

Uji (Existence-Time)

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Generally the term *uji* refers to a time when someone temporarily possesses something that circulates among people, such as money. For example, in the sentence “I will pay when I have (money),” “when” is the Chinese character *ji* and “have” is *u*. Sometimes *uji* points to a small part of a time that continues flowing without break. This meaning of *uji* is often used in Buddhist scriptures and Zen texts. It means not only a moment as a point in time but also sometimes a short period of time during which something continues in the same condition.

In *Shobogenzo*, there is a fascicle titled “*Uji*.” In this writing *uji* is defined as a word implying the oneness of *u* (existence) and *ji* (time). To explain this, I will first discuss a paragraph in the chapter entitled “Teaching the Assembly” in *The Recorded Sayings of Linchi* as an example of the usage of *uji* in Zen texts in general. Then I will explore Dogen Zenji’s definition of *uji*, focusing on *Shobogenzo Uji*.

***Uji* in the Recorded Sayings of Linchi**

In a paragraph in the chapter “Teaching the Assembly” in the *Recorded Sayings of Linchi*, the term *uji* is used as follows:

At the evening gathering, the master taught the assembly and said, “Sometimes (*uji*) a person is taken away and circumstances are not taken away; sometimes circumstances are taken away and a person is not taken away; sometimes both a person and circumstances are taken away; sometimes neither a person nor circumstances are taken away.

This section is well known as the *Shiryoken* (four categorical notes for consideration). It shows four kinds of methods for masters to use in guiding practitioners. “A person” here means the subjective personality of a practitioner. “Circumstances” mean the objects and conditions around the person upon which that personality is based. In guiding a practitioner, a master “sometimes (*uji*) takes away the subject and sometimes (*uji*) leaves only the subject...” This shows that a master flexibly changes the guiding method depending on the person’s ability and character.

I will not discuss the concrete content of the methods here. I will just point out that *uji* is used as a time frame for the classification of the situations in which a master (teacher) guides a practitioner. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, in this quotation *uji* is used to indicate a case in which “the same condition continues for a short duration.”

In its later development, *shiryoken* is interpreted to mean stages in the method of guiding

practitioners, with the first two stages offering guidance for practitioners of lower capacity, the third being a guide for practitioners of mid-level capacity, and the last being a guide for practitioners of the highest capacity. Here it becomes more clear that *uji* is used in classifying cases for ranking.

Dogen Zenji's *Uji*

Let us now see how Dogen Zenji uniquely interprets *uji* in his *Shobogenzo Uji*.

An ancient buddha (Yakusan Igen) said,
Sometimes standing on top of the highest peak,
Sometimes moving along the bottom of the deepest ocean,
Sometimes three heads and eight arms,
Sometimes the sixteen-foot or eight-foot golden body,
Sometimes a staff or a whisk,
Sometimes an outdoor pillar or a stone lantern,
Sometimes the third son of Chang or the fourth son of Lee,
Sometimes the Earth and empty space.

In this word "sometimes (*uji*)," time(*ji*) is already just existence(*u*), and all existence is time. The sixteen-foot golden body is time itself. Because it is time, it has the resplendent brightness of time. We should learn it as the twelve hours of today. The three heads and eight arms are time itself. Because they are time, they are completely the same as the twelve hours of today.

(*Shobogenzo Uji*)

At the beginning of this fascicle, Dogen Zenji begins by writing, "Sometimes (in a certain case), standing on top of the highest peak, Sometimes (in another case) moving along the bottom of the deepest ocean,..." In this quotation (actually these phrases were composed by Dogen Zenji based on the words of Yakusan Igen) the meaning of *uji* looks the same as I explained above. But Dogen Zenji adds a very unique interpretation of this quotation.

According to Dogen Zenji, *uji* means that time (*ji*) is already existence (*u*) and all existence (*u*) is time (*ji*). Dogen Zenji understands *uji* as a word showing the complete oneness of existence and time.

This idea becomes more concrete when we read the next sentence, "... sixteen-foot golden body (Shakyamuni Buddha) is time itself. Because it is time, it has the resplendent brightness of time. We should learn it in the flow of the current time." Each and every existence, even the Buddha's body, has its own time as individual existence and emits its own resplendent brightness (function) through its individual time. But it is not separated from the real world we actually live in. Therefore

we have to study it within the twelve hours (everyday life). That is what Dogen Zenji claims.

What is important here is that “the current time” is not “standard time” which can be uniformly applied to all existences but “inherent time” possessed by each existence in order to manifest its own unique way of being.

In the quotation above, the same thing is also said concerning “three heads and eight arms (heavenly beings).” And things like “chrysanthemum” and “pine tree” have their own unique time and manifest their own way of being (their attributes) within that time.

***Houi* (dharma position), *Kyoryaku* (passage), and *Zengosaidan* (disconnectedness from a before and after)**

Dogen Zenji defines “way of being” (attribute) as “the dharma position of *uji*” (*uji no hou*), and calls the continuation of this position for a certain duration (basically, the time between the beginning of a phenomenon and its end) “passage” (*kyoryaku*).

Let us look at how he articulates the dharma position of *uji* in *Shobogenzo Uji*.

Even forms that seem to slip by are existence. Furthermore, if you leave it at that, since it is the period of the manifestation of slipping by, it is the abiding in dharma position of *uji*. Vigorously abiding in dharma position is *uji*. Don't mistakenly confuse it as nonexistence, don't insist on it as existence.

Here, Dogen Zenji says that even when something seems to slip by (in relation to buddha dharma), that incident itself is *uji* (existence). The state of slipping by, continuing its mode of being, including the beginning and end of it, is maintained. This is called “the dharma position of *uji*.”

Ultimately, Dogen Zenji defines *uji* as the state in which abiding in a dharma position (firmly grounding itself in its own mode of being) is vigorously active.

A phenomenon establishes its own way of being (attribute, or *u*) and is vividly developing and unfolding its way of being (utilizing its own unique time, or *ji*). That is *uji*.

As for passage, Dogen Zenji explains as below;

You should not understand passage as like the wind and rain's going east and west. (...) Passage is, for example, like spring: in spring there are numerous appearances - this is called “passage.” You should learn that it passes through without any extraneous thing. For example, springtime in passing necessarily passes through spring.

(*Shobogenzo Uji*)

He explains that passage is not a “change of situation due to the passage of time” such as the

change of wind's direction from east to west but a single way of being (attribute), such as spring, containing numerous aspects as spring. "Passage" means that something is developing and changing its way of being (attributes) along its own time axis.

As for the idea that individual being has its own unique time, the term *zengosaidan* (disconnectedness from a before and after) in *Shobogenzo Genjokoan* is pointing to the same issue. This word is often understood as almost a single unit of one moment, "this present moment disconnected from both before and after." But it actually means that the current way of being is being independently maintained and developed. It clarifies the abiding in dharma position of *uji* by cutting off its continuity with the time before its emergence and after its disappearance.

Thus, Dogen Zenji's reasoning concerning time is marked by using "the twelve hours," which is the stream of time in everyday life, in one's own way based on specific attributes, instead of setting up universal and uniform "standard time." *Uji* is an expression of this characteristic. If I were to describe Dogen Zenji's definition of *uji* in a dictionary, I would say: (1) for something to have its own way of being (attribute) and develop it along its own unique time axis, (2) existence itself which has its own unique time and establishes its own way of being.

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