



THE
ESSENTIAL

DOGEN

Writings of the Great Zen Master



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Enlightenment

Awakening to the ultimate reality of human existence is called "realization" or "enlightenment." It is the actualization of our innate capacity to experience wisdom beyond wisdom.

[According to Ejo*:] One day a student asked, "Although I have been studying the way for years, I haven't been enlightened. The teachers of old have said, 'Don't depend on intelligence and learning.' So I believe that even if I am slow and have little wisdom, I should not become discouraged. Is there anything to learn from the teachers of old about this?"

Dogen instructed, "You are right. Inherent intelligence or high capacity is not necessary. You should not depend on brilliance or smartness. Don't exclude those who are very slow or less talented. It is a mistake, however, to say that for the true study you should be like a blind, deaf, or mute person. The true study of the way should be easy. But even among hundreds and thousands of students in the assembly of one teacher in Great Song China, those who genuinely attain the way and inherit

dharma are only one or two. Therefore, we should keep the examples of the ancient masters in mind.

"I see that there are those who have the utmost aspiration and those who don't. Those who have the utmost aspiration and study accordingly will not fail to attain the way. You should remember that how much you study and how fast you progress are secondary matters. The joyfully seeking mind is primary.

"Those who vow to steal a precious treasure, to defeat a powerful enemy, or to know a beautiful woman will follow their intention and keep it in mind on each occasion under all circumstances while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. Nothing is left unachieved with such a commitment. If you seek the way with genuine intention as you practice just sitting, as you work on koans about ancient teachers, or as you face the teacher, then you can shoot a bird however high in the sky or catch a fish however deep in the water. But without arousing such a determined mind, how can you achieve the great matter of cutting off the transmigration of birth and death at the very moment the words *buddha way* are uttered? Those who have such a determined mind will invariably be enlightened, whether or not they are less learned or are slow, whether or not they are foolish or unwholesome.

"Upon arousing this mind, you should reflect on the impermanence of the world. Impermanence is not something you merely visualize or something you create and think about. Impermanence is the truth that is right in front of you. You need not study other people's words or textual evidence on this matter. To be born in the morning and to die in the evening, not to see someone today whom you saw yesterday—the impermanence

of life is in your eyes and ears. You should not see or hear it only in terms of others but apply it to your own self.

“Even if you hope to live for seventy or eighty years, in the end you are destined to die. You should regard your pleasures and sorrows, relationships, and attachments in worldly affairs as your enemy. To do so is the way to a fuller life. You should keep in mind the buddha way alone and work for the bliss of nirvana. Especially those of you who are elderly or who are middle-aged, how many years do you have left? How can you be lax in your practice of the way?”

“Yet this is not urgent enough. You should examine both the mundane world and the buddha realm. Tomorrow, or even in the next moment, you might become gravely ill, lose your senses, and suffer from great pain. You might be suddenly killed by a demon, a robber, or an enemy. Truly nothing is for certain. Therefore, in this transient world where the time of death is unpredictable, scheming to live forever or wasting your time plotting against others is quite stupid.

“The Buddhas spoke this truth to sentient beings. Ancestors expounded solely on this matter. I also speak of impermanence, the swift passage of time, and the urgency of birth and death. Do not ever forget this truth. Realize that you have just today, just this moment. You should concentrate your mind on the study of the way without wasting your time. If you do this, your practice becomes easy. To discuss the superiority or inferiority of your nature, or the brilliance or slowness of learning, is not necessary.”

When you ride in a boat and watch the shore, you might assume that the shore is moving. But when you keep your eyes

closely on the boat, you can see that the boat moves. Similarly, if you examine myriad things with a confused body and mind, you might suppose that your mind and essence are permanent. When you practice intimately and return to where you are, it will be clear that nothing at all has unchanging self.

Enlightenment and clarity of the mind occur only in response to the sustained effort of study and practice. Endeavoring in the way ripens the conditions of your practice. It is not that the sound of the bamboo is sharp or the color of the blossoms is vivid. Although the sound of the bamboo is wondrous, it is heard at the moment when it's hit by a pebble. Although the color of the blossoms is beautiful, they do not open by themselves but unfold in the light of springtime. Studying the way is like this. You attain the way when conditions come together. Although you have your own capacity, you practice the way with the combined strength of the community. So you should practice and search with one mind with others.

To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.

If you attain unsurpassable, complete enlightenment, all sentient beings also attain it. The reason is that all sentient beings are aspects of enlightenment.

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass or even in one drop of water.

Enlightenment does not divide you, just as the moon does not break the water. You cannot hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of water does not crush the moon in the sky. The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop and realizes the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky.

All ancestors and all buddhas who uphold buddha dharma have made it the true path of unfolding enlightenment to sit upright, practicing in the midst of receptive samadhi. Those who attained enlightenment in India and China followed this way. Thus teachers and disciples intimately transmitted this excellent art as the essence of the teaching.

Within this unsurpassable manifestation of enlightenment, the entire world of the ten directions is but a small portion; enlightenment exceeds the boundary of the entire world.

One is greatly enlightened by taking up the three realms, by taking up one hundred grasses, by taking up the four great elements, by taking up buddha ancestors, and by taking up the fundamental point. All of these further attain great enlightenment by taking up great enlightenment. The very moment for this is just now.

Great enlightenment right at this moment is not self, not other.

If you speak of “achieving enlightenment,” you may think that you don’t usually have enlightenment. If you say, “Enlightenment comes,” you may wonder where it comes from. If you say, “I have become enlightened,” you may suppose that enlightenment has a beginning.

Great enlightenment is the tea and rice of daily activity.

To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and illuminate the self is awakening.

Those who have great realization of delusion are buddhas; those who are greatly deluded about realization are sentient beings. Further, there are those who continue realizing beyond realization and those who are in delusion throughout delusion.

When buddhas are truly buddhas, they do not necessarily notice that they are buddhas. However, they are actualized buddhas who go on actualizing buddha.

Enlightenment is ungraspable.

Beyond enlightenment is a jewel concealed in your hair.