

On The Unbounded

(*Kokū*)

Translator’s Introduction: While the title of this discourse may be translated as ‘space’, ‘emptiness’, or ‘the void’, these renderings tend to imply something that is negative, whereas *kokū* is a technical Buddhist term for That which is devoid of any obstructions: the Unbounded.

This was apparently the first formal talk that Dōgen gave in his new temple, originally called Daibutsu-ji and later renamed Eihei-ji.

Because right here is where the What exists, It causes Buddhas and Ancestors to find ways to express It. And because the ways that the Buddhas and Ancestors have expressed It have naturally been passed on from Dharma heir to Dharma heir, They have made their whole being their Master’s Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow, so that it hangs suspended within the Unbounded. That which is Unbounded transcends categories such as the twenty types of emptiness. For, altogether, how could the Unbounded be limited to a mere twenty types of emptiness, since there are at least eighty-four thousand types of emptiness? And indeed there may be many more.



Meditation Master Shakkyō Ezō of the Fuchou region once asked Meditation Master Seidō Chizō, “Coming back to the topic, do you know how to grab hold of Space?”

Seidō replied, “Of course I know how to grab hold of space.”

The Master said, “And just how do you grab hold of Space?”

Seidō made a gesture with his hand as if gathering up a handful of something.

The Master said, “You do not know how to grab hold of Space.”

Seidō responded, “My elder monastic brother, you who are a Master, just how do you grab hold of space?”

Thereupon, the Master grabbed hold of Seidō’s nose and gave it a yank.

Trying to suppress a yelp, Seidō exclaimed, “How awful of you! Pulling a person’s nose like that! Fortunately, I’ve been able to get free, quick enough.”¹

The Master said, “If you could have grabbed hold of me like this, you would have grasped It right from the start.”

Shakkyō’s question, “Coming back to the topic, do you know how to grab hold of Space?” is asking, “Is your whole being, through and through, hands and eyes?”²

Seidō’s reply, “Of course, I know how to grab hold of space,” meant for him that Space was like a lump of something. But once It is understood in that way, It becomes stained, and after Space has become stained, It is brought down to earth.³

Shakkyō’s saying, “And just how do you grab hold of Space?” meant “As soon as you call that Reality, it has already completely changed. But even so, by going along with change, you are going towards Reality, following the Tathagata.”

The statement, “Seidō made a gesture with his hand as if gathering up a handful of something,” meant that even though he might know how to ride the tiger’s head, he did not yet know how to grab hold of the tiger’s tail.⁴

Shakkyō’s saying, “You do not know how to grab hold of Space,” was not simply a matter of his stating that Seidō did not have an intellectual understanding of what ‘grabbing hold of Space’ meant, for Seidō was at a place where he had not yet encountered the Unbounded even in his dreams. Even though that was the way things were with Seidō, Shakkyō did not want to end up trying to describe It to him.

Seidō’s asking, “My elder monastic brother, you who are a Master, just how do you grab hold of space?” meant “My elder brother, express what it is in a verse or a word. Do not leave it totally up to me to get it.”

Thereupon, Shakkyō grabbed hold of Seidō’s nose and gave it a yank. We need to explore this through our training: Shakkyō has stuck his whole being up Seidō’s Nose and Seidō fully revealed that he had been grabbed by the Nose. Even

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1. That is, he awoke to the Truth.
 2. The second question here is a reference to the kōan story in Discourse 32: On Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion (*Kannon*).
 3. That is, once the Unbounded is thought as being some thing, It becomes tainted with intellectualizing and is reduced to a worldly understanding.
 4. That is, even though Seidō might know how to do the training, he still had not grasped the Essential Matter.

though this was how things were, the Unbounded is of a whole and It is ‘stones bumping up against stones’.⁵

Seidō, trying to suppress a yelp, said, “How awful of you! Pulling a person’s nose like that! Fortunately, I’ve been able to get free, quick enough.” Earlier he had wished to encounter a True Person, but what he suddenly encountered was his True Self. At the same time, it was not that he could not have stained his True Self, it is that he had to train himself.

Shakkyō said, “If you could have grabbed hold of me like this, you would have grasped It right from the start.” Well, it is not impossible that Seidō could have grasped It right from the start. Even so, Shakkyō did not lend his own strength to Seidō, because Seidō could not have grasped It by Shakkyō’s extending a helping hand to Shakkyō, nor could he have grasped It by the Unbounded’s extending a helping hand to the Unbounded.⁶

To put the matter in broader terms, the universe has no gaps to put ‘space’ into. Even so, this one account has long made Space resound with Its thunder. Since the time of Shakkyō and Seidō, there have been many trainees who have called themselves masterly teachers within the five traditional families—Sōtō, Ummon, Rinzai, Hōgen, and Igyō—but few of them have encountered, or heard of, much less fathomed, what Space is. Before and after Shakkyō and Seidō, there has been the occasional one who has played around with what Space is, but few have grabbed hold of what It is.

Shakkyō had taken hold of It, but Seidō had not caught sight of It. As Abbot of Daibutsu-ji Temple, I would like to have said to Shakkyō, “At that time when you grabbed hold of Seidō’s nose, if you had wanted to grab hold of Space, you should have grabbed hold of your own Nose. And you should have understood how to grab hold of your Fingertips with your fingertips.” Even so, Shakkyō knew a bit about a monk’s everyday behavior of grabbing hold of Space. Even if you are a good hand at grabbing hold of Space, you need to explore through your training with your Master the ins and outs of Space. And you need to explore through your training the killing off of ‘Space’ and the revitalizing of It, and you need to know the relative importance of ‘Space’. You need to preserve and rely upon the grasping of Space, which is, namely, your doing your utmost to train in the Way, your giving rise to the intention to realize that one’s training and enlightenment are

5. That is, even though the Unbounded is totality, It is not static.

6. That is, Seidō had to rely on doing his own training, rather than depend on the Master or the Buddha Nature to do the training for him.

identical, and your listening to what Buddha after Buddha and Ancestor after Ancestor have put forth.



My late Master, the Old Buddha of Tendō, once said the following, “My whole being is like the mouth of a bell suspended in empty space.”⁷ Clearly, you need to recognize that the whole body of space hangs in Space.



The eminent scholar, Abbot Seizan of Hungchou Province, once paid a visit to Baso. Baso asked him, “What Scripture do you lecture on?”

Seizan replied, “The *Heart Scripture*.”

Baso then asked him, “And what do you use to lecture on It with?”

Seizan replied, “I use my mind with which to lecture on It.”

Baso then said, “The mind is like the starring actor, our will is like its supporting player, with the six senses playing the accompanying cast. How can these possibly comprehend how to lecture on a Scripture?”

Seizan responded, “Were the mind unable to give a lecture, surely empty space could hardly do it!”

Baso said, “On the contrary, it is Space that is able to give a lecture.”

With a dismissive swish of his sleeve, Seizan departed.

Baso called after him, “Learned monk!” Seizan turned his head around. Baso said, “From birth to old age, It is ever thus.”

Thereupon, Seizan caught It. Eventually, he went into hiding on Mount Seizan,—whence his name—and nothing more was heard from him.⁸

Accordingly, Buddhas and Ancestors alike are persons who expound the Scriptures and They invariably use Space in expounding these Scriptures. Were it not for Space, They would not be able to expound even one Scripture. Whether They expound on the mind as Scripture or expound on the body as Scripture, in either case They do the expounding by means of Space. By means of Space, They

7. The opening line of a poem by Tendō Nyojō, quoted in Discourse 2: On the Great Wisdom That Is Beyond Discriminatory Thought (*Makahannya-haramitsu*), p. 28.

8. When someone who is erudite has an awakening, it is not uncommon for such a one to drop off his addiction to learning and ‘disappear from public sight’.

manifest what They are deliberately thinking about as well as what goes beyond deliberate thought. Not only have They achieved the wise discernment from having a Master and the wise discernment that goes beyond having a Master, They have also developed Their innate intelligence, as well as Their learned intelligence, for all of these are due to Space. Their becoming Buddha and Their becoming an Ancestor must likewise have been due to Space.



Our Twenty-first Ancestor, the Venerable Bashubanzu, once said the following, “Our physical being is the same as the realm of Space, and this proclaims the Teaching that it is equal to Space. When someone is able to awaken to Space, there is no ‘absolutely right’ nor is there any ‘absolutely wrong’ way.” To be precise, at the very moment when there is the mutual encountering and mutual recognition between a person facing the wall and the Wall facing a person, the realm of Space can be described as the mind of ‘fences and walls’ and the mind of ‘a withered tree’. For those who need to be saved in accord with their own bodily form, Avalokiteshvara* will forthwith manifest in that form and give expression to the Dharma for the sake of that person. This is what is meant by pointing to the principle of ‘being like Space’. For those who need to be saved in accord with some other bodily form, Avalokiteshvara will forthwith manifest in that form and give expression to the Dharma for the sake of that person. This too is what is meant by pointing to the principle of ‘being like Space’. Whether you are being controlled by the twenty-four hours of any day or are in control of the twenty-four hours of any day, in either case, they are both times when you can awaken to the Unbounded.

When a stone is large, it is large just as it is, and when a stone is small, it is small just as it is. This is the principle of things being beyond ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. This is simply the way, at this very moment, to thoroughly explore the Unbounded as the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, which is the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana.

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Giun

* See *Glossary*.