

MYŌE 明恵 (1173–1232)

A Japanese monk ordained in both the 'Shingon' and 'Kegon' heritages, Myōe was an original and restive thinker who straddled the borders of traditional Buddhism and new directions of his age. His theory of universal salvation supported efforts to recognize the disinherited and marginalized members of society at the same time as he criticized the moral laxity of popular 'nenbutsu' practices and what he saw as the distortions of the "heretical" 'Pure Land' thinker Hōnen.* In its place, he championed a restoration of monastic discipline and advocated a "mantra of light" that focused on rebirth in the 'Pure Land' rather than the attainment of 'buddhahood' in this life as Kūkai* had taught. In a rich body of sermons, academic treatises, exegetical commentaries, poetry, rituals, and polemical tracts, Myōe sought to bring doctrinal abstractions to bear on religious and sociopolitical realities.

In the "Letter to an Island" reproduced here in the form reconstructed by his disciple Kikai (1178–1251), Myōe addresses the island of Karumoshima that seems to remind him of the causal production of all things in the mind. By identifying with the island and inviting it to "live inside of him," he seeks to appropriate the idea that all is consciousness and that all other persons and things themselves are beyond reach because of their own nature and qualities. Only by denying the disjunction of the knower from the object of knowledge, can one reach the ground where one can communicate with all things—even a cherry tree. The letter highlights Myōe's inmost feeling of being an integrated part of the world of beings, beyond their differences, all participating in the most excellent being that is Buddha.

[FG]

A LETTER TO AN ISLAND

MYŌE 1197, 36–39

To begin with, think of your own being as an island. This island is the object of attachment to the world of desire. In terms of the senses, it belongs to the categories of color and shape. It is apprehended by sight as an object of visual consciousness and is composed intrinsically of eight elements.¹⁶ Since it is in the nature of all things to know, there is no being that can escape awakening. And seeing that this knowing is by its nature the 'principle'¹ of all things, there is no place from which principle is absent.

16. [The four primary elements of earth, water, fire, and air, and the four derivative elements of sight, smell, taste, and touch.]

The principle of all things is their way of being, their 'suchness'. This suchness itself is the spiritual body, the undifferentiated principle of all things that is not distinct from the world of beings. In the same way, one cannot think of inanimate beings as existing apart from beings with sense. The body of the terrestrial realm is one of the ten bodies of the 'Tathāgata' and thus is not located outside the sublime being of 'Vairocana'. As the doctrine which states that all the six traits of things¹⁷ merge perfectly and without hindering each other, the island in its own being is a body belonging to the terrestrial realm.

In terms of one particular aspect, this island is the body of sensible beings, of retribution for acts, of the listener, of self-awakening, of the bodhisattva, and of the Tathāgata, and it is intelligent, spiritual, and spatial. Given that its own being is made of ten bodies that extend in all directions, the island exhausts 'Indra's net', merging freely and perfectly with everything. It is located high above all our conceptions and far surpasses the reach of knowledge. Thus, when one thinks hard about the principle that rules the island in the presence of the enlightenment of the ten buddhas of the '*Flower Garland Sutra*', one realizes that the secondary retribution (the receptacle world) and the principal retribution (the individual body) do not hinder each other. The One and the many move freely in and out of each other without obstruction, just as they merge into each other in the limitless expanse of Indra's net. The spiritual realm, which extends everywhere, is beyond conceiving, and the ten perfect and ultimate bodies of the 'Tathāgata' are complete.

Then why look for the Tathāgata 'Vairocana' elsewhere than in the very being of the island? It does not lie anywhere other than in each minute part of the vast sea of worlds adorned like a garland of flowers, a receptacle that extends in all ten directions. The teaching that it proclaims is as great as ten times infinity, and its teacher is the *Flower Garland Sutra* in which the principal and secondary merge perfectly. It is able to turn the wheel of dharma without having to ground itself in contemplation and to ascend to the six heavens of the world of the desire to preach without deviating from the tree of enlightenment. So there is no need to seek for it outside. Is it not the very being of the island itself?

As I have yet to attain the pure and the limpid eye of 'Samantabhadra' and be awakened to the nature of the spiritual realm, I can only see the vague outlines of a body of the terrestrial realm in the form of the passionate attachments and conceptual distinctions that animate and inanimate beings show. Since my eye has yet to glimpse the inexhaustible reach of Indra's net within the particularity of its subtle, spiritual body, my superficial ideas seem to separate me from you

17. [The six characteristics of conditioned phenomena are totality, distinction, sameness, difference, formation, and disintegration,]

as if you were not a living being. Still, a dear and close friend, on the face of it, would be no different from you! The only difference would be an illusory image set up in the objective field of my thought, the result of a mode of knowledge generated at a level of consciousness that analyzes the real in terms of the four forms of duration,¹⁸ which in turn are the results of ignorance and insufficient awareness.

In other words, as long as one remains in the sleep of ignorance, one is stuck in the realm of dream-thoughts that reflect that great dream of 'birth-and-death'. At the same time, since we have to do with an existence that lacks a nature of its own, it is not really possible to see how any living being could be different from you. Thus, since you are intimately related to the class of animate beings, I need to respect you as much as any human being close to me, so striking is your resemblance to others.

Though I have not seen you for a very long time, at those moments when I think of you with affection and with the hopes of seeing you again, I remember as if it were yesterday, walking along the seashore with you and making merry at your home. But those days long gone are but part of the endless cycle of conditioning. They, too, are but a dream belonging to the past.

Here the impermanence of the cycle of birth-and-death comes to mind. As I ponder this principle, I feel a true inner affinity for the views expressed by Vasubandhu in the *Abhidharmakośa* to refute the assertions of a sect of "conformists" who insisted that physical acts can be understood in terms of the movements of matter. He concluded that these acts are all temporary and dependent phenomena that perish instantaneously. Reflecting on the way in which dependent patterns of movement perish from one moment to the next, I felt the overwhelming presence of Vasubandhu, as if he were a friend I had known from afar. Pronouncing these words, I began to weep and had the sense that the doctrine of the impermanence of birth-and-death were being inscribed on my heart. Melancholy thoughts began to well up within me and I was distressed at the prospect that time would run out before I had a chance to see you as I so deeply hoped to.

Once the flower of perfect awakening has opened at the feet of the mountain of innate enlightenment, and the moon of knowledge born of the mind's culture has risen up within the emptiness of the nature of things, everything is seen to be akin to the spiritual realm. The principal and secondary retributions could no longer hinder each other. When the one and the many are detached, the unending interminable spiritual realm appears within each minute particle. But

18. [Myōe is referring to a sixth, subtle level of consciousness that analyzes facts in terms of the four modes of temporality (birth, abiding, change, and extinction), at work in duration, which itself is considered the result of unenlightened forces based on ignorance.]

as the one and the many fuse completely, the only real thought that remains is of the unending spiritual realm itself. The rolling waves of consciousness breaking against the shore of the ocean of absolute suchness are so much higher than our mental germinations. The distinctions of our minds look so dreadful in the garden where thought originates. I am too drunk with ignorance to embark on the ship of the six 'perfections'. Caught in the grip of agitated and wicked thoughts, I have no strength to draw the sword of wisdom. It is really pathetic and sad. I have not taken even a hundredth of a step across the vast ocean of birth-and-death to shed transmigration, nor have I cut away so much as a single branch of the gloomy, thick forest of passions.

And so, possessed by the heavenly fox of the seduction of appearances, I made my way step by step up Mt Atago, symbol of the 'three worlds'.¹⁹ And trained by the terrestrial fox of signs that produce acts, I revolve more and more around the sacred mound dedicated to Inari²⁰ where the six destinies of transmigration take shape. The road one takes has no beginning, so when shall one return home? If we remain in a state like this, it matters not if we are remarkable or dull, if we do things one way or another. We will never attain omniscience so long as we fail to ascend the stage of the absence of thought. Given this state of affairs, and though I know you are not alive any more, the desire has come upon me to send you this letter at a time I was longing for you.

Still, my spirit is not thinking only of you. Of the many cherry trees that line the central gates of Takao, there is one I used to speak to at night, when the moon and the other stars were turning bright and reddish. I find myself now at a distance and cannot see it any longer, but memory has taken me back to it again. I sometimes felt like sending a letter to the cherry tree to tell it what happened. But since I would have to be put away if I were mad enough to send a letter to a cherry tree, which cannot utter a single word, I refrained and dismissed it as a bit of folly. There are those among my friends who would agree with me that it would be folly to do something of the sort. In joining you to accompany the mariner 'Vajra' ("Detached"), who traveled the continent of jewels, and in letting my thoughts set sail in the company of the monk Sāgaramegha ("Ocean Cloud"), who dwells in the ocean, what would I lack?²¹ In speaking this way, I am referring to what I would like to be the case. In fact, the companions we

19. [The reference is to a demon said to bring misfortune in its earthly form but benefits in its heavenly form. The three worlds represented by the mountains are the worlds of desire, the sensible, and the supersensible.]

20. [Inari is a deity of grains and symbol of prosperity in general; the fox is its messenger who, for Buddhists, is thought to deceive people and lead them astray.]

21. [Vajra and Sāgaramegha are two of the spiritual teachers Sudhana meets on his pilgrimage to truth, as recorded in the *Gaṇḍavūhya* chapter of the *Flower Garland Sutra*.]

meet in dreams leave us with a bitter taste after we have woken up. It is precisely persons like this who have awakened to the spiritual realm that are true friends.

My only regret is that, for all these speculations, I have yet to dream of the four aspects of time that propel the individual mind. My behavior does not seem to follow my commands. Nevertheless, firmly convinced of the teaching that relates the authentic mode of being of things to their causal conditions, I embrace anyone who invites me to turn away from my ego in order to follow another, and when ignorance blocks the way to return to the origins, I do not let go of the principle that the absence of things is no different from emptiness. When a bodhisattva, having achieved the state of a spiritual body, comes out of meditation, distinctions resulting from attachment to things rise up before him. But when a bodhisattva has reached the stage of the path to subjugation, he deals the final blow to thoughts that produce phenomena, elevating them unconsciously to a path of higher dissolution until the bodhisattva arrives at the endpoint where thought is grounded. Once the winds of ignorance have subsided, there arrives the moment at which all the waves in the sea of the nature of things disappear.

Since we are dealing with degrees of discipline entailed in actualizing the principle step by step, the removal of the passions and realization of the fruit of this removal must take place gradually. That being so, I prefer to address myself to a companion with genuinely detached thoughts, something I find altogether attractive, rather than to one with an extraordinary mind. If you think of the world as it has been these many years past, it seems like a tale that has been dug up out of the earth. These are ancient matters; things today need to be suited to our own age. Listening to me speak this way, one might think there is some hope. But does the monastic community cultivate disciplinary rules in harmony? Does it live in a uniquely spiritual atmosphere? If one cannot give thought to companions close by, then one is not disposed to protect any beings. Generally speaking, these things are both passé and up-to-date.

[FG, RVM]