

# **DŌGEN AND THE FIVE RANKS**

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## DŌGEN AND THE FIVE RANKS

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things. When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization exists, and this no-trace continues endlessly.<sup>1</sup>

Dōgen's famous passage on the self from the Genjo Koan quoted above unveils a broadened understanding of his introspective intent. In order to overturn deeply entrenched unquestioned assumptions regarding the nature of self, Dōgen insists on a thorough going introspection. The introspection contained in these five statements points toward an introspection of penetrating insight, not an intellectual analysis, demonstrating how to structure the study and practice of Buddhist teachings. The five statements are an outline of Zen practice, and in a surreptitious way, mirror the Five Ranks without mentioning them by name.

The Five Ranks originated in Zen in the teachings of Tung-shan, the founder of the Soto Zen School. However, its dialectic formula was inspired by the I Ching<sup>2</sup>, the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, and made its entry into Zen through the philosophical Hua-yen school. Tung-shan adapted the Five Rank's metaphysics into a practical means to teach the Buddhadharma. The Five Ranks are essentially a Chinese expression of the Indian path to enlightenment.

Tung-shan's Five Ranks spread through the Zen Schools of China and Japan. The prominent Japanese Rinzai teacher Hakuin held them in high esteem and wrote a commentary on their relationship to koan practice. Dōgen outwardly rejected the formulaic and structured approach of the Five Ranks as a teaching method. However, he covertly inserted them into many areas of his writings, especially the Shobogenzo, because he understood their value in undermining deep-seated misconceptions even though he considered systematic and academic forms not to be consistent with traditional teachings of the Buddhadharma.

What follows below is a comparison of the Five Ranks of Tung-shan and the Dōgen's five statements of the fourth verse of the Genjo Koan. A brief description of the Five Ranks will be presented first and then their meanings will be contrasted with the five statements.

## **The Five Ranks**

The terms Personal and Universal used below were chosen to depict the worlds of Relative and Absolute, respectively. Other studies use a variety of designations of the dualistic pair such Apparent and Real, Form and Emptiness, Difference and Unity, Individual and Collective, Diversity and Universality, etc. All of them and others are similar in meaning should be considered interchangeable.

1. **The Personal within the Universal:** At this level the Universal, ones Original Nature, dawns within the Personal. A new way of living in the world is unveiled, one grounded in experiential certainty, observation, and inquiry.
2. **The Universal within the Personal:** Here the Universal is the dominant sphere acting as a container for the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of the Personal.
3. **Coming from within the Universal:** The inconceivable mind comes compellingly to the forefront introducing, the new world of unity of the Personal and Universal. The Universal is reflected within the Personal.
4. **Arriving within the Personal:** Within this rank, the Universal and Personal beneficially interact, refining the attributes of the Personal. Each phenomenon's unique expression of the Universal is intimately perceived.
5. **Attainment in both the Personal and Universal:** Unity of the Personal and Universal is attained, so that they respond in unobstructed harmony to each other and with the world at large.

The first and second ranks prepare the mind for the third rank where the pivot point of Zen practice, the fully revealed Universal, penetrates and imbues life with its principle of omnipresence. The fourth rank integrates the Personal and Universal, cultivating their mutuality. The fifth rank establishes perfect freedom as the norm.

**The Personal within the Universal** – *To study the Buddha Way is to study the self.*

Dōgen’s “study” is not only intellectual. The Five Ranks were never intended to be understood on a philosophical level. Their teaching was always about everyday life and practice. Mere knowledge about the Buddha Way does not relieve one of suffering. *Zazen* is Dōgen’s “study”, a discerning insight that provides the ability to monitor the self in action, and to gain the ability to describe the self’s makeup and operation. Taking up the practice of *Zazen* is the first step wherein the arising of the continuous flow of mental, emotional, and physical events is observed. The observational view – the dawning of the Universal – witnesses the phenomena of the Personal in their ever-changing forms. Prior to establishing the mental and emotional distance, whatever is felt at any given moment dominates the mental landscape.

**The Universal within the Personal** – *To study the self is to forget the self.*

“Forget” means to penetrate to the core of the self where the Universal (conscious observation and questioning) is large in proportion to the Personal. The Universal becomes powerful enough to permit a practitioner to use its positive and thoroughgoing vision to directly perceive the non-fabricated voice of nature. Forgetting the self of accumulated habits and conditioned states permits the voice to resound clearly. The strong Universal perspective allows a vigorous and close examination of conditioned states without getting trapped by them. Their harmful effects are not quite put to rest as yet. Nevertheless, they are for the most part recognized for what they are and appropriately dealt with.

**Coming from with the Universal** – *To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things.*

A new worldview spreads out and invites one to look deeply. The Universal prevails because a transformation has taken place, removing barriers, and the “myriad things” manifest within an individual. To try to make the world conform to the self is hopeless, painful and disappointing; allowing the “myriad things” full range of access is fulfilling, stimulating, and satisfying. This openness arises from an expanded comprehension of the hallmarks of Mahayana Buddhism: 1) The all-encompassing wisdom of Emptiness. 2) The recognition of the interdependence of all beings that leads to embracing compassion. 3) The acknowledgement that all phenomena express universal truth.

**Arriving within the Personal** – *When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others will drop away.*

“Body and mind ... will drop away” is when freedom replaces conditioning. The myriad things of the Universal act in complementary accord with the re-emerging Personal, refining the intellect, emotions, speech, reason, intuition, and physical form. The outcome is a balanced and happy person. An abiding sense of accomplishment replaces the ascendancy of mental obscurations. One gains the capability to recognize, accept, and take pleasure in the joy of freedom. The dualistic foci of Personal and Universal are seen to be alive and actively embodied as a radiant light. This light does not transform our dualistic makeup into some vague oneness, but rather brings about a firm understanding of how the foci are, and always have been, a creative complement.

**Attainment in both the Personal and Universal** – *No trace of realizations remains and this no-trace continues endlessly*

Effortless living is at the heart of “no-trace” realization. “No-trace” means to fully engage the world without concern for self. In the Genjo Koan, Dōgen insists that enlightenment exists when the self is perfectly pervious to the myriad beings and events of the world. Delusion insists the world match the needs of an individual’s assumptions; enlightenment opens the self to the free activity of the myriad beings. The dropping off of the body and mind acquaints us with the relief and sweetness of no permanent self. The self and the world maintain their separate identities yet “...the true inside of the inside is not having an inside or outside.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eihei Dōgen, trans by Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, Page 70

<sup>2</sup> See Sheng Yen, *The Infinite Mirror*, pp 103-110 for an introduction to how the Five Ranks arise from Hexagram #30 Li of the I Ching. If Master Sheng Yen is correct in his analysis, the Five Ranks can then be understood to predate Buddhism in China, and adapted by Buddhists to explain the enlightenment process.

<sup>3</sup> William R. LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan*, p. 93  
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983