

LIVE THE LIFE OF IMPERMANENCE

DURING THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY Dogen Zenji gave a talk to his followers called “The Thirty-seven Conditions Favorable to Enlightenment.” These thirty-seven conditions are very old principles relating to practice. They are the very best incomparable wisdom for living. One of these wisdoms is impermanence. How do we live fully a life of impermanence?

My mother died recently at the age of ninety, and her body was so small and light. I notice that even my own body, being over sixty years old, has begun to shrink. It happens. And that coldness of death. As a fact, I think ice is much colder than a human corpse. The coldness that comes with death is something very, very special. I am sure some of you have experienced it, and especially at such a moment, you felt a sense of impermanence or change. And perhaps you asked, “What is this life?” Suddenly we know how fleeting and perhaps even how insignificant our human life is.

“What’s left behind?” we ask. Practically nothing is left, except maybe remains. And if we think something is left, what would it be? I do not mean to exaggerate, but I often have the feeling that my mother left everything. I sense this because I cannot discriminate what and how much she left. Furthermore, I sense to some degree that all I have is what has been left by her. Again I ask, “Just what do I have?” I do not know, but definitely something is there. This sense of impermanence can inspire us to confront our life.

When I myself think of impermanence, what comes up again is the *Abhidharma*’s teaching on how rapidly change is always taking place. We commonly consider ourselves to be living and then dying after fifty, seventy, or ninety years. But as I mention quite often, in a twenty-four-hour period alone we are being born and dying

6,500,000,000 times. It is so fast we cannot notice it. What is the nature of impermanence?

Let us appreciate together what Dogen Zenji teaches about this.

First of all, there are the four types of meditation that eliminate false views: (1) contemplating the impurity of the body, (2) contemplating that perception leads to suffering, (3) contemplating the impermanence of mind, and (4) contemplating no-self [all things are devoid of self].¹

What do we usually like to contemplate? We like to contemplate the beauty of one's physical body because that is what is usually promoted in our society. Instead, when we contemplate impermanence, we are contemplating the impurity of the body. So one might imagine a beautiful man or woman, and when this person dies, what happens to the beautiful body? It deteriorates. This change helps us realize the impermanence of life; we realize how transient life is, how such a beautiful, attractive body changes into that which no one can even bear to see. Our attachment to the body lessens. This resembles the original practice of the old Buddhist monks who meditated in charnel grounds.

However, Dogen Zenji talks about this contemplation in a totally different way. Let me read another passage about the contemplation of impermanence:

Concerning the "contemplation that the mind is impermanent," Sokei (the sixth patriarch, Eno) the ancient buddha said, "Impermanence is the Buddha nature." Great master Yoka Shingaku said, "All things are impermanent, everything is empty, this is the Tathagata's Great and Perfect Enlightenment." Contemplation of the mind's impermanence is the Tathagata's Great and Perfect Enlightenment. If the mind does not contemplate this, it falls into subjectivity. If there is mind, there must also be this contemplation.

The actualization of supreme and total enlightenment is the impermanence and the contemplation of the mind. Mind is not necessarily permanent, nor is it separated from various

pluralistic forms; even walls, tiles, stones, and large and small rocks are mind.²

This passage reminds me of the koan of Joshu's dog: A monk asks Joshu, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" Joshu said, "No." According to the *Record of Joshu*, Joshu first says, "Yes." And the monk asks, "If a dog has Buddha nature, how come he has the dirty skin of a dog?" We think in a similar way, don't we? We think that Buddha nature is something pure and genuine, which cannot be at all compared to what we are, to whatever we have inside of this bag of skin. But this impermanence itself *is* the Buddha nature.

And what is this so-called mind? The mind is impermanent and that impermanence is the Buddha nature—the true nature, the unsurpassable Way. Contemplate this mind as impermanence which is the very life of the Buddha. Furthermore, that mind of impermanence and all its different manifestations are all together Buddha nature. This means not only us but everything: walls, tiles, mountains and rivers, shit stick, trash, literally everything. In other words, each of us and everything in this world are nothing but Buddha nature. And Buddha nature is nothing but the great, perfect enlightenment of Tathagata Buddha.

Dogen Zenji talks about contemplation, mind, and impermanence as one thing. This is a very important point. We usually separate these into three things. We say, "My mind contemplates impermanence," don't we? Dogen Zenji says these three are one. We live our life as impermanence, as the mind, as our zazen. Dogen says they're all one, everything is here.

So, for instance, when we look at life in this way, what is purity? What is impurity? What is delusion? What is enlightenment? If we make any distinction between Buddha nature or the Way itself and how we are actually living, then we are caught in the struggle between subject and object. However our life is, it is not excluded from that Buddha nature. Can we appreciate our life altogether as the life of the Buddha, regardless of the conditions in which we live?

Dogen Zenji says:

Contemplation that all things are devoid of self is that long things are long, short things are short, in themselves. Realization and actualization exist, and therefore, there is no self.³

What does this mean? Long is long, short is short, a so-called pair of opposites. Actually, our life also appears to be made of opposites: suffering and joy, enlightened and deluded, good and bad, all kinds of dualities. Dogen Zenji says that these are all devoid of self. "Devoid of self" means "no fixed thing, no finite thing." If that is the case, what is there? How do we perceive this self?

Our life comes about through causations, direct and indirect causations, and appears as conditions that are constantly changing. Having this body and mind is always the result of many, many causes, *all constantly changing*. When we really see this fact, right there is freedom. Such a life is itself no-self. Right here, all of us, each appearing distinctly-different, are ourselves no-self, not fixed. We are constantly changing. In other words, we are totally free, liberated. If we could really see this, our life would be quite all right.

When we chant the *Heart Sutra* in Japanese, we chant *Kanjizai*. In the English version, Kanjizai, the "one who rests in the Self," is translated as Kanzeon, the "one who contemplates on the sounds of the world." Kanzeon appears as all the creatures he or she is contemplating, all the sounds he or she hears, and expounds the dharma as each and every one of them. So Buddha nature is a dog or you or me. When we say the dog has Buddha nature, we mean the dog *is* Buddha nature.

At the same time, being devoid of self, we appear to be simply what we are. Dogen Zenji repeats this over and over. Sentient beings are not Buddha nature because sentient beings are sentient beings, long is long, short is short. Dogen Zenji says, "All dharmas are no dharmas. That's the way to contemplate this mind devoid of self. If we grasp this, we can attain freedom from perplexity and doubt." You should know that everything is the activity of your life. This activity is all together the activity of Buddha nature, devoid of self, the activity of yourself as you are in each moment. This is what

Dogen Zenji is expounding when he comments on whether a dog has Buddha nature or not.

Let me read a passage from the *Gakudo Yojinshu* in which Dogen Zenji comments on Joshu's dog:

A monk asked Joshu, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" Joshu replied, "*Mu* [non-being, negation]." Beyond this word *mu*, can you measure anything or grasp anything? There is entirely nothing to hold on to. Please try releasing your hold, and releasing your hold observe, what is body and mind? What is conduct? What is birth and death? What is Buddha dharma? What are the laws of the world? What in the end are mountains, rivers, earth, human beings, animals, and houses?

What Dogen Zenji is talking about is clear, isn't it? It does not matter whether we think we have it or do not have it. The point is: what is it? The Sixth Patriarch illustrates this point in such a clear way: "Before you think good or evil, who are you?" Good and bad are just a pair of opposites. What is this body and mind all about? Instead of thinking *have* or *have not*, think about what you *are*.

Let me read what Dogen Zenji says in the very last paragraph of *The Thirty-seven Conditions Favorable to Enlightenment*:

These thirty-seven conditions favorable to enlightenment are the enlightened eyes, the nostrils, the skin, flesh, bones, marrow, hands, feet, and face of the buddhas and patriarchs. Moreover, enlightenment is the actualization of 1,369 (37 × 37) conditions. Practice zazen continually, and drop off body and mind.⁴

That is to say, each condition contains all other conditions. This means that there are innumerable conditions. Again, this is the life of each of us, moment after moment. Being impermanent, being devoid of self, life goes in this way, moment after moment, six-and-a-half billion times a day; this is what is happening.

Dogen Zenji says, "Realize this and you will be liberated, you will realize the unsurpassable Way, the life of the Buddha, the real wisdom." The very ancient teaching is this vivid dynamic life of the buddhas and ancestors, which is no other than the life of each of us.

- [1.](#) Translation based on Nishiyama, vol. 2, p. 72.
- [2.](#) Ibid.
- [3.](#) Ibid.
- [4.](#) Ibid.