

CLARIFY THE GREAT MATTER

Once while in China, I was reading a collection of sayings by an ancient master. At the time, a monk from Sichuan, a sincere practitioner of the Way, asked me, “What is the use of reading recorded sayings?” I replied, “I want to learn about the deeds of the ancient masters.” The monk asked, “What is the use of that?” I said, “I wish to teach people after I return home.” The monk queried further, “Yes, but ultimately, what is the use?”

Later, I pondered his remarks. Learning the deeds of the ancient masters by reading the recorded sayings or koans in order to explain them to deluded people is ultimately of no use to my own practice or for teaching others. Even if I don’t know a single letter, I will be able to show it to others in inexhaustible ways if I devote myself to just sitting and clarifying the great matter. It was for this reason that the monk pressed me as to the ultimate use [of reading and studying]. I thought what he said was true. Thereupon, I gave up reading the recorded sayings and other texts, concentrated wholeheartedly on sitting, and was able to clarify the great matter.

—*Eihei Dogen*,
SHOBOGENZO ZUIMONKI

SOME PEOPLE THINK THAT our practice in the Soto tradition is just-sitting. I feel fortunate that I had a chance to study koans. In this passage Dogen Zenji does not say just sit. What is the difference

between physically sitting on a cushion and sitting in shikantaza? *Shikantaza* is often translated as “just sit!” *Shikan* means “wholeheartedly” or “just,” *za* is the verb “to sit,” and *ta* is an emphatic, an exclamation point. Even to concentrate on sitting wholeheartedly is not enough. Dogen Zenji does not say just wholeheartedly sit on a cushion. If you believe in just doing that, place a rock or a piece of wood on a cushion and let it sit. It sits better than we do. Is that enlightened life? We should not fool ourselves.

Some of you ask, “What am I supposed to do during zazen? Should I just be aware of what is going on around me and observe carefully?” Let’s look at *shikan* once more. Dogen Zenji emphasizes the *shi* part. What is *shi*? Stop! Stop the conscious mind from going on and on and on and on, from one subject to another, unceasingly. And *kan* means seeing, observing, or being aware. These may seem contradictory, but both are important, do you see? If you can stop the conscious mind from going on and on, then you can be aware of what is truly going on, what to do, and how to do it.

In *Shobogenzo Bendowa*, Dogen Zenji talks about the content of shikantaza and about clarifying this great matter. He uses this expression, “clarifying this great matter,” twice even in this short passage. What is the great matter? This is the koan. The *Lotus Sutra* also asks, “Why do buddhas appear in the world? It is because of this one grave, important matter.” The great matter is your true life. Is there a false life? It is your true self. Is there any false self? Is your life a fake? It cannot be. Is your life true? How is it true? This is the great matter: how to clarify your life. In a way, this has nothing to do with sitting. But so far, zazen has proven to be the best and surest way to clarify it.

Shakyamuni Buddha guarantees us that we all have the wisdom and the virtuous aspects of the Tathagata Buddha. What does this mean? This is the great matter! Clarify it and see it as the treasury of the true dharma eye and subtle mind of nirvana. Confirm for yourself that the wisdom and virtue you have are the same as the Buddha’s. When your zazen becomes the zazen of Tathagata Buddha, then you are doing shikantaza. Otherwise you are doing something else.

Dogen Zenji says that reading is unnecessary, even studying is unnecessary. In fact, any kind of practice is unnecessary. He says just sit and clarify this great matter. He does not say that we should not study. He himself studied many things. It is said that he read the entire Tripitaka, a collection of early Buddhist texts, three times through. We can all benefit from study, but at certain periods of time it may be wise not to read much. This is what Dogen Zenji is talking about here.

You might feel that being Christian could be a hindrance to practice, or being a woman, a monk, a layperson, being young or old, smart or dull. These might become hindrances as much as reading literature or poetry or the sayings of the masters. Ultimately, it does not matter whether you are Jewish, Christian, European, American, yellow, white, or black, whether you read or don't read. Buddha himself was Hindu. As a Hindu, he became buddha. Buddha wants you to become buddha, awake, whether you're Jewish, Catholic, or Protestant, whether reading or not reading. Why not?

Do you see the problem? You say, "I am doing shikantaza." No, you are not. This is the problem. You say, "I am working on koan." No, you are not. As soon as you objectify it, as soon as there is any separation between you and shikantaza, between you and koan, there is the problem. Reading books is not the way to solve the problem. Not reading books is not the way to solve the problem. It has nothing to do with working on koan or not working on koan, with doing shikantaza or not doing shikantaza. If you say it does, then you should truly practice koan or truly practice shikantaza. *Shikan* is the koan; *taza* is the case. Koan and shikantaza are the same. We should not be blinded by words. Realize the grave matter! Integrate it! This is why the buddhas appear.

Clarifying the grave matter is more important than simply reading the sayings of the masters. Rather, we should deal with koans, which are the sayings of the old masters, in such a way that our life is one of great intimacy, of shikan. In that way our life will be the same as the sayings and doings of the masters. The masters' sayings manifest as the realization of our lives. This is how we should deal with koans and with shikantaza. How you do it and how much you do

it is your practice. And along with your practice, the realization of your life manifests. Your life is nothing but the Way.

This so-called realization or enlightenment is not something that you add to yourself; it is not something outside your life. It already is your life. It is also the life of Shakyamuni Buddha himself and of all the masters, including Dogen Zenji. When we realize this, we will see ourselves hand in hand with all the masters. And furthermore, my life, your life, becomes the life of the buddhas and ancestors. This is the transmission. That is the meaning of shikantaza and the meaning of koan. Realize it! Your life is already this fact. Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment guarantees it.