

O_N LIFE AND DEATH

Firewood turns into ash, and does not turn into firewood again. But do not suppose that the ash is after and the firewood is before.

We must realize that firewood is in the state of being firewood and has its before and after. Yet having this before and after, it is independent of them.

Ash is in the state of being ash and has its before and after.

Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, so after one's death one does not return to life again.

Thus, that life does not become death is a confirmed teaching of the buddha-dharma; for this reason, life is called the non-born.

That death does not become life is a confirmed teaching of the buddha-dharma; therefore, death is called the non-extinguished.

Life is a period of itself.

Death is a period of itself.

For example, they are like winter and spring.

We do not think that winter becomes spring, nor do we say that spring becomes summer.

—Eihei Doyen,
SHOBOGENZO GENJO KOAN

IN THIS PART OF THE *Genjo Koan*, Dogen Zenji makes a clear statement about life and death. He repeatedly talks about one's life as life and death, as enlightenment and delusion, and as buddhas and beings. This passage on life and death is all about one's

practice, the practice of the Buddha dharma. How do you appreciate your life as the Buddha Way, which goes beyond all duality, beyond our assertions of this or that? What is the action by which you give life to your true self? Dogen Zenji's response is practice. What kind of practice? Practice as realization, as the Buddha Way.

Dogen Zenji teaches about practice as realization from beginning to end. The most difficult part for us to see is the so-called no-self. What does *no-self* mean? It is one of the crucial points relating to life and death. "When the ten thousand dharmas are without self," he teaches, then there is "no life and no death." Without self, whose death is it? Without self, whose life are we talking about? Flight now, here, who is without self? Always right now, here, this *me* is without self. How do you deal with it? Obviously you are dealing with it, adequately or inadequately, comfortably or uncomfortably, desperately, or however.

What is the turning point? We are the turning point ourselves, but turning to what? This word *turn* has many implications in Japanese, including "come back to." Come back to what? To the original self. The original self literally means *here*. Come back to here. From the very beginning, you have never gone anywhere. You have always been here. When you really turn back to here, all the ten thousand dharmas are without self. All ten thousand dharmas are Buddha dharma, the life of each of us. This is what we are appreciating.

We can be released from the confinement of the so-called *I*. We are enslaved by our understanding of *I*: *I* as a hungry ghost, *I* as this or that, or in its best sense, *I* as a human being. But what is the relationship between a human being and the Buddha Way? Is there anything more important than your life? Not your life as a hungry ghost, not even your life as a human being, but your life as the Buddha Way, as the very best unsurpassable Way. Dogen Zenji says that when a person is practicing that Way, he or she is called a buddha.

So who is dying? What kind of death are we talking about? When firewood burns, it becomes what we know as ash. Here Dogen Zenji is not saying that there is no death, nor that death does not exist. He is saying that life does not become death. Death has its own life. Life has its own life, and it has a before and after. We are born and living,

there is a before and after, but life does not become death. Death does not become life, just as ash does not become firewood. You may wonder about the teachings of rebirth. We do not deny rebirth. According to karmic causations, whatever will happen, happens. But life still does not become death, death does not become life. It is unborn and undying. How do we understand this kind of life?

There are at least three different ways to understand life and death: in terms of division, in terms of change, and in terms of instances. Life and death in division is our usual understanding of being born. We live for ten, fifty, or sixty years, some of us for a short time, others longer, and then die. Life and death in terms of change is the life during which we realize some kind of enlightenment and are hence revitalized and born anew. But the most realistic life and death is the life and death of each instant. We are being born and dying 6,500,000,000 times every twenty-four hours.

The more I appreciate this, the more it becomes so real. I am very happy that I am having a new life every moment! I really mean it. Dogen Zenji writes in *Birth and Death (Shobogenzo Shoji)* that this life and death that we are encountering all the time is no other than the life of the Buddha. It is not only our life and death; all around us our relatives, close friends, and strangers are dying. We recently scattered someone's ashes on the mountainside. How do you practice a life that changes so much as the life of the Buddha?

There is a famous koan of Master Dogo and his student Zengen in the *Blue Cliff Record*, Case 55. Dogo was the elder brother of Ungan Donjo, Master Tozan's teacher. Even though he was the elder, Dogo did not become a monk until much later in life. He was a successful businessman and perhaps he thought that becoming a monk was ridiculous. However, his brother Ungan became a monk while young and studied for a long time with Master Hyakujo. Dogo was a brilliant man, and after becoming a monk, he advanced quickly and his understanding surpassed Ungan's. They were wonderful brothers.

The story is that one day Master Dogo and Zengen went to visit a family to perform a service for a dead family member. I do not know whether caskets were used or not in those days, but according to the story, Zengen hit the casket and asked Master Dogo, "Is this alive or dead?" The person was obviously dead. Being dead, is something

alive or not? Even being a corpse, something is alive. Where? How? Is it alive or dead? Master Dogo replied, "I won't say, I won't say."

On their way back to the temple, Zengen was very serious. He asked again, "Is it alive or dead?" It is a serious question. All of us should be grabbed by this question. Am I really alive or not? As a human being, what kind of life is this? As the life of the Buddha, what is this? Zengen demanded of Dogo, "If you do not answer me, I am going to beat you up." He was that serious. Zengen was obviously not just asking whether the man had died or not. What was he really asking? Alive or dead?

It is the same thing that Dogen Zenji is talking about here. Since we will not die after death, it is called unborn and undying, or nonborn, nonextinguished. What does this mean? Your life is unborn, now, here. How to take care of it? Zengen actually beat up Master Dogo. And Master Dogo said, "You'd better leave the temple. If others notice that you beat me up, they're going to beat you up." And Zengen left.

Now we are all laughing while I am telling this story, but I want you to take it seriously. Master Dogo and Zengen were so serious about resolving this issue of life and death. That is also why their realization is so clear. If you just listen to a talk and you feel that perhaps something is understood, it is still not convincing enough for you to confirm your life. You must experience yourself as the Buddha Way! That is why Zengen left. He had to experience the answer for himself.

Zengen went on a pilgrimage, and there are several other koans that record his practice after that. Finally he realized this grave matter of alive or dead. He was very appreciative of Master Dogo. Can I tell you just a little bit more? While on his pilgrimage, Zengen entered the dharma hall of a temple. The hall was very large. Upon entering, Zengen walked back and forth from the south end to the north end, from the north end to the south end, carrying a hoe. A monk saw him and asked, "What are you doing?" Can you imagine what Zengen responded? He said, "I am looking for the remains of my teacher." It is too much, isn't it?

Right now, however you are, *is* life. In Dogen Zenji's *Thorough Functioning (Shobogenzo Zenki)*, he says life *is* manifestation. When

it is manifested, it is the total realization of life and nothing else, and also it is the total manifestation of death and nothing else. What kind of life is Dogen Zenji talking about? It is not at all hard to understand. In one second, life and death is appearing and disappearing more than six thousand times. Dogen Zenji also says, "You have boundless dharma." In other words, in your life there are boundless, countless, innumerable dharmas. Life and death is one of these. How do you like it? You do not like it? I love it.

"There is death in the midst of life, and there is life in the midst of death." What kind of death, what kind of life is this?