



*The iron tree blossoms,
the whole wide world
is spring*

Tetsuju hana hiraku
kogai no haru

鐵樹花開劫外春

Dogen Zenji wrote in the Shobogenzo
about the most basic koan of all:

To study the way is to study the
self
To study the self is to forget the
self

To forget the self is to be enlightened
by all things
To be enlightened by all things is
to remove the barrier between self
and other.

In this way he taught the most basic Buddha Dharma. Learning the Buddha's way isn't about grasping grand concepts or mastering exotic philosophies. It's not about contemplating the beginning of the universe or changing careers and earning more money. Nor is it about being respected by others for following some noble truth. To really learn the Buddha's way is to meet and encounter the true you; there you will discover the true Buddha. When a deep place is realized directly, we know the source of the universe from our own experience. Each and every person's life energy and health are aligned in doing this.

Knowing our true self isn't about understanding the commonly held idea of a self. Our true self is not the modern idea of an ego and not some character or personality that can be mentally designed. Neither is it some legal entity or created persona.

When the Buddha said, "In all the heavens and in all of the earth there is only One," that was humans' basic truth spoken just as it is. A brand-new baby has no information or knowledge or life experience, but it still has the full light of the heavens and earth radiating through it. This radiance is the ultimate root of all human beings and their source. Instead of allowing that life energy to become hardened into an ego, we can be one with society and with the heavens and earth. Being at one with society and the heavens and earth is the truest base for us and our life energy.

This is why the Buddha said to look inside ourselves and take refuge there, rather than looking for refuge in anything outside. This is the self that is of the Dharma. The Buddha also said, "Who sees me sees the Dharma, and who sees the Dharma sees me." This self is the Dharma, exactly.

Ancients called this the Busshin or Bussho, Buddha Nature or Buddha Mind. It was

also called the great-clear-bright-round-perfect-mirror-mind, or was said to be mind as is. It was also referred to as the self that is embracing all things, and Rinzai Zenji called it the true person of no rank which comes and goes through the openings of this physical body. This is not something that can be known conceptually but is that which perceives through all of our senses and apertures.

Joshu used "mu" to refer to this true self which is not a name, nor a form, nor an ability. Hakuin Zenji called it the sound of one hand clapping.

Today modern philosophy calls it the absolute characterless self; to have awareness-experiencing-awareness is another way it is put. But there is no need for difficult words here. We need to let go of the ideas of form, of being male or female, old or young, rich or poor, good or bad. We have to let go of all of those expressions and of any idea of having or not having. We have to let go of any explanation and become life energy itself. This true self must at least once be realized clearly.

Our truest self is not something that has to be analyzed, explained, and accounted for. It's nothing like that; it's completely separate from all of that. We have to awaken to our original true nature and clarify it. We have to let go of the modern idea of an ego and a legal entity of a self, of all our hardened concepts of who and what and how we are.

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Humans in every situation have a difficult time letting go of that ego. If we don't, we can't realize that true self that the ancients talked about. We get caught on the outer layers of the kimono and can't

see the true essence underneath.

To study the self is to forget the self

The ancients said that we must do this as we come and also as we go, all the time, never missing a beat. All of the Patriarchs struggled through this letting go of one's own thoughts and ideas about things to see the true energy and return to it. This is called the Great Death.

Many negating words such as void and empty are used to describe this. We don't want to hear about something that seems so negative; we want to live in a world of joy and positive ideas. But this Mu is not such a plain mu or energy. An infinite existence is inside this mu.

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This is to know the true self and go beyond any separation. Right there, a huge, wide-open state of mind is born, and from there we return to our regular awareness. This is where the flower blooms on the iron tree. But if we do not die totally first, we can't realize this flowering, just as people have a hard time realizing satori if they are not aware of their delusions first.

At the Niruzen River, after being on the mountain for six years doing ascetic training, the Buddha once again entered zazen and let go of everything. He entered the absolute state of mu, forgetting everything that is. We have to enter this state of mind, or we can't know the true meaning of Buddhism. But that deepest darkness is not yet the furthest point. We let go of everything and come and go from that deep, dark place. Then we know the ultimate state of mind from which the Buddha saw the morning star and said, "That's it! That's it! That's me!" Hakuin heard the morning bell ringing and was suddenly awakened. The samadhi of mu can also be broken through by hearing

the wind--the mu becomes the wind, and we know that we ourselves have become that. Without an ego we realize the truest Self. That which is not our ego becomes the true Self, and then we can realize that everything is our true Self. Only once we have forgotten our manufactured self can we be confirmed by all of the tenthousand things.

Put simply, we swap an other for our self.

This is like a parent who always puts the needs of the child first. The parent gives everything for the child's cultivation, no matter how miserable or dirty or painful. Only by knowing this true self can we be truly educated. In a single flower or one moment's scenery we can realize this true self. It is our duty to manifest this and become it.

Poets find this true self in the rain and wind and all growing things and write about it. Sales people find it in what they sell and through the people they encounter. Scientists find truth in what they research--when for the first time we find this true self we see how the whole universe works, and this is what it means to realize Buddha. To encounter that true self is to see everything become Buddha.

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This means that we know that the world is who we are and that we are all already in liberated harmony. This is our most basic koan, in which we are all confirmed by all others and we see that all of us are one great being, that it is all me.

People who are alive will always die, and what laughs will always cry, but all of it is mu. When we experience the truth directly, we are always laughing with this world and with this true emptiness. We then know mu completely.

If all day long we continue, whether we are coming or going, then the iron tree gives forth a flower. Born as a human

in this world, we can encounter this awakening of our true mind. We will see how wonderful it is to be human and know that this is the greatest good fortune. To realize this directly is the greatest thing we can do.

This is not the good fortune of a single generation. For all those to come, we know this true joy and give birth to that true self. This is the truth of the Buddha Dharma.

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