

Shobogenzo Nehanmyoshin

(The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana)

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In Buddhism, *Shobogenzo Nehanmyoshin* indicates the essence of the genuine teaching that has been transmitted generation after generation. The entire phrase is comprised of eight Chinese characters. Since *Shobogenzo Nehanmyoshin* is actually one expression made up of two shorter phrases, I will first explain the meaning of the first four characters, then the second four characters, in order to look in detail at the meaning of the complete phrase.

The first half of the expression, *Shobogenzo* is “the treasury of the true Dharma eye.” It literally means “the thing that contains the eye or main point of the true Dharma.” “True Dharma” means “the legitimate or genuine Buddhist teachings.” “Eye” refers to “the main point.” For this reason, *Shobogenzo*, the first four characters, means “the thing that contains the essential point of the legitimate or true teachings.”

In English, this thing which contains the teachings is often translated as “treasury.” This is to say that since this “treasury” which houses the true Dharma, strictly speaking, is not the “true, correct teachings” themselves. Nevertheless, since these teachings are contained there, the true Dharma is certainly present within it. For this reason according to the tradition of the Zen school, when Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings are passed on from generation to the next, the thing being transmitted, the Buddha dharma itself, has been named *Shobogenzo* or “the treasury of the true Dharma eye.”

It is possible to divide the second set of four characters into “Nirvana” and “marvelous mind.” Nirvana is a Sanskrit word which generally means “the state in which the flame (of desires) has been blown out.” This is a condition where all anguish and suffering have been quieted. This is Shakyamuni Buddha’s state of mind when he attained true awakening and was liberated from all suffering. “Marvelous mind” refers to this truly wonderful condition of mind he attained when he was released from all suffering.

In this way *Shobogenzo Nehanmyoshin*, being comprised of several words with their own meanings, implies the ideal state of Buddha dharma.

References to these terms in the Buddhist sutras

These terms are first found in *The Sutra of the Dialogue between the Buddha and Mahapitaka Brahmaja (Daibonten Monbutsu Ketsugi Kyo)* which is an apocryphal text of Chinese origin. They appear in Chapter Two, “Raising a Flower.”

Then, the Tathagata ascended to the treasure seat and, receiving a lotus flower, he simply held it up without giving a sermon, without saying a single word. The great assembly of 84,000 celestial and human beings all stopped and everyone was silent. At this time, the Venerable Mahakashyapa, seeing the Buddha raises the flower and show it to the assembly, immediately broke into a smile. Then the Buddha said, “I have the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana, the subtle dharma gate of the true form of the formless, not based on words and letters, transmitted separately from the teachings, always remember the truth of the Buddha’s teaching, and the greatest principle of common mortals realizing Buddhahood. Now I have entrusted this to Mahakashyapa.” After speaking, the Buddha was silent.

As you can see from this passage, these terms appear in a story called “Raising a Flower and Smiling” in which Shakyamuni Buddha verifies Mahakashyapa as his successor. In the story, Shakyamuni Buddha demonstrates the true meaning of his teaching by holding up a flower in his hand. It was only Mahakashyapa who understood this. Expressing his understanding with a smile, he was recognized as the Buddha’s dharma heir. Inherent within the teaching entrusted to Mahakashyapa was “the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana.” However, it also included “the subtle dharma gate of the true form of the formless,” “not founded on words and letters, a special transmission outside the teachings” and so forth.

This tradition of the disciple’s inheritance of the master’s Dharma being verified without using words is highly regarded in the Zen school. Consequently this story is included in all sorts of “lamp records,” the traditional accounts of well-known Zen masters and their teachings. Here, I would like to show one example from the chapter on Mahakashyapa in the second volume of *The Records of Tiansheng*.

When the Tathagata was at Vulture Peak (Mt. Grdhrakuta), many celestial beings offered flowers. The World-honored One took one of the flowers and showed it to the assembly. Mahakashyapa smiled. The Buddha said to the assembled monks, “I have the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana. I entrust this to Mahakashyapa. Disseminate this and in the future never let it die out.”

If we compare this passage with the account in *The Sutra of the Dialogue between the Buddha and Mahapitaka Brahmaja*, we can see that, among the various expressions for the teachings that Shakyamuni Buddha entrusted to Mahakashyapa, the one remaining in the second version is “the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana.” It can be said that this is because of the perception that these words expressed the heart of Shakyamuni Buddha’s teachings. Then, these words which were said when the Dharma was transmitted to Mahakashyapa later became fixed phrases used when the Dharma was transmitted from master to disciple and consequently embedded in the lamp records.

Examples from the Two Founders

Next, I would like to look at examples of “the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana” as they appear in the writings of the Two Founders (Dogen Zenji and Keizan Zenji).

The anecdote of raising a flower and smiling mentioned above appears in the case presented in the second chapter of Keizan Zenji’s *Denkoroku* (The Transmission of Light). This may seem redundant, but let’s have a look at that passage.

The first ancestral master was Mahakashyapa. One day, the World-honored One held up a flower and blinked. Kashyapa smiled. The World-honored One said, “I have the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana. I entrust it to Mahakashyapa.”

From this passage, we can see that Keizan Zenji, in writing about this transmission, described this matter in a very traditional way according to the Zen sect. I don’t think there is any problem in thinking that this is strongly related to his intention in writing *The Transmission of Light* and that he was clearly aware of the flow of the Dharma from India to China and from China to Japan.

As for Dogen Zenji, this phrase appears in all of his writings, including many times in the *Shobogenzo*. In the version of the *Shobogenzo* written in the vernacular Japanese language, this phrase is quoted a total of twenty-one times in those seventeen chapters. This phrase is used in his other writings as well. In particular, I would like to introduce a passage from the *Eiheji Koroku* (Dogen Zenji’s Extensive Record) Chapter 4, Dharma Talk No. 304, where he explains his own definition of this term.

Bodhidharma, the first ancestral master (in China), came from the west and did not engage in various practices or give lectures on sutras or commentaries, but only sat in zazen facing a wall for nine years at Shaolin. Sitting itself is the treasury of the Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana. Generation after generation experiences face-to-face transmission and intimately receives the secret seal. Thus, the bone and marrow of the masters and disciples is actually transmitted. Just this is the single genuine matter; other things are not this way.

Here, Dogen Zenji points to the story of Bodhidharma facing a wall for nine years and says that the fact of practicing only zazen itself is “the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana.” One could argue that this was the definition for Dogen Zenji, who advocated *shikantaza*. However, it can also further be said that the “practice” of zazen is the “effect” or “result” itself of Shakyamuni Buddha’s true awakening, which is indicated in the teaching “practice and realization are one.

We can also see the following teaching in the “Buddha Way” chapter of Dogen Zenji’s *Shobogenzo*.

Those people who do not study this principle through practice speak haphazardly and mistakenly. They mistakenly call the treasury of the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana that has been transmitted by the ancestral Buddhist masters “the Zen Sect.” They call ancestral teachers “Zen ancestors” and practitioners “Zen students,” and some of them

call themselves “the Zen School.” These are all branches and leaves based on biased views.

“This principle,” the words that appear near the beginning of the quote directly above, means that, for Dogen Zenji,” the treasury of the true Dharma eye which has been transmitted generation to generation from Shakyamuni Buddha to Huineng completely contains all the virtues and pivotal essence of the Buddha Way. Those who know this do not haphazardly identify themselves as “the Zen School” or as “Zen monks or priests.” This is to say that, as expressed in the dharma talk from *Dogen Zenji’s Extensive Record* quoted above, while the true Dharma is consolidated within “zazen,” this zazen is certainly not merely one part of the teaching. Rather, it shows that we must understand “zazen” as encompassing the whole teaching; that this (zazen) is the “the totality of the Buddha dharma.”

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