

## Chapter Two

### GENJO KOAN

Genjo Koan (現成公案) is the big favorite whenever someone includes a piece by Dogen in an anthology of famous Buddhist writings. It's the one Shobogenzo excerpt to include if you can only include one. Dogen himself was obviously quite fond of it as he continued to rework and revise this particular chapter almost up to the time of his death. It kind of sums up most of what's really important in Shobogenzo in a nice bite-sized chapter. Plus it's got some of Dogen's most quotable quotes. So it's a good place to start.

The word "genjo" means realized and the word "koan" means a "public case." So howcum most translations give the title of Genjo Koan in English as the Realized Universe. A lot of famous dialogues between Zen teachers and their students were written down and made into such public cases for study. Some of these cases are quite mysterious and mystical sounding, though, in the end they're all really quite amazingly straight forward. For Dogen, the word koan was a synonym for dharma, the profound truth of the Universe in the sense that the universe is a mystery. And by that I mean that although the universe is all around us proclaiming its truth so loudly you'd have to be deaf to miss it most of us manage to miss it anyhow.

Genjo Koan starts off with what sounds like a string of contradictory statements that don't seem to make very much sense at all.

"When all dharmas are the Buddha-Dharma, then there is delusion and realization, there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are ordinary beings," Dogen says right at the outset. OK. No major problems there. But then he goes, "When the myriad dharmas are each not of the self, there is no delusion and no realization, no buddhas and no ordinary beings, no life and no death." Wait up! Hold it! I thought there *were* all those things and now he says there aren't.

And *then* just to be even more contrary he says, "The Buddha's truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity, and so there is life and death, there is delusion and realization, there are beings and buddhas."

And just when you think he hasn't twisted your cranium enough he finishes up the paragraph saying, "And though it is like this, it is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds while hated, flourish."

I happen to like that last line a whole lot. In one sense he's saying something like, "Shit happens. Deal with it." But it goes deeper than that. The world will never

behave the way we think it should behave, but that isn't so terrible because the self that thinks the world should behave according to its wishes doesn't really exist.

So what in Holy Heck is going on here with this paragraph? I mean, first he says there is life and there is death, and there is a difference between jus' plain folks and Buddhas. Yet next he says that when we give up the idea of self, all these distinctions disappear. Then he goes right back to what he said in the first line, that these distinctions are real. Well, which is it? Make up your mind, Dogen! But he's not being wishy-washy here. Look at what he says in the next paragraph.

"Those who greatly realize delusion are buddhas. Those who are greatly deluded about realization are ordinary beings." In other words, to be a Buddha is to truly understand delusion thoroughly. But just having a lot of cool ideas about realization or enlightenment doesn't mean squat. Buddhist practitioners have to be especially careful here because we tend to build up a lot of elaborate fantasies about what realization must be like. When we get to the point in our practice that these fantasies begin to play themselves out in our minds, we can get very confused. Oftentimes practitioners start to experience *exactly* the fantasy of "enlightenment" we've constructed for ourselves. It's absolutely perfect because it conforms precisely to our own ego's definition of absolute perfection. If we haven't understood the point that all of our thoughts are just thoughts we can get lost in these delusions about realization for a very long time.

So just what *is* this Buddha's truth stuff Dogen keeps going on and on about? By way of explanation, the D-man gives us a kooky little passage that goes like this. *Ahem*. "To learn the Buddha's truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad dharmas. To be experienced by the myriad dharmas is to let our own body-and-mind, and the body-and-mind of the external world, fall away."

Sounds pretty "Zen," don't it? But what he's trying to say here isn't really all that weird. First off, let's take that "to learn yourself is to forget yourself" business. Dogen does not deny the individual or subjective side of our experience. But to really understand your own subjective experience you need to forget your confused ideas about your self.

To most of us the existence of "self" is unquestionable, self-evident. What could be more obvious? *I* think, therefore *I* am. But, to Dogen it was evident that self did not exist at all — as it is to anyone who pursues Buddhist practice deeply enough. Self is just a mental construct, an idea, a way of understanding reality, a slot within our heads into which we place a certain portion of that which we experience. But when your practice deepens and it begins to dawn on you that all of your thoughts are just thoughts, even that most basic of thoughts, the idea that

your thoughts are generated by something called “self,” becomes questionable and finally dissolves away.

So what happens if we manage to realize this whole “there is no such thing as self” deal? I mean, do you just disappear? Does your whole personality vanish? Do you end up like some kind of soul-less Zen robot or something?

Not at all, actually. Cuz when the *thought* of self breaks down, that to which you assigned the name “self” does not similarly disappear. You just discover that “me” was far too limiting a name for what you really are. Here’s what Dogen has to say about that. “A person getting realization is like the moon being reflected in water: the moon does not get wet, and the water is not broken. The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a dew-drop on a blade of grass. Realization does not break the individual, just as the moon does not pierce the water. The individual does not hinder the state of realization, just as a dew-drop does not hinder the sky and moon.”

The thing is, it’s not like you get some great realization and then your soul vanishes. The fact is your soul or “self” or whatever never existed in the first place except as an ill-formed mental construct that caused you a lot of unnecessary grief. It doesn’t exist right now, so there’s nothing that could possibly vanish in some future “enlightenment experience.” None of the Zen teachers I’ve known were the least bit like robots. If anything, their personalities were stronger than other people’s because they had fewer illusions about what they were.

But just how do you forget your ideas of “self?” You do so, the D-man says, when you are “experienced by the myriad dharmas.” In other words, we do this when we stop concentrating exclusively on how *we* experience the universe and learn how the universe experiences us. It’s not as impossible as it sounds. In fact, you do it all the time.

When I look at you and you look at me, I am experiencing you and being experienced by you at the same time. You don’t know what thoughts are in my head when I look at you. And I don’t know if you notice that zit on the end of my nose or not. And yet my experience of you is a real and vital part of your experience and vice versa. We behave and even think differently in front of others. Maybe if you weren’t lookin’ at me I’d pop that zit. And, of course, it goes way deeper than just that. We are always being experienced by everyone and everything we come in contact with. A Buddhist would even say that you’re being experienced by this book at some level. The money you paid for it will be experienced by me, for example (footnote: Thank you, I think I’ll use your dollar to go buy a box of Good’n’Plenty). And the book itself, though we conceive of it as being an inanimate object can be said to have a kind of ability to experience

things. Maybe not quite the same as yours, but still, a Buddhist accepts that this kind of stuff is part of the wide, vast universe. Of course, you don't need to take this literally if you don't want to. But I find that this way of viewing things makes me far more respectful of the stuff around me.

At some level we each partake in the overall experiences of the whole universe. A gust of wind comes along and everyone in the park feels a chill. The sun suddenly goes supernova and we all burn to a crisp. And even when we think we're not experiencing the experience of the whole universe we still are. We just don't know it. And our *not* knowing it is an indispensable part of that overall universal experience. Gosh.

So where do we get this idea of self in the first place? Dogen's take on it is this: "When a man is sailing along in a boat and he moves his eyes to the shore, he misapprehends that the shore is moving. If he keeps his eyes fixed on the boat, he knows that it is the boat which is moving forward. Similarly, when we try to understand the myriad dharmas on the basis of confused assumptions about body and mind, we misapprehend that our own mind or our own essence may be permanent." It's when we conceive of ourselves as having some kind of permanent essence that we get into trouble. It's that permanent essence that we feel we must protect and preserve, which feels slighted when it's mistreated, which seeks revenge, gets jealous of other people's (non-existent) permanent essences and does all kinds of idiotic things just to try and prove its own worth.

As for the supposed permanency of this non-existent essence, Dogen gives us a metaphor. He says, "Firewood becomes ash; it can never go back to being firewood. Nevertheless, we should not take the view that ash is its future and firewood is its past." Firewood is firewood, ash is ash. It makes no sense to speak of some kind of essence which changes from firewood into ash.

It's like imagining there's some kind of permanent essence which starts off as a bunch of wads of cotton, gets shipped off to Taiwan, sewn into the shape of a T-shirt, gets printed up with the logo of some studdly hair metal band, gets bought for much too much money by a pimply faced teenage boy and worn for three years before ending up as a dish rag, then a cat toy and finally winds up forgotten at the bottom of a landfill somewhere slowly turning into dirt. From the beginning the T-shirt was just a conglomeration of cotton and ink on the material or "form" side and the trademark of the hair metal band along with some merchandiser's greed for making money off of dull witted teenage boys on the immaterial or "emptiness" side. You and I are no different. We're no more than a transitional phase of a particular glob of matter and energy within the vast universe. Yet the wide and vast universe is as much a part of us as we are a part of it.

So if it's a mistake to view our past and our future as something that happens to

our “self” how can we view them? The D-man says, “Remember, firewood abides in the place of firewood in the Dharma. It has a past and it has a future. Although it has a past and a future, the past and the future are cut off. Ash exists in the place of ash in the Dharma. It has a past and it has a future. The firewood, after becoming ash, does not again become firewood.” Our past and our future are cut off from the here and now. We can’t revisit the past and we can’t fast forward ahead to the future. The only real time is now. The only real place is here. And just to make sure we don’t miss the full implications of the metaphor he adds, “Similarly, human beings, after death, do not live again.”

So if even life and death can’t be thought of as things that happen to our “self” what the heck are they? “Life is an instantaneous situation, and death is also an instantaneous situation. It is the same, for example, with winter and spring. We do not think that winter becomes spring, and we do not say that spring becomes summer.”

For what it’s worth let me give you my take on this whole “self” thing. There is something, some segment of the vast and wide universe, which you carve out and call “self” and say belongs to “you.” It’s an odd idea, you know, that “you” belong to “you.” When you were very young you noticed this aspect of the universe and your parents and teachers and friends all told you in overt and subtle ways that this something was your unique “self.” They might have even referred to this something as your “soul.” Everyone had one of these, they told you, and each one was unique, individual, eternally separate from all the others. You accepted this explanation and based your interpretation of all of your experiences on this way of looking at things. It’s only natural you would have done so because nearly all of the great religious, scientific and philosophical works all across the world are based on this understanding. There are virtually no alternatives. So when some book by some old dead Japanese dude comes along and says otherwise, it’s pretty hard to accept.

Yet a certain small and historically nearly insignificant group of frankly crazy seeming people calling themselves Buddhists claim to have discovered that this ordinary and nearly universally accepted way of looking at things is absolutely untrue. Not only that, they claim that any individual in the world can see this for him or herself if only that person is willing to do some work to transcend the ordinary view of things. And they say that if we throw away this false view of things absolutely every aspect of our lives will become immeasurably better. We need to work to transcend the ordinary view, they say, because that view is so very pervasive due mostly to the fact that the vast majority of the world’s population accepts it unquestioningly.

We can transcend this, our man Mr. Dogen says, “when we come back to this concrete place.” Notice he says “come back” — as if we have somehow left the

concrete place where we are right now. How can we ever leave where we are? But we do it all the time. In fact, most of us are sunk so deeply into our own mental images that we can barely even recognize where we are anymore. We need to learn to come back to a place we have never left. It's absurd. But that's the way it actually is.

"If we become familiar with action and come back to this concrete place," Mr. D says, "the truth is evident that the myriad dharmas are not self." Becoming familiar with action sounds like a pretty easy requirement for understanding the truth of the universe. But becoming familiar with action can be tough. You'd think, for example, that becoming familiar with an action as simple as sitting on a cushion and looking at a wall — which is all that zazen really is — would be a snap. But try it some time and see. And if something like that is hard to figure out, becoming familiar with the complicated actions of our every day lives is about a bazillion times more difficult. So what are we to do?

"When we use the whole body-and-mind to look at forms," Dogen says, "and when we use the whole body-and-mind to listen to sounds," he says, "we are sensing them directly." Say what? But using the whole body to look or to listen is, again, not difficult at all. You know how when you go to a really loud concert and you can feel Flea's bass hitting you right in the chest or Eddie Van Halen's high notes slicing right through your sinus passages? The truth is we always sense everything with our whole bodies. It's just that our ears are more sensitive to sound and our eyes more sensitive to light. Nonetheless, light and sound always affect our entire bodies. Our senses aren't really as distinct from one another as we conceive them to be. And we can take what Dogen says here even further since he often uses the words "the whole body" to mean the entire universe. What I call "me" may be little more than an organ the universe uses to experience itself the way we use our ears to experience the sound of Eddie Van Halen.

But, for Dogen, everything always seems to come back to that question he had as a kid. He wondered why Buddhists said we were already perfect, but they recommended all these weird meditative practices in order to realize this innate perfection. So if we only have to come back to right where we are, in other words, if we're always enlightened, why *don't* we notice it? Why are we so confused all the time, fighting, fussing, car-bombing each other and doing all kinds of nasty stuff based on the confused idea that our "self" is somehow real?

In Genjo Koan, he explains it like this. "When fish move through water, however they move, there is no end to the water. When birds fly through the sky, however they fly, there is no end to the sky." (footnote: Since this is a long quote, I've decided not to put it all in the text. But here's the rest of it: "But if a bird leaves the sky it will die at once, and if a fish leaves the water it will die at once. So we can understand that water is life and can understand that sky is life. Birds are life, and

fish are life. It may be that life is birds and that life is fish. And beyond this, there may still be further progress.”)

We can't notice reality anymore than a fish can recognize water. No one can ever notice their own enlightenment. If you think you have realized enlightenment, then it's not really enlightenment, I'm afraid. Bummer, huh? As the D-man says, “When buddhas are really buddhas, they do not need to recognize themselves as buddhas. Nevertheless, they are buddhas in the state of experience, and they go on experiencing the state of Buddha.” (footnote: He also puts it this way, which I like a lot: “There is a state in which the traces of realization are forgotten; and it manifests the traces of forgotten realization for a long, long time.”)

Then he goes on to say, “This being so, a bird or fish that aimed to move through the water or the sky [only] after getting to the bottom of water or utterly penetrating the sky, could never find its way or find its place in the water or in the sky.” This is a very important idea for any of you aspiring to really practice Buddhism. When you start thinking you just gotta, gotta, gotta get right to the bottom of everything and experience whatever you envision as complete, unsurpassed, unqualified whiz-bang with cheese on top Enlightenment, you're already moving in the wrong direction. The enlightenment you're searching for when you search that way is always gonna be way off over there somewhere. Never here. Never now.

And just in case you missed the point about Buddha's not necessarily recognizing themselves as such, Dogen says, “Do not assume that what is attained will inevitably become self-conscious and be recognized by the intellect. Realization is the state of ambiguity itself.” The state of ambiguity — that messy, greasy, mixed up, confused and awful situation you're living through right now — is enlightenment itself. The D-man may sound repetitive here — if he were a modern writer his editor would surely have cut those repetitions out. And we should rejoice and be glad he did not get cut up that way because this is a very hard point to grasp. The more times you hear it repeated in different ways, the more chances it just might stick. Or not.

Dogen ends the chapter with a short story that sums things up. It's one of those hot, sticky, humid days at the end of a long Japanese summer and Zen Master is sitting in his room fanning himself with a paper fan. A monk comes by and asks, “The nature of air is to be ever-present, and there is no place that air cannot reach. So why are you using a fan?”

The Master says, “You have only understood that the nature of air is to be ever-present, but you do not yet know the truth that there is no place air cannot reach.”

The monk says, “What is the truth of there being no place air cannot reach?”

At this, the Master just sits there fanning himself.

The mere fact that we are living in the enlightened state all the time does not absolve us from needing to have the will to the truth, just like the fact that there is air everywhere doesn't mean that there's no sense in fanning yourself when you're hot. The poor student is probably drenched with sweat and smells like a garlic processing plant next door to a waste water treatment facility. And yet instead of solving his real problem by doing something real like fanning himself, he's asking about some idiotic theory of air being everywhere. This is the way we all are, though. We're far more interested in explanations of reality than we are in reality itself. The solution is to see the problem and take action — now. Start from just the place where you are and do something. Buddhism is a philosophy of action. You cannot understand it by merely reading about it. Without the practice of zazen all the theories in the world won't get you an inch closer to the mark. If you're really serious about Buddhism, don't just read about it, *do* it.