

## On the Absolute Certainty of Cause and Effect

(*Jinshin Inga*)

**Translator’s Introduction:** In this discourse Dōgen once again takes up the kōan story of Hyakujō’s fox, which he had commented on in Discourse 73: On the Great Practice (*Daishugyō*). Here, however, he presents a series of poems that various Masters had composed in relation to the subject of cause and effect, all of which Dōgen feels support non-Buddhist views. His own comments make quite clear that no one, under any circumstances, is ever free of cause and effect.

Hyakujō Ekai was a Dharma heir of Baso. Whenever people came to hear him give a public Dharma talk, there was an old man who always came into the Dharma Hall immediately following those in the monastic assembly. He always listened to the Dharma talk and then, when the monks would leave the hall, he would leave at the same time. Then one day, he lingered behind.

Thereupon, the Master asked him, “You who are standing here, who are you?”

The old man replied, “To speak truly, I am a non-human being. Long ago during the eon of Kashō Buddha,<sup>1</sup> I dwelt upon this mountain as Abbot. Then, one day, a trainee asked me, ‘Is even the one who does the Great Practice still subject to cause and effect?’ I replied that such a one is no longer subject to cause and effect. After that, as a consequence, I was reduced to being reborn as a wild fox for five hundred lives. I now beseech you, O Venerable Monk, say something that will turn me around, for I long to rid myself of this wild fox’s attitude of mind.”

Thereupon, he asked the Master, “Is even someone who does the Great Practice subject to cause and effect?”

The Master replied, “Such a one is not blind to causality.”

Upon hearing these words, the old man had a great awakening. Prostrating himself before the Master, he said, “Since I have already

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1. Among the Seven Buddhas, the One whose eon directly preceded that of Shakyamuni Buddha.

shed the outer trappings of a wild fox, I have taken to dwelling on the far side of this mountain. Dare I ask the Venerable Abbot to perform for me a monk's funeral service?"

The Master had the senior monk who supervises the Meditation Hall strike the wooden gong to signal the monks to assemble so that he might tell them that, after their meal, there would be a funeral service for a deceased monk. The whole assembly was at ease with this, though they wondered about it, since there was no sick person in the temple infirmary. After the meal, the Master simply led the assembly up to the base of a rock on the other side of the mountain, where they saw him use his traveling staff to point out the corpse of a wild fox. They cremated the remains in accordance with the appropriate procedure.

At nightfall, the Master went to the Dharma Hall where he gave the monks a talk on the preceding events. His Dharma heir Ōbaku then asked him, "In the past, the man said the wrong thing to turn his disciple around and, as a consequence, was reduced to being a wild fox for five hundred lives. Suppose he had not made this mistake, what would have become of him?"

The Master said, "Come up close and I will tell you."

Thereupon, Ōbaku went on up and gave the Master a slap. The Master clapped his hands and laughed, saying, "I've always thought that the beards of foreigners were red, and here is a red-bearded foreigner."

This story occurs in the *T'ien-sheng Era Record of the Far-reaching Torch*. Even so, people doing the training who are not clear about the fundamental principle of causality fall into the error of denying cause and effect, and to no avail. Sad to say, they tend to be frivolous and casually let the authority of the words and ways of the Ancestors go into decline. 'Not being subject to cause and effect' is surely their denial of causality, and accordingly, they fall into evil realms.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, 'not being blind to cause and effect' is what 'being profoundly convinced of cause and effect' means, and accordingly, those who hear this rid themselves of evil conditions. Do not doubt this: do not mistrust it. Among those of our recent generations who call themselves students of Zen practice, there are many who have denied causality. And how do we know that they have denied causality? Because

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2. That is, the three worlds of hungry ghosts, animals, and those in hells.

they are of the opinion that there is no difference between ‘not being subject to’ and ‘not being blind to’. Accordingly, we know that they have denied causality.



Our Nineteenth Indian Ancestor, the Venerable Kumorata, once said the following:

For the time being, we may say that retribution for our good and bad acts has three periods, but, in general, worldly people only see a benevolent person coming to an early end while some violent person is having a long life, or see an evil one enjoying good fortune while a virtuous one is experiencing calamities, and thereby worldly people conclude that cause and effect is a dead issue and that ‘wrong behavior’ and ‘happiness’ are devoid of any significance. Such people in particular are ignorant of the fact that shadows and sounds are in accord with their source, without even a hair’s breadth of discrepancy between them. And even with the passing of hundreds of thousands of myriad eons, there is no diminishing of that connection.

Clearly, we see from what this patch-robed monk says that he never denied cause and effect. Present-day trainees who have been negligent in their training with the traces left by our ancient teachers have not clarified what the kind instruction of this Ancestor of our tradition is. Those who have been negligent in this training, while at the same time calling themselves good spiritual friends and guides for ordinary people and those in lofty positions, are malicious troops of scholars and great thieves preying on the ordinary and the lofty. Those of you who have come before me and those who will come after me, do not teach the younger generation or the veteran monks with the aim of negating the existence of cause and effect, for this is false teaching and not the Dharma of the Buddhas and Ancestors. It is due to your being negligent in your studies that you have fallen into this false view.

Patch-robed monks, among others in present-day China, are accustomed to saying, “Even though we have received a human body and have encountered the Dharma of the Buddha, we still do not know the details of one or two of our past lives. The former Hyakujō who became a wild fox was able to know five hundred of his past lives. So, it is obvious that he did not lapse into that state due to retribution for his past deeds. It must be as Meditation Master Dōan said in a poem:

*Even if restrained by golden chains or unseen barriers,  
nowhere do I abide.  
Going amidst all manner of beings, I just roll on through  
cycles of birth and death.”*

This is the way that this bunch who are considered to be good spiritual friends and guides see and understand the matter. It is hard to place such a way of seeing and understanding within the house of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Among humans, and foxes, as well as those in the other worlds of existence, there are those who have the ability to get a glimpse of their past lives. Be that as it may, such an ability is not the seed of clear understanding, but is what someone experiences from having previously performed wicked deeds. The World-honored One, for the sake of the ordinary and the lofty, has spoken extensively about this fundamental principle. Not to know it is the height of negligence in one's study. How sad! Even if someone were to know a thousand of his or her past lives, or even ten thousand of them, that would not necessarily bring forth the Buddha's Dharma. There are non-Buddhists who already know of their past lives from over eighty thousand eons, but they have still not produced something we could call 'the Buddha's Dharma'. To know a mere five hundred past lives is no great ability.

In present-day Sung China, among those doing the practice of seated meditation, the folks who are the most in the dark are those who do not know that the teaching of not being subject to cause and effect is a false view. Sad to say, in a place where the genuine Dharma of the Tathagata has spread abroad and there has been a genuine Transmission from Ancestor to Ancestor, heretical gangs have formed who deny cause and effect. Those who are exploring the Matter\* through training with their Master should by all means hasten to make clear the fundamental principle of cause and effect. The later Hyakujō's principle of not being blind to cause and effect means not ignoring the presence of causality. Hence, the underlying principle is clear: we feel the effects of the causes that we put into action. In sum, if you have not clarified what the Buddha's Dharma is, do not go about recklessly preaching for the sake of the worldly and the celestial.



Our Ancestral Master Nāgārjuna once said:

If, like non-Buddhists, you argue against there being cause and effect in the world, then there could be no past or future. If you argue

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\* See *Glossary*.

against there being cause and effect in the realm of enlightenment, then there could be no Triple Treasure, Four Noble Truths, or four stages\* of arhathood.

Be very clear about this: no matter whether it is secular people or monastics who are arguing against the existence of cause and effect, they will be off the Path. To assert that the present is unreal is tantamount to saying, “One’s physical form exists in this particular state, but one’s spiritual nature has been returning to the enlightened state for ever so long, for one’s spiritual nature is one’s mind, and one’s mind is not the same as one’s body.” To understand the issue in this way is to be off the Path. And there are those who say, “When someone dies, they invariably return to the ocean of spiritual nature. Even if they have not studied the Buddha’s Dharma, they will naturally return to the ocean of enlightenment, at which point the wheel of birth and death will cease to turn. This is why there is no future life.” This is the non-Buddhist doctrine of nihilism. Even if they resemble monks physically, folks who hold to such wrong views are not disciples of the Buddha at all, but simply people who are off the Path. In short, to deny cause and effect is to make the mistake of denying the existence of past and future. These people’s denial of cause and effect stems from their having failed to train under a genuinely good spiritual guide. Those who train for a long time under a genuinely good spiritual guide will not hold to the false view that denies cause and effect. We need to reverently trust the compassionate instruction of our Ancestral Master Nāgārjuna and humbly place it above our head.



The monk Yōka Genkaku was an outstanding disciple of Daikan Enō. Originally, he trained in the Tendai tradition of the *Lotus Scripture*, sharing quarters with Great Master Sakei Genrō, the Eighth Chief Master of the Tendai tradition. Once while Genkaku was perusing the *Great Scripture on the Buddha’s Parinirvana* a golden light suddenly filled his room, and he profoundly experienced a spiritual awakening to That which transcends birth and death. He then proceeded to pay a visit to Enō to report to our Sixth Ancestor what he had experienced. Our Sixth Ancestor then gave him the seal\* that confirmed his awakening. Later, Genkaku composed “The Song That Attests to the Way”, in which there are the lines:

*Vacant-headed notions of emptiness which deny causality  
Bring about calamities as dire as a raging conflagration  
or a rampaging flood.*

Be very clear about this: denial of causality will bring about calamities. The old virtuous ones of past generations were quite clear about causality, whereas trainees in more recent times all tend to be skeptical. But even in present times, there are those who cultivate the Enlightened Heart and, for the sake of the Buddha Dharma, study the Buddha Dharma. Like the ancient worthies, they will be clear about cause and effect. To say that there are no causes and no effects is to be off the Path.



In extolling the view of cause and effect contained in Genkaku's lines, our Old Buddha Wanshi once said:

*It's like a foot of water making a ten-foot wave:  
There's nothing to be done about five hundred past lives.  
Though people go on about 'not being subject to' or 'not  
being blind to',  
They're all still in a pit, entangled in the tendrils of  
discriminatory thought.*

*Ha, ha, ha! What a laugh!  
Simply, do you get It, or not?  
If you're truly detached and rid of conventionalities,  
You'll not try to inhibit me from saying, 'Goo goo, ga  
ga!'"*

*The gods sing and the heavenly spirits dance, as the  
music comes forth all by itself,  
And clapping hands join in with merry shouts of laughter.*

Now, the lines,

*Though people go on about 'not being subject to' or 'not  
being blind to',  
They're all still in a pit, entangled in the tendrils of  
discriminatory thought,*

are tantamount to his saying that 'not being subject to' and 'not being blind to' really amount to the same thing.<sup>3</sup>

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3. That is, both phrases are the product of the discriminative thinking of those who have not yet 'got It'.

In short, this discussion of ‘cause and effect’ has not yet completely exhausted the term’s fundamental principle. And why? Because even though Wanshi has shed his wild fox’s attitude of mind right here and now before us, he does not say that after people escape from the attitude of mind of their wild fox, they are reborn in the human world, nor does he say that they are reborn in the celestial world, nor does he say that they are reborn in any other world, but this is something we should wonder about. Once people have dropped off their wild fox’s attitude of mind, those who should be reborn in a favorable world are reborn among celestial beings or among ordinary human beings, whereas those who should be reborn in an unfavorable world are reborn in one of the four unfavorable worlds.<sup>4</sup> Once people have dropped off their wild fox’s attitude of mind, they will not be reborn in some place other than one of the six worlds\* of existence. If someone says that when we die, we return to an ocean of spiritual nature or we return to a universal self, such are the views of those who are off the Path.



Meditation Master Engo Kokugon once said in a poem commenting on an ancient Ancestor’s kōan\* story:

*When fish swim, they may muddy up the water;  
When birds fly, they may shed a feather.  
It is hard indeed to escape the ever-bright Mirror.<sup>5</sup>  
The Great Void knows no bounds.*

*Once something has passed, it is far, far gone.  
The five hundred rebirths were simply dependent on the  
fox’s Great Practice with cause and effect.  
A thunderbolt may suddenly smash a mountain and the  
wind churn up the sea,  
But the Pure Gold, though refined a hundred times, never  
changes Its color.*

Even this verse leans towards denying cause and effect and, at the same time, tends to support the view of eternalism.<sup>6</sup>

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4. That is, favorable or unfavorable for hearing the Dharma.

5. The ever-bright Mirror reflects the karmic consequences of our actions.

6. Eternalism is the belief that the self and the world are both eternal.



The monk known as Meditation Master Daie Sōkō once said the following in a congratulatory poem:

*‘Not being subject to’ and ‘not being blind to’  
Are merely stones and clods of earth.  
Having met them along the path between the rice fields,  
I pulverized the silver mountain.  
Clapping my hands, I give a hearty “Ho, ho!” wherever I  
am,  
For here in Kōshū, this foolish Laughing Buddha is to be  
found.’<sup>7</sup>*

Present-day people in Sung dynasty China consider monks like Daie to be Masters skillful in leading trainees, but Daie’s opinions and understanding never reached the level of skillful means in instructing others in the Buddha Dharma. If anything, he leaned towards naturalism.<sup>8</sup>



Speaking more generally, there are more than thirty who have composed poems and commentaries on this story of Hyakujō’s fox, and not even one of them has had the slightest doubt that ‘not being subject to cause and effect’ means ‘doubting cause and effect’. Sad to say, these persons have not clarified what cause and effect is and have vainly wasted their lives, going astray in a state of confusion. In your exploring of the Buddha Dharma through your training with a Master, number one is clarifying what cause and effect is. Undoubtedly, those who deny cause and effect will, in their fierce pursuit of profits, give rise to false views and thereby become people who sever their own good spiritual roots.

To summarize, the principle of cause and effect is quite clear, and it is totally impersonal: those who fabricate evil will fall into a lower state, whereas those who practice good will rise to a higher state, and without the slightest disparity. If cause and effect had become null and void, Buddhas would never have appeared in the world and our Ancestral Master would not have come from the West. In short, it

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7. ‘The silver mountain’ is an allusion to a mountain that is impossible to scale. It is used in Zen Buddhism as a metaphor for the realm of enlightenment, which is beyond discriminative thought.
  8. In Buddhism, naturalism is the belief that things just happen to happen, which is a denial of cause and effect.

would be impossible for human beings to encounter a Buddha and hear the Dharma. The fundamental principle of cause and effect was not clear to Confucius or Lao-tzu. It has only been clarified and Transmitted by Buddha after Buddha and by Ancestor after Ancestor. Because the good fortune of those who are seeking to learn in these degenerate days of the Dharma is scant, they do not encounter a genuine Master or hear the authentic Dharma, and so they are not clear about cause and effect. If you deny causality as a result of this error, you will experience excessive misfortune, since you would be as ignorant as an ox or a horse. Even if you have not committed any evil act other than denying cause and effect, the poison of this view will immediately be terrible. Therefore, if you who are exploring the Matter through your training with a Master have put your heart that seeks awakening as the first and foremost matter, and therefore wish to repay the vast benevolence of the Buddhas and the Ancestors, you should swiftly clarify what causality really is.

*On a day during the summer retreat in the seventh year of the Kenchō era (1255), I copied this from the Master's draft. It had yet to reach the state of a cleaned-up draft, much less a clean copy. Even so, I have made this copy of it.*

*Ejō*