

Shobogenzo

Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma

Chapter 40 *Hakujushi* The Cypress Tree

Translated by
Carl Bielefeldt

INTRODUCTION

This short text was composed in 1242, at Kōshōji, Dōgen’s monastery just south of the capital at Heian-kyō (present-day Kyoto). It occurs as number 40 in both the 75-fascicle and 60-fascicle redactions of the Shōbōgenzō. The text takes its title from a saying by the famous Tang-dynasty Chan master Zhaozhou Congshen (778-897). Rather than launching directly into his comments on this saying, Dōgen devotes the first half of his essay to a treatment of the figure of Zhaozhou himself, as revealed in his biography and poetry. He tells here the story of Zhaozhou’s encounter with his master, Nanquan Puyuan (748-834), and goes on to praise the strict austerity of his later life as abbot of Gyanyin yuan, where he served till his death at the remarkable age of 120. Dōgen then turns to the title theme of the essay, the meaning of Zhaozhou’s mysterious remark, “the cypress tree at the front of the garden,” in response to the question of why Bodhidharma brought the Zen tradition to China. He goes on to discuss a second saying of Zhaozhou, that the cypress tree has the buddha nature and will become a buddha “once space falls on the ground.” Dōgen’s comments in this section are sometimes quite difficult to interpret and may well leave some readers asking the question with which the essay closes: “what about it?”

Text of *The Cypress Tree*
The Great Master Zhenji of Zhaozhou

Congshen (778-897)] was the thirty-seventh generation from the Tathagata Sakyamuni. At the age of sixty-one, he first “produced the thought” [of enlightenment] and, leaving home, studied the way. At this time, he made a vow, saying, “Even if they are one hundred years old, if they are inferior to me, I will teach them; even if they are seven years old, if they are superior to me, I will inquire of them.” Vowing thus, he wandered south. As he went inquiring of the way, he reached Nanquan and paid his respects to the Reverend Preceptor Yuan [i.e., the Chan master Nanquan Puyuan (748-834)].

At the time, Nanquan was in the abbot’s quarters, where he had been lying down. When the master approached, he [i.e., Nanquan] asked, “Where are you coming from?”

The master said, “Ruixiang [‘Auspicious Image’] cloister.”

Nanquan said, “And have you see the auspicious image?”

The master said, “I haven’t seen the auspicious image, but I have seen a recumbent tathagata.”

Thereupon Nanquan promptly arose and said, “Are you a *sramanera* with a master, or a *sramanera* without a master?”

The master replied, saying, "A sramanera with a master."

Nanquan said, "Who is your master?"

The master said, "It is the first of spring and still cold. I trust the Reverend Preceptor's health is blessed."

Nanquan called the rector and said, "Assign this sramanera somewhere."¹

Thus he lodged at Nanquan and, without traveling anywhere else, pursued the way with concentrated effort for thirty years. Without wasting "an inch of shadow," he had no extraneous activities. Eventually, after transmission of the way and reception of the work, he resided at Guanyin cloister in Zhaozhou for another thirty years. The character of his abbacy was not like those of the usual places.

On one occasion, he said,

Smoking fires – I futilely gaze on the neighborhood;
Parted from buns and dumplings last year.
Thinking of them today, I swallow my spittle in vain;
Rarely maintaining my thoughts, repeatedly sighing.
There's no good person in a hundred households.
The ones that come say they're just looking for tea;

If they don't get their tea, they go away angry.

What a pity. His smoking fires are few; he rarely has a single taste; he has not met a varied taste since last year. When the people of the hundred households come, they are seeking tea; those not seeking tea do not come. There is likely no one in the hundred households who brings him tea. There may be "clouds and water" that "meet the wise," but there are likely no "dragons or elephants" that "think to equal him."²

On one occasion, he also said,

Thinking of those who've left home in this realm,
How many could there be with an abbacy like mine?
An earthen bed with a tattered reed mat,
An old elmwood headrest with no cover at all.
At the icon, I don't burn the incense of Arsaces,
In the ashes, I just smell the odor of cow dung.

From these sayings, we can understand the purity of his cloister. We should study these traces. That his monastic assembly was not many, said to have been less than twenty, is because "being able to do it is hard." The sangha hall was not large and lacked both front shelving and back shelving. There was no lamp light at night and no charcoal fire in winter weather. One could say it was a pitiful life for an aged one. Such was the conduct of the old buddha.³

Once, when the leg of the joined platform was broken, he spliced it by binding twine to a piece of burned wood [and continued to use it] for months and years. When the stewards reported it to be replaced, the master would not permit it. [This incident] is an excellent vestige, rare throughout the generations.

As a rule,

In the breakfast gruel, there isn't any grain of rice;
I vacantly face the quiet window and the dust in the cracks.

Or he would pick up nuts, and both he and the monks would live on them as their daily fare. Late comers now eulogize this conduct, and, though they do not reach the master's conduct, they assume the attitude of "longing for the ancients."

On one occasion, he addressed the assembly, saying,

In the thirty years I was in the south, I exclusively practiced seated meditation. If you all think to get this prime "great matter," you should try investigating the principle and practicing seated meditation. If, in three years, or five years, or twenty years, or thirty years, you haven't attained the way, you can take [this] old monk's head, make it into a ladle, and scoop piss [with it].

He made such a vow. Truly, pursuing the way in seated meditation is the direct path of the way of the buddha. We should investigate the principle, sit and see. Later, people said, "Zhaozhou is an old buddha."

The great master was once asked by a monk, "What is the intention of the ancestral master's coming from the west?"

The master said, "The cypress tree at the front of the garden."

The monk said, "Reverend Preceptor, don't show a person with an object."

The master said, "I don't show a person with an object."

The monk said, "What is the intention of the ancestral master's coming from the west?"

The master said, "The cypress tree at the front of the garden."⁴

This one kōan, though it is said to have originated from Zhaozhou, is in the end something authored by the whole body of the buddhas. Who is "the one in charge"? The principle we should understand here is the point that "the cypress at the front of the garden" is not "an object," the point that "the intention of the ancestral master's coming from the west" is not "an object," the point that 丩 the cypress tree" is not the self; for [it is said,], "Reverend Preceptor don't show a person with an object"; for [it is said,] "I don't show a person with an object." Which "Reverend Preceptor" is impeded by "Reverend Preceptor"? If he is not impeded, he must be "I." Which "I" is impeded by "I"? Even if it is impeded, it must be "a person." Which "object" is not obstructed by the "intention in coming from the west"? For the "object" must inevitably be the "intention in coming from the west." Nevertheless, the "intention in coming from the west" is not dependent on the "object." "The intention of the ancestral master's coming from the west" is not necessarily "the treasury of the eye of the true dharma, the wondrous mind of nirvana." It is "not the mind"; it is "not the buddha"; it is not "not a thing."⁵

[The monk's] saying here, "what is the intention of the ancestral master's coming from the west?" is not merely a question; it is not merely that "both people can see the same." Precisely at the time he asks, he cannot see anyone; how much of himself can he get? Going further, [we can say,] he is without fault.

Therefore, it is “mistake, mistake.” Because it is mistake, mistake, it is “taking a mistake as a mistake.” Is this not “to accept the hollow and entertain the echo”?⁶

Because “the all-pervading spiritual root turns neither toward nor away,” it is “the cypress tree at the front of the garden”: if it is not an “object,” it cannot be a cypress tree; even if it is an object, it is [said,] “I don’t show a person with an object,” and “Reverend Preceptor, don’t show a person with an object.” It is not an old ancestral shrine. Since it is not an old ancestral shrine, he goes on burying. Since he goes on burying, it is “return my concentrated effort.” Since it is “return my concentrated effort,” it is [said,] “I don’t show a person with an object.” Then what else does he use to “show a person”? It must be “I’m also like this.”⁷

The great master was asked by a monk, “Does the cypress have the buddha nature or not?”

The great master said, “It does.”

The monk said, “When does the cypress become a buddha?”

The great master said, “Once space falls on the ground.”

The monk said, “When does space fall on the ground?”

The great master said, “Once the cypress tree becomes a buddha.”

We should not hear the saying of the great master here and discard the question of this monk. The great master’s words, “once space falls on the ground,” or “once the cypress becomes a buddha,” are not mutually dependent sayings. They are questioning “the cypress,” questioning “the buddha nature”; they are questioning “becoming a buddha,” questioning the time [“once”]; they are questioning “space,” questioning “falling on the ground.”

In the great master’s speaking to the monk here, when he says, “it does,” he means the “existence of the buddha nature of the cypress.” Mastering these words, we should penetrate the vital artery of the buddhas and ancestors. That the cypress tree has the buddha nature usually cannot be said, has never been said. It has the buddha nature; so we should clarify its state. It has the buddha nature; how about the height of its ground and stage? We should inquire into the length of its life and physical dimensions; we should ask about its family and clan. Further, in a hundred thousand cypress trees, are they all of the same family, or are they of distinct familial lines? Should there be cypress trees that become buddhas? Cypress trees that practice? Cypress trees that “produce the thought” [of enlightenment]? Does the cypress tree, although it becomes a buddha, not fulfill practice and production of the thought? What is the causal relationship between the cypress tree and space? Does the fact that the cypress tree’s becoming a buddha is definitely “once you fall on the ground” mean that the cypress tree’s virtue as a tree is necessarily space? Regarding the ground and stage of the cypress tree: is space the first ground? Is it the effect stage? We should make concentrated effort to study this in detail. I ask you, old man Zhaozhou, “Did you convey such business because you are yourself one dead cypress tree?”⁸

In general, that the cypress tree has the buddha nature is not in the realm of the alien ways or the two vehicles⁹, is not seen or heard by the sutra masters or treatise masters. How much less is it proclaimed in the “word flowers” of “dead wood and cold ashes.” Only a type like Zhaozhou studies and investigates

it. Zhaozhou's saying here that the cypress has the buddha nature is [asking], is the cypress obstructed by the cypress, is the buddha nature obstructed by the buddha nature? This saying is something not yet fully exhausted by one buddha or two buddhas. Even those with the face of a buddha are not necessarily able fully to exhaust this saying. Even among the buddhas, there will be buddhas who can say it and buddhas who cannot say it.

[The phrase] "once space falls on the ground" is not saying something that could not be the case: every time the cypress tree becomes a buddha, space falls on the ground. The sound of its falling on the ground is not hidden: it exceeds a hundred thousand claps of thunder. The time when the cypress becomes a buddha, while for the time being is within the twelve periods, is further within thirteen periods. The space that falls on the ground is not just the space seen by commoners and sages: there is an additional piece of space, "something not seen by others"; Zhaozhou alone sees it. The ground where space falls is also not the ground occupied by commoners and sages: there is a further piece of ground, "something not reached by *yin* and *yang*"; Zhaozhou alone reaches it. At the time space falls on the ground, though they be the sun and moon, mountains and rivers, they must be "once." Who says that the buddha nature necessarily becomes a buddha? The buddha nature is an adornment after one becomes a buddha; further, there must be a buddha nature that is born together and studies together with becoming a buddha.

Therefore, the cypress and the buddha nature are not "different notes with the same tune." What we say is, since it is "why so?" we should investigate it [asking,] "what about it?"

Recorded the twenty-first day, fifth month, sweetflag season, third year of Ninji (*mizunoe-tora*) [1242] presented to the assembly at the cloister of Kannon Dōri, district of Uji, Yōshū.

Copied the third day (*hinoto-mi*), seventh month, first year of Kangen (*mizunoto-u*); at the residence of the head of cloister, Kippōji, Shibi manor, district of Yoshida, Etchū. Ejō.

HAKUJUSHI NOTES

1. A *sramanera* is a novice, who has not taken the full precepts of the monk.
2. "Clouds and water" is a common term for Buddhist monks; "dragons or elephants" are superior religious practitioners. The sentence draws on the Confucian saying, "when one meets the wise, think to equal him; when one meets the unwise, then look within oneself."
3. The phrase "being able to do it is hard" comes from the saying, "knowing it is not hard; being able to do it is hard." The sangha hall is the monks' quarters, which typically had shelves at the front for food service and in back at the lavatory.
4. To "show a person with an object" means to use a thing to teach people.
5. The terms "impeded" and "obstructed" in this difficult passage might be understood as "identified" or "defined." The "treasury of the eye of the true dharma, the wondrous mind of nirvana" indicates the tradition of Zen that Bodhidharma is said to have brought to China.
6. "To accept the hollow and entertain the echo" usually means something like "to take seriously what is vacuous"; most interpreters take it in a positive sense here.

7. "The all-pervading spiritual root turns neither toward nor away" is a line from the Chan master Shitou's "Song of a Grass Hut (*Caoan ge*). "Burying" here is probably a term for Zhaozhou's teaching practice. "I'm also like this" is from the Sixth Ancestor, Huineng's, description of "undefiled practice and verification."

8. The "first ground" and "effect stage" refer respectively to the beginning and end of the bodhisattva path.

9. "Alien ways" refers to non-Buddhists; "the two vehicles" are non-Mahayana traditions of Buddhism. "Dead wood and cold ashes" usually refers to practitioners of contemplative trance.