

On Experiencing That Which Is Above and Beyond Buddhahood

(*Butsu Kōjō Ji*)

Translator’s Introduction: This discourse is one of the most opaque in the *Shōbōgenzō*, not because the underlying meaning is difficult to grasp, but because of the extensive use of Zen Buddhist metaphors. Even though ‘translations’ and paraphrases of these metaphorical references are supplied for most occurrences, some of these allusions would require such extensive notation to clarify the meaning for readers who are unfamiliar with them that their meaning must be left to the reader to intuit through a study of Dōgen’s remarks.

The reason why this discourse has such recourse to metaphoric language is that Zen Masters were being asked to use words to describe a state that words cannot readily convey. Someone who has gone above and beyond Buddhahood has entered a realm of existence in which there is no longer the same sense of a personal identity, an identity which those who have a false sense of self take to be who they really are.

Tōzan, our Founding Ancestor from Yün-chou Province, was the direct successor and heir of Donjō of Mount Ungan in T’an-chou Province. Tōzan was an Ancestor of the thirty-eighth monastic generation descending from the Tathagata, who was the thirty-eighth Ancestor counting back from him.¹

There was once a time when Great Master Tōzan addressed his assembly, saying, “Once I had directly experienced That which is above and beyond Buddhahood, I had the ability to say a few words about It.”

Thereupon, a monk asked, “And what were the words you spoke?”

The Master said, “When I spoke about It, my acharya,* you did not hear It.”

The monk asked, “Are you listening, Venerable Monk?”

The Master said, “When I am not speaking about It, I am waiting to hear It.”

1. That is, it makes no difference whether one regards Ancestors as descending from the Tathagata or as counting back to the Tathagata, since all Ancestors are the same in essence as the Tathagata.

* See *Glossary*.

The words quoted just now about experiencing That which is above and beyond Buddhahood are those of our Ancestor, Great Master Tōzan. Other Ancestors of the Buddha have habitually explored through their training what the Great Master said and have directly experienced That which is above and beyond Buddhahood. You need to understand that experiencing That which is above and beyond Buddhahood is above and beyond any innate cause or any fulfillment of effects.² Even so, when the Ancestors experienced ‘not hearing It when words are spoken about It’, they did not fail to penetrate into the meaning of this through their training. Until you have actually arrived at That which is above and beyond Buddhahood, you will not have directly experienced That which is above and beyond Buddhahood. Until you can put It into words, you have not directly experienced That which is above and beyond Buddhahood. It is above and beyond any mutual appearance or disappearance, and It is above and beyond any mutual giving or receiving.³ Thus, the time when what is spoken of fully manifests is the time of experiencing That which is above and beyond Buddhahood. The time when That which is above and beyond Buddhahood fully manifests is the time when the acharya fails to hear.

‘The acharya not hearing’ means “The experience of That which is above and beyond Buddhahood is inaudible to you,” and “At the time when words are spoken, the acharya does not hear It.” Keep in mind that the Master’s speaking with words is not tainted by being heard or by not being heard. For this reason, speaking is not connected with hearing or not hearing.

‘You, my acharya’ is contained within ‘what does not hear’ and within ‘what is put into words’. In other words, it is encountering ‘such a person’* and not encountering ‘such a person’; it is both ‘this’ and ‘not this’. At the moment when the acharya is speaking, he is an acharya who is not listening. The essential meaning of ‘his not listening’ is his not listening by dint of his being tongue-tied, by dint of his being hindered by what is going on in his ears, by dint of his eyes being blinded by the Master’s luminosity, and by dint of his being blocked up in body and mind. This is why he did not hear. Taking these points up again, we do not treat them as ‘putting It into words’. Not listening goes above and beyond ‘being put into words’: it is simply not hearing at the time when It is put into words. From beginning to end, the Founding Ancestor’s words, “When I spoke about It, my acharya, you did not hear It,” are like wisteria vines relying on wisteria vines for support. Even so, it will resemble what is spoken being entwined with what is spoken; it is being obstructed by what is spoken.

2. In other words, It is beyond training and enlightenment.

3. This sentence describes various aspects of the one-to-one Transmission that are transcended.

When the monk asked, “Are you listening, Venerable Monk?” he was saying in effect, “It is not that you, Venerable Monk, are listening to your own words, since the one who is asking the question is not the Venerable Monk, and my question goes beyond ‘speaking words.’” Even so, the monk was trying to ask whether he should train himself to listen and speak simultaneously. For example, he was trying to learn whether speaking is just speaking and whether listening is just listening. And although the question had been put that way, it goes beyond the disciple’s tongue to fully express.

The words of our Founding Ancestor Tōzan, “When I am not speaking about It, I am waiting to hear It,” need to be studied thoroughly in order to clarify their meaning. That is, at the time of putting It into words, one is not simultaneously listening to It. Listening will fully manifest at the time when one is not speaking. It is not that one idly disregards the time of not speaking, waiting for ‘not speaking’ to occur. At the moment of just listening, one does not consider putting It into words to be something extraneous, because such a thought is truly something extraneous. At the time when there is just listening, it is not that speaking of It has departed and exists solely as a side issue. And at the time when there is speaking of It, it is not that ‘just listening’ has closely hidden itself within the eyes of the one speaking and then suddenly thunders forth. As a consequence, even if someone is the acharya, at the time when It is spoken of, that person does not hear It. Even if the someone is the ‘I’, the time when there is no speaking is one of just listening, and this is comparable to “I have the ability to say a few words about It” and to “I have directly experienced That which is above and beyond Buddhahood.” It is, for example, the direct experience of just listening at the time when someone else is engaged in speaking about It. This is why Tōzan said, “When I am not speaking about It, I am waiting to hear It.” Although he spoke thus, experiencing That which is above and beyond Buddhahood is not an experience prior to the Seven Buddhas* but an experience that is above and beyond the Seven Buddhas.

Our Founding Ancestor Tōzan once pointed out to his assembly, “You need to know that there are people who are above and beyond Buddhahood.”

At the time, there was a monk who asked him, “What is a person who is above and beyond Buddhahood?”

The Great Master replied, “A non-Buddha.”⁴

4. That is, someone who is beyond any fixed idea of what a Buddha is.

Ummon once commented on Tōzan's reply, "We cannot name It, nor can we describe It, so we speak of It as 'a non-.'"

Hofuku once commented, "Buddha is something 'non-.'"

And Hōgen once commented, "Calling upon expedient means, we call such a one a Buddha."⁵

Generally speaking, an Ancestor of the Buddha who is above and beyond being 'an Ancestor of the Buddha' would be our Founding Ancestor Tōzan. The reason for that is, even though there are many others who have the countenance of a Buddha and an Ancestor, they have not even dreamt of the term 'being above and beyond Buddhahood'. Even if it had been explained to the likes of a Tokusan or a Rinzai, they could not have attested to it through their direct experience. And even if the likes of a Gantō or a Seppō had worked their own bodies to a nubbin through training, they would never have tasted a Master's Fist.⁶ Such phrases as "The direct experience of That which is above and beyond Buddhahood," "I have the ability to say a few words about It," and "You need to know that there are people who are above and beyond Buddhahood," which our Founding Ancestor spoke, cannot be mastered experientially short of training for one, two, three, four, or five triply immeasurable hundreds of great kalpas.⁷ And, by all means, there will be those who have the ability to explore the Subtle Path through their training.⁸

It is imperative that you know that there are those who are above and beyond Buddhahood. In other words, theirs is a life of playing with what is left after body and mind have dropped off. Even so, we can recognize the Old Buddha by His raising of a Fist. When you have already caught sight of Him in this manner, you will know that there is Someone who is above and beyond Buddhahood, and that there is no one who is above and beyond Buddhahood.⁹ What I am pointing out to the community at present is not that you must become someone who is above and

5. That is, we call such a one a Buddha for want of a better term.

6. Both Gantō and Seppō were disciples of Tokusan.

7. That is, just short of never.

8. One of three ways taught by Tōzan for training disciples, the Subtle Path is the path by which the Master leads the trainee to a profoundly deep inner realm beyond the opposites. The next way is the Bird's Way wherein, like a bird in flight, the Master's way of training disciples moves freely and unobstructedly, leaving no karmic traces behind. The final way is Extending the Hand, whereby the Master makes use of various expedient means to guide the trainee.

9. There is 'no one' because self has dropped off.

beyond Buddhahood, nor that you must encounter someone who is above and beyond Buddhahood, but simply that you must know that there are those who are above and beyond Buddhahood. When you can grasp this fundamental point, you will no longer attempt to know whether there is someone who is above and beyond Buddhahood or whether there is no one who is above and beyond Buddhahood, for that one who is above and beyond Buddhahood is a non-Buddha. Should there be a time when some doubt arises as to what a non-Buddha is, you should consider that such a one is not called a non-Buddha because he or she existed before the historic Buddha, or because he or she came after the historic Buddha, or because he or she has transcended the historic Buddha: he or she is a non-Buddha simply because such a one has gone above and beyond Buddhahood. Such a one is called a non-Buddha because he or she has dropped off a Buddha's countenance and a Buddha's body and mind.



Meditation Master Jōin Koboku from the eastern capital—who was a Dharma heir of Fuyō Dōkai—once addressed his community, saying, “Once you directly know that there is the experience of That which is above and beyond Buddhahood, you will indeed have the ability to give voice to It. Now, my virtuous Zen monks, say right off! What is your experience of That which is above and beyond Buddhahood?”

“There is a child within the human family. His six sense organs are lacking, his seven kinds of consciousness are incomplete. He is the Great Icchantika, one lacking the seed of Buddha Nature. When he meets a Buddha, he slays ‘Buddha’: when he meets an Ancestor, he slays ‘Ancestor’. The Celestial Halls cannot house him: even the Hells have no gateway that can hold him. O great assembly! are you acquainted with ‘such a person’*?”¹⁰

10. In this quotation, Jōin is describing the function of Buddha Nature after someone has awakened to the Truth and gone above and beyond Buddhahood. What remains is not something outside of or apart from being a human (that is, it is ‘a child within the human family’), although the distinction of being male or female is no longer relevant. Having let go of all attachment, It functions as if the six sense organs were lacking. Similarly, the conviction has dropped away that the six sense organs, the judgmental, intellectual mind, and the ‘awakened mind’ constitute all there is to being completely awakened. As the Great Icchantika, It functions beyond conventional notions of good and evil, and lacks the seed of Buddha Nature, because It is already the fruition of Buddha Nature. Distinctions, such as

Then, after a good long time, he said, “The one facing you now is not from Sindh. He sleeps a lot and also talks a lot in his sleep.”

‘His six sense organs are lacking’ means that a person has exchanged his eyes for black nuts from a bo-tree, his nostrils for bamboo tubes, and his skull for a toilet spatula. Pray, what could be the underlying principle of these exchanges? It is because of this principle that his six senses are lacking. Because his six senses are lacking, he has become a Golden Buddha after having passed through the furnace, and he has become a Mud Buddha after having passed through the Great Ocean, and he has become a Wooden Buddha after having passed through fire.

‘His seven kinds of consciousness are incomplete’ is synonymous with a ‘broken wooden ladle’.* Even though it is said that he ‘slays Buddha’, he encounters Buddha, and because he encounters Buddha, he slays ‘Buddha’. Were he to aim at entering the Celestial Halls, the Celestial Halls would immediately collapse. Were he to encounter the Hells, the Hells would suddenly fall away. Consequently, when he comes face-to-face with someone, his face breaks out into a smile, and he asks for nothing from Sindh.¹¹ He sleeps a lot and also talks a lot in his sleep. Keep in mind that the principle of this is that ‘both the mountains know themselves and the earth knows itself’ and that ‘the whole body of jewels and stones are smashed into hundreds of pieces’. You should take your time to explore through your training what Meditation Master Koboku pointed out to his assembly. Do not do it hastily.



When Dōyō of Mount Ungo went to train under Tōzan, who was the Founding Ancestor of our lineage, Tōzan asked him, “O acharya, what is your name?”¹²

Ungo responded, “Dōyō.”

‘Buddha’ and ‘Ancestor’, have been done away with, because they are inherently dualistic and no longer relevant. Finally, the worlds of existence, such as heavenly and hellish states, do not restrict It.

11. ‘Something from Sindh’ is a metaphor for asking for the very best someone can offer that is appropriate to the situation; here, the reference is to not asking for anything from another. Dōgen will take up this metaphor in Discourse 79: On ‘The King Requests Something from Sindh’ (*Ō Saku Sendaba*).
12. In some Zen Buddhist contexts, such as the present one, acharya is simply a polite form of address for any monk, since in a monastery a monk may learn from any of his fellow trainees.

The Founding Ancestor then said to him, “Speak again, but from a place above and beyond the conventional.”

Ungo responded, “Were I to speak from a place above and beyond the conventional, then this ‘I’ would not be called Dōyō.”

Tōzan said, “When I was with Ungo, what I answered him was in no way different.”

We certainly need to look in detail at what the Master and disciple are now saying. “Were I to speak from a place above and beyond the conventional, then this ‘I’ would not be called Dōyō” was Dōyō’s speaking from above and beyond Buddhahood. You need to explore through your training that, in the Dōyō who had just come, there is That which is not called Dōyō and which is above and beyond ‘Dōyō’. At the time when he manifested the principle of “Were I to speak from a place above and beyond the conventional, then this ‘I’ would not be called Dōyō,” he was the True Dōyō. Even so, do not say that he would be Dōyō even in a place above and beyond the conventional. When he heard the Founding Ancestor’s words, “Speak again, but from a place above and beyond the conventional,” were he to have said, “Speaking from a place above and beyond the conventional, I am nevertheless named Dōyō,” this would still be his speaking from a place above and beyond the conventional. And why do I say so? Because Dōyō, in a twinkling, has leapt into the True Dōyō’s brain and concealed himself there. Although we say that he has concealed himself there, he openly reveals his True Form.

When Sōzan Honjaku went to train under our Founding Ancestor Tōzan, the latter asked him, “O acharya, what is your name?”

Sōzan replied, “Honjaku.”

The Founding Ancestor said, “Speak again, but from a place above and beyond the conventional.”

Sōzan responded, “I cannot say it.”

The Founding Ancestor asked, “Why on earth can’t you say it?”

Sōzan responded, “Because It is not called Honjaku.”

The Founding Ancestor approved of this response.

I would comment that it is not that there are no words in that place above and beyond Buddhahood, it is just a matter of “I cannot say it.” Why does he not say it? Because his True Self is not called Honjaku. Since this is so, the words from the place that is above and beyond are not spoken, and the unspoken words of that place above and beyond are unnamed, and the unnamed Honjaku is a term from that place above and beyond. As a result, Honjaku is unnamed. Since this is so,

there is a non-Honjaku, there is the Unnamed which has dropped everything off, and there is a Honjaku that has been dropped off.



Meditation Master Banzan Hōshaku once said, “Among thousands of saintly persons, none have Transmitted the one path to That Which is Above and Beyond.” The phrase ‘the one path to That Which is Above and Beyond’ is the wording of Banzan alone. He did not speak of what is above and beyond, nor did he speak of those who are above and beyond; he spoke of the one path to That Which is Above and Beyond. His main point is that even though thousands of saintly ones may have come forth in great profusion, they have not Transmitted the one path to That Which is Above and Beyond. ‘To not Transmit’ can also mean that the thousands of saintly ones have preserved a part of something that is above and beyond being Transmitted. We can study the Matter* in this way too. And there is still something more that needs to be said: thousands of saintly ones and thousands of wise ones do indeed exist, and even so, wise and saintly though they may be, the one path to That Which is Above and Beyond is above and beyond the realm of the wise and saintly.



Meditation Master Chimon Kōso was once asked by a monk, “What is this thing about ‘That which is above and beyond Buddhahood?’”

The Master answered, “I hold the sun and moon aloft atop my staff.”

That is, his saying that one’s staff holds aloft the sun and moon is the same as ‘experiencing going above and beyond Buddhahood’. When we explore through our training the staff of the sun and moon, then the whole universe is thrown into darkness, which is our going above and beyond Buddhahood. And it is not that the sun and moon are the staff: what is atop the head of the staff is what is atop the whole staff.



Meditation Master Dōgo of Tennō-ji Temple, while still a novice in the assembly of Kisen, asked, “What is the Great Intent of Buddha Dharma?”

Master Sekitō replied, “It is above and beyond anything that can be grasped, above and beyond anything that can be comprehended.”

Dōgo asked, “As you have gone above and beyond, is there any other way you have of putting It?”

The Master replied, “The vast expanse of space does not hinder the white clouds as they float by.”

As I see the matter, Sekitō was a second-generation descendant of Daikan Enō. The monk Dōgo of Tennō-ji was a younger monastic brother of Yakusan. There was the time when he asked, “What is the Great Intent of Buddha Dharma?” This question is not one that beginners or those who have entered training late in life are equal to. This can only be asked when someone has already heard of the Great Intent and been able to understand what It is.

Sekitō responded, “It is above and beyond anything that can be grasped, above and beyond anything that can be comprehended.” You need to know that within the Buddha Dharma, the Great Intent exists at our first moment of spiritual awareness and It exists at the stage of our ultimate, full awakening. That Great Intent is not something to be grasped. Giving rise to the intention to train, doing the training and practice, and realizing the Truth do indeed exist, and they too are not something to be grasped. That Great Intent is not something to be comprehended. Training-and-enlightenment does indeed exist and training-and-enlightenment is not some ‘thing’ that exists, for it is not anything to be grasped or comprehended. Again, that Great Intent is neither something to be grasped nor something to be comprehended. It is not that the Noble Truths and training-and-enlightenment do not exist: it is that they are not something to be grasped or comprehended. And it is not that the Noble Truths and training-and-enlightenment exist only for a while, it is just that they are not something to be grasped or comprehended.

Dōgo asked, “As you have gone above and beyond, is there any other way you have of putting It?” That is, if there is another way the Master has of putting It, it will be a manifestation of the Master’s having gone above and beyond, for ‘another way of putting It’ is synonymous with skillful means, and ‘skillful means’ is synonymous with all the Buddhas and all the Ancestors. Although the Master stated it in the way that he did, a further way may indeed exist. Even though a further way may exist, it is not something that will exclude ‘a further way does not exist’, for that could also be a Master’s assertion.

“The vast expanse of space does not hinder the white clouds as they float by” were Sekitō’s very words. Moreover, his use of the words ‘vast expanse of space’ is not something that puts a limit on the vast expanse of space. Although his

saying ‘the vast expanse of space’ does not hinder the vast expanse of space from floating by, his ‘white clouds’, by its very nature, also does not limit the white clouds. The white clouds’ floating by is unhindered, and the floating by of white clouds does not hinder the vast expanse of space from floating by. Not to be limited by others is also not to be limited by oneself. It is not the case that in order for a face-to-face meeting to take place, there be no limits except the one that each person does not hinder the other. Because of this, there are no limits between Master and disciple. This expresses the ultimate reality and the outer form of Sekitō’s statement, “The vast expanse of space does not hinder the white clouds as they float by.” At that very moment, Sekitō raised the eyebrows of the one who was exploring the Great Intent through his training, and the trainee caught a glimpse of the Buddha coming to meet him and encountered the Ancestor coming to meet him: he met himself coming and met the other coming. This has been considered the principle of ‘asking once and being answered ten times’. As to the ‘asking once and being answered ten times’ of which I am now speaking, the one who asks once must be ‘such a person’ and the one who gives ten replies must also be ‘such a person’.



Ōbaku once said:

Well now, persons who have left home life behind to become monks need to realize that there is an aspect of the Matter that has come down to them from the past. For example, it is like Great Master Gozu Hōyū, who realized the Truth while training under the Fourth Chinese Ancestor Daii Dōshin. Even though Gozu’s voicing of the Dharma had breadth and depth, he still never comprehended the key point of what was above and beyond Buddhahood.¹³ When you have the eyes and the brains for this, you will be able to distinguish between false and true religious groups.

The Matter that has come down from the past, which Ōbaku alluded to in this way, is the Matter that has been genuinely Transmitted down to us by Buddha after Buddha and Ancestor after Ancestor. We call that Matter the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana, which is the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching. Even though we say that It exists within us, we need to recognize It. And even though

13. That is, he never understood that one goes on, always becoming Buddha, even after an initial realization of the Truth.

we say that It exists within us, It is still beyond the intellect's ability to grasp. Without the genuine Transmission of Buddha after Buddha, one cannot encounter It even in one's dreams. Ōbaku was a Dharma child of Hyakujō and even surpassed Hyakujō. And, as a Dharma grandchild of Baso, he even surpassed Baso. Generally speaking, among the Ancestors of those three or four generations, none could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Ōbaku. It is Ōbaku alone who made it clear that Gozu lacked both horns.¹⁴ Other Buddhas and Ancestors have never recognized this.

Meditation Master Hōyū of Mount Gozu was a venerable monk of high standing who trained under the Fourth Chinese Ancestor. His teaching was broad and deep. Truly, when we compare him with academic teachers of Scriptures and scholarly commentators, among those who came to eastern lands from the West he was neither inadequate nor lacking. Yet even so, sad to say, he had not recognized the key point of what lay above and beyond Buddhahood and was therefore unable to state what the key point of being above and beyond Buddhahood was about. Because he did not know what this key point was, how could he possibly distinguish between the false and the true? He was simply a person who had merely studied words. To know the key point of what lies above and beyond Buddhahood, to train and practice with this key point, and to awaken to this key point are unreachable for ordinary, run-of-the-mill people. Yet wherever there is a genuine effort to train, It will manifest without fail.

What is called 'the experience of going above and beyond Buddhahood' is synonymous with arriving at Buddhahood, and then going on above and beyond until one once again meets Buddha. It is the same as sentient beings' meeting Buddha. Since this is so, then if one's encountering Buddha is simply on a par with a sentient being's encountering 'a Buddha', then this will not be 'meeting Buddha'.¹⁵ If one's encountering Buddha is just like a sentient being's encountering 'a Buddha', that person's meeting Buddha will be illusory. How much less could it be the experience of going above and beyond Buddhahood! You need to know that the experience that is above and beyond, of which Ōbaku speaks, is above and beyond what is envisioned by those folks nowadays with limited insight. Simply, there have been those whose expressions of the Dharma

14. There is a play on words here that is lost in translation. The name Gozu means 'bull's head'. To say that he lacked both horns alludes to his not yet having experienced full spiritual maturity.

15. 'Meeting Buddha' is the topic of Discourse 59: On Encountering Buddha (*Kembutsu*). There, as here, Dōgen distinguishes between our ability to see Buddha Nature in someone else and our ability to recognize our own Buddha Nature.

were below those of Gozu and there have been those whose expressions of the Dharma were equal with those of Gozu, and even so, they may well have been the younger and older Dharma brothers of Gozu. How could they possibly know the key point of what is above and beyond Buddhahood? Others, such as those ‘thrice wise and ten times saintly’,* do not know the key point that lies above and beyond Buddhahood. How much less could they open or close the key point of what lies above and beyond! This point is the very eyes for your exploring the Matter through your training with your Master. If you know what the key point of going above and beyond Buddhahood is, you will be a person who has gone above and beyond Buddhahood, for you will have realized what lies above and beyond Buddhahood.

Given to the assembly at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple on the twenty-third day of the third lunar month of the Ninji era (April 24, 1242).

Copied by me, based on an unrevised manuscript written in the grass style, at Eihei-ji Temple on a day during the summer retreat in the first year of the Shōgen era (1259).

Ejō