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Zenki, “Total Dynamic Working”

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The 22nd Chapter of Dogen’s Shobogenzo

We often hear there is no god in Buddhism. Yes, we can say, there is no centralized intelligence; there is no anthropomorphized god or personalized god following our every move. But there is something: the mystery of being, the functioning of the universe. Dogen addresses this something (which we can’t even call a “thing”) as Zenki, the total dynamic functioning of the universe.

Zenki has been translated in various ways. Katagiri calls it “total dynamic working”, Okamura calls it “total function” and Tanahashi calls it “undivided activity.” What is undivided? It is the expression of non-duality, of co-arising, of oneness that embraces two-ness. While our discursive mind is constantly dividing the world into the opposite (life and death, subject and object, you and me), the world is pumping away in total dynamic functioning.

The “zen” character in Zenki means total. The “ki” character means function, activity or machine. The oldest machine in china is the loom, a weaving machine with many parts. Each part has some separation but each individual part needs to connect with all the other parts and function together to achieve its purpose.

We can use this metaphor of the weaving machine to demonstrate the total functioning of the opposites. The warp can represent the universal energy, the present moment, the oneness of all things. The woof or weft can be the individual uniqueness of each form, the historic dimension, the storyline or karma (causes and conditions) of each unique event. The shuttle that weaves the weft threads through the warp is the motion of weaving both opposites together, making it all come together into one inseparable piece.

Our life force (the individual destiny) and the life force of the universe (the universal functioning) all are working together. This is what Katagiri-Roshi called our Total Personality. We can understand each person, place, or form, as Buddha. If we can see this

total dynamic functioning no matter what circumstances or what storyline has arisen: this is Buddhist Faith.

“Ki” or “functioning” comes from the Japanese character compound “kikan.” Kikan is the central mechanism of a machine: a mainspring, a hinge, or a pivot. “Kan” means gate. A gate can be seen as something that separates but also a passageway that connects. It is an obstacle but also an opening. **Life of this present moment is within this functioning/kikan. This functioning/kikan is within the life of this present moment.** Nishijima and Cross translated this as “the momentary pivot-state” (the total realization of life and death in each moment). Katagiri Roshi followed this translation with the poetic phrasing, “the pivot of nothingness.” We cannot find this pivotal moment, however hard we try because it is not findable or substantial or a “thing.”

The first line of Zenki is quite a beautiful expression of the whole piece. ***The great way of all buddhas, when it is completely penetrated, is liberation and manifestation.*** Liberation can translate as enlightenment or nirvana: freedom, letting go, releasing into formlessness, the expression of oneness or the absolute. Manifestation is the great expression of life through form; sometimes we call this samsara. However, the whole point in zenki is that these two sides completely co-arise and dynamically work together in this present moment. They are not two. As Katagiri Roshi says, birth and death are one event.

This present moment is the gateway to this all-consuming functioning. This is the great way of all buddhas. The great way is the path as you walk. From the *Harmony of Difference and Sameness: **If you don't understand the Way right before you, how will you know the path as you walk? Progress is not a matter of far or near, but if you are confused, mountains and rivers block your way.*** The great way is none other than the next step. If you look up and project into the future, or look around, all of a sudden, the mountains and rivers are your mental obstacles. When really, crossing the river is actually just the next step or the next stroke of your swimming, and you are sopping wet and splattered with mud. This is Buddha's great way: Samsara and Nirvana completely co-arising. Mud and purity arise together!

This great way is found when you **completely penetrate** the object that is arising right now. This means that subject and object are merged in the functioning of the present moment. In

order to be “completely penetrated” into the present moment, there is a lot of letting go and trusting that needs to happen. We have to trust that total dynamic functioning (Zenki) is working completely and with harmony in order to have our discursive, controlling mind settle down into rest and openness, accepting the moment as it is. Again, this is Buddhist Faith. “Accepting the moment as it is” does not mean passivity. Accepting and responding are also dynamically working together. In order to respond in the most wholesome way to our life circumstances, we begin by completely accepting or being intimate with what is actually arising. As Katagiri Roshi often humorously said, to poke your head in there and evaluate everything, is bringing a gap between what is happening and you.

In this Zenki, inner and outer are dynamically working together. The whole world is working together to produce this moment and there is no “self” apart from that “whole working together.” Dogen uses the example of a boatman, the boat, the oars, the rudder, the tide, the current, the river, the banks, the sky, etc. All of these elements make up the world of the “self” of the boatman. Their functioning together makes up the experience of the person but there is no separate person. The person is also, simply, the functioning of the mechanism of the five-skandhas (form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness) and yet, as hard as we try to find it, there is no solid, substantial, unchanging “self.”

Within each moment, birth and death co-arise. This means that inherent in each form is its own destruction. Each moment is born and completely dies. This is a Buddhist understanding of time. Each moment is the source of being, arising and dissolving so fast that our conscious mind cannot see it. So we can say that **experience releases itself**. This slogan can help us trust more and let things be. Death is inherent in each moment, which also means that the next moment is completely fresh. There is nothing for us to hold on to or manipulate. Things are dynamically flowing.

Dogen from Zenki:

Life is not coming; life is not going; life is not appearing; life is not becoming. And yet, life is manifestation of the total function, death is manifestation of the total function.....Any single moment and any single being are not apart from life. Any single matter or any single mind is not apart from life.....The entire great earth and the entire space appear in life and also appear in death. However, it is not that one piece of entire great earth and one piece of entire space carry out the total function

within life and also carry out the total function within death. It is neither one nor different; neither different nor identical; neither identical nor multiple.

How does this understanding – neither one nor different, neither different nor identical, neither identical nor multiple – affect then, our behavior as human beings? How do we live our lives, knowing the oneness of interdependence or inter-being and also keeping the integrity of each form as unique? How do we cut a carrot differently than we rip a lettuce? How do we treat a person in deep suffering or a person who is experiencing a lot of pleasure according to their circumstance? How can our minds be so flexible that we respond according to the uniqueness of each situation without getting attached to the results of our actions? Gathering up and letting go – this is practice. We can be the expression of the pivot of nothingness, taking care of manifestation and being unafraid of liberation.

Katagiri Roshi wrote, “As simply as you can, you have to stand up in this moment and then let go.”