

Turning the Light Around and Shining Back

ekō henshō

回光返照

Shakyamuni Buddha (Sandhinirmochana Sutra, ~300 C.E.): “Buddhist Yoga” translated by Thomas Cleary, pages 44-46

Attentively meditate on the inner stream of the meditating consciousness...Continually focus attention on meditation on the uninterrupted mind, the mind that focuses on images. (this is called shamatha) Meditate on the one-pointedness of mind... This means realizing that images concentrated on are only consciousness; or realizing this, to meditate on suchness. (this is called the union of shamatha and vipashyana, calm-abiding and insight)

Bodhidharma, first Chinese Chan ancestor, d. 532 (Treatise on Contemplating Mind): “Zen Dawn” trans. by J.C. Cleary, page 81

Huikē (the second ancestor) asked: For those intent on the path of enlightenment, what method should be practiced, what method is most essential and concise? Bodhidharma said: Just contemplate mind – this one method takes in all practices, and is indeed essential and concise.

While Bodhidharma was facing a wall, Huikē said: My mind is not yet at peace. Please pacify my mind. Bodhidharma said: Bring me your mind and I will pacify it for you. Huikē said: I have looked for my mind and cannot find it. Bodhidharma said: I have pacified your mind for you.

Jianzhi Sengcan, third ancestor, d. 606 (Song of the Trusting Mind): trans. by Richard Clarke, edited by Kokyo Henkel

To return to the root is to find the meaning, but to pursue appearances is to miss the source. At the moment of turning the light of awareness around (henshō), there is going beyond appearance and emptiness. (the first time *henshō* is used)

Shuangfeng Daoxin, fourth ancestor, 580-651 (Dharma Gate of Calming the Mind to Enter the Way): “Zen Dawn,” page 49

To be mindful of Buddha is to be mindful of mind...With constant mindfulness of Buddha, grasping at objects does not arise...This is the true reality-nature body of the Tathagata...It is also called bodhi, nirvana, prajna. There is no sense of the subject observing and the object observed.

Daman Hongren, fifth ancestor, 601-674 (Treatise on the Supreme Vehicle): “Minding Mind” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 9

Calm yourself, quiet your senses. Look right into the source of mind, always keeping it shining bright, clear and pure.

Dajian Huineng, sixth ancestor, 617-713 (Platform Sutra): “Sutra of Hui-neng” trans. by Thomas Cleary, pages 13, 52

When you do not think of good and do not think of bad, what is your original face? (At these words, Huiming was greatly enlightened) What I have told you is no secret. If you reflect inwardly (henshō), the secret is in you.

Observe your own original mind; don’t cling to the appearances of external things.

Wang Wei, 699-761 (Retreat at Mt. Chungnan): “Roaring Stream” trans. by Nelson Foster, page 37

I follow the stream to its very source, then sit and watch where the clouds rise.

Shitou Xiqian, 700-790 (Song of the Grass-Roof Hermitage): “Cultivating the Empty Field” trans. by Taigen Leighton, page 58

Turn around the light to shine within (ekō henshō), then just return. The vast, inconceivable source can’t be faced or turned away from...If you want to know the undying person in the hut, don’t separate from this skin bag here & now. (1st time *ekō henshō* used)

Yaoshan Weiyuan, 751-834: “Shobogenzo” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 10

As the Chan Master Yaoshan was sitting, a monk asked: What are you thinking of, so still and intent? Yaoshan said: I am thinking of that which is not thinking. The monk asked: How can one think of that which is not thinking? Yaoshan said: It isn’t thought (nonthinking, beyond thinking).

Linji Yixuan, d. 866: “Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi” trans. by Burton Watson, page 68

You must right now turn your light around and shine it on yourselves (ekō henshō), not go seeking somewhere else. Then you will understand that in body and mind you are no different from the ancestors and buddhas, and that there is nothing to do.

Guishan Lingyu, 771-854: “Shobogenzo” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 10, “Five Houses of Zen” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 27 (ekō henshō on 17)

Using the subtlety of thinking without thought, think back to the infinity of the flames of awareness. When thinking comes to an end, return to the source, where essence and characteristics always abide, phenomenon and noumenon are nondual. The real Buddha is suchness as-it-is. (Upon hearing these words, Yangshan realized great awakening)

Yangshan Huiji, 807-883: “Book of Serenity” case 32, trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 140

The thinker is the mind and the thought-of is the environment. Therein are mountains, rivers...and so forth; reverse your thought to think of the thinking mind – are there so many things there?

You people should all turn back your light and reflect (ekō henshō); do not memorize my words. Since beginningless eons you have turned your backs on the light and plunged into darkness; the roots of your false conceptions are deep.

Furong Daokai, 1042-1118: “Timeless Spring” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 59

When you get here, turn the light around to shine back (ekō henshō), let go your hands and accept it.

Yuanwu Keqin, 1063-1135 (Zen Letters): “Zen Letters” trans. by J.C. and Thomas Cleary, pages 66, 85, 97

The most important thing is for people of great faculties and sharp wisdom to turn the light of mind around and shine back (ekō henshō) and clearly awaken to this mind before a single thought is born.

Go directly to your personal existence in the field of the five aggregates, turn the light around and reflect back (ekō henshō).

Your true nature is clear and still and as-it-is – empty through and accept it. When you see clearly this true nature, this true nature is mind, and this mind is true nature... It is called the ever-abiding fundamental source.

Hongzhi Zhengjue, 1091-1157: “Cultivating the Empty Field” trans. by Taigen Leighton, page 16

Take the backward step and directly reach the middle of the circle from where the light issues forth.

Lanxi Daolong, 1213-1279 (Treatise on Sitting Meditation): “The Original Face” trans. by Thomas Cleary, pages 30-31

What is turning the light around and shining back? (ekō henshō) Illuminating outward things, one’s own light is turned back to shine on the inner self... The knowing mind is the light, errant thoughts are shadows; the light illumining things is called shining, and when the mind and thoughts do not range over things but are turned toward the original nature, this is called turning the light around and shining back. It is also called panoramic illumination; illumining the whole of the immediate substance, it is where neither delusion nor enlightenment have ever appeared... The nonproduction of a single thought is what is known as the original essence of mind. It is not stopping thought, yet it is also not not stopping thought; it is just the nonproduction of a single thought.

Eihei Dogen, 1200-1253 (Universal Recommendation for Sitting Meditation): “Shobogenzo” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 9

You should stop the intellectual activity of pursuing words and learn the stepping back of turning the light around and shining back (ekō henshō); body and mind will naturally drop off and the original face will appear... Think of what doesn’t think. How do you think of what doesn’t think? Nonthinking. This is the essential art of sitting meditation.

(Extensive Record): “Dogen’s Extensive Record” trans. by Taigen Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, page 268

Everyone without exception holds on to the jewel that glows in the night... Unless we turn the light around and shine it within (ekō henshō), how can we hold close the jewel when we are lost in the outlying countryside?

(Awesome Presence of Active Buddhas): “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye” trans. by Taigen Leighton & Kazuaki Tanahashi, page 268

Thoroughly practicing, thoroughly clarifying, is not forced. It is just like recognizing the shadow of deluded thought and turning the light around to shine within (ekō henshō). The clarity of clarity beyond clarity prevails in the activity of buddhas. This is totally surrendering to practice. To understand the meaning of totally surrendering, you should thoroughly investigate mind. In the steadfastness of thorough investigation, all phenomena are the unadorned clarity of mind. (also see Dogen’s One Bright Pearl for *ekō henshō*)

Koun Ejo, 1198-1282 (Absorption in the Treasury of Light): “Minding Mind” trans. by Thomas Cleary, page 80

Just cast body and mind into the great treasury of light and don’t look back.

Keizan Jokin, 1268-1325 (Transmission of Light): “Record of Transmitting the Light” trans. by Francis Cook, page 222, 235

When you encounter the skill of a spiritual teacher and not a single thought arises, this is when you see smoke. If you stop here and rest, it is like stopping at warmth; but if you continue on, you will see fire. This means knowing the One who does not give rise to a single thought... It is called the indestructible hidden body; that body is empty and bright.

Learning the Way is said to be apart from mind, thought, and consciousness. These must not be thought of as body and mind. There is still a wonderful brightness that is eternally unmoving. If you look carefully, you will certainly reach it. If you are able to clarify this Mind, no body and mind can be found; no self and others can be involved. Therefore it is said, “Drop off body and mind.”... When you look, nothing is there.

Pojo Chinul, 1158-1210 (Complete Sudden Attainment of Buddhahood): “Selected Works of Chinul” trans. by Robert Buswell, page 268

Now I aim solely to induce ordinary people of great aspiration to look back on the radiance (henshō) of the one true Dharma-realm which is their own mind’s fundamental wisdom of universal brightness. They will then be able to awaken to the fact that, although the names of the Buddhas in the ten directions are different... these are the form and functioning of their minds’ wisdom of universal brightness; they are not external things.

Yondam Yuil, 1720-1799: “Selected Works of Chinul” trans. by Robert Buswell, page 63

To trace the radiance back (henshō) means to trace the radiance back to the numinous awareness of one’s own mind. It is like seeing the radiance of the sun’s rays and following it back until you see the orb of the sun itself.

Secret of the Golden Flower, attributed to Taoist Master Lu Yan (d.798): trans. by Thomas Cleary, pages 18, 19, 21, 37

Turning the light around (ekō) is not turning around the light of one body, but turning around the very energy of creation. It is not stopping random imagination only temporarily; it is truly emptying routine compulsion for all time.

The light is neither inside or outside the self. Mountains, rivers sun, moon and the whole earth are all this light, so it is not only in the self. All the operations of intelligence, knowledge and wisdom are also this light, so it is not outside the self. The light of heaven and earth fills the universe; the light of one individual also naturally extends through the heavens and covers the earth. Therefore, once you turn the light around, everything in the world is turned around.

The turning around is “stopping” (shamatha); the light is “seeing” (vipashyana). Stopping without seeing is called turning around without light. Seeing without stopping is called having light without turning it around. Remember this.

If you can look back again and again into the source of mind, whatever you are doing, not sticking to any image of person or self at all, then this is turning the light around wherever you are. This is the finest practice.

Tilopa, 988-1069 (Pith Instructions to Naropa on Mahamudra): “Straight from the Heart” trans. by Karl Brunnholz, page 96

When you look at the center of the sky, seeing will cease. Likewise, when mind looks at mind, the swarms of thoughts cease and unsurpassable enlightenment is attained.

Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, 1512-1587 (Clarifying the Natural State): “Clarifying the Natural State” trans. by Erik Pema Kunsang, page 27

While in the state of lucid and thought-free calm-abiding, look directly into your conscious mind. It is a wakefulness for which no words suffice. It is not a definable entity, but at the same time, it is a self-knowing aware emptiness that is clear, lucid and awake. Sustain this without distraction... This is what is given many names, such as buddha-nature, nature of mind, nonarising dharmakaya, basic natural state, innate mind, original wakefulness, and mahamudra.

Jamgon Mipham, 1846-1912 (Lamp that Dispels Darkness): “Perfect Clarity” trans. by Erik Pema Kunsang, page 27

When your mind experiences a vacant state, which lacks both thought and mental activity, look naturally into the one who notices this state, the one who is not thinking. When you do so, there is a thought-free knowing (rigpa) that is totally open, free from inside and outside, like a clear sky. This knowing is not a duality of that experienced and that experiencing, but you can resolve that it is your own nature and feel the conviction that “it is no other than this.”