

Here is a story. Mazu said, “This mind itself is Buddha.” Damei (“Great Plum”) studied this more than thirty years, dwelling on his mountaintop, hiding his traces in the sounds of the valley and the colors of the mountain. The ancestor Mazu finally sent a monk to visit and say to Damei, “Mazu’s Buddha Dharma is different these days.”

Damei responded, “How is it different?”

The monk said, “No mind, no Buddha.”

Damei said, “Even if he says ‘No mind, no Buddha,’ I just follow ‘This mind itself is Buddha.’ ”

The monk returned to the ancestor.

Mazu said, “That plum is ripe.”

*Dogen said:* “this mind itself is Buddha” is most intimate. Year after year Damei ripened in the middle of summer.

This discourse refers to Cases 30 and 33 in the Mumonkan. In his commentary on *This very mind is the Buddha*, Mumon says that if you directly grasp Baso’s meaning, you wear the Buddha’s clothes, eat the Buddha’s food, speak the Buddha’s words, do the Buddha’s deeds—that is, you are the Buddha himself. Think about it, whatever we do, we are Buddha. An angry Buddha, a sad Buddha, a daydreaming Buddha.

This goes to the very essence of things. It responds to the deepest questions of our lives that brought many of us to our practice: *What are we and why are we here.* We are Buddha. Our lives are the unfolding of enlightenment. As Suzuki roshi said, “[our experiences] are nothing but a continuous or repeated unfolding of the one big mind.

But the problem is that we are almost never aware of this big mind; we lose contact with our essential nature as it is covered by layers and layers of delusion. *Delusions are endless, but we vow to end them.* Suzuki Roshi said that we are perfect just the way we are, but we could use a little improvement. So what are we to do? Dogen tells us that we need to practice—not as a means to an end; not as a way to make us feel better; not as a way to enlightenment. No, we need to practice, to sit, in order to enact our original nature. Our Zazen is a ritual to enact what is already here. Our practice is

enlightenment, because we are Buddha. In Fukanzazengi, Dogen says: The zazen I speak of is not [learning] meditation practice. It is simply the Dharma gate of peace and bliss, the practice-realization of totally culminated awakening.

Another way of putting this is to say that the fruits of our practice come not from our efforts but from our nature. Buddha discovered that we need to sit zazen in order to experience who and what we are. We have to take a step back from the activities of our life and turn on the light that shines within. Then we see our lives in the totally new context. Think about it. We don't need to create anything; we just need to see what is already here.

In another koan, Baso is sitting zazen. His teacher, Nangaku, asks him why he is sitting to which he responds, "to become a Buddha." So Nangaku picks up a tile and starts to polish it. Baso asks him why he is polishing the tile. Nangaku says that he is making a jewel.

Baso asks his teacher, "How can you make a tile a jewel?"

Nangaku responds: "How can you become a Buddha by practicing zazen?"

This is the great discovery of the Buddha. It is something that we need to discover for ourselves.

This is very simple, but it is not easy. Our practice is simple, but it is not easy. I don't want anyone to go home tonight and think that he or she is Buddha and there is nothing else to do. Why? Because there is no Mind, no Buddha! We are told that if we even mention the word, "Buddha" we need *to rinse out our mouths for three days*. What are we to make of this seeming contradiction? Why is Dogen retelling this ancient story?

On the most obvious level, we can think that Damei's teacher is just his student. Mazu is testing to see if his student will rely on his own experience or abandon his lifetime practice for someone else's teaching. In Zen we are instructed not to search for the truth in books or the teachings of the ancients or even in the words of our teachers. Buddha warned us not to accept anything he said until we could prove it by our own experience. There is no truth outside our own experience. If Buddha says, "no" but you experience "yes," you must not believe him. You can keep what he says as a hypothesis and continue searching, but you must not believe it as a fact until you

experience it as a fact of *your* life. You should have faith not in some external figure such as Shakyamuni or Moses or Jesus. You should have faith in your zazen!

On another level, you can see these two statements as referring to two stages of our practice. A monk asked Baso, “Why do you teach that Mind is Buddha?”

Baso replied, “To stop a baby's crying.”

The monk asked, “What is it like when the baby stops crying?”

Baso answered, “No Mind, no Buddha.”

On a further level, we need to see that that these two koans are not contradictory as much as they are complimentary. They are, in fact, two ways of describing reality just as you can describe light as both a particle and a wave. Life's fundamental facts often cannot be expressed in simple declarative propositions. Reality is all inclusive and contains seemingly irreconcilable facts. Life is joyous, life is suffering.

Most important, we need to find a way not to become too focused on either point of view. Buddhism is the middle way. If you go too far in one direction you will lose your way. When I was studying the two cases from the Mumonkan with my first Zen teacher, I was told that I needed to accept both statements as true. I began to see that sometimes I would be attached to *Mind itself is Buddha* and sometimes I would be attached to *No mind, no Buddha*. And I knew that I needed to let go of all attachments. Keeping both points of view I found that I was able to let go of my attachment to one statement over the other, but too many other things. My grasping at things was loosening!

I saw that I invariably favored on point of view over another. And these points of view would constantly change, depending on my thinking and not my actual experience. And I saw how attached I was to my latest thought, which was always limited. I learned that my thought could not contain both points of view but my experience could. As Suzuki Roshi said, “Zen is about experience, not philosophy.” This is not to say, however, that great ideas such as the Four Noble Truths do not have a place in our practice. They serve many functions. They provide a religious context for our practice as well as engaging our minds. But most important, a great idea can have a quieting effect on us. These ideas are intended to attract deeper levels of our intelligence as well as support our ongoing efforts against our egoistical patterns of thought and emotions.