

maJoshu and Dogen discuss:

Does a dog have Buddha-nature?

Yes and no.

(From the “Bussho” fascicle of *Shobogenzo*)

by Byakuren Judith Ragir

Ordinary minds are caught between yes and no. All of Zen is directed towards learning to hold the paradox of non-duality. Life is happening; we exist. At the same time, if we look deeply into time and place, even the physicists are finding that we don't exist as we thought we did. We are not just the appearance of things.

If this is reality, how do we live without denying or getting caught on one side of the dynamic functioning of existence and non-existence, life and death, becoming and being?

This koan is directed at, as Dogen says, “realizing that the words in their silence are the same as the razor edge on a laugh.” On a laugh, with our hands gesturing in the air, we end up saying, “don't know!” We need to blow our discriminating mind in order to understand the dynamism of the moment. Both form and emptiness (being and non-being) is expressed, simultaneously, as one.

A group of us were discussing this koan, and a practitioner was insistent about her absolute position that “a dog has buddha-nature. Yes!” How could I (the teacher), or the ancestors, insinuate that her beloved dog didn't have buddha-nature? Didn't Buddha say, “All sentient beings without exception have the buddha-nature!”? Ah, well, what **do** we mean by buddha-nature? This is precisely the topic of Dogen's fascicle “Bussho” (buddha-nature).

As a teaching technique, we can talk about two types of buddha-nature as long as we recognize that in truth, they are not two. In “Bussho”, Dogen describes
mu-buddha-nature, the “no”, (emptiness or non-being)
and u-buddha-nature, the “yes”, (form or being),

The fourth patriarch in a dialogue with a practitioner says, “You have no buddha-nature”. Dogen reads this passage, as “You are mu-buddha-nature”. This differentiation between “have” and “are” is very important to Dogen's linguistics. When you use the word “have,” it implies that there is a subject and object. “I” have “buddha-nature”. But for Dogen, this language does not point to the truth. There is no “I” as an isolated unit and a separate self. There is only “entire being”. Entire being is the completely inter-related functioning of the universal energy and “I”. It is the expression of interdependence with no boundary that distinguishes an “I” from a “them”.

From Bussho:

Whether you speak of “living beings,” “sentient beings,” “all classes of living things” or “all variety of living beings”, it makes no difference. The words “entire being” mean both sentient beings and all beings. In other words, **entire being is the buddha-nature.**” I call the whole integral entity of entire being “sentient beings”. Just at the very time when things are thus, both inside and outside of sentient beings are, as such, the entire being of the buddha-nature. Dogen is being very specific about the inter-being of all things and is in complete accord with the teaching of no-centralized self. Inter-dependence itself is buddha-nature.

So this buddha-nature deconstructs the “I”, or even “dog”, in terms of time and space or inside and outside. It cannot be spoken of in terms of have and have not, yes and no, in that moment or this moment. It is the completely integrated moment. It is the pure working of the moment.

He writes that this dynamism and inter-being is none other than the ordinary objects of our life and ourselves. *Entire being is a buddha’s words, a buddha’s tongue, the pupils of a buddha-ancestor’s eyes, the noseholes of a Zen monk. Nor does the term “entire being” mean emergent being, or original being, or mysterious being, or anything of the like, much less conditioned being or illusory being. It has nothing to do with such things as mind and object, substance and form*”. Buddha-nature, the essence, or “nothingness” is not a “thing” or a “mystery” that is outside of our ordinary reality.

What does it mean that “entire being is a buddha’s words, a buddha’s tongue, the pupils of a buddha-ancestor’s eyes, the noseholes of a Zen monk”? This again, is Dogen’s way of pushing us back into realizing that the present moment appearance is the functioning moment. He says in “Fukanzazengi”, “Going forward is after all, an everyday affair.” The coming together of the causes and conditions that produce this moment is, after all, all we have, and is the manifestation of life itself. Right here! Right now, whether we know it or not. Buddha-nature is not a metaphysical thing; it is the very dynamic here and now. Dogen writes, “They are the ordinary, rice-eating, tea-drinking occurrences in the lives of Buddhas and ancestors.” He also writes: “Look!!! Temporal conditions!!! Look!!! Buddha! Buddha! Look!!! Nature!! Nature!!”

Dogen expression in this fascicle also works with the version of Joshu’s “Mu” koan in *The Book of Serenity* :

Monk: *Does a dog have a buddha-nature or not?*

Joshu: *Yes*

Monk: *Since it has, why is it then in this skin bag?*

Joshu: *Because he knows yet deliberately transgresses.*

Another monk at another time asks: *Does a dog have a buddha-nature or not?*

Joshu: *No*

Monk #2: *All sentient beings have a buddha-nature – why does a dog have none, then?*

Joshu: *Because the dog exists in karmic consciousness.*

This koan continues to explore that “u-buddha-nature,” does not hinder or is not in opposition to “mu-buddha-nature.” Yet one cannot see the other. “Mu-buddha-nature” does not have the mind to see form. “U-buddha-nature” cannot see emptiness but is the manifestation of its suchness. Dogen calls “u-buddha-nature,” “the emancipation of suchness.” Form is the active expression of “mu.” It is the present moment blooming and exhausting itself into freedom. It is the creative moment of “mu-buddha-nature.”

This is the reverse of how we usually think. Usually, we think that form itself, seen through karmic consciousness, obstructs “mu.” But the understanding of “mu” and “u” completing each other is very radical. This integration strikes me as very life-affirming. There is nothing to get rid of or to think of as a façade. THIS is it! Form and emptiness, “u” and “mu”, inter-embrace in the dynamism of this working moment in life.

Our Rinzai dharma brothers and sisters emphasize realizing “mu.” In fact, in the Gateless Gate, this koan only has the answer of “no” and does not have any mention of “yes.” This is a very important point. It is very difficult and demanding task to be concentrated enough and silent enough, to break open our ordered consciousness. Our perceptions have to drop off or open, in order to have an actual experience of vastness and infinite silence. This “mu” experience informs our expression of the inter-embrace and interrupts our belief in the solidity of our stories and our self. This insight changes how we live our life.

But the “yes” is also important. It is what prevents Zen from becoming cold and indifferent. The “yes” expresses our understanding of “he knows but deliberately transgresses” or “because the dog exists in karmic consciousness.” We know about vastness, and yet, we deliberately take care of the stories (our karmic effects or temporal conditions) with care and precision. Realizing the impermanence and insubstantiality of form, we still take care of it with an ungrasping attitude and with kindness. How do we take care of it? In the moment of its arising.

As a human being or a dog, there is no other place to be but in “our skin bags.” The image of a skin bag has reference to Shih-t’ou’s Grass Roof Hermitage poem. Shih-t’ou writes: “If you want to know the Undying Man in his hermitage, you must not leave your own bag of skin.” If you want to know “mu”, you must not, or cannot, leave “u.” We realize and practice the ancient law of cause and effect within the field of impermanence. This is non-duality.

“The original being, shines alone” within everything we do or say, whether we know it or not. There is nothing special we have to do. Dogen writes, “The Undying Man, whoever he may be, is never at any time separated from his bag of skin.” The original being shines through everything and cause and effect works endlessly.

From *The Gateless Gate*, Mumon's poem:

The dog! The buddha-nature!

The truth is manifested in full.

A moment of yes-and-no

Lost are your body and soul.