

Dotoku (Able to Speak)

Rev. Tairyu Tsunoda
Komazawa University

Dotoku literally means “able to speak.” As I will discuss later, this word carries a very important meaning within Dogen Zenji’s teachings. The Chinese character *do* has many meanings ①way, path, road, ②bodhi, awakening, ③say, talk, speak, ④lead, govern. *Dou* in “*dotoku*,” means “say,” or “speak.” *Toku* means “attain,” “get,” “merit,” “be able to.” In *dotoku*, *toku* is used to mean “be able to.” So all together *dotoku* means “able to say,” or “able to speak.”

Dogen Zenji Placed Importance on Words

It is usually said that truth (reality) cannot be expressed in words (conveyed through language). This is also a common understanding in the Zen tradition. There is a phrase, “knowing coldness and warmth for oneself.” We can say “it is as cold as ice,” or “the water’s temperature is x degrees” to indicate the coldness or warmth of water to someone else, but to understand the coldness or warmth directly one must actually put his/her hand into the water without depending on the words. In Zen, it is important to know for oneself, to understand through direct personal experience. It is essential to experience for oneself through actually seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching. Words have only a limited ability to convey direct experience. Zen claims that it is impossible to explain in words not only the functions of feeling and cognition but also the content of the mind, such as how it feels to become awakened. Therefore Zen talks about “Not relying on letters. Transmission outside the scriptures,” and “Transmission from heart to heart.”

Dogen Zenji belongs to the Zen tradition and he shares its basic standpoint. But he also highly values the function of words. This is an important characteristic of his teachings.

We can find the same viewpoint in the teachings of his teacher, Nyojo. Dogen Zenji once asked Nyojo this question:

Dogen asked: “Now it is said in all corners of the world that transmission is outside the scriptures; this is the great meaning of the first Ancestral Teacher’s coming from India. What does this signify?”

Nyojo replied: “Why should the great Way of the buddhas and ancestral teachers concern inside or outside the scriptures? Yet it is said that transmission is outside the scriptures simply because, apart from what Kasyapa Matanga and others transmitted, the First Ancestral Teacher came from India to China, and intimately transmitted the Way and bestowed the method of practice. Therefore they say that the transmission is outside the scriptures. The world cannot have two Buddha Dharmas. Before the First Ancestral Teacher arrived in China there were only teachings and practices and there were no masters. When the First Ancestral Teacher came to China, it was as if the people of China received him as their king and the land, the treasures and the people of the country were subject to this king.”

Hokyoki

We can see in Nyojo's teachings that, even though he accepts "transmission outside the scriptures," he does not disparage the scriptures (sutras and commentaries, i.e., teachings expressed in words). He taught that there were not two Buddhisms, the one transmitted to China before Bodhidharma came from India to China and another one (Zen) that Bodhidharma transmitted. He said, "The world cannot have two Buddha Dharmas." He asserted that when Bodhidharma came to China, the people got a leader of Buddhist practice.

We can also find evidence in *Hokyoki* to demonstrate that Nyojo did not criticize Mahayana Buddhism or Hinayana Buddhism that existed prior to Chinese Zen.

In that time Zen monks took pride in their superiority over both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism prior to Chinese Zen and were critical of them. But Nyojo disparaged this trend. He valued the teachings of Buddhist scholars within both Mahayana Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism. We can feel the strength of his attitude from comments like "If you criticize them, you don't need to be a Buddhist. Why don't you convert to some other religion?"

Nyojo Zenji's understanding of "transmission outside the scriptures" was very different from the mainstream Song Dynasty Zen teachers' understanding of this phrase which expressed the essence of Zen. He did not blindly criticize Hinayana Buddhism, although Zen is a form of Mahayana Buddhism, or make light of teachings expressed in words. Being deeply influenced by his teacher, Dogen Zenji emphasized the importance of teachings explained in words.

The Truth Can Be Expressed in Words

Dogen Zenji highly valued *dotoku* (able to speak), seeming to oppose the Zen School's doctrine of "transmission outside the scriptures," that is to say, "the truth does not exist among words." This is very unique to Dogen and it sounds paradoxical as a statement coming from a person of the Zen tradition. *Dotoku* means "able to speak," or "able to express in words." Moreover, it means that the truth can be expressed by words or by actions. *Dotoku* is a statement through which we can understand Dogen Zenji's perspective concerning the expression of Buddha Dharma.

Dogen Zenji's essay entitled "*Dotoku*" is found in the *Shobogenzo*. What is *dotoku* able to speak or express? It is Dharma, Buddha Dharma, truth or reality.

The truth of how things really are cannot be expressed in words. Words are just words. They are not the truth itself. Surely words are one of the expressions of truth but they cannot completely convey the totality of the truth. That is Zen's basic perspective. While fully upholding this perspective, at the same time Zen dares to confront the task of expressing that perspective in words. That is the interesting thing about Zen. The famous exchange between the Sixth Ancestral teacher Eno and Nangaku Ejo (in *Shobogenzo Three Hundred Cases*) clearly demonstrates this.

When Zen Master Nangaku Ejo went to study with the Sixth Ancestral Teacher, the Ancestor asked him, "Where are you from?" Nangaku said, "I came from the place of National Teacher An of Suzan." The Ancestor said, "What is this that has thus come?" Nangaku could not answer. He attended on the master for eight years. "Now I understand it. When I first

came to study with you, you asked me, ‘What is it that has thus come?’” The sixth ancestor said, “How do you understand it?” Nangaku said, “To say it is like something misses it.” The sixth ancestor said, “Does it depend upon practice and realization?” Nangaku said, “It is not that there is no practice and realization. It is just that they cannot be defiled.” The Sixth Ancestor said, “Just this non-defilement is what buddhas have maintained and transmitted. You are like this. I am like this. Ancestors in India were like this.”

Shobogenzo Three Hundred Cases, case no.101

When Nangaku came to study under the Sixth Ancestor, he was not able to respond to the question, “What is this that has thus come?” After practicing for eight years, he answered, “To say it is like something misses it.” The Sixth Ancestor praised this answer and affirmed it. Nangaku successfully expressed it by saying, “To say it is like something misses it.” This is a great example of *dotoku*, “able to speak,” or “able to express.”

At first Nangaku could not answer the question. Dogen Zenji says that it was not because his understanding was immature. According to Dogen, Eno’s question, “What is it that has thus come?” was not a question but already an expression of the truth. It was *dotoku*. That is why there was no way to answer it. But buddhas and ancestors have to be able to answer it in their own words. Therefore, Nangaku practiced for eight years to be able to reply, “To say it is like something misses it,” expressing the truth in his own words.

In the Sixth Ancestor’s question, “What is it that has thus come?” “what” implies the “Ten Thousand Things” or “all things.” It is not an interrogative. Although he expressed it in the form of a question, he meant that Nangaku’s coming to study signified that “what” has thus come.

In terms of space, our presence can only be described as “what.” In terms of time, it can only be described as “thus come.” Or, going further beyond the duality of time and space, it can only be expressed as “what has thus come.” There is no other way of saying it. Yet, this is the Sixth Ancestor’s own expression. When we try to express the truth, we need find our own way of expressing the truth in our words, without borrowing his words. Insofar as you are a person awakened to the truth, you must be able to express it in your own words.

If you really understand it, you can express it.

All buddhas and ancestors are *dotoku* (able to express). Thus, when buddhas and ancestors wish to select buddhas and ancestors, they always ask, “Have you expressed it or not?”

opening sentences of *Shobogenzo Dotoku*

If one really becomes enlightened, he/she can put the Buddha Dharma into words. It does not matter how it is expressed, or what kind of words are used. The point is whether the person can express or not. Otherwise it cannot be said that the person fully understands the Buddha Dharma. This is what Dogen Zenji meant. That is why the master always asks the disciple, “Can you express it?” when selecting a candidate to whom he/she can hand down his/her dharma. Only when the disciple can express does the master make him/her a dharma heir.

We can also find Dogen Zenji's views on expression in *Shobogenzo "Shinfukatoku"* (The Mind Cannot Be Grasped). He examines the case of Tokusan (780~865) who received a blow from an old woman who sold rice cakes although he was a famous commentator on the *Diamond Sutra* and called himself "Diamond King Shu." The theme of this fascicle is what the Mind is about.

Those who nowadays wear cloud robes and mist sleeves (monks) who laugh at Tokusan for being unable to respond and praise the old woman for her brilliance, are foolish. We may doubt the old woman's understanding because, when Tokusan could not answer, she could have said, "Reverend, you cannot answer my question. Ask me the same question and I will give you an answer." If she could have answered Tokusan, it would have been clear that she was truly a person of realization.

Asking a question is not yet making a statement. There has never been a case since olden times where someone who said nothing was regarded as a person of realization.

Shobogenzo "Shinfukatoku"

Tokusan surely received a blow from the old woman. But she did not make any statement. Therefore it is not clear that the old woman is a person of realization. This is Dogen Zenji's point. He values action rather than speech. But he still asserts that a person who cannot speak, or a person who cannot express the Buddha Dharma should not be acknowledged as a realized person of Buddha Way.

Originally written in Japanese by Rev. Tairyu Tsunoda

Translated by Rev. Issho Fujita

Assisted by Rev. Tonen O'Connor and Rev. Zuiko Redding