

On ‘The Threefold World Is Simply Your Mind’

(Sangai Yuishin)

Translator’s Introduction: The title of this discourse comes from the first line of a verse passage in the *Avatamsaka Scripture*, which Dōgen takes as his theme. The threefold world is comprised of three spiritual states, the names of which are often rendered in English translations as those of desire, form, and beyond form. The world of desire is associated with the six worlds of existence: human, hellish, animal, hungry ghost, fighting spirits, plus the six lowest of the celestial realms. The world of form is associated with four higher celestial realms in which carnal appetites have dropped off. The world beyond form is associated with the four uppermost celestial realms wherein there is only the enjoyment of meditative states. The main theme of this discourse is that these three ‘worlds’, all together, comprise the whole of existence, with nothing beyond them, and that they are all constructs of our own mind.

Our Great Master Shakyamuni once said in verse:

*The threefold world is simply our one, whole Mind,
For there is nothing apart from the Mind.
Our mind, Buddha, and all sentient beings—
These three are indistinguishable from each other.*

What He expressed in this single verse is the whole effort of His lifetime, and this whole effort of His lifetime was the whole of all His efforts. While these efforts were actions that were done deliberately, they must have been actions that were the free functioning of His words and deeds. Therefore the statement, “The three worlds are simply our one, whole Mind,” which the Tathagata voiced, is the full manifestation of the whole Tathagata, and the whole of His lifetime is the whole of this one verse. The three worlds constitute our whole world and, at the same time, we do not say that the three worlds are what our mind is. That is why the three worlds are still a threefold world however much they may resemble the brilliance of a crystal jewel which pervades all directions.¹

1. This particular reference to a jewel-like brilliance occurs in Zen texts to describe the penetrating brilliance and clarity of the original state of one’s mind.

Although some may make the mistake of thinking that the mind is beyond the three worlds, this is totally impossible. The spaces of inside, outside, and in between, as well as the times of beginning, middle, and end—all are encompassed by the threefold world. The threefold world is just what is seen as the threefold world. And what is viewed as something beyond the threefold world is a misperception of the threefold world. The threefold world is viewed by some as 'an old nesting place' whereas others may see it as 'a new item'.² 'Old nests' and 'new items' are but different views of the same threefold world. This is why our Great Master Shakyamuni Buddha once said, "It is best to see the threefold world as the threefold world." What is looked at in this way is what the threefold world really is, and this threefold world is just as we perceive it to be. The threefold world is not one's fundamental being, nor is it our present existence, nor is it something that newly arises, nor is it something born from causes and conditions, and it is beyond anything that has a beginning, a middle, or an end. There is the threefold world that is left behind and there is the threefold world of the here and now. This is the mutual meeting of a marionette with a marionette.³ It is the bringing forth and nurturing of kudzu and wisteria vines.⁴ The threefold world of the here and now is what we see as the threefold world. 'What we see' means our seeing the threefold world as a threefold world. 'Seeing it as a threefold world' refers to the threefold world as it manifests right before us, as we manifest it right before us, and as our spiritual question manifests right before our very eyes. We all innately have the ability to make the threefold world be the vehicle for the arising of our spiritual intention, our practice and training, our realizing enlightenment, and our experiencing nirvana. This is why our Great Master Shakyamuni once said in verse:

*These three worlds, right now,
Are what we all innately have,
And all sentient beings within them,
Without exception, are My children.*

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2. 'An old nesting place' is a common Zen metaphor for a habitual, erroneous viewpoint, whereas 'a new item' refers to seeing things anew with enlightened eyes.
 3. A marionette, or wooden figure, is sometimes used metaphorically in Zen texts to refer to someone who has awakened to his True Nature and is no longer 'pulling the strings'.
 4. 'Kudzu and wisteria vines' here refers to the Master-disciple relationship. Dōgen explores this metaphor in Discourse 47: On the Vines That Entangle: the Vines That Embrace (*Kattō*).

Because these three worlds here and now are what the Tathagata innately had, the whole universe was His threefold world, because the threefold world is the whole universe. 'Here and now' encompasses the past, present, and future. The occurring of past, present, and future does not obstruct the here and now, but the occurring of the here and now does obstruct past, present, and future from arising.

That which 'we innately have' refers to the whole universe in all ten directions being our real, true Body. It refers to the whole universe in all ten directions being a mendicant monk's Eye. 'Sentient beings' are real, true bodies of the whole universe in all ten directions. Because each and every sentient being is born sentient, they are called 'sentient beings'.

'Without exception, they are My children' means that children are also manifestations of the ceaseless operation of Buddha Nature. Even so, of necessity, children receive their bodies, along with their hair and skin, all unharmed and unbroken, from a compassionate parent. Parents regard this as the child's fully manifesting. Yet, at this present moment, since there is no parent who is before and no child who is after, nor a child who is before and a parent who is after, nor a parent and child being lined up beside each other, we call this the principle of 'My children'. Although the body is not something that is given, we receive it; although it is not something that we snatch, we acquire it. It is beyond the characteristics of coming and going, beyond the measure of large and small, beyond discussions of old and young. We should hold to it like the 'old' and 'young' of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Sometimes there is a parent who is 'young' and a child who is 'old', or a parent who is 'old' and a child who is 'young', or a parent who is 'old' and a child who is 'old', or a parent who is 'young' and a child who is 'young'. One who makes a study of his parent's 'agedness' would not be a child; one who has not seen through the 'youthfulness' of his child would not be a parent. The 'age' and 'youth' of a child, as well as the 'age' and 'youth' of a parent, must be fully explored, in detail, and without haste.

There are parents and children for whom the parent-child relationship emerges at the same time, and there are those for whom the parent-child relationship disappears at the same time, and there are those for whom the parent-child relationship emerges at different times, and there are those for whom the parent-child relationship disappears at different times. Without standing against the compassionate parent, one has brought forth 'my child', and without standing against 'my child', one has brought forth the compassionate parent. There are sentient beings who are mindful, and there are sentient beings who are not mindful; there is my child who is mindful, and there is my child who is not mindful. In this manner, my child and I—and I am also a child—are both the true heirs of our

Compassionate Parent Shakyamuni. All beings of the past, present, and future in the whole universe—every last one of them—are the Buddhas of past, present, and future in the whole universe. The children of all Buddhas are sentient beings, and the Compassionate Parents of all sentient beings are Buddhas. Consequently, the flowering and fruiting of the hundreds of things that arise are what all Buddhas have as Their own, and the rocks and stones, large and small, are what all Buddhas have as Their own as well. Their peaceful places are the forests and fields, for They are already free of attachment to forests and fields. Be that as it may, the main point of what the Tathagata said was simply the phrase ‘My children’. You need to thoroughly explore that He never spoke of His being their parent.



Shakyamuni Buddha once said:

Even the three Bodies of all Buddhas do not extend beyond the threefold world.⁵ Since no sentient being exists outside the threefold world, why would there be some other place where the Buddha would transform Himself for their sake? Therefore, I say that the assertion that there is another world of sentient beings outside of the threefold world is a teaching from the non-Buddhist *Scripture on the Greater Existence*, and it is not what has been voiced by the Seven Buddhas.*

You should clarify through your thorough exploration with your Master that the three Bodies of all Buddhas are these three worlds. Nothing exists outside of these three worlds. For example, just as nothing exists outside the Tathagata, so too nothing exists outside of our walls and fences. And just as nothing exists outside of training, so too nothing exists outside of being a sentient being. Were there no sentient beings, who is it that could be converted by a Buddha? What is being converted by a Buddha is always a sentient being. Keep in mind that the saying, “Outside the threefold world, there is another world of sentient beings,” is a product of the non-Buddhist *Scripture on the Greater Existence*.

5 These three Bodies of the Buddha (Skt. *Trikaya*) are: 1) The Truth Body (Skt. *Dharmakaya*), which represents Absolute Truth or Buddha Mind Itself. 2) The Reward Body (Skt. *Sambhogakaya*), which represents the blissful reward of Buddhist training. 3) The Transformation Body (Skt. *Nirmanakaya*), which is the physical body of the Buddha as It appears in the world.

* See *Glossary*.

The one, whole Mind is beyond being just one or two things. It is beyond the threefold world and beyond departing from the threefold world. It is beyond 'making mistakes'. It has the knowledge obtained from one's discriminating and It is not bound by that knowledge. It is the tiles* and stones of our walls and fences and It is the great earth with its mountains and rivers. Mind is synonymous with Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow; Mind is synonymous with holding the flower aloft and breaking into a smile.⁶ There is the mind of attachment and the mind free from attachments. There is the embodied mind and there is the Mind beyond body. There is the mind that comes before the body, and there is the mind that comes after the body. When a body is born, it will be from a womb, from an egg, from moisture, or from some transformation. When a mind emerges, it will be from a womb, from an egg, from moisture, or from some transformation. Blue, yellow, red, and white are what the Mind is. Long and short, square and round are what the Mind is. Birth and death, coming and going, are what the Mind is. Years, months, days, and hours are what the Mind is. Dreams, visions, and flowers in the sky are what the Mind is. Water bubbles, foam, and flame are what the Mind is. The spring flowers and the autumn moon are what the Mind is. Our day-to-day moments are what the Mind is. Even so, It cannot be destroyed. For this reason, the Mind is the real appearance of all thoughts and things. The Mind is each Buddha on His own, along with all other Buddhas.



Great Master Gensha Shibi once asked his disciple Jizō Keichin, "Just how do you understand the saying 'The threefold world is simply your mind?'"

Pointing to a chair, Keichin said, "When naming that thing, Venerable Monk, what do you take it to be?"

The Great Master said, "A chair."

Keichin then said, "Venerable Monk, you do not understand 'The threefold world is simply your mind.'"⁷

6 This is a reference to the Transmission of the Dharma from Shakyamuni Buddha, who held aloft an udumbara blossom, to his smiling disciple Makakashō.

7. Despite this remark's implication that the Master is lacking in some way, it actually has a positive meaning, namely, that the Master's understanding goes beyond a merely intellectual one.

The Great Master replied, “When giving a name to that thing, I see it as bamboo and wood. When you name it, what do you take it to be?”

Keichin responded, “When I name it, I also take it to be bamboo and wood.”

The Great Master then said, “Were we to search the whole of the great earth for somebody who understood Buddha Dharma, we would not be able to find a single one.”⁸

Now, let us look at the Great Master’s question, “Just how do you understand the saying ‘The threefold world is simply your mind?’” Whether one has a way of understanding this saying or not, both states are synonymous with the threefold world being simply one’s own mind. This is why the threefold world may not yet be ‘simply one’s mind’.⁹ And this is why Keichin pointed to a chair and said, “When naming that thing, Venerable Monk, what do you take it to be?” You need to understand that “What do you take it to be?” means “How do you go about naming it?”

As to the ‘chair’ that the Great Master spoke of, we should also add, “Did he understand the term ‘the threefold world’ or not?” and “Is the chair synonymous with the term ‘the threefold world’ or does it go beyond it?” and “Was the term ‘the threefold world’ referring to the word ‘chair’ or to what the Great Master said?” You need to thoroughly investigate expressions like this so that you may learn to express the Matter yourself. By asking questions like this, you come to your own understanding of the Matter. And by investigating the experience of others, you can come to have your own experience of the Truth.

Keichin then said, “Venerable Monk, you do not understand ‘The threefold world is simply your mind.’”

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8. One of the ways by which a Chinese Zen Master would test the spiritual level of a disciple was by asking him or her, “How do you understand such-and-such a saying?” It is evident from the context that the discussion centers on the principle of the difference and non-difference between component parts, such as bamboo and wood pieces (one’s ‘tiles and stones’), and the ordering of those pieces to form a functionally useful object, such as a chair (one’s ‘walls and fences’). Dōgen, apparently deliberately, does not say how this particular kōan story is to be understood, but s leaves the reader to decide how he or she would respond to Shibi’s question.
 9. That is, because one may not yet understand that the threefold world is simply one’s mind, such a person will not recognize that this is so.

This statement is, for example, equivalent to ‘the East Gate and the South Gate’ whereby Jōshū expressed what a Jōshū is—and he was also the West Gate and the North Gate. And furthermore there is an East Jōshū district and a South Jōshū district in China.¹⁰ Even if you have an understanding of what ‘the threefold world is simply your mind’ means, you need to thoroughly explore what Keichin meant by his statement, “You do not understand ‘The threefold world is simply your mind.’” Moreover, the statement that “The ‘threefold world is simply your mind’” goes beyond ‘understanding’ and ‘not understanding’.

The Great Master replied, “When giving a name to that thing, I see it as bamboo and wood.”

We certainly need to shed light upon the details of this most excellent expression, which goes beyond any discriminative concept. As to the Great Master’s statement, “When giving a name to that thing, I see it as be bamboo and wood,” what did he call it prior to his naming it as bamboo and wood in the present instance? In its jewel-like brilliance up to that moment, had it always been—beginning, middle, and end—bamboo and wood? In his calling it bamboo and wood at this time, is he saying that this is synonymous with the threefold world simply being one’s mind? Or is he not saying that this is synonymous with the threefold world simply being one’s mind? Keep in mind that, in his saying of a morning that the threefold world is simply one’s mind, he may express it as ‘a chair’, or as ‘simply the mind’, or as ‘the threefold world’. Even so, in his saying of an evening that the threefold world is simply one’s mind, he may express it as, “When giving a name to that thing, I see it as bamboo and wood.”

You need to recognize that Keichin’s saying “When I name it, I also take it to be bamboo and wood” may be part of a face-to-face interchange between Master and disciple, and then again it may be that they are both right from start to finish in exploring the Matter together. Be that as it may, you need to thoroughly explore through your training whether the Great Master’s saying, “When giving a name to that thing, I see it as bamboo and wood,” and Keichin’s saying, “When I name it, I also take it to be bamboo and wood,” are actually both saying the same thing and whether or not they are both correct.

The Great Master then said, “Were we to search the whole of the great earth for somebody who understood Buddha Dharma, we would not be able to find a single one.”

10. In other words, the name that we give to something is relative, not absolute. Thus, the East Jōshū district is east in relationship to the South Jōshū district, and vice versa.

This expression also needs the closest scrutiny. Keep in mind that the Great Master, in naming it, simply took it to be bamboo and wood, as Keichin did also. Further, they had not understood “The threefold world is simply one’s mind,” nor had they failed to understand “The threefold world is simply one’s mind,” nor had they asserted that the threefold world is simply one’s mind, nor had they failed to assert that the threefold world is simply one’s mind. Even so, I should like to ask Great Master Shibi, “You assert that, were we to search the whole of the great earth for somebody who understood Buddha Dharma, we would not be able to find a single person, but see if you can answer me this: what do you take ‘the whole earth’ to be?” In sum, we need to thoroughly explore the Matter* in this way.

Given to the assembly on the first day of the seventh intercalary lunar month in the first year of the Kangen era (August 17, 1243) on Yamashi Peak in Echizen Province.¹¹

Copied by me on the twenty-fifth day of the same month and year (September 10, 1243) whilst in the quarters of the acting Head Monk.

Ejō

11. In the Chinese and Japanese lunar calendar, there are twelve months of either twenty-eight or thirty days. Since this creates a discrepancy with the 365-day solar calendar, every two or three years a thirteenth lunar month is inserted (intercalated) in the calendar at some point. In the present instance, it was inserted between the seventh and eighth lunar months. This is technically known as an intercalary lunar month. An analogy can be found with our inserting the day of February 29 every four years to even out the annual solar calendar, and that day is technically called an intercalary day.