

On the Roar of the Dragon

(Ryūgin)

Translator’s Introduction: The roar of the Dragon refers to a sound not unlike that of the wind blowing through a grove of barren trees. This sound may become audible during meditation when the meditator has dropped off body and mind, that is, has let go of the greed, anger, and delusion which form attachments to the five skandhas. The withered tree that Dōgen speaks of in this discourse is a common Buddhist metaphor for someone who has reached a deep level of meditation, a person whose passions have all but disappeared. This meditative state, however, is not to be confused with a quietistic or blissful condition, which is simply a passing phase that may arise in spiritual practice.

The title could also be rendered as the “Song of the Dragon”, since it is also used to describe a particularly forceful expression of the Dharma, one that sets the Wheel of the Dharma turning.

Great Master Tōsu Daidō of Shuchou Province was once asked by a monk, “Does the roar of the Dragon exist even within a withered tree?”

The Master replied, “As I would put it, the Lion’s roar exists within one’s skull.”

Talk of withered trees and dead ashes is something taught by non-Buddhists. Even so, you need to distinguish between withered trees that non-Buddhists speak of and withered trees that Buddhists speak of. Even though non-Buddhists talk about withered trees, they do not know what a ‘withered tree’ is, much less would they actually hear the Dragon’s roar. Non-Buddhists imagine that a withered tree is something dead or dying. They have been taught that such a tree cannot experience the springtime.

We explore through our training the ‘withered tree’ that the Buddhas and Ancestors speak of as ‘the ocean having dried up’. ‘The ocean having dried up’ is synonymous with ‘the tree having withered up’ and ‘the tree having withered up’ is synonymous with its having encountered the Spring. The tree’s being unwavering is a sign of its having withered.¹ Such trees as mountain trees, ocean trees, and sky

1. ‘Unwavering’ in this context means not being shaken by the arising of delusive thoughts.

trees are what withered trees are.² Their budding is the roar of the Dragon within a withered tree. Even those trees whose girth is measured in hundreds of thousands are offspring of some withered tree. Its form and its innate nature, its embodiment and the strength derived from its being withered comprise the long-lived withered trees which Buddhas and Ancestors speak of. At the same time, they go beyond being long-lived or short-lived. There are the trees of mountains and valleys, and there are the trees of fields and villages. The trees of mountains and valleys are conventionally called pines and cedars. The trees of fields and villages are conventionally called ordinary people and those in lofty positions. We explore through our training that those whose ‘leaves grow from their roots’ are called the Buddhas and Ancestors, and we explore the expression ‘end and beginning here return unto the Source’.³ What is just like this is the long Dharma body of withered trees and the short Dharma body of withered trees. Those who are not withered trees do not yet roar like a Dragon, and those who are not yet withered trees will not forget the sound of the Dragon. “How many times have I met the spring, my heart unswerving?” is the Dragon’s song of one who is completely withered.⁴ To be sure, this ‘song’ is not in the same category as the five tones in a conventional musical scale, but two or three of the Five Tones are in the sequence of the Dragon’s song.

At the same time, by this monk’s question, “Does the roar of the Dragon exist even within a withered tree?” it has been brought forth for the first time in immeasurable eons. It was his bringing forth his spiritual question. Tōsu’s saying “As I would put it, the Lion’s roar exists within one’s skull” means “What place could there possibly be that is concealed from It?” And it means “We never rest from surrendering our self and from supporting others.” And it means “Skulls are scattered everywhere in the fields.”⁵

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2. This is a description of various types of meditators: mountain trees are those who are sitting as still as a mountain, ocean trees are those who are exploring the Depths, and sky trees are those who are exploring the Unbounded.
 3. The quotations in this sentence come from the *Sandōkai*, a poem by our Thirty-fifth Ancestor, Sekitō Kisen, which is customarily recited every day in Zen Buddhist monasteries.
 4. This quotation is from a poem by Daibai Hōjō, which Dōgen gives in full on page 387 of Discourse 29: On Ceaseless Practice (*Gyōji*).
 5. That is, in the fields of training.



Great Master Kyōgen Chikan was once asked by a monk, “What is the Way?”

The Master answered, “The singing of the Dragon amidst the withered trees.”

The monk replied, “I don’t understand.”

The Master said, “It is the Eye in skulls.”

Later, there was a monk who asked Sekisō, “Just what sort of thing is this ‘singing of a dragon amidst withered trees?’”

Sekisō replied, “Even now, there is Its being tinged with delight.”

The monk then asked, “Just what is that thing about ‘eyes in skulls?’”

Sekisō replied, “Even now, there is Its being tinged with consciousness.”

There was also a monk who asked Sōzan, “Just what sort of thing is this ‘singing of a dragon amidst withered trees?’”

Sōzan replied, “Its bloodline has not been severed.”

The monk then asked, “Well, just what is that thing about ‘eyes in skulls?’”

Sōzan replied, “They are not completely dried out.”

The monk then said, “Oh, I don’t know about that! Are there any who can hear it?”

Sōzan replied, “There is not one person on the whole of the great earth who has not already heard It.”

The monk retorted, “I’m not convinced. What verses does a dragon chant?”

Sōzan replied, “I do not know what those verses are, but those who do hear It bemoan the fact that others do not.”⁶

6. These three short dialogues are typical of many kōan stories that involve a Master and someone identified only as a monk. The monk—presumably a novice—asks a question based on an attempt to understand some saying by an Ancestor from a commonplace, literal perspective, whereas the Master gives a response as if the monk had asked his or her question from a spiritual perspective. This is done to help the monk break through a

The hearers and the chanters that these monks were just now talking about do not come anywhere near to those who actually sing the Dragon's song, for this melody is what the Dragon Itself sings. Being amidst withered trees or in a skull are not referring to something inside or outside, nor are they a reference to self or other; they are referring to the 'What' that is here and now and to the 'What' that has always been of old. Its being tinged with delight even now is the horns on Its head coming forth. Its being tinged with consciousness even now is Its completely shedding Its skin.

Sōzan's saying, "Its bloodline has not been severed," means that the Way is not concealed and that, within the sphere of words, there is the turning around of self. "They are not completely dried out" means that the drying up of the ocean has not completely reached the bottom. Because the drying out has not achieved completion, there is drying going on atop the dryness. The monk's asking, "Are there any who can hear it?" implies "Are there any who cannot?" As to Sōzan's saying, "There is not one person on the whole of the great earth who has not already heard It," I should have liked to ask him, "Putting aside, for the moment, your remark about there being no one who has not already heard It, tell me, in the time before the whole earth sprang into existence, where was the roar of the Dragon then? Speak up! Quick, quick!"

"I'm not convinced. What verses does the Dragon chant?" is the question that needs answering for all our sakes. The roaring Dragon, quite naturally, is making vocal sounds and taking up the Great Matter* whilst in mud; this is Its taking in a breath through Its nostrils. "I do not know what those verses are" means that a Dragon exists within those verses. "Those who do hear It bemoan the fact that others do not" is sad indeed!

The roar of the Dragon that has now come forth through such Masters as Kyōgen, Sekisō, and Sōzan creates the clouds and makes the rain. It does not speak of the Way, nor does It speak of Eyes or skulls; it is just the thousands of songs, the myriad songs that the Dragon sings. Its still having delight is found in the croaking of bullfrogs, and Its still having consciousness is found in the mumbling of worms. Therefore, Its bloodline has not been severed; there is one gourd succeeding

dependence on worldly ways of thinking. That is, in the above three cases the monks think that what they are quoting is somehow about mythical creatures called dragons, whereas the Masters are pointing the monks to a deeper meaning of the term 'Dragon', that is, they are pointing to one's innate Buddha Nature.

* See *Glossary*.

another.⁷ Because Its skull is not completely dry, It is the chief pillar* of the temple from whose Womb is born the other pillars of the temple. It is the temple's main stone lantern* which is most conspicuous among all the stone lanterns in the temple.

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7. The gourd refers to a Master as a vessel for the Water of the Spirit, which is passed on through the Transmission.