

Baika (Plum Blossoms)

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Dogen Zenji loves *baika* (plum blossoms)

The plum tree is a flowering tree brought to Japan from China by Japanese diplomatic delegations sent to China during the Tang dynasty. It has graceful flowers blooming in early spring and a noble fragrance. The Japanese people immediately loved it and up to the present time it has been greatly cherished as a typical Japanese flower. As suggested by the phrase “The plum throws off pure fragrance after enduring severe cold,” the plum flower offers us the power of life by surviving through the severe coldness of winter and emanating a pure fragrance in the midst of the snow.

In *Eihei Koroku*, vol.1, no. 34, Dogen Zenji says,

If this greatest cold does not penetrate into our bones, how will the fragrance of the plum blossoms pervade the entire universe?

Reading this, we can see that Dogen Zenji loved *baika* as a symbol of something that blooms beautifully after overcoming difficulties. In Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo*, there are two fascicles that have the name of a flower in their titles. They are *Baika* and *Udonge* (Udumbara Blossom). As I mention later, for Dogen Zenji *baika* was *udonge* and they are closely related.

In *Shobogenzo Baika*, he expanded *baika* to represent all flowers by writing

billions of blossoms are one family of plum blossoms

Not only that, it seems that he had a special feeling about *baika*.

A Mysterious Dream

In *Shobogenzo Shisho*, we see an account of a mysterious dream about *baika* which Dogen Zenji had during his pilgrimage in Sung dynasty China.

Dogen Zenji had the opportunity to see various *shisho* (lineage documents) while visiting temples in China. After he visited Mount Tiantai and Mount Yadang, on the way back to Mount Tiantong, he stopped by the Wannian Monastery of Pingtian. Yuanzi, the abbot, showed his own *shisho* to Dogen Zenji.

A *shisho* is a type of dharma transmission certificate that a master gives to his or her disciple. So, this is a document given only to disciples certified by a master. It should not be shown to even a close disciple or an old attendant monk without a special reason. But fortunately Dogen Zenji had the opportunity to see it because Yuanzi had a mysterious dream a few days before Dogen Zenji

visited his temple.

In this dream, a distinguished priest who seemed to be Zen Master Fachang of Mount Damei appeared, holding up a branch of plum blossoms. He said, "If a true person comes who has disembarked from a boat, do not withhold these flowers." And he gave Yuanzi the plum blossoms. Strangely enough, before five days had passed, Dogen Zenji, who had disembarked from a boat, came to meet Yuanzi. Since the *shisho* was written on brocade that has a plum blossom design woven into it, Yuanzi felt the dream was a prophecy telling him not to withhold showing his *shisho* or transmitting the dharma. In accordance with the dream, he willingly permitted Dogen Zenji to see his own *shisho* and said to him, "Since you must be the one Damei was referring to, in accordance with the dream I have taken this document out. Do you wish to inherit dharma from me? If so, I would not withhold it."

Dogen Zenji could have requested to receive *shisho* from him then, but he did not do so. He only offered incense and bowed. An incense attendant of Yunai was there and said that it was the first time he had ever seen a *shisho*.

Dogen Zenji also had a mysterious dream. It was documented in *Shobogenzo Shisho*:

On my way back to Tiantong from Mount Tiantai, I stayed at the entry hall of the Husheng Monastery on Mount Damei. At that time I had an auspicious dream in which the ancestor Damei came to me and gave me a branch of plum blossoms in full bloom. This image of the ancestor was worthy of great respect. The branch was one shaku¹ tall and one shaku wide. Aren't these plum blossoms as rare as an udumbara blossom? This dream was just as real as if I were awake. I have never before told this story to anyone in China or Japan.

This dream in which Damei came to Dogen Zenji and gave him a branch of plum blossoms in full bloom was the same mysterious dream as Yuanzi's. He firmly believed that the plum blossom in the dream was an *udumbara* blossom. After this incident, Dogen Zenji met Zen master Rujing and received *shisho* from him.

Udumbara Blossom

The *udumbara* is a legendary flower in Buddhism which blooms only once in three thousand years. In Zen tradition, it is mentioned in the story of Mahakasyapa smiling at the Buddha's holding up a flower. Shakyamuni Buddha held up this flower and blinked. Only Mahakasyapa smiled with understanding at this revelation. It is said that the dharma was transmitted from Buddha to Mahakasyapa in this way.

Dogen Zenji wrote a *Shobogenzo* fascicle entitled *Baika*. This fascicle is Dogen Zenji's commentary on his master Rujing's *jodo* words about plum blossoms. Reading this fascicle, we can strongly feel Dogen Zenji's admiration of Zen Master Rujing, his rejoicing over meeting his true master and the unsurpassable joy of receiving his dharma face-to-face. He wrote;

¹ A *shaku* is approximately one and one-half feet.

Plum blossoms in snow is the emergence of an *udumbara* blossom. How often do we see the eyeball of the true dharma of our Buddha Tathagata but do not smile, missing his blink? Now we authentically receive and accept that plum blossoms in snow are truly the Tathagata's eyeball.

Dogen Zenji's meeting with Rujing was exactly "the emergence of an *udumbara* blossom" for him. He often saw plum blossoms but took them as ordinary flowers. But after being taught by Rujing, he realized that the plum blossoms he often saw were nothing but *udumbara* blossoms which flower once in three thousand years. Before this, he could not smile like Mahakasyapa because he was not aware of Buddha's sermon, revealed through plum blossoms that remind one of Buddha's blink. But now he embodied the correctly transmitted Buddha dharma and could see plum blossoms as *udumbara* blossoms. This means he realized nothing other than that this self is the Buddha and he discovered the way in which he would continue practicing the self as the Buddha.

The paragraph I quoted can be understood as Dogen Zenji's declaration that he had received the correctly transmitted dharma from Zen master Rujing.

Thus *baika* is a flower with a close relationship with Dogen Zenji. For him *baika* is the Buddha himself, Rujing himself, and the correctly transmitted Buddha dharma itself.

Aren't we missing the Buddha's sermon that is being addressed to us everywhere because of the hectic pace of daily living? We should take time to quietly reflect upon ourselves, living a life of authentic faith based upon the correctly transmitted Buddha dharma taught by Dogen Zenji and Keizan Zenji (the Two Founders) and regulating body and mind. If we do so, some day we will definitely be able to hear the voice of a branch of *baika*.

In 1952, to commemorate the 700th anniversary of Dogen Zenji's passing away, a practice group of Sotoshu hymns was created. It was named *Baika-ryu* (*baika* style). This naming is of great significance.

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