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On ‘Your Very Mind Is Buddha’

(*Soku Shin Ze Butsu*)

Translator’s Introduction: In this discourse, Dōgen makes clear that the saying “Your very mind is Buddha” is to be understood in a particular way: it is a remark addressed to one who has already given rise to the intention to train and realize Buddhahood. Those who have not yet done so are apt to think of ‘mind’ as referring to intellectual, perceptual, and cognitive functions, which are viewed as constituting a personal ‘self’, a misconception akin to the Shrenikan view that such functions constitute an immortal soul. Because of this danger, Dōgen gives a detailed presentation of this Shrenikan view, which he immediately refutes through quoting the kōan story alluded to in Discourse 1: A Discourse on Doing One’s Utmost in Practicing the Way of the Buddhas (*Bendōwa*). He then goes on to show how the meaning of the saying “Your very mind is Buddha” can be explored more deeply and what some of its implications are.

What the Buddhas and Ancestors, without exception, have traditionally maintained and entrusted to us is, simply, that this very mind of ours is Buddha. Even so, the statement “Your very mind is Buddha” did not come from India, but was first heard in China. Many trainees have misunderstood what it means, but have failed to explore their misunderstanding to their advantage. Because many have not seen their misunderstanding through to its obviously erroneous conclusion, they have wandered off onto non-Buddhist paths.

Hearing talk of ‘your very mind’, those befuddled by doubts speculate that the intellectual, cognitive, and perceptual functions of sentient beings are synonymous with ‘the Mind of enlightenment before someone has awakened to It’, and accordingly fancy themselves to be a Buddha. This is due to their never having encountered a genuine Teacher of Buddhism.¹

The sort of non-Buddhist view I am referring to existed in India under the name of the Shrenikan view. The following is in accord with that viewpoint:

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1. That is, had they met such a Teacher, he would never have permitted such folly. The original text carries no implication that anyone who encounters a genuine Teacher of Buddhism will automatically and instantaneously be freed from all delusions, or that, if a disciple is deluded, it is inevitably because his or her teacher is inadequate. Even the Buddha could not help those who would not take His Teachings to heart.

A Great Principle resides in our present body whose presence can readily be discerned. Specifically, it discriminates between suffering and pleasure, knows what is cold or hot, and perceives the misery of pain and the itch of desire. It is not limited by any physical thing or affected by any surrounding conditions. Although physical things come and go, and conditions arise and disappear, this Spiritual Intelligence forever exists, unchanging.

This Spiritual Intelligence permeates all living beings far and wide. The mundane and the saintly alike harbor this spirit, without any difference between them. Even though the illusory flowerings of false teachings may exist in humans temporarily, once they become aware of this wise discernment through its accord with a particular thought, physical 'things' fall away and conditions disappear; thereupon, the Spiritual Intelligence alone remains in its original nature, ever clear and bright. Even though the bodily aspect ultimately breaks down, the Spiritual Intelligence comes out intact, just as when a house is being completely destroyed by a fire, the householder emerges and escapes.

This Intelligence, which is clear in its functions yet whose substance is mysterious and beyond our grasp, is referred to as the nature of those who are spiritually awakened and wise. We also call it 'Buddha', as well as 'enlightenment'. We ourselves, as well as all others, are equally endowed with it; the deluded and the enlightened are both permeated with it. Whatever myriad things and conditions may exist, this Spiritual Intelligence is neither linked to these conditions nor the same as these things, but abides forever throughout the eons. Since all conditions existing in the present are dependent on the Spiritual Intelligence, they can be regarded as being real. Because they are innately conditioned to arise, they actually exist. Even so, they do not abide forever, as does the Spiritual Intelligence, since they only exist for a while before they disappear.

Because this Intelligence understands things in mysterious ways, without depending on light or darkness, it is called 'that which knows what the spirit is'. It is also referred to as 'the True Self', 'the Source of Enlightenment', 'One's Original Nature', and 'One's Fundamental Substance'. One who awakens to this Original Nature is said to return to the Ever-abiding and is called a Mahasattva, that is, 'a Great Being who has returned to the True'. After this, he does not

transmigrate through the cycle of birth and death, but comes to realize the non-arising, non-perishing 'Ocean of his Original Nature', and enters therein.

Apart from this Intelligence, there is no reality or truth. To the extent that someone is unaware of this Nature of his, the three temporal worlds and the six worlds* of existence compete to arise.

Such is the view of the non-Buddhist Shrenikans.



The fully awakened Chinese National Teacher Echū of the great T'ang dynasty once asked a monk, "Where do you come from?"

The monk replied, "I come from the South."

The Master asked, "Do you have good spiritual friends in the South?"

The monk replied, "We have quite a few."

The Master asked, "What do they point out to people?"

The monk said, "Spiritual friends there point out to trainees, right from the start, that their own minds are Buddha. 'Buddha' means 'enlightenment', and we are all, right now, fully equipped with a Nature that experiences and knows through what It sees and hears. This Nature is innately good, and has the capacity to raise the eyebrows and make the eyes twinkle. Since It exists throughout the whole body, when It rustles through the head, the head 'knows', and when It rustles through the foot, the foot 'knows'. This is why it is called *samyak-sambuddha*, 'the One Who Knows Everything Perfectly'. No other Buddha exists apart from this. This body of ours experiences birth and extinction, but the Nature of our mind, from time without beginning, has never yet arisen or perished. The body's arising and perishing is like a dragon's changing his bones for lighter ones,² a snake's shedding its skin, or someone moving from a former residence—that is, the physical aspect is transient, but this Nature is permanent. This is roughly what is taught in the South."

* See *Glossary*.

2. A reference to the Chinese folk belief that fossil bones belonged to dragons who had left them behind in order to live and fly about in the sky.

The Master said, “If this is so, then there is no difference between their teaching and the non-Buddhist view of the Shrenikans. The latter view states that there is a sort of ‘Divine Nature’ in this body of ours, which has the capacity to know pain and itch, and that, when the body disintegrates, this divine aspect departs from it, like a householder fleeing when his house is on fire—the dwelling is impermanent whilst its householder is forever. Were the matter like this, there would be no way, upon examination, to distinguish right from wrong, so how can we accept it as correct?”

“When I used to go on pilgrimages, I would often encounter this sort of thing. In recent times it has flourished even more widely. These ‘good friends’ would gather together an assembly of some three to five hundred and, seeing stars in their listeners’ eyes, would say that this is our Buddhist tradition’s Teachings in the South. Taking up the Sixth Ancestor’s *Platform Scripture*, they would alter what It says by garnishing It with vulgar and rude comments and stories, whilst adulterating or deleting the wise and saintly intentions of the Ancestor, thereby deluding and confusing their followers. How can this be considered the uttering of our Teachings? How painful! It will be the death of our tradition. Were we intended to take our perceptual and cognitive functions to be our Buddha Nature, Vimalakirti* would certainly not have said that the Dharma is apart from our perceptual and cognitive functions, and that, when we are occupied with these functions, then this is being engaged in perceiving and cognizing, and is not a seeking of the Dharma.”

The National Teacher was a leading disciple of the former Buddha Daikan Enō and was the outstanding good spiritual friend of celestial and human beings. Grasping the spiritual import of what the National Teacher has pointed out, you should take it as the model for your training and study. When you detect the discriminatory view of the non-Buddhist Shrenikans, do not follow it.

In more recent times, of all our colleagues who are Abbots or Masters in the various monasteries of Great Sung China, none compares with the National Teacher. From ancient times, a spiritual friend who could equal the National Teacher has still not entered this world. And yet, ordinary, worldly people mistakenly hold the opinion that Zen Masters like Rinzai and Tokusan are the equals of the National Teacher. Fellows who hold such a view are all too many. These people, alas, are not clear-eyed teachers.

The saying “Your very mind is Buddha,” which Buddhas and Ancestors have assured us is so, is something not even dreamed of by non-Buddhists or by followers of the two Lesser Courses.* Only Buddhas and Ancestors—and They alone—pass on that one’s mind is Buddha, and only They experience its meaning to the fullest. Having heard of it, They have put it into practice and have come to realize it for Themselves.

The term Buddha implies that the hundreds of karmic seedlings from defiling passions have been weeded out and discarded. However, I am not speaking of this term as it is applied to a sixteen-foot tall golden statue.

The term *soku* (‘that which is immediate’) refers to one’s spiritual question before one deals with what is right before one’s eyes, and before one learns to avoid the blunders that may arise from not dealing with that question.

The term *ze* (‘is’) refers to the three temporal worlds of ‘was’, ‘is’, and ‘will be’, from which there is no retreating or escaping, and which are not merely a figment of the mind.

The term *shin* (‘mind’) implies the walls and fences of discernment before they have been mudded fast with mortar, and before one has fabricated anything or added fixtures.

We may thoroughly examine these terms in the form, for instance, of “Your very mind is Buddha,” or in the form of “Your mind, at this very moment, is Buddha,” or “Buddha, right now, is your mind,” or “Your very mind is what ‘Buddha’ is,” or “This ‘Buddha’ is your mind right now.” To thoroughly explore the meaning in this manner is precisely an instance of one’s very mind being Buddha. In promoting the meaning, the Ancestors passed it on in a straightforward manner as “Your very mind is Buddha,” and it has come down to us today, accurately transmitted in this form.

The so-called ‘mind which has been correctly Transmitted’ refers to the whole mind being synonymous with ‘all thoughts and things’, and all thoughts and things are what constitute ‘the whole mind’. This is why someone in the past once said, “When a person fully realizes what his mind really is, not an inch of solid ground will exist upon the earth.” You must understand that when you fully realize what your mind is, the whole canopy of the heavens is knocked down and the spinning earth is completely torn asunder. On the other hand, when you come to see what your mind really is, the earth becomes three inches thicker.

An ancient one of great virtue once said, “And just what is this wondrously pure, bright mind? It is the great earth with its mountains and rivers, along with the sun, the moon, and all the stars.”

Now you know clearly: what is called 'mind' is the great earth with its mountains and rivers; it is the sun, the moon, and the stars. Even so, when you take what is being expressed here one step further, something is lacking; when you draw back from what it is saying, something has gone too far. The mind that is the great earth with its mountains and rivers is simply the great earth with its mountains and rivers: there are no surging waves nor is there any wind-driven spindrift to disturb or upset it. The mind that is sun, moon, and stars is simply sun, moon, and stars: there is no fog nor is there any mist to obscure its clarity. The mind that is the coming and going of birth and death is simply the coming and going of birth and death: there is no 'being deluded' nor is there any 'realizing enlightenment'. The mind that is the tiles* and stones for walls and fences is simply the tiles and stones for walls and fences: there is no mud nor is there any water to make a binding mortar. The mind that is the four elements* and the five skandhas* is simply the four elements and the five skandhas: there are no wild horses of unbridled willfulness nor any monkeys with insatiable desires. The mind that is the Master's Dharma seat and his ceremonial hossu* is simply the Master's seat and hossu: there is no bamboo whose joints block clear passage nor is there any wood twisted up with knots. Since this is the way things are, "Your very mind is Buddha" means, pure and simply, that your very mind is Buddha; all Buddhas are, pure and simply, all Buddhas.

Thus, "Your very mind is Buddha" refers to all Buddhas, that is, to Those who have given rise to the intention to realize Buddhahood by practicing and training until They awaken to Their enlightenment and realize nirvana. Those who have not given rise to the intention to realize Buddhahood by practicing and training until they awaken to their enlightenment and realize nirvana are not those whose very mind is Buddha. Even if, for a fraction of an instant, you give rise to the intention to train and realize the Truth for yourself, your very mind will be Buddha. Even if, for the tiniest, imperceptible moment, you give rise to the intention to train and realize the Truth for yourself, your very mind will be Buddha. Even if, for immeasurable eons, you give rise to the intention to train and realize the Truth for yourself, your very mind will be Buddha. Even if, for the length of only one single thought, you give rise to the intention to train and realize the Truth for yourself, your very mind will be Buddha. Even if, half-heartedly, you give rise to the intention to train and realize the Truth for yourself, your very mind will be Buddha. Nevertheless, were you to say of someone who is taking ever so long to train to become a Buddha that his mind is not Buddha, you have not yet seen your mind to be Buddha, nor do you yet know what the saying means, nor are you yet

truly training in the Way. You have not met a genuine Teacher of Buddhism who knows how to open up your very mind to be Buddha.

The term 'all Buddhas' means Shakyamuni Buddha: Shakyamuni Buddha is synonymous with one's very mind being Buddha. At that very moment when all the Buddhas of past, present, and future have become, do become, and will become Buddha, without fail, They become Shakyamuni Buddha. This is what "Your very mind is Buddha" means.

This was delivered to the monastic assembly at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple, Uji County, Yamashiro Province, on the twenty-fifth day of the fifth lunar month in the first year of the En'ō era (June 28, 1239).

It was written down by me on the twelfth day of the seventh lunar month in the third year of the Kangen era (August 5, 1245), while in the chaplain's quarters at Daibutsu-ji Temple, Yoshida Prefecture, Echizen Province.

Ejō