

Byojoshin Zedo (Ordinary Mind is the Way)

By Rev. Kodo Takeuchi

“Ordinary mind is the Way” are the words of Baso Doitsu (709-788). With Baso, we can see one of the final goals of Chinese Zen, which was founded by Bodhidharma. Baso’s thought was also expressed in “Mind itself is buddha,” the idea that the mind of the self, as it is, is buddha. This is also expressed in the teaching that “function is nature,” the view that all of our everyday words and actions are themselves the function of buddha-nature. Another expression of this is “to be ordinary with nothing special” which is to say that, without looking outside ourselves for something sacred, we should be content with the self as it is.

Regarding “ordinary mind,” Baso said the following:

There is no need to practice the Way. Simply do not defile it. What does it mean to defile it? All the kinds of fabrications and goal-oriented actions based on the duality of birth and death are defilements. If you want to directly understand the Way, ordinary mind is the Way. What is ordinary mind? It is the mind in which there are no fabrications, no biased value judgments, no preferences, no time or eternity, nor dualistic thoughts such as common and sacred. In a sutra it says, “It is neither the practice of a common, ordinary person nor the practice of a sage, but the practice of a bodhisattva.” All the ordinary actions of walking, standing, sitting, and lying down and all the interactions with people and things around us are the Way. The Way is nothing but the Dharmadhatu. Indeed, the innumerable numbers of superb functions are also within the Dharmadhatu. If this were not the case, how could we say “the Dharma gate of the mind ground?” How could we speak of the “inexhaustible lamp?” (*Dentoroku*, Chapter 28 in *A History of Ideas Found in the Ancestral Records*, Ogawa Takashi, pp. 67-68.)

We often come across explanations of “ordinary mind is the Way” which say that it means “the ordinary, commonplace mind as we are is the Way.” However, this way of expressing it risks orienting the reader toward an easygoing acceptance of the current situation or all-too-easy self-affirmation. For this reason, this is an expression which can be easily misunderstood.

Baso clearly defines “ordinary mind” as letting go of value judgments such as right and wrong, preferences, distinctions between common and sacred, as well as being free of dualistic ways of thinking. In addition, devoting oneself to applying this ordinary mind in our daily lives is to practice the Way within the realm of the Dharma. For Baso, ordinary mind is not something to be obtained through practice but rather something we already have. Therefore it is necessary for us not ruin it by adding unneeded contrivance.

For Baso, the mind as it is, is the Buddha. All aspects of everyday life including such things as raising an eyebrow and winking an eye are the functions of buddha nature. However, for later Zen students this idea had a detrimental result. There was a tendency to flatten out this teaching and just accept the present condition of the self as “ordinary mind,” or to reify the “mind” of the self.

In the *mondo* (dharma inquiry) between Baso’s disciple, Nansen Fugan (748-834) and Nansen’s

disciple, Joshu Jushin (778-897) as well, this reification is rejected by indicating that the way of practicing “ordinary mind” is like empty space and cannot be compared to anything else.

Joshu asked Nansen, “What is the Way?” Nansen replied, “Ordinary mind is the Way.” Joshu asked, “How should I seek for the Way?” Nansen said, “If you seek for it, you will only go in the wrong direction.” At that point Joshu asked, “But if I don’t seek for it, how will I ever know what the Way is?” Nansen said, “The Way is neither knowing nor not knowing. Knowing is delusion, not knowing is indifference. When you have truly reached the Way that is beyond doubt, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space. How can it be talked about in terms of right and wrong? Joshu was immediately awakened to the original function; his mind was like the clear moon. (*Sodoshu*, Chapter 18 in *A History of Ideas Found in the Ancestral Records*, Ogawa Takashi, pp. 95-96.)

In Baso’s lineage of Zen, the ideal of equating the original nature of the self (buddha nature) with the present condition of the self with no mediation, doubts, and critical thought about Baso’s teaching can be seen even among his disciples. In time, expressions such as “neither mind nor buddha” and “not mind, not buddha, not things” appeared. This can be seen as a dialectic to “the mind itself is buddha” devised to break down the reification of the “mind.” However, these two conflicting axes of the original nature of the self and the present condition of the self became building blocks of the later history of Zen thought.

In our Soto lineage of Zen following Sekito, there was an attempt to grasp both of these ideas as a subtle, yet profound relation of “neither too close nor too far apart” and “neither one nor two.” It is precisely the pursuit of “the original person,” “the lead character,” “that person,” and so forth where the predominant characteristic of Sekito’s lineage is apparent.

In what way, then, does Dogen Zenji teach about “ordinary mind?” There is a passage in the *Butsu Kojo Ji* (The matter of going beyond Buddha), a chapter of the *Shobogenzo* in which he speaks about the *mondo* between Nansen and Joshu.

Great Master Joshu Shinsai asked Nansen, “What is the Way?” Nansen said, “Ordinary mind is the Way.”

This is to say the ordinary mind of the world is the Way. To study the ordinary mind of the world is most delicate. With regard to the body, with regard to the mind, at all times we must study it as the ordinariness of the world. There must not be the slightest defilement or forceful endeavoring toward a goal. In body and mind, we do not call “yesterday” as “today” or act as if it is so, or “today” as “tomorrow,” and we do not make body as mind, do not move from mind to body. Just in this way it is referred to as “ordinary mind.” We tend to confuse it with the states of the ordinary plants and flowers. We must realize that not to become stagnant in this place is the normal ordinary way of plants. By means of this ordinary mind, the many flowers and grasses do not dry up or rot.

Although the buddhas and ancestral masters escape from the world, forget the self, and practice the Way, they would not be able to attain [the Way] if they were not within the

ordinary, everyday. This is because practice of the Way is itself to be the “ordinary.” For us as well, even if we throw away the ways of the world we have heretofore adhered to, promptly follow in the footprints of the buddhas and ancestral masters, practice what they did and progress, if we do not practice the mind of “ordinary” even while within the Way, even if we think of it and it seems as if we are doing it, this is the same as mistaking the “ordinary.” It isn’t that there is no practice-realization. There is nothing which is not “ordinary.” It is simply that it must not be defiled. (*The Complete Works of Dogen Zenji*, Vol. II, p. 569. Published by Shunjusha)

Here, Dogen Zenji clearly says that “ordinary mind” is not to intentionally seek the Way nor is it to consciously move toward the Way. With regard to the body and mind as well, he declares that ordinary mind is to completely focus on just the present moment with no thought of past or future, and with no separation between body and mind.

When we hear the expression “ordinary,” we may think that it means to see all plants as they are, but this is a mistake. All plants are essentially ordinary, being apart from the hierarchy of human values. For that reason, drying up and rotting are nothing more than viewpoints arising from the side of human beings. They essentially do not exist.

Those people who practice such “ordinariness” are called “buddhas.” However, if there is the particular intention to obtain ordinary mind, this is to become far away from the ordinary. The myriad dharmas exist as ordinariness. Undeclared practice-realization within the ordinariness is the way of practice done by buddhas and ancestral teachers.

It can safely be said that for Dogen Zenji the nature of the mind as well as the way of practicing the way are included within “ordinary mind is the Way.” His understanding of the phrase becomes deeper - to mean “to practice the dharma itself within all ordinary things.”

A passage from *Shinjin Gakudo* (Studying the Way with body and mind) clearly states this:

Ordinary mind, whether in this world or other worlds, is the everyday, ordinary mind. Long ago leaves from this place and today comes from this place. When [yesterday] leaves, the whole sky leaves. When [today] comes, the whole earth comes. This is “ordinary mind.” Ordinary mind opens and closes within these confines. Because a thousand gates and ten thousand doors are opened and closed, they are the ordinary. (*The Complete Works of Dogen Zenji*, Vol. I, p. 49. Published by Shunjusha)

Here, as well, we must be extremely vigilant and careful not to simply explain “Ordinary mind is the Way” as “the ordinary, commonplace mind is the Way.”

There is another reason why the Soto sect must put great value on “Ordinary mind is the Way” as one of the main tenets of our school. This is because when Keizan Zenji inherited the Dharma of Gikai Zenji there was an exchange, the *mondo* between them about “ordinary mind.”

In the most common version of the *Tokokuki*, there is a passage, *Tokoku Dentoin Goro Gosoku narabi Gyogo Ryakuki*. In this section, the words of awakening and biographical sketches of Nyojo Zenji, Dogen Zenji, Ejo Zenji, Gikai Zenji, and Keizan Zenji are recorded. Among these is the *mondo*

between Gikai Zenji and Keizan Zenji.

One day, the teacher (Gikai) asked (Keizan) Jokin, “How have you attained ‘ordinary mind?’” Jokin said, “The Way is neither knowing nor not knowing.” The teacher, saying nothing, approved of his answer. Then, acknowledging him with words, he said, “Your spirit far surpasses me. The teachings of Dogen Zenji will certainly flourish [under you].

In many Soto histories that were revised during the Edo Period, additions were made to this *mondo*. However, the oldest version of this *mondo* in the *Tokokuki* is concise. For that reason, it seems as if the description of Keizan Zenji’s intense feeling is conveyed even though this was an experience which only he could know.

There is no doubt that “The Way is neither knowing nor not knowing” is an answer that was based on the *mondo* we looked at above between Nansen and Joshu. Surely, you can understand from the passage above that this was not a question which could be answered only with words. It is certain that Keizan Zenji, who had experienced the true meaning of “Ordinary mind is the Way,” expressed his answer with words and then he must have exhibited “ordinary mind” to his teacher, Gikai Zenji, in some non-verbal form or other. It was because the teacher saw and understood this that he acknowledged his disciple silently and then commended him by saying that the teachings of Dogen Zenji would flourish under him. Gikai Zenji was a man who had been driven out of Eihei-ji and was coming to the end of a life full of difficulties and suffering, and there is no doubt that in his silence we can feel his deep emotion at finally having found a true disciple.

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