

THE ANSWER IS SIMPLE

DOGEN ZENJI SAID,

When staying at Tendo monastery in China while old master Nyojo was abbot there, we sat zazen until about eleven o'clock at night and got up at about half past two to sit zazen. The abbot sat with the assembly in the *sodo* [the monks' living and practice area] never taking even one night off. While sitting, many monks fell asleep. The abbot walked around hitting them with his fist or his slipper, shaming and encouraging them to wake up. If they continued to sleep, he went to the *sodo*, rang the bell, and called his attendants to light the candles. On the spur of the moment, he would say such things as: "What is the use of sleeping? Why do you gather in the *sodo*? Why did you become a monk and enter this monastery? Consider the emperor and officials of the government; who among them leads an easy life?"

The emperor governs with justice; the ministers serve with loyalty and down to the commoners. Who leads an easy life without laboring? You have avoided these labors, entered the monastery, but now spend your time wastefully. What on earth for?"

Life and death is the grave matter. Everything is impermanent and changes swiftly. The teaching schools and the Zen schools both emphasize this. This evening or tomorrow morning you may become sick or die. Still you have no idea how your death may come or what kind of sickness you may contract. It is utterly foolish to pass the time meaninglessly sleeping or lying down while you are alive and not practice the Buddha dharma. Since you are like this, the Buddha dharma is dying. When people devotedly practiced zazen, the Buddha dharma flourished throughout the country. As of late, the Buddha dharma is falling into decay because no one promotes zazen.

—Eihei Dogen

SHOBOGENZO ZUIMONKI

This passage was written over seven hundred years ago in very different circumstances, and yet it is so vital, so alive! It is a very vivid admonition to us. Although we do not have the lifestyle of a monk or nun living in a monastery, practicing together twenty-four hours a day, basically all of us practice zazen.

Dogen Zenji emphasizes the importance of zazen. Zazen must be done correctly, not loosely, not daydreaming or sleeping, not drowsy zazen. What is the purpose of doing zazen? In order to clarify your aspiration, think on the impermanence of life. We never know when we will die. Reflect upon this seriously: how much do I clarify this grave matter of life and death as a personal fact? What is the best way for me to live?

Dogen Zenji lost his parents when he was a young child, so the urgency of his questioning arose from his own experience of impermanence. Shakyamuni Buddha first became aware of impermanence when he saw people suffering from old age, sickness, and death. When he saw a person who manifested peace in the midst of this world of suffering,

he left the comforts of his life to solve this question of the grave matter of life and death. Dogen Zenji says that the power of aspiration is such that when we really want to resolve something, we find a way to do it.

We might feel a little awkward reading the words of master Nyojo or about the quest of Shakyamuni. Having a family, living a secular life, having all kinds of problems—which are the most urgent for us to solve? Do we think about the impermanence of life or how to live more comfortably? We have all kinds of distractions that blind us to this simple matter of impermanence.

Dogen Zenji emphasizes that life and death contain the fact of constant, swift change. In fact, he uses the phrase “Life and death is the grave matter.” We chant this verse every evening after zazen:

Life and death are of supreme importance.

Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.

Each of us should strive to awaken.

Awaken. Take heed, do not squander your life.

This is exactly the purpose of doing zazen.

The point is very simple: awakening is Buddha’s teaching. This is the key. Awakening is for anybody, everybody! Why do these old masters talk about zazen in such a strict way? Physical strictness does not guarantee awakening. I do not know how many monks were practicing under all these strict masters, but I am one hundred percent sure that not all of them awakened. In fact, awakening has nothing to do with strict or easy practice.

In one of his early writings entitled *Endeavor to Practice the Way (Shobogenzo Bendowa)*, Dogen Zenji asks eighteen commonly asked questions and answers them himself. The first question is, “Why do you talk so much about the importance of zazen?” His answer is very simple: Because the Buddha did zazen and awakened. What did the Buddha realize? He realized this matter of life and death.

Dogen Zenji says to practice diligently so that you can see the impermanence of your life. The more you feel this impermanence, the more you *have* to know what this life is, what this death is. When we really see

this impermanence, we pay much more attention to the principles of attachment and detachment. In a way, detachment is as bad as attachment. And attachment, in a way, is as good as detachment. After all, what is wrong with being attached? Without attachment, we cannot live. If we all are physically detached, if we are detached from our life, then how can we survive?

So where does the trouble come in? This is very simple. The trouble is caused by our self-centered, egocentric ideas. The obstacle to awakening is always *me*, always *I*, *my*, *me*. My feeling, my thought, my pain, my idea, all must be eliminated from the beginning because it is a partial or relative view. When we meditate on how we feel or what we think, we remain in a dualistic condition. In the Zen tradition, we avoid this kind of meditation because it is an endless process. When you pursue your thoughts, you can create all kinds of fantastic things. But then what? It doesn't clarify the grave matter of life and death.

What should we do in order to take care of this trouble? Again the answer is simple: Be yourself! Become zazen yourself. Be your true life and death. Be the Buddha! Yet this simple matter is somehow the most difficult to do. How do you awaken to this simple, clear, straightforward fact of who you are? Until you clarify this matter, you will not be at ease. Maybe you can be comfortable for a while, but sooner or later you will come back to this point, for the grave matter will not be settled for you.

Dogen Zenji says, "Life and death is the grave, important matter. There is no life and death, since there is the Buddha in life and death." Consider that life and death itself is no other than peace, no other than nirvana. Nirvana is not some life that will happen one day in the future. It is our life and death right now, right here.

One definition for nirvana is that it is the state of extinction of all sorts of desires that trouble us. In a way, the desire for nirvana itself is attachment. And yet desire is very, very important. For instance, as bodhisattvas we should have the desire to *do* something with our life. Bodhisattvas are those who take boundless vows, and because of these vows, the world gets better. Who is the bodhisattva? A bodhisattva cannot be any person other than yourself. Do you see this? How are you really a bodhisattva?

Each of us has this strong bodhi mind, the mind of awakening. Each of us must awaken. No one can do it for us. Shakyamuni Buddha had to awaken by himself. He struggled for years, and finally he gave up everything and just faced himself. For one week, he did zazen completely. He did not have a teacher, but something supported him, something led him to realization. What was it? Is it supporting you, too? Shakyamuni had a fierce determination. If you really want to awaken, how can *you* do it?

Zazen may be the most direct way. Do it wholeheartedly. Just sitting on the cushion and taking a nap or daydreaming is not zazen. When you sit, don't get involved in any side-business. Be determined to resolve the great matter. Put all your energy into it. When you do this, you will find tremendous strength.

How do you take care of this for yourself? *Where do you miss the point?* This is what you must clarify. I really encourage you. It isn't even a matter of encouraging or discouraging. If you realize this grave matter, that is the very best I can do. This grave matter of life and death is so obvious, so simple, and yet so hard to realize. Even though you are in the midst of the awakened life, you do not realize it.

How do you handle this dilemma?