

On ‘The One Bright Pearl’

(*Ikka Myōju*)

Translator’s Introduction: *Ikka Myōju* follows a form that Dōgen later uses in many of his discourses of the *Shōbōgenzō*. Namely, he relates, often in his own words, one of the classic kōan stories found in Chinese Zen literature. During the telling, he inserts his own commentary to clarify or underscore points which are relevant to monastic training and perspectives.

In this world of ours, there once was a Great Master named Sōitsu, who lived in the monastery on Gensha Mountain in Fukien Province, in the great kingdom of China. His religious name was Shibi and his family name was Sha. While still in lay life, he was fond of fishing and would sail his boat out on the Nant’ai River, as was the habit with all sorts of fishermen. However, he had not the slightest hint that the Golden Fish would, of Its own accord, leap up into his boat, without Its even being hooked.

Near the beginning of the Chinese Kan-t’ong era of the T’ang dynasty (ca. 865), he suddenly aspired to leave the dust of secular life behind him; so, in his thirtieth year, he abandoned his boat so as to dwell on a mountain.¹ Having awakened to the ceaseless fluctuations of the floating world, he had come to recognize the great worth of the Buddha’s Way. In time, he went to Seppō Mountain to seek spiritual instruction under Great Master Seppō Shinkaku and to practice the Way day and night.

One day, with his travel bag upon his back, he set out from the mountain top, intending to deepen his practice by studying with other Masters elsewhere. Just as he was climbing down, he stubbed his toe on a rock, and it began to bleed and smart terribly. Suddenly he had a deep realization.

Thereupon, he said, “This body has no independent existence, so where is the pain coming from?” He then returned to Seppō and told him what had happened.

Seppō asked him, “Is this Shibi the Austere Monk?”

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1. ‘To dwell on a mountain’ is a common Buddhist metaphor for entering monastic life and doing one’s meditation as part of that life. ‘Abandoning his boat’ refers not only to Shibi’s giving up his attachment to a beloved object in his lay life but also to his giving up his simply drifting along on the river of life.

Shibi responded, “I have never dared to deceive anyone about that!”

Delighted by this response, Seppō said, “Who could fail to cherish this response? Who could have expressed the Matter* more fully?”

On another occasion, Seppō called out to him, “O Shibi, my austere monk, why haven’t you gone out on a pilgrimage to seek a Master to train with?”

When Shibi answered, “Bodhidharma did not come east to China for that, nor did the Second Ancestor go west to India for that!” Seppō highly praised what he had said.

Shibi had been devoted to fishing for so much of his life that he had never set eyes on the voluminous body of Buddhist Scriptures and spiritual writings, even in his dreams. Nevertheless, when he put the depth of his resolve to realize the Truth above all else, a spirit of determination emerged, which surpassed that of the other monks around him. Seppō realized that Shibi excelled all others within the assembly and praised him as towering above Seppō’s other disciples.

For his robe, Shibi used a coarse hemp cloth, and, since he had no other change of clothing, it was filled with hundreds of patches. Against his skin, he wore an undergarment made from paper, and for a lining between the two, he used mugwort leaves kneaded until they were pliant. Apart from working under Seppō, he did not seek out any other Master to train with. Even though he kept to just one Master, he certainly found within himself the spiritual strength to become the heir to his Master’s Dharma.²

In time, he realized the Way and, afterwards, in pointing It out to people, he would say, “The whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the One Bright Pearl.”



One time a monk inquired of him, “Reverend Monk, I have heard you say that the whole universe throughout all its ten directions is one bright pearl. How am I, as a trainee, to understand the meaning of this?”

* See *Glossary*.

2. Since making pilgrimages to spiritually call on other Zen Masters was still a widespread tradition among Chinese Zen trainees of his day, Dōgen is pointing out that this is not an essential practice, and that what is truly essential is for each trainee to find within himself the spiritual strength to be a Dharma heir of their Master.

Shibi answered, “Since the whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the One Bright Pearl, what use is there in trying to understand this with the intellect?”

However, the next day the Master asked this monk, “The whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the One Bright Pearl, so what do you think this means?”

The monk responded, “Since the whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the one bright pearl, what use is there in my trying to understand this with my intellect?”

Shibi replied, “It is indeed clear to me that, even though you are blindly looking into the demon’s cave within the pitch black mountains of ignorance, you are doing your training.”

Shibi was the first to voice the statement, “The whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the One Bright Pearl.” Its basic idea is that the whole universe throughout all its ten directions is not to be thought of as vast and grand or minute and insignificant, nor as made up of angles and curves, nor as the center or core of something else, nor does it act like some lively fish darting about in a sea of space or like dewdrops brightly whirling in the wind. Moreover, because it is not something that was born and will die, not something that is coming or going, it is being born and dying, coming and going all the time. Because of its being just what it is, it is from here that the days of yore have forever departed and from here that the present arises. By thoroughly doing one’s training, who will say, once he has looked deeply, that the universe is just something fluttering about. Or who will say, once he has fully investigated the matter, that the universe is merely a motionless thing?

In speaking of ‘throughout all its ten directions’, Shibi was referring to our ceaselessly creating a ‘self’ by chasing after things or creating ‘things’ through our pursuit of a self. In response to a disciple’s statement, “When we give rise to delusory feelings, we alienate ourselves from Wisdom,” Shibi affirmed that there was such a separation by a turn of his head or a change of expression on his face. This was his hitting the nail on the head through word or gesture; it was the trainee presenting his understanding and the Master agreeing with it. Because we create ‘things’ through the pursuit of a self, the universe is ever restless throughout all its ten directions, unceasing in its arising, but since this causal principle is one that exists prior to the arising of anything, its operation is beyond our intellect to control.

This ‘One Pearl’ is still not Its name, but It can be expressed so, and this has come to be regarded as Its name. The ‘One Pearl’ is what refers directly to That which is beyond the measurement of years, for in Its extending endlessly over the

past, It also extends over the present and into the future. Even though we have a body and mind at this very moment, they are the Bright Pearl. They are not some vegetation sprouting up here or there, nor are they ‘mountains and rivers that arise from a duality like that of Heaven and Earth’. They are the Bright Pearl.

By his question, “How am I, as a trainee, to understand the meaning of this?” the monk seems to be operating from his delusory karmic* consciousness, yet, as a manifestation of the functioning of That Which Is Reality, this consciousness is the Absolute Principle of Reality. Further, you need a foot of water to make a one-foot wave rise up, which is to say that a ten-foot high pearl will give off a ten-foot high light.

Shibi’s way of stating this was to say, “Since the whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the One Bright Pearl, what use is there in trying to understand this with the intellect?” This saying is the way of speaking which Buddhas inherit from Buddhas, Ancestors inherit from Ancestors, and Shibi inherited from Shibi. Even if you were to try to evade being Their heir to this way of speaking, there is ultimately no place where you can go to completely evade It. Even were you able to evade the obvious for a while, sooner or later there will be some remark that will occasion Its manifesting before your very eyes.

However, the next day the Master asked this monk, “The whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the One Bright Pearl, so what do you think this means?”

On the previous day Shibi had given voice to the Dharma of Certainty; now he was giving voice to the Dharma of Uncertainty. By voicing the Dharma of Uncertainty on this day, he was saying just the reverse of what he had said the previous day, as he smiled and nodded his head approvingly.

The monk, parroting Shibi, responded, “Since the whole universe throughout all its ten directions is the one bright pearl, what use is there in my trying to understand this with my intellect?”

One could say that the monk was riding the robber’s own horse in pursuit of the robber. Shibi has taken a completely different approach, whereby the Old Buddha explains the Matter for you. Just turn your light around and return to That which shines within, for how much use is there in trying to understand This through the intellect? When someone gives voice to It, it will be a matter of ‘seven sweet dumplings and five savory dumplings’;³ even so, it will be instructive guidance

3. Sweet dumplings are associated with Southern Chinese cuisine, and savory ones with the cuisine of the Northern Chinese. Like many other references to food in Zen texts, ‘dumplings’ serves as a metaphor for the Dharma, which spiritually nourishes the trainee.

that is 'south of the Hsiang River and north of the Liu', that is, two different ways of designating the same area.

Shibi said, "It is certainly clear to me that, even though you are blindly looking into the demon's cave within the pitch black mountains of ignorance, you are doing your training."

You must realize that the faces of the sun and the moon have never yet at any time changed places. The face of the sun always rises as the sun's face; the face of the moon always rises as the moon's face. Therefore, even if we say that the season right now is mid-summer, we should not say that it is our Original Nature that is sweltering. This is why this Bright Pearl exists not only without a beginning but also without an end. It is 'One Bright Pearl as the whole universe throughout all its ten directions': It is not said to be two or three. Your whole being is your pair of eyes of the True Dharma; your whole being is the embodiment of Truth; your whole being is a single line of Scripture; your whole being is luminosity; your whole being is your whole heart and mind. When your whole being exists, your whole being has no impediments: it is perfect in its completeness and is ever-turning, like the rumbling on of cart wheels. Because the merit of the One Bright Pearl takes some 'visible' form like those stated above, Avalokiteshvara* and Maitreya* exist right now, seeing Its forms and hearing Its sounds. And there are old Buddhas and there will be new Buddhas who manifest in bodily form in order to give voice to the Dharma.

When the time is right, you will find the Dharma enfolded in empty space or enfolded within the lining of that which clothes you; or you will find It stored in the folds of the dragon's chin or stored in the folds of the king's headdress, and all are the One Bright Pearl that is the universe throughout all the ten directions. Keeping It enfolded beneath your robes is proper deportment: do not talk about displaying It on the outside. Enfolding It in your headdress or underneath your chin is proper deportment: do not imitate those who would playfully display It upon their headdresses or around their necks. Whenever you are drunk on delusion, there will be a Close Friend who will present you with this Jewel, and you must, without fail, present this Jewel to your Close Friend. Come a time when you take to hanging the Jewel around your own neck, you are, beyond doubt, drunk with delusion. Because this is the way things are, the world in its entirety is the One Bright Pearl.

Dōgen's point is that even though the flavor and size of the servings of Dharma may differ among Buddhists because of such things as local customs and habits, the Dharma Itself is fundamentally the same in Its capacity to sustain those who ingest It.

This is why, even though it seems that, on the surface, things are either fluctuating or still, everything is the Bright Pearl. To know that this is precisely how the Jewel is, is what the Bright Pearl is. In this manner we can perceive the sounds and forms of the Bright Pearl. Because this is the way things can be, even though you may be uncertain about whether or not something is the Bright Pearl, you should have no doubt about whether or not there is the Jewel. Whether you actively pursue your doubts, cling to them, or let them go, they are simply momentary observations of little significance, fleeting images of small weight.

Do we not cherish the Bright Pearl with Its infinite variety of shades and hues like this? Its multifaceted, brilliantly hued sparkling is the merit of the universe throughout all its ten quarters; who can take this from you by force? After all, there is no one in any of the market places of this world who throws away a roof tile, so do not worry about which of the six worlds* of existence you will fall into due to causality.⁴ Never hidden, It is, from the first, synonymous with always doing one's training, and doing it consistently as well as thoroughly. The Bright Pearl is your Original Face: the Bright Pearl is your very Eye in all Its brightness.

Nevertheless, neither you nor I know precisely what this Bright Pearl is and precisely what It is not, but hundreds of notions and opinions about this subject all too obviously have become associated with 'food for thought'. Now, through Shibi's voicing of the Dharma, we have learned and had clarified for us the point that what appears as our body and mind is, and always has been, the Bright Pearl. Hence, the conscious mind is not what we are, so who is it that arises and passes away? Why worry yourself over whether or not something is the Bright Pearl? Even if you are perplexed as you grope along, do not think that this is not the Bright Pearl. Since there is no action or thought that can be generated that is not of the Bright Pearl, even your going back and forth, in and out of the demon's cave within the black mountains is nothing other than the One Bright Pearl.

This was delivered to the monks at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple, Uji Prefecture, Yamashiro Province, on the eighteenth day of the fourth lunar month in the fourth year of the Katei era (June 2, 1238).

It was transcribed by me, while in my quarters in Kippō-ji Temple, Shibi Manor, Yoshida County, Echizen Province, on the twenty-third day of the seventh lunar month in the first year of the Kangen era (August 10, 1243).

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4. That is, just as those in the marketplace can recognize the value of a mere roof tile, so even someone's being reborn in some hell, for instance, will have its spiritual value.