

from THE DIFFICULTY OF REPAYING THE DEBT TO THE BUDDHAS AND THE PATRIARCHS

by Hakuin Ekaku

Translated by Norman Waddell

Buddha means “one who is awakened.” Once you have awakened, your own mind itself is buddha. By seeking outside yourself for a buddha invested with form, you set yourself forward as a foolish, misguided person. It is like a person who wants to catch a fish. They must start by looking in the water, because fish live in water and are not found apart from it. If a person wants to find buddha, they must look into their own mind, because it is there, and nowhere else, that buddha exists.

Question: “In that case, what can I do to become awakened to my own mind?”

Answer: What is that which asks such a question? Is it your mind? Is it your original nature? Is it some kind of spirit or demon? Is it inside you? Outside you? Is it somewhere intermediate? Is it blue, yellow, red, or white?

It is something you must investigate and clarify for yourself. You must investigate it whether you are standing or sitting, speaking or silent, when you are eating your rice or drinking your tea. You must keep at it with total, single-minded devotion. And never, whatever you do, look in sutras or in commentaries for an answer, or seek it in the words you hear a teacher speak.

When all the effort you can muster has been exhausted and you have reached a total impasse, and you are like the cat at the rathole, like the mother hen warming her egg, it will suddenly come and you will

break free. The phoenix will get through the golden net. The crane will fly clear of the cage.

But even if no breakthrough occurs until your dying day and you spend twenty or thirty years in vain without ever seeing into your true nature, I want your solemn pledge that you will never turn for spiritual support to those tales that you hear the down-and-out old men and washed-out old women peddling everywhere today. If you do, they will stick to your hide, they will cling to your bones, you will never be free of them. And as for your chances with the ancestors’ difficult-to-pass koans, the less said about them the better, because they will be totally beyond your grasp.

Hence a priest of former times, Kao-feng Yuan-miao, said, “A person who commits themselves to the practice of Zen must be equipped with three essentials. A great root of faith. A great ball of doubt. A great tenacity of purpose. Lacking any one of them, one is like a tripod with only two legs.”

By “great root of faith” is meant the belief that each and every person has an essential self-nature they can see into, and the belief in a principle by which this self-nature can be fully penetrated. Even though you attain this belief, you cannot break through and penetrate to total awakening unless feelings of fundamental doubt arise as you work on the difficult-to-pass [*nanto*]



Jean-Claude Berens

koans. And even if these doubts build up, and crystallize, and you yourself become a “great doubting mass,” you will be unable to break that doubting mass apart unless you constantly bore into those koans with a

great, burning tenacity of purpose.

Thus it is said that it takes three long kalpas for lazy and inattentive sentient beings to attain nirvana, while for the fearless and stouthearted, buddhahood comes in

a single instant of thought. What you must do is to concentrate single-mindedly on bringing all your native potential into play. The practice of Zen is like making a fire by friction. The essential thing as you rub wood against stone is to apply continuous, all-out effort. If you stop when you see the first sign of smoke, you will never get even a flicker of fire, even though you keep rubbing away for two or three kalpas.

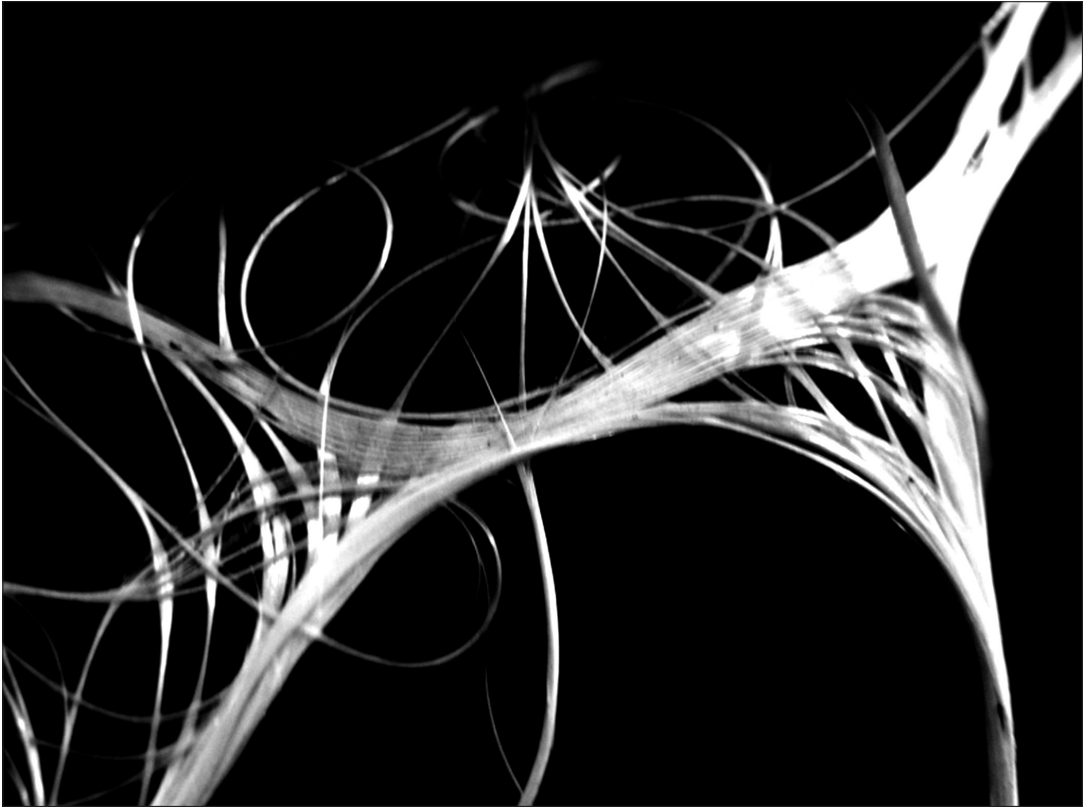
Only a few hundred yards from here is a beach. Suppose someone is bothered because they have never tasted sea water and decides to sample some. They set out in the direction of the beach, but before they have gone a hundred paces they stop and come back. They start out again, but this time they return after they have taken only ten steps. They will never get to know the taste of sea water that way, will they? But if they keep going straight ahead without turning back, even if they live far inland in a landlocked province such as Shinano, Kai, Hida, or Mino, they will eventually reach the sea. By dipping their finger in the water and tasting it, they will know instantly the taste of sea water the world over, because it is of course the same everywhere, in India, China, the southern sea or the northern sea.

Those dharma nobles who explore the secret depths are like this too. They go straight forward, boring into their own minds with unbroken effort, never letting up or retreating. Then the breakthrough suddenly comes, and with that they penetrate their own nature, the nature of others, the nature of sentient beings, the nature of the evil passions and of enlightenment, the nature of the buddhanature, the god nature, the bodhisattva nature, the sentient being nature, the nonsentient being nature, the

craving-ghost nature, the contentious spirit nature, the beast nature—they are all of them seen in a single instant of thought. The great matter of their religious quest is completely and utterly resolved. There is nothing left. They are free of birth and death. What a thrilling moment it is!

It is with great respect and deep reverence that I urge all you superior seekers who investigate the secret depths to be as earnest in penetrating and clarifying the self as you would be putting out a fire on top of your head; to be as assiduous in boring through your doubt as you would be seeking a lost article of incalculable worth; to be as hostile toward the teachings left by the buddha-ancestors as you would be toward a person who had just slain both your parents. Anyone belonging to the school of Zen who does not engage in the doubting and introspection of koans must be considered a dead-beat rascal of the lowest type, a person who would throw away the greatest asset they have. Hence Kao-feng said, “At the bottom of great doubt lies great enlightenment... A full measure of doubt will become a full measure of enlightenment.”

Don't think the commitments and pressing duties of secular life leave you no time to go about forming a ball of doubt. Don't think your mind is so crowded with confused thoughts you would be incapable of devoting yourself single-mindedly to Zen practice. Suppose a person was in a busy marketplace, pushing their way down a narrow street in a dense crowd, and some gold coins happened to drop out of their pocket into the dirt. Do you imagine they would just leave them there, forget about them, and continue on their way because of where they were? Do you think someone



Joseph Robertson

would leave the gold pieces behind because they were in a congested place or because the coins were lying in the dirt? Of course not. They would be down there pushing and shoving as much as they had to, frantically turning everything upside down, with tears in their eyes. Their mind wouldn't rest until they had recovered them. Yet what are a few pieces of gold set against the priceless jewel found in the headdresses of kings, that way of inconceivable being that exists within your own mind? Could

a jewel of such worth be attained easily, without effort?

There once was a denizen of the Eastern Sea, Redfin Carp by name, who was endowed with an indomitable spirit and an upright character. Redfin Carp was a figure of immense stature among his fellow fish. He was constantly bemoaning the fate of his comrades. "How many untold millions of my brethren proudly dwell in the vast ocean deeps. They entrust themselves to its boundless silver waves, glide up and down



Susan Ford Collins

among the swells, and sport in the seaweed and kelp. Yet countless of them are taken by baited hooks and caught in nets. They wind up on chopping blocks, where they are sliced and cooked to fill the bellies of those in the human world. Their bones are cast away and

left to mingle in the dust and mire. Their heads are thrown to the stray dogs. Some are dried or salted for inland markets. Exposed in stalls and shopfronts for all to see. Not a single one finishes out his natural span. How sad is the life of a fish!"

Amid these sad musings there was a great welling of spirit in Redfin Carp's breast. He pledged a solemn vow. "I shall swim beyond the Dragon Gates. I shall brave the perilous bolts of fire and lightning. I shall transcend the estate of ordinary fish and achieve a place among the order of sacred dragons. I shall rid myself forever of the terrible suffering to which my race is heir, expunge every trace of our shame and humiliation."

Waiting until the third day of the third month, when the peach blossoms are in flower and the river is full, he made his way to the entrance of the Yu Barrier. Then, with a flick of his tail, Redfin Carp swam forth.

You have never laid eyes on the awesome torrent of water that rolls through the Dragon Gates. It falls all the way from the summits of the far-off Kunlun Range with tremendous force. There are wild, thousand-foot waves that rush down through gorges towering to dizzying heights on either side, carrying away whole hillsides as they go. Angry bolts of thunder beat down with a deafening roar. Moaning whirlwinds whip up poisonous mists and funnels of noisome vapor spitting flashing forks of lightning. The mountain spirits are stunned into senselessness; the river spirits turn limp with fright. Just a drop of this water will shatter the carapace of the giant tortoise; it will break the bones of the giant whale.

It was into this maelstrom that Redfin Carp, his splendid golden red scales girded to the full, his steely teeth thrumming like drums, made a direct all out assault. Ah! Golden Carp! You might have led an ordinary life out in the boundless ocean. It teems with lesser fish. You would not have gone

hungry. Then why? What made you embark on this wild and bitter struggle? What was waiting for you up beyond the barrier?

Suddenly, after being seared by cliff-shattering bolts of lightning, after being battered by heaven-scorching blasts of thunderfire, his scaly armor burnt from head to tail, his fins singed through, Redfin Carp perished into the Great Death and rose again as a divine dragon—a supreme lord of the waters. Now, with the thunder god at his head and the fire god at his rear, flanked right and left by the gods of rain and wind, he moves abroad with the clouds in one hand and the mists in the other, bringing new life to the tender young shoots withering in long-parched desert lands, keeping the true Dharma safe amid the defilements of the degenerate world.

Had he been content to pass his life like a lame turtle or blind tortoise, feeding on winkles and tiny shrimps, not even all the effort Vasuki, Manasvi, and the other Dragon Kings might muster on his behalf could have done him any good. He could never have achieved the great success that he did.

Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1786) is a major figure of Japanese Rinzai Zen and is recognized as one of the most versatile and original artists of the Edo period.

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