

REALIZING GENJŌKŌAN

THE KEY TO DŌGEN'S SHŌBŌGENZŌ

by Shohaku Okumura

foreword by Taigen Dan Leighton



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

disagree, arguing that although the character combinations 心塵 and 身心 are each pronounced *shinjin*, they are pronounced with different tones in Chinese, and Dōgen would therefore not have confused them. My thought is that if Dōgen Zenji had heard Rujing use the expression only once, as he did in the fictitious story that appears in *Denkōroku*, it might be possible that he misunderstood. But according to *Hyōkyōki*, written by Dōgen himself, Dōgen discussed the expression *shinjin-datsuraku* with Rujing at least three times. We know from *Hyōkyōki* that Dōgen used the expression in speaking to Rujing, and it seems certain that Rujing would have corrected Dōgen if he had made a mistake in its pronunciation. For these reasons, I don't think it is possible that Dōgen made such a mistake in understanding these key words.

Let us take a closer look at this expression, *shinjin-datsuraku*, that is so widely discussed as an essential point in Dōgen's teachings. The literal meaning of the Chinese character *datsu* (脱) is "to take off" or "slough off," and *raku* (落) means "to drop off," "cast off," or "fall down." The scholar Carl Bielefeldt translates this expression as "slough off body and mind," emphasizing the first half of the compound, *datsu* (脱). The translations "dropping off body and mind" and "casting off body and mind" emphasize the second half of the compound, *raku* (落). But what does *shinjin-datsuraku* really mean for us in our practice?

Throughout our lives, from the time we are born until we die, we wear some kind of clothing. Clothing gives an indication of social class and occupation, and it may communicate cultural and religious background. Monks wear monks' robes, an emperor wears regal garments, farmers wear farm clothes, and soldiers wear uniforms according to their rank. Rich people wear luxurious garments and poor people wear inexpensive ones. Chinese people wear Chinese clothes, the Japanese wear Japanese clothes, Americans dress like Americans. When we see people's clothing, we see who those people are in society.

We wear other kinds of clothing. Social position and status are types of clothing that define us. We wear the clothing of poverty,

wealth, or the middle class; we wear the clothing of occupations such as doctor, lawyer, mechanic, priest, student, teacher. But when we sit facing the wall and let go of thought, including comparing ourselves with others, we take off all this clothing. In *zazen* I am not a Japanese Buddhist priest; I am neither Japanese nor American. In *zazen* we are neither rich nor poor, neither Buddhist nor Christian. The terms "Japanese," "American," "Buddhist," "Christian," "man," and "woman" are only relevant when we compare ourselves with others. When I compare myself with Americans, I am Japanese, but before I knew of people who weren't Japanese I didn't know that I was Japanese. When we just sit facing the wall in *zazen*, we are neither deluded living beings nor enlightened buddhas; we are neither alive nor dead; we are just as we are. That's it. In *zazen* we take off all of our clothing and become the naked self.

We have many different experiences during the course of our lives, and in the process of experiencing these billions of things we create a self-image. We come to consider ourselves as capable or incapable, superior or inferior, rich or poor, honest or dishonest. We define ourselves in this way and hold on to ideas of who we are; we create the karmic self. But when we sit in *zazen*, we let go of all of these self-images. When we open the hand of thought, these concepts drop off and the body and mind are released from karmic bindings. This is what *datsuraku* means. As Rujing said, we are then released from the five desires and the six coverings. In *zazen* we are not pulled around by the objects of our thinking or emotions, so we are released from the three poisonous minds that bind us to *samsara*. This just sitting in *zazen* is itself the practice of *nirvana*.

I am a Buddhist priest and I am also my wife's husband and my children's father. When I am with my family, I am a father, so I play the role of a father. When I give a lecture, I am a teacher so I do my best to talk about Dōgen Zenji's teachings in an understandable way, though I don't know if I succeed. These roles are like clothing I put on in different situations, and I define who I am according to the role I am doing my best to fulfill at the time. But when I sit facing the wall,

I am neither a father nor a Buddhist priest. At that time I am nothing. I am empty. I am just who I am. This is liberation from my karmic life. This does not mean that my zazen practice is necessarily easy or painless, of course.

So Dōgen's statement "To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of others drop off" simply means that in zazen the separation between self and others falls away, is dropped off. Zazen reveals the total reality of interdependent origination. When we let go of thought, we settle our whole being into interpenetrating reality. This is how we are verified by all beings.

There is a trace of realization that cannot be grasped.

The original expression Dōgen Zenji uses for "cannot be grasped" is *kyukatsu*. *Kyu* means to be at rest, not working, not in action. *Katsu* means to stop. "Trace of realization" and *kyukatsu* are in contradiction to each other. *Kyukatsu* means to be traceless, so all trace of enlightenment is at rest and has stopped existing. "There is a trace of realization that cannot be grasped" means that there is a "traceless trace" of realization. Here Dōgen is saying both that "there is" and "there is not" a trace of realization. In other words, as soon as we grasp this realization, we miss it. Instead we must just keep practicing without grasping any trace of realization. If one thinks, "Now I am verified by all things," one has already missed realization. Just practice, then the trace is there and yet it isn't there. This trace of realization is like the trace of birds flying and fish swimming. It is there but we cannot see or grasp it. If we try to grasp it we miss it, but when we open the hand of thought, it is there.

Dōgen also wrote about this traceless trace in *Shōbōgenzō Yuibutsu-yobutsu* (Only Buddha Together with Buddha):

Again, when a bird flies in the sky, beasts do not even dream of finding or following its trace. Since they do not know that there is such a thing, they cannot even imagine

this. However, a bird can see traces of hundreds and thousands of small birds having passed in flocks, or traces of so many lines of large birds having flown south or north. Those traces may be even more evident than the carriage tracks left on a road or the hoofprints of a horse seen in the grass. In this way, a bird sees birds' traces.

Buddhas are like this. You may wonder how many lifetimes buddhas have been practicing. Buddhas, large or small, although they are countless, all know their own traces; you never know a buddha's trace when you are not a buddha.

You may wonder why you do not know. The reason is that while buddhas see these traces with a buddha's eye, those who are not buddhas do not have a buddha's eye, and they just notice the Buddha's attributes.

All who do not know should search out the trace of the Buddha's path. If you find footprints, you should investigate whether they are the Buddha's. Upon being investigated, the Buddha's trace is known, and whether it is long or short, shallow or deep, is also known. To illuminate your trace is accomplished by studying the Buddha's trace. Accomplishing this is Buddha Dharma.¹⁶

And Zen Master Linji (Jap.: Rinzai) said:

If bodhisattvas, even those who have completed the ten stages of mind practice, were all to seek for the traces of such a follower of the Way, they could never find them. Therefore the heavenly beings rejoice, the gods of the earth stand guard with their legs, and the buddhas of the ten directions sing his praise. Why? Because this man of the Way who is now listening to the Dharma acts in a manner that leaves no traces.¹⁷

In Zen teachings such as this quote from Linji, “traces” refers to attachment to one’s own actions, and “leaving no traces” is generally regarded as a positive thing. But Dōgen Zenji’s usage of “trace” differs from that commonly found in Zen teachings. He did say, as Linchi did, that one should simply keep practicing without self-attachment, leaving no visible traces. But according to Dōgen, the trace of practice that leaves no visible trace can be seen by other bodhisattvas who share our aspiration, just as the path of passing birds can later be seen by other birds of the same kind.

We endlessly express this ungraspable trace of realization.

In zazen and in all the activities of our daily lives, our practice is to try to express this traceless trace of realization and the reality of interdependent origination. This is the point of Dōgen Zenji’s teaching in Genjōkōan. When we practice in order to express reality, we can see that practice and realization are one. Without practice there is no such thing as enlightenment, although we usually think practice is one thing and enlightenment is another. We usually approach practice as the means and enlightenment as the reward, but realization is only manifested within the process of practice, moment by moment.

WHEN WE SEEK WE ARE FAR AWAY

PERHAPS A BRIEF review of some of the sections we have already discussed will be helpful at this point. As you will recall, each of the first three sections of Genjōkōan presents an understanding of reality from a different view. In the first two, Dōgen Zenji discusses the Dharma from two different perspectives. When reality is viewed from the first perspective, there is practice, delusion and realization, life and death, buddhas and living beings. When viewed from a different Dharma perspective, within reality there are no delusion and no realization, no buddhas and no living beings, no birth and no death.

In section 3 Dōgen discusses the Buddha Way, the concrete life experience of practice. Within this concrete experience of life, there is a time of arising (birth) and a time of perishing (death), but these are not distinctly separate from each other. When there is arising, for example, there is just arising, and this arising is not in opposition to perishing. When we are alive, we are totally alive regardless of the condition of our lives. No matter how seriously sick one may be, for example, one’s life is still 100 percent life. Life and death do exist, but there is no dichotomy between life and death in our actual experience. Since birth, we are each of us living 100 percent, but in a sense we are simultaneously dying as well; each moment we live we also are