

The Mind Itself Is Buddha

Shobogenzo Sokushin Zebutsu by Eihei Dogen Zenji, translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi and Steve Allen

What buddhas and ancestors have maintained without exception is “the mind itself is buddha.” However, this particular expression was not known in India; it was first heard in China.

Many students misunderstand this teaching as they do not file a file about it [do not examine it thoroughly]. Because they do not file a file, they fall into a group of those outside the way. Upon hearing the phrase *the mind itself is buddha*, ignorant people think that the thoughts and awareness of ordinary beings who have not aroused the enlightenment seeking mind, are already buddhas. They think in this way because they have not yet met an authentic teacher.

*

Senika, who lived in India, was one of those outside the way. This was his theory:

The great road lies within this body right now. How it works is easy to know: The soul discerns pain and pleasure, cold and heat, aching and itching. It is not obstructed by things and is not concerned with objects. While things come and go, and objects are born and perish, the soul exists without changing. It pervades all sentient beings both ordinary and sacred.

Although there are flowers of emptiness, which are false reality, as soon as an embracing wisdom appears even for a moment, things disappear and objects perish. The soul, the original nature, alone is clearly permanent. When the body is broken, the soul comes out of it unbroken. It is just like the owner of a house on fire who comes out of it safely.

What is luminous is called the nature of an awakened or wise person, a buddha. This is awakening. Self and other equally possess this nature. Both enlightenment and delusion are connected with it.

Whatever things or objects may be, the soul is different from them and is unchanged for eons. The objects that exist right now are real only if the soul abides in them. As these objects arise from the soul, the original nature, they are true reality. But they are not permanent; they exist and then disappear.

As the soul intuitively knows bright and dark, it is called a knowing spirit. It is also called the true self, the source of awakening, true nature, or true body. To realize such a true nature is described as returning to permanence. This soul is called a great being that returns to reality.

After such realization, the soul does not transmigrate in birth and death; it enters the ocean of the true nature of no birth and death. There is no reality other than this. When this true nature is not revealed, the three realms and the six paths emerge one after another.

This was Senika’s theory.

*

Huizhong, National Teacher Dazheng, of Tang China, asked a monk, “Where have you come from?”

The monk said, “I have come from the south.”

Huizhong asked, “What kind of teachers are there in the south?”

The monk replied, “There are many.”

Huizhong asked, “How do they teach?”

The monk said, “Teachers there directly help students to realize that the mind itself is buddha. They say, ‘Buddha means awakening. All of you already possess the nature of seeing, hearing, understanding, and knowing. This nature can cause you to raise your eyebrows and wink. It functions in the past and future. It fills your body. If you touch your head, the head knows it. If you touch your leg, the leg knows it. Thus, it is called correct, pervasive knowing. There is no buddha other than this. Your body is within birth and death, but mind nature has neither been born nor died since beginningless time. The body is born and dies just like the skin a snake leaves behind, the bones a dragon replaces with its old ones, or a house the owner walks away from. Your body is impermanent, but your nature is permanent.’ This is roughly what they teach in the south.”

Huizhong said, “If it is so, their teaching is no different from that of Senika, an outsider of the way. He says, ‘Inside your body there is a spirit. It knows aching and itching. When your body is destroyed the spirit leaves, just like the owner of a house that is on fire who escapes from it. The house is impermanent but the owner is permanent.’

If we examine these theories, neither of them is closer to the truth than the other. When I traveled to various places, I heard many accounts of this kind of teaching. It has been particularly popular in recent times. They gather together three or five hundred monks and tell them that this is the essential teaching of the south. By taking up the *Platform Sutra*, altering the text, mixing in coarse stories, and leaving out sacred teachings, they confuse later

generations. How can we call their statements teachings? How painful it is that our school is in such decline! If seeing, hearing, understanding, and knowing were buddha nature, Vimalakirti would not have said, ‘Dharma is different from seeing, hearing, understanding, and knowing. To practice seeing, hearing, understanding, and knowing is only to practice seeing, hearing, understanding, and knowing. It is not seeking dharma.’”

Huizhong, a senior disciple of Huineng, Old Buddha Caoxi [the Sixth Ancestor], was a great teacher of humans and devas. Clarify his essential teaching and make it a standard for study.

The mind itself is buddha, which has been maintained by buddha ancestors, is not something those outside of the way or practitioners of the Two Lesser Vehicles can even dream of. Only buddha ancestors together with buddha ancestors have been actualizing and penetrating *the mind itself is buddha*. Thus, it has been heard, practiced, and realized. Thus, buddha’s one hundred blades of grass have been taken up; they have been made to disappear. However, this cannot be explained as the sixteen-foot golden body [of the Buddha].

This is the fundamental point, which does not wait for actualization. It does not avoid being decomposed. In itself, there are three realms—there is no walking away. *Itself* is not merely mind only. The mind is a wall. It is not stained by muddy water; it is not created.

Study thoroughly, “The mind itself is buddha,” “The mind is buddha itself,” “Buddha is itself the mind,” “The mind is itself is,” “Buddha is itself is.” By studying thoroughly in this way and taking up *the mind itself is buddha*, you authentically transmit it to *the mind itself is buddha*. It has been authentically transmitted until today.

The mind that has been authentically transmitted is: one mind is all things, all things are one mind.

Thus, an ancient teacher said, “If you realize this mind, there is not an inch of land left on earth.”

Know that when you realize this mind, the entire sky collapses and the whole earth explodes. Or, if you realize this mind, the earth raises its surface by three inches.

*

Ancient masters [Yangshan and Guishan] said to each other, “What is the wondrous clear mind?” “I say it is mountains, rivers and the earth; it is the sun, the moon, and the stars.”

Thus, we know that the mind is mountains, rivers and the earth; the mind is the sun, the moon, and the stars. What is said here is not more, not less.

The mountains, rivers, and the earth mind are just the mountains, rivers, and the earth. There are no extra waves or spray [in this mind]. The sun, the moon, and the stars mind is just the sun, the moon, and the stars. There is no extra fog or mist. The coming and going of birth and death mind is just the coming and going of birth and death. There is no extra delusion or enlightenment. The walls, tiles, and pebbles mind is just the walls, tiles, and pebbles. There is no extra mud or water. The four great elements and the five skandhas mind are just the four great elements and the five skandhas. There is no extra horse or monkey. The chair and whisk mind is just the chair and whisk. There is no extra bamboo or wood.

This being so, *the mind itself is buddha* does not divide *the mind itself is buddha*. Buddhas do not divide buddhas. Thus, *the mind itself is buddha* indicates buddhas of aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana. Those who have not actualized aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana do not experience *the mind itself is buddha*.

Even if you arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and actualize practice-realization for a moment, that is *the mind itself is buddha*. Even if you arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and actualize practice-realization within the most minute practice, that is *the mind itself is buddha*. Even if you arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and actualize practice-realization for innumerable kalpas, that is *the mind itself is buddha*. Even if you arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and actualize practice-realization in a flash of thought, that is *the mind itself is buddha*. Even if you arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and actualize practice-realization within half a fist, that is *the mind itself is buddha*.

Those who say that practicing for an eon to become buddha is not *the mind itself is buddha*, have not seen, known, and studied *the mind itself is buddha*. They have not met an authentic teacher who expounds *the mind itself is buddha*.

The buddhas spoken of here are no other than Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha is *the mind itself is buddha*. When all buddhas in the past, present, and future are buddhas, they unfailingly become Shakyamuni Buddha. This is “the mind itself is buddha.”

Presented to the assembly of the Kannondori Kosho Horin Monastery, Uji County, Yamashiro Province, 1239