, I would say I am within, making offerings to billions of Buddhas.

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Eihei Kōroku

5

In ancient times a man up in a high tower saw two monks passing by in front of the tower; there were two gods sweeping the road and strewing flowers before them.

Then when the monks came back that way, there were two demons angrily shouting and spitting, wiping away their tracks.

The man came down from the tower and asked the monks the reason for this phenomenon.

The monks said, "As we were going, we were discussing the principles taught by the Buddha. On our way back, we were talking about trivia. That must be why it was like this."

The two monks were awakened by this. They repented and went on their way.

Although this is a crude objectification, when you examine it carefully you find it is a most important issue for people studying the Way, Why? Simply because outside objects appear when emotive thoughts arise. If thoughts do not arise, there are no objects that can be apprehended.

In the case of this old story, the gods found a road on which to strew flowers, the demonic spirits found a way to spy: that is why it was like this. What about when the gods find no road on which to strew flowers, and the demons have no way to spy?

Do you want to understand? I will say now what has not been said in former generations.

Buddhas do not appear in the world by virtue of meditation experiences, powers, or occult knowledge. Ordinary people of sharp faculties also practice these meditations, yet they do not realize noncontamination. If the enlightened one explained, they too would realize noncontamination.

6

I didn't go to many monasteries, but I happened to see my teacher and directly found that my eyes are vertical and my nose is

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horizontal. Then I was not to be fooled by anyone. So I came back with open hands. That is why I haven't got any Buddhism at all; I pass the time leaving it to the flow. Every morning the sun rises in the east, every night the moon sets in the west. When the clouds are gone the ridges of the mountains are bared; when the rain has passed, the surrounding hills hover low. Ultimately, how is it? [Silence] One leap year after every three; the rooster crows at dawn.

7

Even acting upon seeing the moment of opportunity is not yet expertise; if you manage by physical manifestation, I still dare not accept it.

That is why it is said, "What thing is it that comes thus?"

What is the principle behind "what thing is it that comes"?

[Silence]

The true does not cover the false, the crooked does not hide the straight.

8

*Cultivating practice for three immeasurable cons,
don't rest when the task is fulfilled.
Realization attained in an instant,
defilement cannot affect it.*

An ancient said, "Understanding the meaning according to the scriptures is the enemy of the Buddhas of all times; but a single word's departure from the scriptures is the same as devil talk."

When we do not depend on the scriptures yet do not depart from the scriptures, how do we practice? Do you want to read a scripture?

[Raising a whisk]

This is my whisk; what is the scripture?

What follows is lengthy; I leave it for another day.

9

One statement removes obstructing fixations; one statement fills everywhere. Tell me, which statement do the enlightened ones use to help people?

I have a statement that the enlightened ones have never made, and which I will quote to you.

Complete.

10

Even dismantling fixed structures is whirling in the flow of birth and death; even imparting the middle way is still illusion and error.

When you study thus, you are studying along with the Buddhas. When you study it as not thus, you are studying along with your self.

Studying along with the Buddhas and studying along with your self, explaining a furlong and explaining a foot; these are different. Speaking of ten and speaking of nine are different.

What is "not thus"? It is your self. What is "thus"? It is the Buddhas.

When the great Baso was beginning to teach, his teacher Nangaku said to his own group, "Is Baso teaching people?" They said he was. Nangaku said, "I have never seen anyone bring news of this." No one had any reply.

So Nangaku sent a monk to Baso, with these instructions: "When Baso gets up in the hall to lecture, just ask him how he is. Remember what he says and come back."

The monk went and did as he had been told. When he returned, he told Nangaku, "Baso said, 'Ever since the barbarian rebellion, these last thirty years, I have never lacked salt and soup for meals.'"

Making a ball of this story, I offer it to the enlightened ones. There are three people who bear witness: one says it is making offerings of flowers, one says it is making offerings of precious

incense, one says it is making offerings of head, eyes, marrow, and brains.

Leaving aside the testimony of these three people, how would the testimony of the whole community have any ordinary people explain?

“In the million years since the barbarian rebellion, I’ve never lacked salt and vinegar.”

11

The lineage of Buddas comes from conditions, the teaching of Buddhas comes from the start. Once you have encountered good conditions, you shouldn’t miss them, but should cultivate practical application. In practical application there is refutation and there is accommodation.

Being here, you shouldn’t stumble past; you should find out the Way. In finding the Way, there is practice, there is effort; if you break through one day, all things will be complete. If you haven’t broken through, all things will be wrong.

Once there was a certain monk in the assembly of one of the great classical masters who was serving as the superintendent of the monastery.

One day the Zen master asked him, “How long have you been here?”

The monk said, “Three years, so far.” The Zen master asked, “You are young; why don’t you ever ask about the Teaching?” The monk said, “I dare not deceive you. I already attained peace while I was at the place of another Zen teacher.”

The Zen master inquired, “By what words did you gain entry?” The monk said, “Once I asked the teacher, ‘What is the student’s self?’ The teacher said, ‘The fire god comes looking for fire!’”

Hearing this story, the Zen master remarked, “That is a fine saying, but I’m afraid you didn’t understand.”

The monk said, “The fire god is in the realm of **fire**; to seek fire with fire is like seeking self with the self.”

The Zen master said, “You really don’t understand. If Buddhism were like this, it wouldn’t have reached the present.”

The monk left in high dudgeon, but on his way out he thought, “This Zen master is the teacher of five hundred people. There must be some point to his warning that I’m wrong.”

So he went back to the Zen master and apologized. The master instructed him, “You ask me.” The monk said, “What is the student’s self!” The Zen master said, “The fire god comes looking for fire!” At this the monk was greatly enlightened.

Before, it was “the fire god looking for fire,” and it was “the fire god looking for fire” afterwards too: why wasn’t he enlightened the first time, but fell into the road of intellectual understanding; and why was he greatly enlightened afterwards and shed his nest of cliché?

Do you want to understand?

[Silence]

*The **fire** god comes looking for **fire**;
how much light do **the** pillars and lamps begrudge?
Buried in the **ashes**, though you search you don’t see;
lighting it up and blowing it out,
it goes into action again.*

12

When Sudhana visited Manjushri, Manjushri said to him, “Go outside and get a stalk of medicinal herb.”

Sudhana went out and looked all over the earth, finding nothing that was not medicine.

He returned and said to Manjushri, “The whole earth is medicine; what could I bring?”

Manjushri said, “Bring a stalk of medicinal herb.”

Sudhana brought a blade of grass.

Manjushri took the blade of grass, then showed it to the assembly and said, “This blade of grass can kill people and can also enliven people.”

Before, it was a blade of grass; later, it was a blade of grass: how far apart are before and after?

[Silence]

They're a blade of grass apart.

13

Before the day of the full moon, the wind is high, the moon is cool. After the day of the full moon, the sea is calm, the rivers are clear. Right on the day of the full moon the sky and wind go on forever.

Having gotten to be thus, it is necessary to be thus.

Advance a step, and the Enlightened Ones arrive;

Step back, and the heart is bare and single.

Not advancing, not withdrawing, don't say I have no help for people, don't say you people **have** no realization. Once you have heard of this, do you want to practice in this way?

[Silence]

Without turning away from the multitudes of people, body and mind drop off.

14

The king of a country in eastern India invited a Buddhist master to a feast, in the course of which he asked, "Everyone is reciting scriptures; why don't **you**?"

The master answered, "Breathing **out**, I do not follow myriad objects; breathing **in**, I do not dwell on mental or physical elements: I always 'recite' such a 'scripture,' hundreds of thousands of millions of volumes."

Try further to explain the principle.

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A seeker asked one of the great Zen ancients, "What is the great meaning of the Buddhist teaching?"

The Zen ancient said, "You cannot but know."

The seeker asked, "Is there yet a turning point beyond?"

The Zen ancient said, "The eternal sky does not inhibit the flight of the white clouds."

You can't but know the Buddha's great meaning; it is after all stylish where the style is slight. The eternal **sky does not** inhibit the flight of the white clouds; this time why bother to ask a Zen master?

16

When the sky becomes one, it is clear; when earth becomes one, it is at rest; when people become one, they are at peace; when time becomes one, it is positive energy. This oneness is eternal; in this eternity Buddhas and Zen masters get their life, and people awaken resolve, cultivate practice, discern the Way, and attain realization of one statement.

Having gained power within eternity, having gained life within eternity, then you make remembrance beads of the bodies of Buddhas and Zen masters, and count off the three hundred and sixty-five days: every time you reach *today*, then you can go on thus.

This then is the body-mind of Buddhas and Zen masters, because you can go on *thus*.

[Silence]

*The mind-body of every Buddha now becomes eternal;
the facets of the precious jewels are formed like the skies;
counting, counting, how very long.*

The lucky day is when you discover it's all one day.

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NOTES

- I. Two perspectives on integration of presence and transcendence: from the point of view of practice, and (in the verse) from the point of view of realization.

Three practical exercises are presented. One is contemplation of the impermanence of the subject, another is contemplation of the impermanence of objects. The third is alertness in the immediate present.

“The nose hung in front of your face” is the immediately present awareness, through which consciousness is “breathed.” Typically, **Dōgen** stresses that it is not enough to reach the point of total presence of mind; it is important to be able to use it effectively.

The verse plays on the contrasts between evanescence and permanence, change and constancy, distinguishing them **even** as it weaves them together, portraying the Zen mind in the world yet transcending the world at the same time.

2. “Having no mind” is traditionally interpreted in such terms as having no selfish, grasping, deluded mind; not minding pointless superficialities; not minding insult or slight; not dwelling obsessively on any particular function of mind.

“Mind itself is Buddha” was taught by an early Chinese Zen master to stop people from seeking enlightenment as something to be acquired elsewhere.

“If you understand accordingly, you are as far off as the sky is from earth.” If you understand “no mind” and “this mind” in conventional terms, you wind up identifying mindless blankness or random thought with Buddha.

“If you do not understand accordingly, you are just a common sort.” Having no mind, in the truly liberative, not escapist sense;

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realizing the very mind itself, in its essential nature rather than its superficial functions: both are means of transcending the ordinary consciousness.

The symbolism of the first two lines of the verse is self-explanatory. The last two lines mean that when you realize enlightenment in yourself through individual transcendence, your experience of the whole world takes place in a new light.

3. “Thinking” of what does not think refers to the Zen exercise of *ekō henshō*, “turning the light around to shine back,” or turning the attention to the innermost mind, to the very seat of consciousness. Elsewhere **Dōgen** refers to this as the essential art of *zazen* or sitting meditation.

Just as **Dōgen** warns people not to take the Zen phrase “this mind is Buddha” to refer to thoughts or the thinking function, he uses this story on “thinking of what does not think” to help ensure that meditators will reach sufficiently deeply into the source.

When the Zen master says “It is not thought,” this means that the expression “thinking” here is only a metaphor, and the process of directing the attention in this manner is not “thought” in the sense of conceptualization or mental talk.

This exercise is not unthinking self-absorption, and it is not self-analysis. The verse is a representation of its subtlety and centered balance in practice.

4. See the translation of **Dōgen’s** *Shōbōgenzō* essay “Awakening the Unsurpassed Mind,” paragraphs 5, 16, 22, 35.
5. According to ancient Buddhist lore, it is **possible** to attain occult powers without being enlightened. Of six supernormal powers said to be attained by enlightened Buddhas, only one is believed to be exclusive to them; that is what is called the knowledge of **noncontamination**. The enlightened Buddhas’ unique power of **noncontamination** refers to their ultimate unaffected freedom in the midst of all phenomena. This cannot be “acquired” by a contrived “practice.” On this see the chapter entitled “The Ten Stages” in the *Flower Ornament* Scripture, particularly the sections on stages four, seven, and eight.
6. This passage is a conventional expression of *suchness*.
7. The first passage alludes to the Zen practice called *kōjō*, which means transcendence and also progress, referring to the continuing process of going beyond accomplishment.

The second and third passages allude to the Zen practice called *ekō henshō*, referred to earlier in the notes to the third section of these translations from *Eihei Kōroku*, meaning to turn the attention around to focus on the innermost essence of mind. This practice is not of only one stage; its use is renewed in advanced stages to wean the mind from higher experiences and maintain its essence in complete freedom.

The question “What thing is it that comes thus?” is from an ancient Zen story in which the person thus questioned replies, after eight years of contemplation, “To speak of it as like something would be to miss the mark.”

This represents the “unpegged” clear eye that sees objectively: as **Dōgen** says, in its perspective “the true does not cover the false, the crooked does not hide the straight.”

8. Superficial **literalism** does not yield the real meaning of Buddhist scripture; yet avoiding literalism does not mean ignoring the teachings either. The classical Zen master Baizhang (Hyakujō) interpreted this saying in these terms: “**To** remain fixedly abiding in the present mirroring awareness is the enemy of the Buddhas of all times; yet anything outside of this is the same as devil talk.”
9. Removing obstructing fixations to attain more complete consciousness is an essential part of Zen practice: whether primary attention is given to the “removal” or to the “pervasion” depends upon the stage of progress realized by the individual learner. To pose this as a question of choice, as if it were a matter of preferring one “statement” to **the** other, is a typical Zen strategic maneuver to make individual hearers think for themselves.

“Complete” is “a statement that the enlightened ones have never made” insofar as the Way never ends. Not only is the Way infinite; there are also infinite ways to see the infinity of the Way. For example, as the object of Buddhas is to enlighten all beings, this process is never complete; as the object of Buddhas is to awaken to all knowledge, this process is never complete. Also, when one attains the “statement that fills everywhere,” namely the experience of panoramic awareness, this seems to be complete; but it is only so in a general sense, not in terms of every particular of potential within encompassing consciousness.
10. The first paragraph represents the Buddhist “transcendent wisdom” teaching on the end transcending the means.

The second paragraph introduces the classic Zen terms “thus” and “not thus,” which developed through the early Zen handling of the Buddhist teaching of “suchness.”

To “study thus” means to receive communication directly from objective reality. To “study it as not thus” means to detach from subjective notions of reality.

Detaching from subjective notions of reality is close to receiving communication directly from objective reality, but not quite the same experience. In *Tendai* Buddhist terms, this is the difference between a conformational state and a state of realization; one is still affected by deliberate cultivation, the other is spontaneously so of its own nature. This point is illustrated very precisely and in great detail by the differences between the experiences of the seventh and eighth stages of enlightenment as described in the core book of the “**Ten** Stages” in the *Flower Ornament Scripture*.

Baso (Mazu) and Nangaku (Nanyue) were Chinese Zen masters of the middle Tang dynasty. Nangaku is considered a direct disciple of the illustrious Sixth Ancestor of Zen, one of the greatest figures in all of Zen history. Like most of the Sixth Ancestor’s disciples, Nangaku is overshadowed in history by his great teacher, and nothing much is really known about him. Baso, on the other hand, ranks almost on a par with his spiritual grandsire in Zen history; he is said to have produced between eighty-four and one hundred and thirty-nine enlightened disciples, a most unusual achievement.

Nangaku and Baso were regarded as ancestors of the Rinzai schools of Zen, and stories about them were popular among followers of Rinzai Zen.

“The barbarian rebellion,” an overthrow of the conventional order, symbolizes Zen awakening.

“Salt and soup for meals” refers to living and working in the world after enlightenment. “Thirty years” is a traditional figure representing a period of completion and maturation after awakening.

“Making a ball of this story, I offer it to the enlightened ones.” The imagery of this paragraph is from the *Flower Ornament Scripture*: see, for example, the stories of Ratnachuda and the perfumer Samantanetra in the final book of the scripture, the “Entry into the Realm of Reality.” The idea of offering both external and internal resources refers to a complete dedication to enlightenment, such as

Dōgen describes in his *Shōbōgenzō* essay “Awakening the Unsurpassed Mind.”

“In the million years since the barbarian rebellion. . .” The essential theme of both the *Lotus* and the Flower Ornament scriptures is the eternity of the reality underlying Buddhahood. In Tendai Buddhist terms, here Dōgen shifts perspective from initial enlightenment, the individual realization that takes place in time (“thirty years”), to fundamental enlightenment, the perennial potential that makes individual realization possible throughout all time (“million years”).

11. “Refutation” and “accommodation” are complementary teaching techniques. In abstract terms, a “statement removing obstructing fixations” (see, selection 9 above) exemplifies “refutation,” while a “statement filling everywhere” exemplifies “accommodation.” In concrete terms, it is possible to apply these techniques in general or in particular, so they could take many different forms.

The famous story Dōgen recites gives one example of a concrete practical application of these methods, and recapitulates their abstract pattern in his verse. “How much light do the pillars and lamps begrudge?” The reality of suchness is always evident; subjective imaginings are all that screen it. As long as suchness is “buried in the ashes” of mental construction, “though you search you don’t see” because of what is in your eyes. “Lighting it up and blowing it out,” rousing the self-questioning necessary to penetrate through the very possibility of self-deception, the original mind underlying it all “goes into action again.”

12. Sudhana and Manjushri are key figures of the *Flower Ornament* Scripture. Manjushri, personification of wisdom, is one of the main interlocutors of the whole scripture. Sudhana, personification of wholesome learning capacity, is a pilgrim of enlightenment in the extended allegory of the final book of the scripture, the “Entry into the Realm of Reality.” In that book Manjushri locates Sudhana and sends him on a journey; ultimately Manjushri **appears** to Sudhana again on the eve of the consummation of his journey.

In the famous *Discourse* on the *Flower Ornament*, a Tang dynasty treatise highly regarded in Chinese Zen studies, the symbolism of this final meeting is briefly described in these terms:

After establishing Sudhana in his own place, Manjushri disappeared, illustrating how after the fruition of Buddhahood

one is not different from when one was among ordinary mortals. After one attains Buddhahood, Buddha is basically nonexistent, so Manjushri “disappeared.”

Sudhana saw as many spiritual benefactors as atoms in a billion-world universe, in the sense that knowledge of the body of reality pervades the real universe evenly, so he saw everything everywhere as no different from the body of Manjushri.+

Taking the “blade of grass” in Dōgen’s story to stand for suchness, or being-as-is, this first paragraph from the text shows how “this blade of grass can kill people.” while the second paragraph shows how “this blade of grass can enliven people.”

Death and life are “a blade of grass apart.” This means, “How do you see this blade of grass?”

The *Vaipulya*, or “Extended” teachings of Buddhism, in which the whole world is identified with nirvana and Buddha, are said to be poison to those who cannot digest them, clarified ghee to those who can digest them.

13. The “day of the full moon” refers to awakening.

“The wind is high, the moon is cool”: the whirl of events in the world may be hectic, but the original mind is unaffected.

“The sea is calm, the rivers are clear”: when the whole mind is serene, its functions are lucid.

“Sky and wind go on forever”: the eternal unchanging and temporal change are comprehended simultaneously.

“Without turning away . . . body and mind drop off”: emotional and intellectual transcendence are attained without rejecting the world and abandoning society.

14. This is a refined breathing-mindfulness exercise, used to attain serenity of mind.

15. “You cannot but know”: it is everywhere.

“The eternal sky does not inhibit the flight of the white clouds”: realization of the absolute does not extinguish experience of the relative.

“Why bother to ask a Zen master”: it is obvious.

16. The Tao *Te Ching* says, “Sky became clear by attaining unity, earth

**Entry into the Realm of Reality: The Guide*, translated by Thomas Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications), p. 83.