

# *Genjo Koan* (Complete manifestation of established truth)

Rev. Kodo Takeuchi  
Center for Soto Zen Studies  
Chief Research Fellow

*Genjo koan* is the title of the first fascicle of the 75-fascicle version of *Shobogenzo*, which is thought to have been compiled by Dogen Zenji himself. This term is also frequently found in Dogen's other writings. It is important to understand this term if one is to understand his teaching.

The first word, *genjo* (現成), means "actual and full manifestation with nothing hidden." *Koan* (公案) originally meant "an official document or decree," but later it was used to mean "established truth." In the Sung Dynasty Zen tradition, *genjo koan* meant, in many cases, that all that appears before us is, just as it is, the absolute truth.

But as *koan* Zen or *kanna* Zen (Zen of seeing the question) became popular, the word *koan* started to mean "a Zen dialogue selected and presented for a practitioner's dedicated study." *Koan* in this case meant an ancient, fixed story or case. *Koan* acquired a very static meaning. Dogen Zenji wanted to return to the original and more lively meaning of *koan*. This is why he wrote *Shobogenzo Genjo Koan*.

Dogen Zenji connects *genjo koan* and *zazen* in *Fukanzazengi*:

The *zazen* I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma gate of repose and bliss. It is the practice-realization of totally culminated awakening. It is things as they are in suchness (*koan genjo*). Traps or snares can never reach it.

Here Dogen Zenji clearly says that *koan*, or reality as it appears before us, is *bodhi*, or awakening itself. This is fully manifested in sitting *zazen* in the unity of practice and realization.

Keizan Zenji also writes about this. He quotes from Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo Zazenshin* in his "Words for Master Myojo" from *The Dharma Words of Master Keizan, the Founder of Mount Tohoku*.

The great-grandfather in Dharma, the founder of Eihei (Dogen Zenji), said, "It manifests with no-thinking. It is completed without transposing." This means that the original self manifests when there is no-thinking and the source of mind is completed when there is no transposing. What is it like to be at the state of being fully manifested and completed? Don't you see? ... The great-grandfather in Dharma also said, "There is no fire in the cold fire pit. I lie down alone in the empty hall. There is no light in the cold night. I leisurely sit under the bright window." Even without knowing a single thing or having even a half-baked understanding, it is possible to be a leisurely person who has gone beyond studying and is not exerting oneself in anything. To sit without knowing a single thing or having even a half-baked understanding is to be that kind of person.

Thus, *genjo koan* primarily means the world of truth which actually manifests in zazen. In *Shobogenzo Genjo Koan*, Dogen Zenji exhausts words to examine the attitude of the practitioner who is wholeheartedly studying *genjo koan*, the appearance of various dharmas that manifest as *koan*, and how we cognize those appearances.

*Genjo koan* is connected with the study of the Buddha Way. About this, Dogen Zenji writes;

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be realized by the myriad dharmas. To be realized by the myriad dharmas is to let the body-mind of oneself and others drop away.

The Buddha Way is the process of deeply inquiring into the self. It starts with forgetting the self, then realizing that everything is embraced by the dharma. Eventually both the self and everything other than the self together leave the world of ideas and concepts behind and completely merge with the dharma. At that point “dropping off body-mind” are the words we use to express the reality of the dharma itself.

Dogen Zenji writes in *Shobogenzo Genjo Koan* that when a person truly becomes the dharma itself, that person simply goes on acting as a buddha without being aware that he/she is a buddha.

When buddhas are truly buddhas, there is no need for them to perceive they are buddhas. Yet they are realized, fully confirmed buddhas – and they go on realizing buddhahood continuously.

But it is not that the person feels nothing at that time, as Dogen Zenji points out in *Shobogenzo Genjo Koan*.

When you have still not fully realized the dharma in body-mind, you think it sufficient. When the dharma fills body-mind, you feel some lack.

The more the dharma fills body-mind, the more we feel some lack because, as the dharma itself, we merge with the dharma and are realized with the dharma. Therefore the dharma never appears as an objective entity in opposition to the self.

... the reason we are unable to know its total knowable limits is simply because our knowing lives together and practices together with the full penetration of the Buddha Dharma ...

Yet, as Dogen Zenji writes, various dharmas are perceived by a person through the senses. :

It is like boarding a boat and sailing into a broad and shoreless sea. You see nothing as you gaze about you but a wide circle of sea. Yet the great ocean is not circular. It is not square. It has other, inexhaustible virtues

He uses the sea's appearance when we sail on it as a metaphor. The world reflected by the senses is the only thing that the practitioner's eyes can perceive at that moment.

Then what attitude should the practitioner who studies the reality of *genjo koan* have? In *Shobogenzo Genjo Koan* we read

Fishes swim in the water and however much they swim, there is no end to the water. Birds fly the skies, and however much they fly, there is no end to the skies. Yet fishes never once leave the water, birds never forsake the sky. When their need is great, there is great activity. When their need is small, there is small activity. In this way, none ever fails to exert itself to the full, and nowhere does any fail to move and turn freely. If a bird leaves the sky, it will soon die. If a fish leaves the water, it at once perishes.

This metaphor is asking practitioners a serious question, "What is it that is inseparable from the life of a Zen practitioner, like water and the sky are inseparable from the life of a fish and a bird?"

Even if a bird or fish desired to proceed further on after reaching the end the sky or the water, it could make no way, could find no place, in either element. When that place is attained, all of one's everyday activities are immediately manifesting reality (*genjo koan*). When that way is achieved, all of one's everyday activities are immediately manifesting reality. (Shobogenzo Genjo Koan)

Like a bird or a fish, a practitioner should attain "the place" and "the way" from which they are inseparable and wholeheartedly engage in the everyday activities of a Zen practitioner, instead of acting only after fully interpreting and understanding the world in which they exist. That is how *genjo koan* is realized. To study the reality of *genjo koan* is not to anticipate and seek to know how the world of *genjo koan* may be perceived but to realize the world as *genjo koan* through the everyday activities of a Zen practitioner.

What is "the place" to a Zen practitioner? What is "the way" to a Zen practitioner? According to Dogen Zenji, the self and all things that exist here and now are inseparable from time itself and we should regard everything in terms of time. He calls it *uji*, "being-time."

The way the self arrays itself is the form of the entire world. See each thing in this entire world as a moment of time. Things do not hinder one another, just as moments do not hinder one another. The way-seeking mind arises in this moment. A way-seeking moment arises in this mind. It is the same with practice and with attaining the way. Thus, the self setting itself out in array sees itself. This is the understanding that the self is time. (Shobogenzo Uji)

"The place" to a Zen practitioner is "the right now of being-time," which continuously appears and disappears. "The way" to a Zen practitioner is arousing a way-seeking mind, practicing the way, and attaining nirvana, which is practiced as being-time. The entire world is nothing but the manner in

which the self as being-time continuously arrays itself.

Entities of every manner and kind of being-time in the realm of darkness and light are all the immediate manifestation of my full exertion, all my full exertion making a passage. One must learn in practice that unless it is one's self exerting itself right now, not a single dharma or thing can either immediately manifest itself or make a passage. (Shobogenzo Uji)

The self is one kind of being-time. A single dharma fully manifests itself, through wholehearted practice, as the everyday activities of a Zen practitioner as one event or one action that appears right now, right here. Thus the practice-realization of the Buddha Way becomes the uninterrupted flow of the full manifestation of established truth.

“Everyone should just wholeheartedly engage in this genjo koan. What is this genjo koan? It is just all buddhas in the ten directions and all ancestors, ancient and present, and it is fully manifesting right now. Do you all see it? It is just our rolling up the curtain and letting down the curtain at the entrance to the practice hall at this moment. It is getting onto and getting off the sitting platform. Why don't you all understand and practice this excellent genjo koan? Today this mountain monk (Dogen), without begrudging my life or my eyebrows, for the sake of all of you, expounds this repeatedly.” Dogen Zenji pounded the floor with his staff and immediately descended from his seat. (Eihei Koroku 60)

In this *jodo* (informal talk), Dogen Zenji straightforwardly shows his disciples that *genjo koan* is no other than the everyday monastic activities.

Originally written in Japanese by Rev. Kodo Takeuchi

Translated by Rev. Issho Fujita

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