

The Four Seals

To begin with, there are two kinds of reality within our lives as human beings. One is the reality of chance or accident. The other is a reality having an absolute or undeniable nature. For example, perhaps I pour myself a cup of tea. I don't have to be pouring tea for myself, it's an accidental reality. There is no absolute reason why I have to be sitting here having tea, I just happen to be doing so. Seeing things in that way, most of our life consists of accidental realities: things could be taking place another way.

This is not to say there are no absolute realities. There are indeed some undeniable realities. For example, all living things die. There are no exceptions! No matter how much one is opposed to it or resists it, everything dies. This is an inescapable reality. So, unlike the accidental realities that just happen to come about, that could be changed by intention or design, there are undeniable realities that occur no matter how much we may resist them.

Any real or absolute truth must consist of living out our lives in accord with the inescapable realities that come about no matter how much we may oppose them. Buddhism as a religious teaching is founded precisely upon this kind of truth. During the period when trade between India and Greece and Rome was flourishing, around the time of Christ, when Mahayana Buddhism was developing, expressions and explanations concerning Shakyamuni's attitude and way of life became highly refined. Then, out of this, the true uniqueness of Buddhism developed. This uniqueness is embodied in the four seals, or principles, the *shihōin* (sometimes — the first three seals are mentioned, in which case they're

known as the *sanbōin*). These four seals more or less summarize Buddhism.⁴

The first seal is that all phenomena are impermanent, *shogyō mujō*. The second is that everything is suffering, *sangai kaibu*. The third is *shobō mugū*, sometimes glossed as all things and events (all *abharma*) being without self. Maybe it would be clearer to say that things have no substantial independent existence of their own. The fourth seal is that nirvana is tranquility, or quiescence, *nehan jaku-jō*. In Mahayana Buddhism, the expression *shobō jissō*—all things are themselves ultimate reality, or all things are as they are—is also used for this point, meaning that everything is truth in itself. These four succinct principles are unique to Buddhism.

Impermanence, *shogyō mujō*, means that every living thing dies. In other words, everything that has life loses life. Moreover, no one, least of all the living thing itself, knows exactly when its life will end. Life has a limit, and it is always in a state of uncertainty. This is the first undeniable reality.

I have mentioned that many people think that simply pursuing material happiness or riches is most important in life. But strand that way of life next to the reality of death and it completely falls apart. When a person who thinks he is happy because of his material situation has to face death, he's likely to fall into the depths of bitterness and despair. If happiness means having plenty of money and good health, then by that very definition, you're only going to hit rock bottom when it's your time to die. When you are faced with death, what good is being healthy or wealthy? That is why all of these materialistic pursuits only end in despair in the face of the undeniable reality of death.

What exactly is it that we have to learn from this first undeniable reality? We have to clarify what life and death really are. We have to know clearly just what it means to be alive and what it means to die. In Pure Land Buddhism, there is an expression *goshō o negau*; that is, have hope for the next life. The belief is that life opens up after death. But that's not a very good understanding of the expression. What *goshō*, or "afterlife," refers to is the life that arises when one clarifies this matter of death. It means knowing clearly just what death is, and then really living out one's life. That is the most important thing we can learn from the first undeniable reality.

For us to remain unclear about life and death can only result in our dying in great despair and bitterness. This point leads to the second undeniable reality, that all things are suffering, or *sangai kaie*. Suffering is not something that comes to attack me periodically; my whole life, as it is, is suffering. Nevertheless, I go around fighting with people, loving them, ignoring them, without ever being able to truly see that suffering. Actually, suffering in the deepest sense is all of that. In other words, as long as this matter of death remains unclear, everything in the world suffers. That is the meaning of the idea that all sentient beings are suffering. It is something that isn't talked about much simply because most people wouldn't have any idea of what it's about.⁵

Opening I've mentioned that there are two types of realities, the one being accidental reality and the other being undeniable reality.

Hand When you think about it, I myself am just an accidental reality.

of

Thought After all, there is nothing that says I had to be born in twentieth-

— century Japan. I could just as well have been born in ancient Egypt, or Papua New Guinea, or indeed not have been born at all. In

other words, being born in any age or in any place is a possibility, an accident, just as my being here right now is an accident.

From that we can say, then, that all the things I see in my world, and the world itself taking shape as I create it, are also an accident.⁶ For example, perhaps I look out the window and see that the weather has cleared up, so I think about what a nice day it is. But that is only because of where I happen to be. Somewhere else, it is surely raining right now. So, in a broader sense, it isn't quite right to say that "today" is a clear day. After all, somewhere there are people who are getting rained on or snowed on, and somewhere else, people must be laboring under a hot desert sun. Therefore, there's no reason to believe that only the things I see with my own eyes are absolutely or undeniably true.

There is no way we can say that our way of looking at things is absolute. If you and I are sitting together, you may think that we are both looking at the same cup in front of us, but it's not true. You look at it from your angle and from your perspective and I view it from mine. There's no ground for our saying that a fact we know or an idea we embrace is absolute.

Consider all the weather satellites circling the Earth. From their positions, the whole world looks like a map, and cities like New York or Tokyo look like some sort of mold growing on the surface. So it looks like people are just living in the same sort of mold that grows on a piece of old cheese. In that sense, I have no ground for saying that the world I see is everything; even weather satellites can show me that. If we look at a picture taken from the moon, the earth appears to be nothing more than a little ball with some sort of white fuzz floating around it. In brief, everything I happen to see is an accident.

Practice
and
Pessimism

Since my having been born in Japan in the twentieth century is just an accident, it follows that I—sitting here and looking out the window in this room of this particular house, at the moment when I write these words—an nothing but an accident. I'm only relative, I'm not absolute. If I come to the conclusion that I am accidental, then naturally my thoughts are also accidental.

If both my mind and I are accidental, maybe the only thing remaining that could be called inevitable, or absolute, is God. That God must be absolute is the foundation for the rise of religions where only God can be true or real. Since we are nothing but things that have been created, we are just relative. The origin of this kind of religion thus begins with denial of oneself in favor of another, God.

The third way to approach life that I mentioned earlier says that because from an individual perspective everything is relative, or accidental, what should be relied on is abstract truth, or *logos*. This kind of truth is derived purely from human reason, or, in Greek, *nous*. This is the foundation of Western philosophy.

This kind of thought doesn't focus on the individual, but rather upon the whole of humanity. Though every member of humanity was born and dies, humanity as a whole doesn't die. Well, actually it will eventually—with the end of the Earth or before. But humanity has been around for over fifty thousand years and will probably be around for another fifty thousand. In other words, it wasn't born, in a certain sense, and won't die. The academic world does not take up the problem of things coming into being and dying. Rather, what it takes up is humankind as a phenomenon that was not born and won't die. However, to view

things from that perspective entails coming to the realization that when I die I will be abandoned by truth.

How does Mahayana thought differ from these ways of looking at things? The Buddhist approach from a Mahayana perspective might be described this way: By accepting and properly understanding the true nature of both accidental and undeniable realities, and by living in accord with this understanding, the matter of living and dying will cease to be such a terrible problem.

The third undeniable reality is that all things lack substantial, independent existence; this is *sho-bō muga*. Since nothing is substantial by itself just as it is, there is nothing to hold on to. This means your thoughts are not something to hold on to either, so the only thing to do is to let go of all that comes into your head.

The expression "letting go of whatever arises" is my own way of expressing the idea of *ku*, or emptiness. This can also be interpreted as "without body or form," or not being tied to form. We can talk about this or that only because we grab on to or try to make some connection with something.⁷ "Letting go of whatever arises" is not trying to forge a link with some outside object. This is the truth derived from the third undeniable reality.

The first undeniable reality is that every living thing dies, and the second undeniable reality is that we suffer throughout our lives because we don't understand death. The truth derived from these two points is the importance of clarifying the matter of birth and death. The third undeniable reality is that all of the thoughts and feelings that arise in my head simply arise haphazardly, by chance. And the conclusion we can derive from that is not to hold on to all that comes up in our head. That is what we are doing when we sit zazen.

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What we call "I" or "ego" arises by chance or accident, so we just let go instead of grasping thoughts and "I." When we let go of all our notions about things, everything becomes really true. This is the fourth undeniable reality, complete tranquility, or *nehan jakujō*. It is also described as "all things are as they are," *shobō jissō*. Therefore, when we let go of everything, we do not create artificial attachments and connections. Everything is as it is. Everything exists in one accidental way or another. This is the present reality of life. It is the reality of that which cannot be grasped, the reality about which nothing can be said. This very ungraspability is what is absolutely real about things.

Things being just as they are is also known as the *suchness* of things (*tathatā* in Sanskrit). But don't assume that what I've been calling "the present reality of life" is some fixed entity. It is not something that can be grasped or understood through reason or intellect. We let go, and that, as it is, is the reality of life outside of which there can be no other reality.

When we let go of our conceptions, there is no other possible reality than what is right now; in that sense, what is right now and here is absolute, it's undeniable. Not only that, this undeniable reality is at the same time the reality of life that is fundamentally connected to everything in the universe. This is undeniable reality. The truth to be derived from this is that right now is all-important. Dwelling here and now in this reality, letting go of all the accidental things that arise in our minds, is what I mean by "opening the hand of thought."

When we think of "now" in the ordinary sense, we assume that there is a linear flow of time from the past into the present and forward into the future. Actually, it isn't that way at all. Actually, all

that there really is, is *now*. As the scenery of the present, however, there is a past, present, and future. Let me say that again: *within the present*, there is a past, a present, and a future. The past and future are real and alive only in the present. This concept of time in Buddhist thought is very important. It is different from the notion in Western philosophy that time flows from the past, into the present, and on into a future in a linear way. According to Buddhist teachings it doesn't quite work that way. The past, present, and future are all contained within the present.

We have to realize that there is nothing outside of the present. Quite often people become shackled by the past. Believing that you came from a prominent family with a lot of money and feeling ashamed about your present condition is nothing more than being shackled to a conception of the past. Thinking that you have to repair a house because it appears to be old is only an idea; thinking that you have to fix it to preserve it unchanged is also just an idea. Likewise, to feel that you have to do something like become famous in the future is only to be shackled by your ambitious ideas about the future. What is most important is right now.

But again, within that "now" we have past experiences. Within the present, we have past experiences and a direction toward the future that we face. We have to vivify our past experiences and face toward the future—all within the present. Only if we master the realities of the past can they function vividly and smoothly in the present. Only if we have learned how to drive a car can we effectively use one to go somewhere. Doing exactly that is called *genjō kōan*, the koan of life becoming life. *Genjō* is the present becoming the present.

Practice
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A man leaves his house after an argument with his wife, gets into his car all excited, and—bang!—he gets into an accident, all because he wasn't living fully in the present. This is a case of the present not completely living in the present. The truth to be derived from the Third Undeniable Reality is that we must give life to, or vivify, our past experiences and face the future, while living fully in the present.

Whether we realize it or not we are always living out life that is connected to everything in the universe. But when I say that, I'm not talking about someone else's life, or life in general separate from myself. The life that runs through everything in the universe is me. I don't mean me as an ego, I mean my self in the true sense, the universal self. It is the foundation of all life experiences. Eihei Dōgen Zenji referred to the reality of life in this sense as *jinnissai jiko*, or "the self that extends through everything in the universe."

This self is not some fixed body, it's constantly changing. Every time we take a breath we're changing. Our consciousness is always changing, too. All the chemical and physical processes in our body are also constantly changing. And yet, everything temporarily takes a form. This is our true self, *jiko*. This is the real or universal self, or the reality of life, as I prefer to call it. Whatever way you put it, I am here only because my world is here. When I took my first breath, my world was born with me. When I die, my world dies with me. In other words, I wasn't born into a world that was already here before me, I do not live simply as one individual among millions of other individuals, and I do not leave everything behind to live on after me. People go through life thinking of themselves as members of a group or society. However, this isn't

how we really live. Actually, I bring my own world into existence, live it out, and take it with me when I die.

I can't stress enough how essential it is to look very, very carefully at this universal self that runs through everything in the universe. You live together with your world. Only when you thoroughly understand this will everything in the world settle as the self pervading all things. As Buddhists, this is our vow or life direction. We vow to save all sentient beings so that this self may become even more itself. This is the direction we continuously face.

Shakyamuni Buddha said it this way: "All worlds are my world and all sentient beings—people, things, and situations—are my children." Dōgen Zenji's expression *rōshin*, nurturing mind or attitude, came out of this. My way of expressing this is "everything I encounter is my life"—*dan tokoro waga seiwei*.

That is why our most fundamental attitude must be "just doing," or "doing nothing but this" (*shikan*). It's not a matter of thinking correctly about life. Thinking about life simply isn't enough. Our life is whatever we are encountering right now, and our practice is *shikanzaza*, which is literally "just sitting." More broadly it means to put our energy into settling everything in our world here and now, where we really live.

Practice Is for Life

I want to take up the point of why it is so important to continue throughout our lives our practice of "everything I encounter is my life." The most essential point in carrying on our practice is to wake up this self that is inclusive of everything. This means we have to realize, over and over, that all sentient beings fall within the boundaries of our life.

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Foundations of Zen
Buddhist Practice

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Wisdom Publications • Boston