

THERE IS A POEM about plum blossoms by Hata Zenji, the former chief abbot of Eihei-ji monastery, which he gave to me when I once visited him.

*White plum, one blossom,  
two blossoms, three blossoms,  
one thousand blossoms,  
ten thousand blossoms.*

What is this plum blossom? The plum blossom has five petals, which some say symbolizes the five schools of Chinese Zen. But it seems to me that these five schools are tiny compared with the real blossom of life. There is also the udumbara flower, which blooms once every three thousand years. Only some twenty-five-hundred years have passed since Shakyamuni Buddha appeared in the world, so what kind of flower is this? The lotus is also a primary blossom, as in the *Lotus Sutra*. What are these blossoms? The plum, the udumbara, and the lotus blossoms are all analogous to the life of each of us.

We appreciate this very life itself as the blossom of the Three Treasures when we observe Shakyamuni Buddha's Nirvana Day. What is nirvana? There are different definitions of nirvana, just as there are different kinds of blossoms. For example, we can look at nirvana as the extinction of passion, although you may not be satisfied with that definition. Passion is not necessarily something negative. Passion is a very important, positive energy. If we

extinguish this energy, we are dead. So this view of nirvana is like a candle that burns and is finally extinguished.

What are some other kinds of nirvana? We say that when Shakyamuni Buddha attained realization, he entered nirvana. Being in nirvana, he still had to deal with the problems of the body and mind, such as illness, difficulties, and being disturbed in one way or another, just like you and me. Upon *Parinirvana*, or his physical death, all these physical and mental difficulties were extinguished.

There are different implications to nirvana. Nirvana also refers to the genuineness of our own nature. In other words, our self nature is pure and genuine. What kind of blossom is this pure and genuine nature? Harada Sogaku Roshi, who was a brilliant scholar as well as a tough Zen master, wrote *The Eight Beliefs of Buddhism*. A more literal translation of the title would be “eight things that we can trust or have faith in.”

The first belief is intrinsic Buddha nature. You are this nature now, at this very moment! What is intrinsic Buddha nature? Where is it? Buddha nature is not only no other than this very form, it is also everything. It is one blossom, a hundred blossoms, ten thousand blossoms. What is the difference between this body and mind and your true nature? Do you have any false nature? You, being as you are, are you false? Even to say true nature is funny. Nature has no true or false. What is it?

This leads us to the second belief, the misconception of the self or ego, *I*. Where does this *I* sneak in? One's understanding about oneself is somewhat deluded. How do these deluded thoughts occur? We recognize something that is not quite adequate, and we lose the vision of the true nature of life. The third belief is the continuity of life before and after death. If this life continues, how does it continue? And the fourth belief is the sureness of causation. This is relatively easy to understand, everything occurs by causation. We often speak of something as a coincidence or accident, but nothing happens without direct and indirect causes. The next belief is the existence of all buddhas. There exist those who have broken through the illusion of ego and have realized Buddha nature. The sixth belief is the mutual attraction between you and the buddhas. Without this mutual attraction, would we practice the Way? Would we

seek nirvana? Not only are we seeking, but the Way itself is supporting us. All buddhas exist, how do you communicate with them? Where and how do they exist? Then, the seventh belief is that you and others are not two. Do you believe this? If you do, how sure are you about it? How can you confirm the fact that everything is dependent upon every other thing? And the eighth belief is that we are all in the process of becoming Buddha. All of us, without exception regardless of race, nationality, education and so forth, are becoming Buddha.

What is the relationship between the first belief of Buddha nature, that it is intrinsic, and the last belief, that we are all accomplishing the Buddha Way? Of course, it is not a matter of first and last, this is a continuous process, without beginning or end. If you do not see even one of these eight beliefs, you do not understand any of them. The reverse is also true. When you are sure of just one of these beliefs, you understand them all because all are connected. These are eight different aspects or perspectives of one fact. What is this fact?

Another definition of nirvana is no dwelling place. What is this dwelling nowhere? In other words, in this life we are not confined to any permanent or fixed state, so dwelling in no place is itself nirvana. Dogen Zenji urges us to take birth and death as nirvana itself. When you do this, you will dislike neither birth nor death, nor will you desire to attain nirvana. Thus, you are free from birth and death. This is the nirvana of no dwelling place, do you see? The *Platform Sutra* says that the Sixth Patriarch was enlightened upon hearing the line from the *Diamond Sutra*, "Dwelling in no place, raise the mind." In other words, being truly free and liberated, your life unfolds naturally, without obstructions, and that is nirvana.

So this Buddha nature is nirvana. This genuine nature is the blossom of your life. Dogen Zenji says: "Consider that nirvana is itself no other than our life." How do we experience this for ourselves? Such experience gives us indestructible strength; it gives us confidence, conviction, and peace. Our life is nothing but this blossom of nondwelling, non-attached nirvana. How can you confirm this for yourself?