

SEE THE SHADOW OF THE WHIP

THERE IS A FASCICLE in Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo* entitled "Shobogenzo Shime [Four Horses]." He begins this fascicle with the famous case 32 from the *Gateless Gate*, The Non-Buddhist Questions the Buddha:

One day a nonbeliever visiting Shakyamuni Buddha said, "Question with or without words?" And Buddha remained silent. Then after some time the nonbeliever prostrated before the Buddha and said, "Because of your great compassionate teaching, I am relieved of all illusion and see the Buddhist Way clearly before me." He again prostrated before Shakyamuni and left. After this departure, Honorable Ananda questioned the Buddha, "What did the nonbeliever find that caused him to perceive the Way?" And Venerable Shakyamuni replied, "A good horse is one that runs merely on seeing the shadow of a whip."¹

What is being expressed here with and without words? As you know, our life itself is expressed. In a way all of you know what life is, and yet at the same time you have an uncertain feeling about it, don't you?

The non-Buddhist, not sitting even one period of zazen, goes to Shakyamuni Buddha and asks, "With words, without words?" What is the non-Buddhist asking? And what did the Buddha do? Shakyamuni Buddha sat there, not saying anything. The non-Buddhist appreciated the Buddha, said thanks, and left. Who is the non-Buddhist? Many of you are Judeo-Christian. Even those who have received the Buddhist precepts are Jewish or Christian to some degree. So what did this non-Buddhist realize?

Although the Buddha was silent to the non-Buddhist, he spoke to Ananda. What is the Buddha telling Ananda about the non-Buddhist and the horse? When you are sensitive enough, you can feel the whip of Shakyamuni Buddha. Who is he whipping? Is it Ananda? Or you?

The teaching of this koan has to do with the importance of awakening. The non-Buddhist is asking, "What kind of way is with words, without words?" Dogen Zenji clearly states it is the unsurpassable, the very best Way. He quotes from the *Agama Sutra*:

The Buddha said to the assembled people: "There are four kinds of horses. The first is a horse that out of fear will obey his rider's will at the mere sight of the whip's shadow. The second will act accordingly when the whip touches its hair. The third, when the whip has struck its flesh. And the fourth will yield only when the whip has reached its very bones. The first horse is like a man who realizes impermanence when he learns of a death in the neighboring village. The second horse is like a man who realizes this when death occurs in his own village. The third is like a man who does not awaken this mind until death occurs among his own family. And the fourth horse is like a man who awakens this mind only when his own death is imminent."²

In this analogy, the fact of death is first experienced as the death of someone distant from us, then the death of a close friend or family member, and finally by the fact of our own death. But just how closely do we relate to birth and death? Even at this moment, one of our monks is in the hospital and the doctor says there is no hope for recovery. All of us are experiencing it as something happening not to someone in a place far away but to someone closely related to us. What can we do about it? What can I really do with his life? With his sickness? And with his death?

We can look at our lives from the perspectives of these four kinds of horses. This whip has really hit *me*. And being whipped, I reflect upon myself and ask what is the best that I can do for our dying monk at this moment. How can we appreciate this life of birth, old age, sickness, and death? It is not just a matter of being in the

hospital. What is the difference between right here now and there in the hospital? In a way, it is different. But if we see the wholeness of this life, then it is the same.

Dogen Zenji quotes from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*:

The Buddha once said, there are four ways to control a horse. The first is to strike the horse's hair; the second, its skin; the third, its flesh; and the fourth, its bones. A rider's intentions are revealed to the horse by the location of the strike. Similarly, the Buddha used four ways to lead sentient beings to the Way. The first is to expound the law of birth. This is similar to a horse that finds the correct path as a result of having his hair struck by his rider. The second is to also expound the law of old age. This is like a horse that does the same after being struck on the skin. The third is to further expound the law of sickness. This equates with striking the horse's flesh. And the fourth is to include death in the explanation. This is like striking the horse's bones. A rider, however, is not always successful in leading a horse onto the right path. Shakyamuni, on the other hand, never fails to lead sentients to the Way. Thus he is known as the Great Controller of Man.³

Controller of Man, or the "person who has a good command of herself or himself," is one of the Buddha's ten nicknames. And what is the horse? The horse could be seen as the person who is trained to have good command of the self. What did the non-Buddhist see? What do we see? The horses run according to their sensitivity to the whip. How sensitive are we to illness, old age, and death as the very fact of reality?

We are living this life of impermanence, all experiencing it this very moment. How sharply are we sensing it? And if we do not feel it deep within our own bones, we are not the horse who runs at the shadow of the whip. Impermanence is the reality of change, the reality that is birth and death, rise and fall, creation and extinction. How are we truly appreciating this very moment, which may be the only moment we are living? If we do not see this, we do not understand impermanence.

Let me read the last part:

The receptive person realizes the Way merely on hearing the teaching on the law of birth. Others do not do so until old age has also been explained, and still others not until sickness and death have consecutively been added to the teaching. In a similar way, the three latter methods of controlling a horse occur only after the first has transpired. The latter three teachings of Shakyamuni—old age, sickness, and death—exist only as a result of the occurrence of the former on birth. It was Shakyamuni himself who initially proclaimed the law of birth, old age, sickness, and death. He did so not to break man's unity with these, nor to establish them as a standard of the Way. Rather, he used them as a means to lead sentient beings to the Way, a task in which he never fails.⁴

Dogen Zenji is saying that by talking about this life as old age, sickness, and death, we allow sentient beings to obtain the dharma of the unsurpassable Way. Shakyamuni Buddha talks about birth, sickness, old age, and death “to lead sentient beings to the Way, a task in which he never fails.” Who is the person who never fails? Is it Shakyamuni Buddha or is it someone else who leads all sentient beings to the unsurpassable Way? How do *you* obtain this supreme wisdom?

Impermanence is always the plain, simple reality of our life, which is no other than the supreme Way itself. Those who see life in such a way run upon seeing the shadow of the whip. And when we see that the supreme Way is no other than our daily life, we must take good care of it. The best way to take care of it is to simply live the life of no division between birth or death, between this or that.

So what is life? What is sickness? Who is getting old? Who is dying? What are these different perspectives teaching us? It is not a matter of four kinds or two kinds of perspectives as such. Each one of us has a different life and yet the same life—the life of birth, illness, old age, and death. How do we best live this life of the supreme Way?

[1.](#) Kosen Nishiyama, trans., *Shobogenzo*, vol. 3 (Tokyo: Nakayama Shobo, 1983), 112.

[2.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 113.

[3.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 113–14.

[4.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 114–115.