

Muchu setsumu (Explaining a Dream within a Dream)

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Dream and Reality

“Explaining a dream within a dream” is a phrase that expresses a situation where, within a dream, someone is telling another person “Today, I saw this dream.” This is to speak of something without any substance; something which is an illusion and far from reality.

Usually, this expression is used to indicate that all phenomena in the actual world do not have a fixed substance. It is used to mean “After all, this world is like a dream” or “It is something which is fleeting like a dream.”

However, Dogen Zenji’s interpretation of this phrase was different. He taught that the world like a dream is in fact real and furthermore he said that Buddhism can only be practiced in this world of reality.

When those imposters, who do not truly study Buddhism, encounter the teaching “explaining a dream within a dream,” they idly suppose it might mean “imagining insubstantial dream-like things which do not exist at all.” They suppose that “explaining a dream within a dream” is just like piling delusion on top of delusion. But it is not this way. When you say the words “within delusion is just delusion,” you should still thoroughly investigate that the expression “delusion on top of delusion” is the path in the vast sky (the Way of Buddha).

Here, we can understand that Dogen Zenji is saying that “explaining a dream within a dream” does not mean piling delusion on top of delusion, but rather that it is the way of Buddhism itself.

Furthermore, Dogen Zenji says:

“Explaining a dream within a dream” is all buddhas. All buddhas are wind, rain, water, and fire. They receive these names and they retain those names. “Explaining a dream within a dream” are the ancient buddhas (the true buddhas). In the Lotus Sutra it says, “Riding in this precious, jeweled vehicle, we immediately arrive at the Buddha’s place of the truth.” The place of the Buddha to immediately arrive at is within this precious, jeweled vehicle.

Here, Dogen Zenji says that this dreamlike world of reality is all of the buddhas themselves. For this reason, all buddhas are the wind, rain, water and fire immediately in front of us. In other words, all things in the universe are the appearance of the shapes of all buddhas and these buddhas are called by the names of those things. This is to say that this very dreamlike real world is the world of all buddhas. And all of these buddhas see this dreamlike real world as the world of buddhas.

“Riding in the precious, jeweled vehicle and immediately arriving at the place of the truth” means that “Shakyamuni Buddha has put us on this wonderful vehicle decorated with jewels and which immediately takes us to the place of enlightenment.” These words can be found in the “Parable” chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*.

Picking up these words, Dogen Zenji teaches that “Immediately arriving at the place of truth is to be riding in the precious, jeweled vehicle.” The place of truth which Shakyamuni Buddha immediately takes us to is the vehicle that we are now riding in. This means that this very vehicle itself is the Buddha’s place of truth. In other words, Dogen Zenji says that it isn’t the case that Shakyamuni Buddha will take us to some splendid world somewhere else, but rather that the Buddha’s world is nothing other than this actual world, the actual world in which we live.

If We Live Within Awakening, That Is the World of the Buddhas

In the “Flowers in the Sky” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, there is a similar teaching.

When foolish people hear that the Tathagata said, “What is seen by obscured eyes are flowers in the sky,” they think that because “obscured eyes” means the deluded eyes of sentient beings, such beings see non-existent forms in clear space. It is from this understanding and point of view that they mistakenly think that the theory of the three worlds (the world of desire, the world of form, and the world of the formless) and the six realms (heaven, human beings, hell, animals, fighting devils, and hungry ghosts), as well as the theory of buddhas existing and not existing, exist even though these things have essentially never existed. If this deluded way of seeing (the cloud directly in front of our eyes) is cured, they will no longer see these non-existent flowers and so they would end up with the understanding in which it is said “there essentially are no flowers.” How unfortunate! This sort of person completely fails to understand from beginning to end about the appearance of what the Tathagata called “flowers in the sky.” The principle of what the buddhas called “obscured eyes” is something which ordinary people (sentient beings, common mortals) have still not thought about. Buddha-tathagatas practice within the world of these flowers in the sky and are able to enter the room of the Tathagata and sit and wear the robe (of a monk). When Shakyamuni Buddha picked up a flower, blinking, and transmitted the Dharma to Mahakashapa (the treasury of the true Dharma eye; the marvelous mind of Nirvana,) it was a koan in which “obscured eyes and flowers in the sky(the absolute truth)” was manifested. That the treasury of the true Dharma eye; the marvelous mind of Nirvana has been correctly transmitted to the present without being cut off is “obscured eyes and flowers in the sky.”

As shown in this passage, “flowers in the sky” usually refers to flowers in the sky which do not actually exist seen by eyes which suffer from a disease. This means that because the eyes are not well they see flowers in the sky which are not really there. What is this an allegory for? In the standard interpretation of Buddhism, the realms of delusion such as the three worlds and the six realms appear because common, ordinary people see the world with deluded eyes. This means that

because there is delusion such people think that things exist which in fact do not exist. However, Dogen Zenji does not explain it this way. For him, “flowers in the sky” are not flowers which do not exist, but rather that such “flowers in the sky” are obvious facts.

Dogen Zenji further teaches,

Ordinary scholars only think that flowers in the sky exist because of the sickness in the eyes. They do not understand the principle that because of the flowers in the sky sickness arises in the eyes. You must not foolishly think that obscured eyes (clouded eyes = the real world) is delusion and there exists the truth separate from it.

It is not the case that since there is delusion that something which does not exist is seen to exist, but rather that ordinary people are deluded within the present world which is truly here (the existent world). In the presently existing real world, buddhas live as awakened buddhas, and ordinary people live as ordinary deluded people. In this real world, it is ordinary people who are deluded and it is the buddhas who are awakened.

For us, there is the real, physical world. There is real life. Other than this real life, there is no true life, even if you seek for it and no matter where you might look for it. How should we live this real life? This is the question. If we live within delusion, that is the world of ordinary people. If we live within awakening, that is the world of the buddhas.

The Plum Blossoms Were the Udumbara Flower

In Dogen Zenji’s main work, the *Shobogenzo*, there is a chapter titled, “Plum Blossoms.” In this chapter, Dogen Zenji interprets the words of his teacher, Nyojo Zenji, and we can also gauge his supreme joy at having been able to inherit Nyojo Zenji’s Buddhadharma.

That very single plum flower blossoming in the snow is the udumbara flower, a flower which blooms once every 3,000 years. On a regular basis, I have seen plum blossoms many times, but I have not noticed that those blossoms are truly the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. Long ago, when Shakyamuni Buddha held up a flower and blinked, it was only Mahakashapa who realized Shakyamuni Buddha’s mind and smiled broadly. I was only absent-minded and was unable to smile in the same way that Mahakashapa did when Shakyamuni Buddha blinked and gave a similar teaching on plum blossoms. But now that I have already encountered Nyojo Zenji and received his teaching I truly know that the plum blossoms in the snow are the Tathagata’s eye and this is something I have finally grasped. (“Plum Blossoms”, *Shobogenzo*)

Until that point, Dogen Zenji had seen plum blossoms blooming in the snow as just plum blossoms. But after receiving Nyojo Zenji’s teaching, he was able to realize “What?! These plum blossoms which I have been seeing every day are the udumbara flower which blooms only once every 3,000 years.” He had realized that the simple, unassuming plum blossoms expressed the Buddhadharma.

One could argue that this story as well is the discovery of the splendor of reality. This is the standpoint where flowers in the sky are recognized as the truth, where there is no reality apart from a dreamlike world. This story of being able to see plum blossoms as the udumbara flower also says that this very same person knew that he was the Buddha as he was and that this person was able to discern the path to continue practicing the self as a Buddha.

Really Living

We see the world to the extent of our capability to recognize and know the world. We must know that there are parts of the world beyond that which we are cognizant of, that there are many aspects of the world which we are unable to perceive. We must not think that our ways of seeing things and our ways of thinking are correct; that what we perceive is the truth.

One could argue that what is for birds to be the sky, it is the water for fishes, and it is the great earth for human beings. It is important for us to live like this with a big, wide way of seeing things. With this big, wide mind, this is, for me, to live the reality of life. It is this very reality, the extent to which I am cognizant of, which is my place to live. It is important to take good care of that reality, and to continue living wholeheartedly in the moment now.

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