



A Zen Master in Meditation, Shi K'o (Sekkaku). 10th Century

Zen Buddhism

Sōtō Zen

Essays from the Shōbōgenzō by Dōgen Zenji

[Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253) was the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism. This essay is part of a remarkable collection of essays called *Shōbōgenzō*, or “Treasury of the Eye of True Teaching.” The commentary introducing the essays is by the translator Thomas Cleary.]

The Issue at Hand (*Genjōkōan*)

The term *genjōkōan* seems to appear first in ninth-century China and is often used in Japanese Sōtō Zen to refer to present being as the topic of meditation or the issue of Zen. *Gen* means “manifestation” or “present,” *jō* means “become.” *Genjō* means actuality—being as is, at hand, or accomplished, as of an accomplished fact. *Kōan* is a common Zen word which is often left untranslated, having to some extent become a naturalized English word. *Kō* means official, public, or open, as opposed to private or personal; *an* means a consideration, or a considered decision. A *kōan* in standard literary Chinese means an official report or an issue under consideration. The term was adopted in Zen with much the same meanings, only transposed into the frame of reference of Zen tradition and experience.

Genjōkōan is one of the most popular and oft-quoted essays in *Shōbōgenzō*. Written to a lay disciple, it contains a number of key points stated in a most concise fashion. The very first paragraph contains a complete outline of Zen, in a covert presentation of the so-called “five ranks” (*go i*) device of the original Chinese Sōtō Zen school. The scheme of the five ranks—relative within absolute, absolute within relative, coming from within the absolute, arriving in the relative, and simultaneous attainment in both relative and absolute—is not overtly used in Dōgen’s work, perhaps because of the confusion surrounding it, but its structures are to be found throughout *Shōbōgenzō*.

Following this summary introduction, the essay proceeds to the discussion of enlightenment. Dōgen says the way to enlightenment is to forget the self. The self in this sense refers to an accumulation of habits, including the habit of attachment to this accumulation as a genuine personality. Dōgen calls this forgetting “shedding body and mind,” an expression which is said to have galvanized his awareness as a young man and which he repeatedly uses to describe Zen study. Commentators on Dōgen's lectures describe it in these terms: “Each moment' of time is thoughtless; things do not provoke a second thought,” and “This is the time when the whole mind and body attains great freedom.”

This, however, is not the whole issue. In one of his lectures Dōgen says that “shedding body and mind” is the beginning of the effort, and in *Genjōkōan* he affirms that there is continuing progress in buddhahood, going beyond the attainment of enlightenment: “There is ceasing the traces of enlightenment, which causes one to forever leave the traces of enlightenment which is cessation.” In the *Hokke* scripture Buddha reveals to his liberated disciples that nirvana, cessation of afflictive habits, which had been expediently represented as the goal, is as it were a resting place on an infinite path.

In the essay *The Business of Progress (or transcendence) of Buddha*, also in *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen wrote, “To go on informing the Buddha of today it is not only today is called the business of progress of Buddha.” The celebrated Zen master Hakuin said, “Without cultivation and practice after enlightenment, many who have seen the essence miss the boat”; and Hakuin's assistant Tōrei said, “Lesser enlightenment turns out to be a hindrance to great enlightenment. If you give up lesser enlightenments and don't cling to them, great enlightenment will surely be realized.” Dōgen says that there are differences in depth and breadth of the realization of enlightenment, and speaks here of enlightenment as being enlightened by all things. This leads to the issue of perspective.

Dōgen states that delusion is a matter of experiencing things with the burden of the self—the bundle of mental habits, ingrained views, which is identified with the self. This is a basic issue of all Buddhist thought. The condition of the self, with its set of conditioned perceptions and views, is implicitly taken as a kind of absolute or veritable point of reference if one takes one's experience as conceived to be reality. In order to overcome hidden prejudice in the form of unquestioned views, Dōgen says that introspection is necessary, to see that things have no absolute identity, that they are not necessarily or totally as one may view them.

But then Dōgen goes on to point out the absoluteness, so to speak, of relative identity. Logically, if particular things exist, or are defined, relative to one another and therefore lack absolute identity, yet that absolute identitylessness still depends on their relative identity. The approach Dōgen takes, however, is not that of deduction but of direct witness (*genryō*), which he refers to, in classic Zen terminology, as the realms of before and after being disconnected. Thus Dōgen explains the traditional “characteristics of emptiness” called birthlessness and nonperishing in terms of the noncoexistence of before and after, or the nonconcurrence of a state with its own nonexistence. Dōgen's emphasis here seems to be not on discursive understanding of this point of logic, but on presence of mind in the most thoroughgoing sense, direct experience of the present.

Dōgen also speaks of enlightenment in terms of the universal being reflected in the individual; this “merging” of universe and individual does not, however, obliterate the individual or restrict the universal. This leads to the apparent paradox of life being at once finite and infinite. One life, or one sphere of experience, contains everything that is within its scope and nothing that is beyond its range. At every moment we reach, or are at, the full extent of our experience; and yet this never limits the potential of experience in itself. Each moment is complete, hence infinite, in itself, though it be finite as a point of comparison with past or future. In the Kegon philosophy, this interpenetration of the finite and the infinite is represented by the figure of “arriving in one step,” each moment of awareness being the focal point of the whole nexus of existence. Again Dōgen drives at the full experience of the present without conceptually delineating it.

Finally Dōgen quotes a classic Zen story alluding to the necessity of practical application even though truth, or enlightenment, is inherent in everyone. A monk asks his teacher why he uses a fan if the nature of wind is eternal and omnipresent; the teacher replies that the student knows the nature of eternity but not the principle of omnipresence, and to illustrate this principle the teacher just fans himself. As one of the Kegon philosophers said, “If not for practice flowing from reality, there is no means to merge with reality.”

The Issue at Hand

When all things are Buddha-teachings, then there is delusion and enlightenment, there is cultivation of practice, there is birth, there is death, there are Buddhas, there are sentient beings. When myriad things are all not self, there is no delusion, no enlightenment, no Buddhas, no sentient beings, no birth, no death. Because the Buddha Way originally

sprang forth from abundance and paucity, there is birth and death, delusion and enlightenment, sentient beings and Buddhas. Moreover, though this is so, flowers fall when we cling to them, and weeds only grow when we dislike them.

Acting on and witnessing myriad things with the burden of oneself is “delusion.” Acting on and witnessing oneself in the advent of myriad things is enlightenment. Great enlightenment about delusion is Buddhas; great delusion about enlightenment is sentient beings. There are also those who attain enlightenment on top of enlightenment, and there are those who are further deluded in the midst of delusion. When the Buddhas are indeed the Buddhas, there is no need to be self-conscious of being Buddhas; nevertheless it is realizing buddhahood—Buddhas go on realizing.

In seeing forms with the whole body-mind, hearing sound with the whole body-mind, though one intimately understands, it isn't like reflecting images in a mirror, it's not like water and the moon—when you witness one side, one side is obscure.

Studying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. Studying oneself is forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself is being enlightened by all things. Being enlightened by all things is causing the body-mind of oneself and the body-mind of others to be shed. There is ceasing the traces of enlightenment, which causes one to forever leave the traces of enlightenment which is cessation..

When people first seek the Teaching, they are far from the bounds of the Teaching. Once the Teaching is properly conveyed in oneself, already one is the original human being.

When someone rides in a boat, as he looks at the shore he has the illusion that the shore is moving. When he looks at the boat under him, he realizes the boat is moving. In the same way, when one takes things for granted with confused ideas of body-mind, one has the illusion that one's own mind and own nature are permanent; but if one pays close attention to one's own actions, the truth that things are not self will be clear.

Kindling becomes ash, and cannot become kindling again. However, we should not see the ash as after and the kindling as before. Know that kindling abides in the normative state of kindling, and though it has a before and after, the realms of before and after are disconnected. Ash, in the normative state of ash, has before and after. Just as that kindling, after having become ash, does not again become kindling, so after dying a person does not become alive again. This being the case, not saying that life becomes death is an established custom in Buddhism—therefore it is called *unborn*. That death does not become life is an established teaching of the Buddha; therefore we say *imperishable*. Life is an individual temporal state, death is an individual temporal state. It is like winter and spring—we don't think winter becomes spring, we don't say spring becomes summer.

People's attaining enlightenment is like the moon reflected in water. The moon does not get wet, the water isn't broken. Though it is a vast expansive light, it rests in a little bit of water—even the whole moon, the whole sky, rests in a dewdrop on the grass, rests in even a single droplet of water. That enlightenment does not shatter people is like the moon not piercing the water. People's not obstructing enlightenment is like the drop of dew not obstructing the moon in the sky. The depth is proportionate to the height. As for the length and brevity of time, examining the great and small bodies of water, you should discern the breadth and narrowness of the moon in the sky.

Before one has studied the Teaching fully in body and mind, one feels one is already sufficient in the Teaching. If the body and mind are replete with the Teaching, in one respect one senses insufficiency. For example, when one rides a boat out onto the ocean where there are no mountains and looks around, it only appears round, and one can see no other, different characteristics. However, this ocean is not round, nor is it square—the remaining qualities of the ocean are inexhaustible. It is like a palace, it is like ornaments, yet as far as our eyes can see, it only seems round. It is the same with all things—in the realms of matter, beyond conceptualization, they include many aspects, but we see and comprehend only what the power of our eye of contemplative study reaches. If we inquire into the “family ways” of myriad things, the qualities of seas and mountains, beyond seeming square or round, are endlessly numerous. We should realize there exist worlds everywhere. It's not only thus in out of the way places—know that even a single drop right before us is also thus.

As a fish travels through water, there is no bound to the water no matter how far it goes; as a bird flies through the sky, there's no bound to the sky no matter how far it flies. While this is so, the fish and birds have never been apart from the water and the sky—it's just that when the need is large the use is large, and when the requirement is small the use is small. In this way, though the bounds are unfailingly reached everywhere and tread upon in every single place, the bird would instantly die if it left the sky and the fish would instantly die if it left the water. Obviously, water is life; obviously the sky is life. There is bird being life. There is fish being life. There is life being bird, there is life being fish. There must be progress beyond this—there is cultivation and realization, the existence of the living one being like this. Under these circumstances, if there were birds or fish who attempted to traverse the

waters or the sky after having found the limits of the water or sky, they wouldn't find a path in the water or the sky—they won't find any place. When one finds this place, this action accordingly manifests as the issue at hand; when one finds this path, this action accordingly manifests as the issue at hand. This path, this place, is not big or small, not self or other, not preexistent, not now appearing—therefore it exists in this way. In this way, if someone cultivates and realizes the Buddha Way, it is *attaining a principle, mastering the principle*; it is *encountering a practice, cultivating the practice*. In this there is a place where the path has been accomplished, hence the unknowability of the known boundary is born together and studies along with the thorough investigation of the Buddha Teaching of this knowing—therefore it is thus. Don't get the idea that the attainment necessarily becomes one's own knowledge and view, that it would be known by discursive knowledge. Though realizational comprehension already takes place, implicit being is not necessarily obvious—*why necessarily* is there obvious becoming?

Zen Master Hōtetsu of Mt. Mayoku was using a fan. A monk asked him about this: “The nature of wind is eternal and all-pervasive—why then do you use a fan?” The master said, “You only know the nature of wind is eternal, but do not yet know the principle of its omnipresence.” The monk asked, “What is the principle of its omnipresence?” The master just fanned. The monk bowed.

The experience of the Buddha Teaching, the living road of right transmission, is like this. To say that since (the nature of wind) is permanent one should not use a fan, and that one should feel the breeze even when not using a fan, is not knowing permanence and not knowing the nature of the wind either. Because the nature of wind is eternal, the wind of Buddhism causes the manifestation of the earth's being gold and by participation develops the long river into butter.

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The Nature of Things (*Hosshō*)

The *nature of things* is a fundamental term of Mahayana Buddhism. It is defined as being the nature of *thusness* (*tathatā*), *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), and *nirvana*. In pristine Buddhism, nirvana, or “extinction,” refers to the attainment of dispassion, peace of mind, freedom from anxiety and mental afflictions. In Mahayana Buddhism, nirvana is commonly used in reference to things, with the meaning of “emptiness.” In terms of the person, nirvana refers to the extinction of false description, of fixed views; this results in awareness of the “empty” or “open” nature of things. Emptiness means that things in themselves are indefinable; being dependent on relations, things are said to have no individual or absolute nature of their own. It is this nonabsoluteness which is called emptiness. Another way of expressing it is in terms of inconceivability. The descriptions by which things are defined, and even the experience of things, depend on the mind, and are not the supposed things in themselves. Thus the nature of things in themselves is said to be inconceivable, beyond description, or “empty.”

Yet this “emptiness” has no existence of its own either, since it is nothing but the nature of things as relative and identityless. That is to say, the emptiness of things and the relative existence of things are not antithetical but identical in essence. The term *thusness* embraces both of these aspects of reality—the relative existence of things and the emptiness of absolute existence of particular things. These two perspectives are referred to as two facets of *thusness*—that which is unchanging (absolute emptiness) and that which accords with conditions (relative existence). The term *thusness* itself alludes to the simultaneous realization of emptiness and existence, experiencing directly and openly without fixed conceptual glosses, seeing everything as being simply “thus.”

This essay by Dōgen clearly aims at countering the mistaken notion that the nature of things *qua* emptiness is opposed to or exclusive of the appearances of things, or relative existence. This erroneous notion posits the obliteration of appearances as the means of realizing the nature of things, something which Dōgen opposes throughout his works. Rather than trying to obliterate anything, Dōgen aims at breaking through the barrier of conception to realize the nature of things in everything, to realize the nature of things *is* everything.

The Nature of Things

In meditation study, whether following scripture or following a teacher, one *becomes enlightened alone without a teacher*. Becoming *enlightened alone without a teacher* is the activity of the nature of things. Even though one be *born knowing*, one should seek a teacher to inquire about the Path. Even in the case of *knowledge of the birthless*¹ one should definitely direct effort to mastering the Path. Which individuals are not *born knowing*? Even up to enlightenment, the fruit of buddhahood, it is a matter of following scriptures and teachers. Know that encountering a scripture or a teacher and attaining *absorption in the nature of things* is called the *born knowing* that attains *absorption in the nature of things* on encountering *absorption in the nature of things*. This is attaining knowledge of past lives, attaining the three superknowledges,² realizing unexcelled enlightenment, encountering inborn knowledge and learning inborn knowledge, encountering teacherless knowledge and spontaneous knowledge and correctly conveying teacherless knowledge and spontaneous knowledge.

If one were not *born knowing*, even though might encounter scriptures and teachers one could not hear of the *nature of things*, one could not witness the *nature of things*. The *Great Path* is not the principle of *like someone drinking water knows for himself whether it's warm or cool*. All Buddhas as well as all bodhisattvas and all living beings clarify the Great Path of the nature of all things by the power of inborn knowledge. To clarify the *Great Path* of the *nature of things* following scriptures or teachers is called clarifying the *nature of things* by oneself. Scriptures are the nature of things, are oneself. Teachers are the *nature of things*, are oneself. The *nature of things* is the teacher, the *nature of things* is oneself. Because the *nature of things* is oneself, it is not the self misconceived by heretics and demons. In the *nature of things* there are no heretics or demons—it is only *eating breakfast, eating lunch, having a snack*. Even so, those who claim to have studied for a long time, for twenty or thirty years, pass their whole life in a daze when they read or hear talk of the *nature of things*. Those who claim to have fulfilled Zen study and assume the rank of teacher, while they hear the voice of the *nature of things* and see the forms of the *nature of things*, yet their body and mind, objective and subjective experience, always just rise and fall in the pit of confusion. What this is like is wrongly thinking that the *nature of things* will appear when the whole world we perceive is obliterated, that the *nature of things* is not the present totality of phenomena. The principle of the *nature of things* cannot be like this. This *totality of phenomena* and the *nature of things* are far beyond any question of sameness or difference, beyond talk of distinction or identity. It is not past, present, or future, not annihilation or eternity, not form, sensation, conception, conditioning, or consciousness—therefore it is the *nature of things*.

Zen Master Baso said, “All living beings, for infinite eons, have never left absorption in the nature of things: they are always within absorption in the nature of things, wearing clothes, eating, conversing—the functions of the six sense organs, and all activities, all are the nature of things.”

The *nature of things* spoken of by Baso is the *nature of things* spoken of by the *nature of things*. It learns from the same source as Baso, is a fellow student of the *nature of things*: since hearing of it takes place, how could there not be speaking of it? The fact is that *the nature of things rides Baso*; it is *people eat food, food eats people*. Ever since the *nature of things*, it has never left *absorption in the nature of things*. It doesn't leave the *nature of things* after the *nature of things*, it doesn't leave the *nature of things* before the *nature of things*. The *nature of things*, along with *infinite eons*, is *absorption in the nature of things*; the *nature of things* is called *infinite eons*. Therefore the *here* of the immediate present is the *nature of things*; the *nature of things* is the *here* of the immediate present. *Wearing clothes and eating food* is the *wearing clothes and eating food of absorption in the nature of things*. It is the manifestation of the *nature of things* of food, it is the manifestation of the *nature of things* of eating, it is the

¹ “The Birthless” means emptiness, also immediate experience without comparison of before and after. This line could read “Even if one be without inborn knowledge . . . ,” but in Buddhism the term conventionally refers to knowledge of the uncreated.

² The three superknowledges are paranormal perceptions of saints and Buddhas: knowledge of birth and death of beings in the past, knowledge of the features of birth and death of beings in the future, and knowledge of extinguishing mental contaminations. In Zen all three are sometimes interpreted in reference to insight into the fundamental mind, which is in essence the same in all times and has no inherent contamination.

manifestation of the *nature of things* of clothing, it is the manifestation of the *nature of things* of wearing.³ If one does not dress or eat, does not talk or answer, does not use the senses, does not act at all, it is not the *nature of things*, it is *not entering the nature of things*.

The manifestation of the Path of the immediate present was transmitted by the Buddhas, reaching Shakyamuni Buddha; correctly conveyed by the Zen adepts, it reached Baso. Buddha to Buddha, adept to adept, correctly conveyed and handed on, it has been correctly communicated in *absorption in the nature of things*. Buddhas and Zen adepts, *not entering*, enliven the *nature of things*.⁴ Though externalist scholars may have the term *nature of things*, it is not the *nature of things* spoken of by Baso. Though the power to propose that *living beings* who *don't leave the nature of things* are not the *nature of things* may achieve something, this is three or four new layers of the *nature of things*. To speak, reply, function, and act as if it were not the *nature of things* must be the *nature of things*. The days and months of *infinite eons* are the passage of the *nature of things*. The same is so of past, present, and future. If you take the limit of body and mind as the limit of body and mind and think it is far from the *nature of things*, this thinking still is the *nature of things*. If you don't consider the limit of body and mind as the limit of body and mind and think it is not the *nature of things*, this thought too is the *nature of things*. Thinking and not thinking are both the *nature of things*. To learn that since we have said *nature* (it means that) water must not flow and trees must not bloom and wither, is heretical.

Shakyamuni Buddha said, “Such characteristics, such nature.” So *flowers blooming and leaves falling* are *such nature*. Yet ignorant people think that there could not be *flowers blooming and leaves falling* in the realm of the *nature of things*. For the time being one should not question another. You should model your doubt on verbal expression. Bringing it up as others have said it, you should investigate it over and over again—there will be escape from before.⁵ The aforementioned thoughts are not wrong thinking, they are just thoughts while not yet having understood. It is not that this thinking will be caused to disappear when one understands. Flowers blooming and leaves falling are of themselves flowers blooming and leaves falling. The thinking that is thought that there can't be flowers blooming or leaves falling in the *nature of things* is the *nature of things*. It is thought which has fallen out according to a pattern; therefore it is thought of the *nature of things*. The whole thinking of thinking of the *nature of things* is such an appearance.

Although Baso's statement *all is the nature of things* is truly an *eighty or ninety percent* statement, there are many points which Baso has not expressed. That is to say, he doesn't say *the natures of all things do not leave the nature of things*,⁶ he doesn't say *the natures of all things are all the nature of things*. He doesn't say *all living beings do not leave living beings*,⁷ he doesn't say *all living beings are a little bit of the nature of things*, he doesn't say *all living beings are a little bit of all living beings*,⁸ he doesn't say *the natures of all things are a little bit of living*

³ Var. Lect. “Clothing is the manifestation of the nature of things, food is the manifestation of the nature of things, eating is the manifestation of the nature of things, wearing is the manifestation of the nature of things.”

⁴ Here “not entering” means that the nature of things is not something external to be entered; rather it is something omnipresent to be lived.

⁵ This passage seems to point to *kōan* practice, specifically the use of *kosoku kōan* or ancient *kōan*, Zen sayings or stories used to focus awareness in certain ways. “There will be escape from before” refers to the shedding of former views or states of mind.

⁶ The (individual) natures of things are not apart from the (universal) nature of things, because individual natures are relative, hence empty of absolute identity—this emptiness itself is the universal nature of things.

⁷ Living beings *qua* living beings—that is, in terms of relative identity or conditional existence—are always such, by definition.

⁸ “All living beings” as seen from one point of view (such as that of human perception) are a small part of “all living beings” as seen or experienced from all possible points of reference. This is reminiscent of the Kegon teaching of all realms of being mutually containing one another. According to the Tendai doctrine, the totality of all living beings is defined in terms of ten realms or universes, but as each contains the potential of all the others, this makes one hundred realms. The Kegon doctrine takes this further and says that each of the latent or potential realms in each

beings.⁹ He doesn't say *half a living being is half the nature of things*.¹⁰ He doesn't say *nonexistence of living beings is the nature of things*,¹¹ he doesn't say *the nature of things is not living beings*, he doesn't say *the nature of things exudes the nature of things*, he doesn't say *living beings shed living beings*. We only hear that living beings do not leave absorption in the nature of things—he doesn't say that the nature of things cannot leave absorption in living beings, there is no statement of absorption in the nature of things exiting and entering absorption in living beings. Needless to say, we don't hear of the attainment of buddhahood of the *nature of things*, we don't hear *living beings realize the nature of things*, we don't hear *the nature of things realizes the nature of things*, there is no statement of how *inanimate beings don't leave the nature of things*. Now one should ask Baso, what do you call “living beings”? If you call the *nature of things* living beings, it is *what thing comes thus*? If you call living beings living beings, it is *if you speak of it as something, you miss it*. Speak quickly, speak quickly!

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Birth and Death (*Shoji*)

Birth and Death, which is undated in the *Shōbōgenzō*, integrates transcendence with being in the world. The theme is a reflection of the basic principle that existence is empty and emptiness is existence, which is put into practice by neither grasping nor rejecting, being free from both craving and aversion.

In a well-known Zen story a monk comes to a Zen master, who asks him where he has come from. “The South,” replies the monk. The master asks the monk about Buddhism in the South, a region abounding in Zen centers; the monk answers, “There’s a lot of discussion going on.” The master says, “How can that compare with me planting the fields here and making rice balls to eat?” The monk, who apparently did not see anything enlightening or liberating about this, said, “What can you do about the world?” The master said, “What do you call the world?”

In the final analysis, according to the Zen teachings, it is not that the world binds people, it is people who bind themselves to the world. Bondage and delusion do not come from the world itself, but from ideas and attitudes regarding the world, from people’s relation to the world. Therefore the question of what can be done about the world calls forth the question of what people think and feel the world to be.

Birth and Death

“Because there is Buddha in birth and death, there is no birth and death.” Also, “because there is no Buddha in birth and death, one is not deluded by birth and death.” These are the words of two Zen teachers called Kassan and Jōsan. Being the words of enlightened people, they were surely not uttered without reason. People who want to get out of birth and death should understand what they mean.

If people seek Buddha outside of birth and death, that is like heading north to go south, like facing south to try to see the north star: accumulating causes of birth and death all the more, they have lost the way to liberation. Simply understanding that birth and death is itself nirvana, there is nothing to reject as birth and death, nothing to seek as nirvana. Only then will one have some measure of detachment from birth and death.

It is a mistake to assume that one moves from birth to death. Birth, being one point in time, has a before and after; therefore in Buddhism birth is called unborn. Extinction too, being one point in time, also has before and after, so it is said that extinction is nonextinction. When we say “birth” there is nothing but birth, and when we say

realm also contains the latent potential of every other realm, so they are, in terms of their endless interrelation, multiplied and remultiplied infinitely.

⁹ In terms of the doctrine of the interdependence of everything in the cosmos, as exemplified by the Kegon teaching, all things are a part of the existence of each and every thing and being.

¹⁰ Essence (emptiness of absolute identity) and characteristics (existence of relative identity) may be likened to two “halves” of the totality of all existence and the nature of things.

¹¹ “Nonexistence of living beings” as emptiness of an absolute nature of “living beings” is the nature of things *qua* emptiness.

“extinction” there is nothing but extinction. Therefore when birth comes it is just birth, and when extinction comes it is just extinction. In facing birth and extinction, don’t reject, don’t long.

This birth and death is the life of the Buddha. If we try to reject or get rid of this, we would lose the life of the Buddha. If we linger in this and cling to birth and death, this too is losing the life of the Buddha; it is stopping the Buddha’s manner of being. When we have no aversion or longing, only then do we reach the heart of the Buddha.

However, don’t figure it in your mind, don’t say it in words. Just letting go of and forgetting body and mind, casting them into the house of Buddha, being activated by the Buddha—when we go along in accord with this, then without applying effort or expending the mind we part from birth and death and become Buddhas. Who would linger in the mind?

There is a very easy way to become a Buddha: not doing any evil, having no attachment to birth and death, sympathizing deeply with all beings, respecting those above, sympathizing with those below, not feeling aversion or longing for anything, not thinking or worrying—this is called Buddha. Don’t seek it anywhere else.

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All selections from:

Cleary, Thomas, trans. *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays by Dōgen*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1986.