

The front and back of life

DOGEN ZENJI SAID, “The great path of the buddhas, in its consummation, is passage to freedom, is actualization.”

Whatever object you are focusing on, there is always some aspect of it—whether it’s a book, a chair, the floor, the light, or the air that surrounds you—that goes beyond its own framework. This is actualization. But what is truly actualized is not anything you can see with your senses. It can’t be apprehended through our notions of right and wrong, good and bad, like and dislike. What is truly actualized is beyond the dualistic world.

With actualization, we don’t see life as opposed to death. Life is something more than any idea we can have about it. When life is completely actualized, it functions with death. Like life, death is greater than any idea we can conjure up in our minds. It is more than just the opposite of life. When we try to deal with death as though it were something opposed to life, it scares us. But death is the complete actualization of Reality. It is based in freedom. Life passes out of life to freedom; death passes out of death to freedom. This book, the floor, the light—all things empty themselves and pass through to freedom in the same manner. This is complete, perfect actualization.

Just before he was about to die, the Zen monk and poet Ryokan was asked, “What do you think about life?” He responded with a haiku: “Maple leaf, falling down, showing front and back.” Life is just like a maple leaf falling. “Falling” means that your life is marching toward death, marching to the graveyard. And on the way to the grave, what happens? Your back shows. Your front shows. You show grief, you show pleasure, you show suffering. That’s it. This is life.

Someone asked me to write Ryokan’s words in calligraphy, but when I did, I added one more thing. I wrote, “When the maple leaf falls, there’s no failure in its fall.” Do you understand? Right in the midst of falling, there is no failure. “No failure” is completely beyond success and failure. This “completely beyond” is not abstract. “Completely beyond” refers to what is truly actualized, which is complete and perfect, beyond our petty thoughts of good and bad, beyond our likes and dislikes.

The falling of leaves is why the scenery in autumn is very beautiful. Sometimes when we feel the impermanence of life, it makes us pensive or sad. But it’s just autumn. Even in the fall of a single leaf, we can realize how the whole world becomes autumn. A single leaf shows autumn exactly as it is. This is not abstract. This is our life.