

DOGEN ZENJI'S *Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen*¹ is a fundamental text relating to the practice of zazen. The Soto master Harada Sogaku Roshi picked certain phrases from this text and worked with them as koans.

For me there is basically no difference between koan and zazen. What is the most important point of both koan and zazen? Needless to say, it is our life. We call our life Buddha nature. Mountains and rivers and the great earth all depend on this nature. Strictly speaking, everything is no other than this nature. What is this Buddha nature? It is the absoluteness of life, it is our life. This is what all the masters in different times and places have dealt with. And now that is what you are dealing with, too. This boundless life is the true life of each of us, do you see?

How can zazen be practiced by anybody, everybody? How can koan be practiced in this way? A koan is not solving a puzzle or playing some kind of game. No! What is important is how you are taking care of your life. Sometimes this life is a shit stick, sometimes a true man of no rank, sometimes a wheel, a dog, a cat, trees, flowers, mountains and rivers, and the great earth. All of these appear as Buddha nature.

The first koan that Harada Roshi picked from this *Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen* is, "The Way is basically perfect and all-pervading." And it goes with the next line, "The dharma vehicle is free and untrammelled." What is the dharma vehicle? How does it function freely? How can we appreciate life as perfect and all-pervading? We say that life is a manifestation of one thing, and it is also a manifestation of everything. That is also the nature of *our* life.

It has no limit, it is free and untrammelled. If we think we are limited, we think so in our head. This life is limitless!

The second koan is, "If there is the slightest discrepancy, the Way is as distant as heaven from earth." Dogen Zenji says later on, "When you take one misstep, right there you fail." This is true, isn't it? In order to go somewhere, if you go in even a slightly different direction, the distance becomes wider and wider the farther you go. So we should be careful about even the slightest discrepancy. Relating to our zazen, what creates this discrepancy? How does this discrepancy arise? This is a most important point to consider, especially because of how much trouble this discrepancy causes us.

The third koan is, "One is making the initial, partial excursions about the frontiers." What are these "initial, partial excursions"? Then along with that line, "It is still somewhat deficient in the vital Way of total emancipation." What is the Way of total emancipation? What is the relationship between partial excursions and total emancipation?

Then the fourth koan. "Learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate yourself." What does this mean? I do not mean as an explanation, but actually, as a matter *of fact*, how do you illuminate yourself inwardly, and how do you step backward? How do you look at yourself?

The next koan follows: When you take that backward step, then "body and mind of themselves will drop away and your original face will be manifest." How does your original face manifest? How does your body and mind drop away? Isn't it a wonderful koan? I am quoting exactly what Dogen Zenji says. Each sentence is a beautiful koan.

What is this original face? In Buddhism we do not separate the essence from the appearance or reality. The intrinsic nature and relative reality of this body all together are Buddha nature, the original face. This very flimsy, clumsy life itself is none other than Buddha nature, do you see?

What is prior to all our intellectual knowledge and discriminative functions of our mind? There is a famous koan of the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng, who was an illiterate newcomer to the monastery but his realization was profound. Much to the shock of the monks who had practiced long and hard at the monastery, he was recognized by the

Fifth Patriarch as his dharma heir. So when Hui-neng received dharma transmission from the Fifth Patriarch, his life was in danger, and he went into hiding in the mountains. Monk Myo, a former general, chased after him. When Myo caught up with him, the Sixth Patriarch said, "Without thinking good or evil, show me your original face." In other words, prior to this or that, prior to right or wrong, good or bad, prior to all these discursive thoughts, what is there? What is the original face? What is *your* original face?

The sixth koan is how to sit. Dogen Zenji says, "Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking. This is in itself the essential art of zazen." This refers to a famous koan by Master Yakusan Igen. A monk asks Master Yakusan, "When we do zazen, what do we think about?" We have the same question, don't we? When we sit, how do we think about sitting? Master Yakusan says, "Think of the unthinkable." In other words, think of not-thinking, or no-thinking. The monk's question naturally follows: "How can we think of not-thinking?" Or of the unthinkable, or no-thinking? Master Yakusan replies, "Nonthinking."

We could penetrate this essence of zazen endlessly. What is non-thinking? Think without thinking! Sit without sitting. What kind of thinking is this? What kind of zazen is this? Or, what is the thinking of zazen? What does zazen think when zazen is doing zazen?

Dogen Zenji tells you to really drop body and mind. This is the most important way to do zazen. What is he talking about? And what is the difference between koan and zazen in dropping body and mind? Maintain this one Buddha-mind seal. What is this Buddha-mind seal? I say it's koan. It's shikantaza. It's *shobogenzo*, the treasury of the true dharma eye and subtle mind of nirvana. And how to maintain this one Buddha-mind seal is our practice, our life! Our vows, our aspirations, are to truly maintain this Buddha-mind seal. Do not let this torch die out!

The next koan is: "Practice-realization is naturally undefiled." This is obvious. When you do this kind of zazen, there is no defilement. In fact, there is no such thing as practice or realization, as such. Dogen Zenji says further, "Going forward in practice is a matter of everydayness." Regardless of how far you go in practice-realization, it is ordinary, it is not anything special. In other words, it does not matter

whether this is your first zazen, or zazen of ten years, fifty years, it is just ordinary life. So how is that practice-realization not defiled?

The last koan is, “Your treasure store will open of itself and you will use it at will.” How does your treasure house open by itself? How do you appreciate it and use it?

Isn't this something? Every sentence has beautiful, marvelous points that we can work with carefully as koans, as guides for our life. I encourage you to read the *Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen* at least once a day; digest it well, even memorize it. Then penetrate it, touch the heart of what Dogen Zenji is saying. What kind of zazen does he want us to do? And when we do such zazen, Dogen Zenji says body and mind naturally drop off and our original face manifests. In other words, our true life will manifest by itself.

[1](#). Waddell and Abe, 13–16.