

Hotsu Bodaishin (Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment)

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Arousing the mind that seeks the Buddha Way

The phrase “*hotsu bodaishin*” means arousing the aspiration for enlightenment. Usually, this refers to a practitioner’s bringing forth the mind of a bodhisattva, that is, the aspiration to realize buddhahood. Therefore, arousing the aspiration for enlightenment – a bodhisattva aspiring to be a buddha – refers to giving birth to the resolution to begin Buddhist practice or training.

Dogen Zenji also uses “arousing the aspiration for enlightenment” in this commonly understood way. However, in his work *Points to Watch in Practicing the Way* (Gakudo Yojinshu), he defines “arousing the aspiration for enlightenment” as “to arouse the mind that sees and recognizes impermanence.” And in the “Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, he defines “arousing the aspiration for enlightenment” as “to arouse the mind which vows to save all beings before saving oneself.” I will comment on these below.

Arousing the mind that sees and recognizes impermanence

In the first chapter of *Points to Watch in Practicing the Way*, “The Need to Arouse the Aspiration for Enlightenment,” Dogen Zenji says:

The mind that aspires to enlightenment is known by many names, but they all refer to one mind. The ancestral master Nagarjuna said, “The mind that sees into the flux of arising and decaying and recognizes the impermanent nature of the world is also known as the mind that aspires to enlightenment.” Should we then call this mind as the mind that aspires to enlightenment? When the transient nature of the world is recognized, the ordinary, selfish mind does not arise; neither does the mind that seeks fame and profit. Fearing the swift passage of time, practice the Way as though saving your head from fire. Reflecting on the transient nature of life, exert yourself just as Shakyamuni Buddha did when raising his foot.

There are many names for arousing the aspiration for enlightenment, the mind that seeks the way of awakening. Simply put, they are all one mind, which fundamentally is the mind that sees and recognizes impermanence. Dogen Zenji points to Nagarjuna’s words as the basis for this reasoning. When one truly sees into the flux of arising and disappearing, the self-centered mind does not arise, thoughts of seeking fame and profit cease, and the mind that seeks the Way of Buddha arises. For this reason, when this mind that seeks enlightenment – the mind that sees into the transient nature of the world, the mind that seeks the Way - arises, we become free from the selfish, egocentric mind, the mind which seeks fame and profit. We are then alarmed by the extremely quick passage of time. Without wasting any time, we practice as if we were batting away flames enveloping our head and hair. We devote ourselves to the practice, reflecting on the uncertainty and fragility of our bodies and lives. And we endeavor assiduously, following the

example of Shakyamuni Buddha who made the great effort to keep one foot raised for seven whole days.

It can be said that it is really very difficult to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment in this way and that it is not easy to arouse this mind. However, Dogen Zenji also had this to say in the “Studying the Way with Body and Mind” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*:

Even if the true aspiration for enlightenment has not arisen in us, we should study the methods of the buddhas and ancestral masters who aroused the aspiration for enlightenment before us. This is to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment, it is the naked mind from moment to moment, it is the mind of the ancient buddhas, it is everyday, ordinary mind, it is the triple world as the one mind.

Dogen Zenji says that if we are unable to arouse the true aspiration for awakening, it is sufficient to learn about the ways in which the long line of buddhas and ancestral masters has aroused this aspiration. In other words, the aspiration for enlightenment is to practice according to the teachings of the past Buddhist masters as well as to practice according to the instruction of one’s own teacher.

Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is not something that is done only once

For this reason, arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is not something that is done only one time. In the “Arousing the Aspiration for the Unsurpassable” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen Zenji says, “To hear that arousing this aspiration is a one-time occurrence and that practice is endless, but the result is a one-time verification, this is not to hear the Buddhadharma.” He says that “Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is to arouse this aspiration millions of times.” The aspiration for enlightenment is also to practice in accordance with the teachings of the buddhas and ancestral masters, doing this practice forever.

Furthermore, in the first of the two “Continuous Practice” chapters of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen Zenji has this to say about this aspiration:

In the great Way of buddhas and ancestral masters, there is always unsurpassed practice which is continuous and never interrupted. It continues in an unbroken cycle, so that there is not the slightest interval between arousing the aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana. Continuous practice is like the circle of the Way.

Arousing this aspiration for enlightenment, we stand upon this principle of continuous practice like the circle of the Way. It is not the case that it is sufficient to arouse this mind only once. It is to remember over and over again, to always keep it in mind and to put into continual practice.

Arousing the mind to save all beings before we save ourselves

In the “Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen Zenji says, “Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment means arousing a vow to save all living beings before

saving oneself.” Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is to arouse a vow to save all sentient beings by having them awaken to buddhahood before you yourself do so, and to actually practice this. This is the mind referred to in the Buddhist sutras as “Saving others before saving oneself.”

Quoting from the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, Dogen Zenji instructs us in the “Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment” chapter of the *Shobozenzō*:

Praising Shakyamuni Buddha in verse, the Bodhisattva Mahakashyapa says,

Arousing the aspiration and the ultimate state, these two are not separate.

Of these two states of mind, it is more difficult to realize the former.

This is to save all others before saving oneself.

For this reason, I bow to this mind which you arouse for the first time.

When you first have this aspiration, you already are the teacher of celestial and human beings.

You arise above sravakas and pratekya buddhas.

Such an aspiration for enlightenment surpasses the triple world.

Therefore, it is called “Unsurpassable.”

Arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is first arousing the mind to save all others before saving oneself. This is called “the first arousal of aspiration for enlightenment.”

This to say that arousing the aspiration for enlightenment is “the first time we arouse the mind that vows to save all others before attaining one’s own liberation.” It is not different from the ultimate state. “The ultimate state” refers to becoming a buddha; to attaining true awakening. It is to achieve perfect enlightenment, the unsurpassed wisdom of the Buddha. “These two states” refers to “the aspiration for enlightenment” and “the ultimate state.” These two have been provisionally distinguished and of the two, arousing the very first aspiration is more difficult to do than realizing true awakening.

If I were to liken this to a marathon race, arousing this aspiration is to stand at the starting line. Reaching the goal is the ultimate state. Once you have started running, certainly there is a goal. Of course, you must continue running and not stop, but as long as you continue running there is certainly a goal. To be sure, more difficult than continuing to run is the question of whether or not you even have the desire to run a marathon. Then, you must stand at the starting line. You must start the race. If you do not have the wish to run a marathon, if there is no desire to start the race, it is impossible to expect that you will reach the goal. In the same way, if you arouse the mind that aspires to awaken and begin to practice, you will certainly reach the attainment of true awakening even if it is a long, long way off. However, if you do not arouse that aspiration in the first place, it will be impossible to attain true awakening.

We might think that the first aspiration to “save all others before saving oneself” is the first aspiration to attain the Way and this mind is something that must be sustained until the attainment of true awakening. Rather, it is to continue and to protect that aspiration forever after. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Way of Buddha is the continuation of the actual practice of “saving others before saving oneself.”

Also, this aspiration to realize the Way, this vow to save others before saving oneself is described in these words:

The meaning of the aspiration for enlightenment is to endeavor without ceasing – in body, speech, and thought – to help all sentient beings arouse the aspiration for enlightenment. This leads them to the Way of Buddha. To merely provide sentient beings with worldly pleasures is not beneficial for them.

(From “Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*)

As it says here, the aspiration for enlightenment is by all means to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment others, as well as to lead them to the way of Buddha, and to always practice this in your actions, speech, and thought. Dogen Zenji instruction, saying, “To merely provide sentient beings with worldly pleasures is not beneficial for them” is particularly important. To thoughtlessly pamper people with worldly pleasures does not benefit them. As for how we can truly benefit sentient beings, it is expressed in this passage, “to help all sentient beings arouse the aspiration for enlightenment and to lead them to the Way of Buddha.”

This is clarified in the following passage:

To benefit sentient beings is to help them arouse the aspiration for enlighten other sentient beings before awakening oneself. Do not think of yourself as becoming a buddha by helping people to arouse the aspiration to enlighten others before awakening oneself. Even when your merit for becoming a buddha has matured, you turn that merit around and dedicate it to others so that they may become buddhas, thereby attaining the Way.

(From “Arousing the Aspiration for Enlightenment” chapter of the *Shobogenzo*)

This is to say that to benefit sentient beings is to help them arouse the aspiration to awaken other sentient beings before awakening themselves. This is an important point. To truly give something that will benefit others is not a matter of giving them money or material things. Nor is it a matter of indulging them by giving them things they want. If you can help people arouse the mind to awaken others before awakening themselves, then this is to truly save them. This would be to give them something truly beneficial.

If you can arouse this aspiration in sentient beings to awaken others before awakening themselves, you truly save them. This also generates great merit for you. However, you must not think, “Using this merit, I am going to become a buddha. Now I am able to realize buddhahood.” Even if you have sufficient merit to become a buddha, even if you were finally able to reach the rank of a buddha, you would not become a buddha. You would continue to work so that other sentient beings become buddhas and awaken to the Way. There exist an infinite number of sentient beings and it can be said that it is impossible to deliver all sentient beings to the other shore. Yet, to be a bodhisattva is to practice and make this effort as long as you are alive.

This is Dogen Zenji’s teaching as well as Keizan Zenji’s, who inherited this teaching of arousing the aspiration for enlightenment. The Two Founders of the Soto School were truly bodhisattvas. It

is precisely this form of a bodhisattva, which is in fact nothing other than to be a buddha.

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