

# A REFLECTION ON THE ZEN POETRY OF DOGEN: VERSES FROM THE MOUNTAIN OF ETERNAL PEACE

Amporn Sa-ngiamwibool  
Shinawatra University, Thailand

## ABSTRACT

*Buddhism aims to awake or, ultimately, enlighten the mind. Meditation practice is suggested as the best way to awake the mind, according to Zen. This reflection aimed to explore how Eihei Dogen, a Zen master, awakes and draws the reader or mediator to the point of utterly still meditation where no words and boundaries exist with a focus on one of his writing, **The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace**. This reflection also traced back the incident in Sutra that influenced his poetry. A conclusion that can be drawn upon this reflection reassures that the poetry of Dogen conveys the original, true essence of the mind as revealed in Sutra through Maha Kassapa's enlightenment and how to practice the mind through various symbols.*

**Keywords:** Eihei Dogen, the awakened mind, enlightenment, poetry, Buddhism

## Introduction

Mind is the essence of Buddhism since the era of Gautama Buddha up until now. All practices in Buddhism therefore focus on awakening the mind. One of the most important incidents regarding to this awakening was when Gautama Buddha raised up a lotus and only Maka Kassapa smiled. This smile reflected his awakened mind. Zen masters have followed this tradition of mind-awakening practice/meditation. Among the Zen masters, Eihei Dogen is one of the most revered masters of all time. This paper therefore aims to examine his poetry and reflect on it to see how he has passed on this tradition in his poetry.

The contents of this paper aim to describe Dogen's characteristics of the awakened mind as appeared in his book, *The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*, illustrate how he used symbols to represent the awakened mind and explain how he taught the practice of awakening the mind through his poetry. The contents of this paper therefore fall into three parts:

- I. The Awakened Mind in the Poetry of Dogen
- II. Symbols of the Awakened Mind in His Poetry
- III. How to Awaken the Mind through the Poetry

### I. The Awakened Mind in the Poetry of Dogen

#### 1.1 The definition of the awakened mind

The awakened mind is the basis of the state of the mind when the mind is fully awakened or enlightened. This state of the mind can be attained by meditation. At the beginning of meditation, the mind is not focused so it is temporarily awakened. Through meditation, the mind becomes more focused and more awakened. Through deep and fully focused meditation, the mind becomes fully awakened and free from all suffering. This state of fully awakened mind is called enlightenment. This paper primarily focuses on the state of the mind when it is awakened, temporarily or permanently as enlightened. Therefore, the awakened mind and the enlightened mind are the same meaning in this paper. Both reflect the radiance of the Buddha's countenance.

#### 1.2 The origin of Zen's mind-awakening meditation and initial symbolic meaning

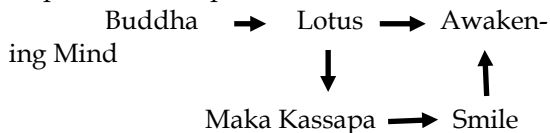
In Sutra, one of the best models for mind-awakened meditation is Maka Kassapa. He was insightfully impressed by the radiance of the Buddha's countenance and sensing the enlightenment shone through it at the very first sight. He was particularly honored by the Buddha who praised him as the one who would attain enlightenment like the Buddha who later proclaimed to be the Master when he passed away. After the Buddha passed away, he was later considered as the Father of the Sangha. According to Sutra, he is a model of disciplined and austere life devoted to

meditation. Because of this, he is the Master of the Zen masters.

The incident that is believed to be the origin of Zen was when Gautama Buddha raised up a lotus, only Maka Kassapa, one of his principal disciples, responds with a smile. Nobody knows actually what Maka Kassapa realized but this realization was believed to be the state of fully awakened mind or enlightenment. This instant enlightenment strongly influenced Zen masters who have followed the attainment of Maka Kassapa. According to Zen, this enlightenment can be attained by practice or meditation, not by words. However, Zen masters do not completely disregard the role of language as a means to teach how to attain the enlightenment. All Zen masters practice and teach this enlightenment through symbolic meanings. Among the Zen masters, Eihei Dogen is most well-known for this.

To analyze how Dogen uses symbols in his poetry, it is necessary to trace back to the origin that influences his mind. The lotus in the hand of the Buddha which led Maka Kassapa to enlightenment is the key symbol. In Sutra, lotus might be the most important symbols because it is related to the Buddha and enlightenment. The Buddha walked lotuses when he was born. The flower is later the symbol of his enlightenment as we seen that Buddha images are sitting on this sacred lotus. In his teaching, he classified human minds into the four groups symbolized by four groups of lotuses.

Lotus is also the symbol of Maka Kassapa's enlightenment. His fully wakened mind was reflected through his smile when he saw the lotus in Buddha's hand. This relationship can be exemplified as follows:



### 1.3 What is the "buddha mind" like in the poetry of Dogen? How does Dogen refer to Maka Kassapa's enlightenment?

This relationship as exemplified above strongly influences Dogen's idea. In the poem entitled "A Zen Monk Asked for a Verse" (English version by Steven Heine) from his collection of "Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace," he defines mind as buddha.

*"Mind itself is buddha" -- difficult to practice, but easy to explain;*

*"No mind, no buddha" -- difficult to explain, but*

*easy to practice.*

The mind that is described as "buddha" here must be the mind that Maka Kassapa spiritually realized when he saw the lotus in the hand of Gautama Buddha. This realization or is also called "enlightenment," "spiritual intelligence" or "awakened mind." The mind is therefore described as "buddha," "enlightenment," "spiritual intelligence," "enlightened awareness" and "awakening mind." This buddha mind – either of sacred or common – is the same and the same as that of Maka Kassapa. Every one possesses this buddha mind and, according to Dogen, can attain enlightenment as revealed in the poem "True person manifest throughout the ten quarters of the world."

*The true person is*

*Not anyone in particular;*

*But, like the deep blue color*

*Of the limitless sky,*

*It is everyone, everywhere in the world.*

According to this poem, the "true person" here should mean the buddha mind so this mind is "everyone ... in the world" – both sacred and common – and is "not anyone in particular." This means that the mind pervades all souls without distinction. Also, this mind is "everywhere in the world." It is in all things so it is all around us. In brief, this mind is in everyone and everywhere. It is vast and limitless like the sky. This means that the mind is omnipresent as it is in everything and everywhere in the world. The mind as nature here implies that it is eternal and remains unchanged as nature represented by the sky here. This eternal and unchanged mind indicates that this mind is always present; it always exists here and now in everyone, everything and everywhere. This is the way that Dogen reminds the readers of a famous saying in Buddhism that "the Buddha mind is here and now." This "here and now" is the essence of mind practice and meditation.

The mind is in everyone, everything and everywhere in this world. Then the question arises. Does everyone and everything possess the quality of the buddha mind? According to Dogen, the presence of buddha mind is truly spiritual. This means that if one does not possess spiritual presence of buddha mind, he does not have the buddha mind as revealed in the previous poem, "A Zen Monk Asked for a Verse," that "No mind, no Buddha." The "true person" therefore refers to the person who possesses truly spiritual presence

of buddha mind.

This reminds the reader of the dissimilarities between Maka Kassapa and the other disciples. Only Maka Kassapa smiled in the presence of the lotus because he possesses spiritual essence or presence of the buddha mind. When he perceived the lotus, it was not the lotus that was truly spiritual. It was his perception of the spiritual essence or presence of the buddha mind.

Therefore, the "buddha" mind is the mind that insightfully perceives the spiritual essence of the things that represent the enlightened mind. The "buddha" mind in a person turns that person to the "true person." The "buddha" mind in things turns those things to the true things. This true self is called "original essence" and also called "original substance." The perception of this spiritually original essence is the basis of the awakened or enlightened mind. Someone realizes this original essence is said to have the "buddha" mind. This is how Dogen reminds his reader of Maka Kassapa's perception of the spiritually original essence through his poetry.

## II. Symbols of the Awakened Mind in the Poetry of Dogen

Nature such as mountains, rivers, and the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars is commonly seen in the Zen poetry as the symbol of the mind. Nature also plays a vital role in the poetry of Dogen. The moon, water in various forms, from simple symbols (e.g. dew/dewdrop, stream, waves and rain) to subtle ones (e.g. wading and fishing, snow and, heron), and the world (and as symbolized by a dew or dewdrop and raindrop to refer to oneness) are often used symbols of enlightenment. In the poem entitled "Impermanence," the moon and water in the form of moonlight and dewdrops play a vital role in describing enlightened mind.

*To what shall*

*I liken the world?*

*Moonlight, reflected*

*In dewdrops,*

*Shaken from a crane's bill.*

In Zen poetry, the moon is often used in Zen poetry as a symbol for enlightenment. Moonlight is understood to mean the radiance of pure awareness that permeates the universe. In this poem, moonlight also means enlightened awareness that is "reflected" in "dewdrops."

Water is often used in Zen poetry as a common spiritual metaphor used to describe the experience of the world. Like experience of the world, water is tangible, yet ephemeral and it cannot be stopped or grasped. In this poetry, water is presented in the form of dewdrop. Each dewdrop means an individual experience of the world or each person's experience of the world. It is a worldly experience so it cannot generate radiance of pure awareness. But this radiance of pure awareness symbolized by the moonlight is reflected in each dewdrop. The dewdrop that contains the full reflection of that moon within therefore contains pure awareness or enlightened awareness. This is what Dogen borrowed from the incident that Maka Kassapa smiles. Maka Kassapa is the dewdrop contains the full reflection of that moon within and his smile that generates radiance of enlightenment is the symbol of awaken mind.

Also, in another poem "In the Stream," water in the form of stream is a metaphor of the state of the mind that cannot generate radiance of pure awareness. Its luminous purity was blurred by worldly experience and cannot be reflected as described below.

*In the stream,*

*Rushing past*

*To the dusty world,*

*My fleeting form*

*Casts no reflection.*

The "dusty world" here is a daily world that becomes "dusty" because of dust. If we do not get rid of the dust (all evils), we do not see the true essence of the world that lies beneath the dust. Therefore, "To the dusty world, My fleeting form Casts no reflection." Similarly, in a dusty stream, we see only the dust that covers the surface. The dust prevents us from seeing the true essence of the stream that lies beneath the dusty surface. The dusty world and the stream here refer to the impure mind. This is a way that Dogen explained why others monks did not smile – as their minds were full of dust and these dusty minds prevented them from actually seeing "the true essence" of the lotus in the hand of Buddha. Only the mind of Maha Kassapa that is free from dust actually saw "the true essence" of the lotus which is a symbol of the enlightened awareness of the true nature of the world. His smile therefore casts a reflection of his enlightened awareness which lies beneath what he perceived on the surface.

A more elaborated description of this

profound state of perception which leads to the enlightened awareness is also suggested in another form of water (i.e. snow) as seen in the poem entitled "Worship," in which Dogen signifies what worship truly means.

*A white heron*

*Hiding itself*

*In the snowy field,*

*Where even the winter grass*

*Cannot be seen.*

To understand this poem like other poems of Dogen, the reader needs to think and reflect on them again and again. For example, the reader might ask himself these questions. What is the poem entitled "Worship"? Why is it a heron? What is it a white heron? Why is the heron in a snowy field, not in a Zen garden as it is usually be seen in a picture? What is the relationship between the heron and the snow? Why is it winter, not other seasons? Why is it hiding itself, not wading and fishing in the river as it is usually be seen? Where is it hiding in such a snowy field?

On the first time, the reader might find no answers at all. When he thinks and reflects on them, he will see all connections between the title "Worship" and "a white heron" which is "Hiding itself" utterly still "In the snowy field" where everything is completely white because it is "Where even the winter grass/ Cannot be seen." Obviously, to understand this poem, an interpretation is needed and it falls into several levels.

On one level, why is this poem entitled this poem "Worship"? What does a heron have something to do with worship? To answer these questions, one has to look at the symbolic meaning of a heron in Zen. A heron is commonly seen in a Zen garden and Zen refers to meditation.

Hence, the heron becomes a symbol of meditation. Because of this symbolic reference, the heron possesses a strong relationship with worship and represents a worshiper or meditator. Due to this symbolic meaning, this poem was entitled "Worship". This is a way that Dogen reminds the reader of Maka Kassapa as a model of worshiper who was impressed by the radiance of the Buddha's countenance and sensing the enlightenment shone through it at the very first sight.

On another level, why is it "Hiding itself"? In a Zen garden, it is very common to see a heron is wading, or walking through water or fishing. While wading and fishing,

the heron was utterly still. The heron therefore refers to utter stillness. If we observe a heron, we will see its utter stillness. When it is standing, it stands utterly still. When it is wading, its movement seems completely quiet. When it is fishing, it is determined and completely focused. Its utter stillness is here referred to a visual act of "Hiding itself". This utter stillness stands for this utterly still meditation. The act of "Hiding itself" hence becomes a symbolic act of utterly still meditation. This is a way that Dogen reminds the reader of Maka Kassapa as a model of a model of disciplined and austere life devoted to meditation.

On a higher level, numerous questions are relating to the scene where this act of "Hiding itself" is taking place. What does a heron have something to do with the snowy field? Why isn't it a Zen garden where a heron is commonly seen? Why is it "In the snowy field"? Why is it "Where even the winter grass" "Cannot be seen"? What are the symbolic meanings of all these?

If the reader contemplates, the imagery of being "white (heron)" will answer all these questions. An imagery of a white heron among bushes and trees in a Zen garden where can be easily seen because of its being white. Even though the heron is a symbol of a meditator and a Zen garden is a symbol of meditation, the heron and the garden cannot describe utterly still meditation that is already implied by the act of "Hiding itself". But "In the snowy field" "Where even the winter grass" "Cannot be seen," the white heron (the meditator) can vanish (hide) into an environment of white (the snow) or utterly stillness of deep and focused meditation. In addition, white is the color that symbolizes radiance and glows. Snow is often used in Zen poetry to suggest the enlightened awareness as it can generate radiance of pure awareness. White, snow and radiance are the symbol of enlightenment. This is why the white heron in this poem is "Hiding itself" "In the snowy field." This is a way that Dogen reminds the reader of the radiance of the Buddha's countenance and the enlightenment shone through the sight of Maka Kassapa.

More importantly, the snowy field where is described as "Where even the winter grass" "Cannot be seen" is the symbol of being oneness. Everything is lost in that radiance. Even the green color of the winter grass cannot be seen. Everything is the same

and seen as one. Nothing, except the snow, is radiant and can be seen. The snowy field is therefore a symbol of oneness. In utterly still meditation, the body, the mind and the soul are as one.

Above all, the snowy field is the symbol of oneness and this oneness is the true nature of the world. According to Dogen, the recognition of this true nature is true worship. In the snowy field, everything is the same and becomes as one. Everything in this world is the same and becomes as one. This is the true nature of the world and this world includes our true self. Snow in Zen poetry is often used as the symbol of the true nature of the world and our true self. To perceive this true nature is to look into the true nature of the world. This true nature within us can be perceived by utter stillness of deep, focused and meditation which will lead to the recognition of our true self or our own bright nature in the midst of the radiant snowy field. This recognition is what true worship is, according to the title, *Worship*.

Therefore, what Dogen, like all Zen masters, teaches is to recognize the true self that lie in everything. The next part will consider how he teaches and awakens the reader's mind in his poetry.

### III. How to Awaken the Mind through the Poetry

Clearly, according to Dogen, meditation is the means to enlightenment as revealed in the poem "*Worship*." To achieve this, he leads the reader to the aim of meditation. In one of his poems entitled "*Zazen*," he implies the aim of meditation through the symbolic meanings of the moon and water.

*The moon reflected*

*In a mind clear*

*As still water:*

*Even the waves, breaking,*

*Are reflecting its light.*

"*Zazen*" is meditation. This poem deals with the aim of meditation and how to practice meditation (i.e. to clear and settle the mind). As revealed in the previous poem, in utterly focused meditation, the mind becomes clear and calm, like still water. In this poem, "*Zazen*," this clear and clam mind is also like the gentle and peaceful light of the moon (happiness and peace) reflected in the still water (happiness and peace). Even though the mind is unsettled, its stillness remains unchanged like the gentle light of the moon

(happiness) reflected in the water broken by the waves.

This poem conveys what meditation aims for. According to Dogen, meditation practice aims to clear and settle the mind. If the mind becomes clear and still, it will become gentle like the light of the moon and clam like the stillness of water. Even though the waves (unhappiness) break into the mind and stillness goes away from the mind, it is just for a while. The stillness will come back to the mind just like the gentle clarity of the moon that will never go away even though the stillness of water that reflects the moon is unsettled by the waves. The clarity of the water still reflects the light of the moon.

In our busy daily life in the "dusty world" (in the poem entitled "*In the Stream*"), waves and dust (unhappiness) break into our mind many times a day. When the mind is settled by the waves, its stillness goes away and the mind becomes unhappy. But if we reflect on this poem, look into the true nature within us and clear the dust in our mine, we will perceive utter stillness that is unsettled by the waves. This is what Dogen suggests here in this poem and in the previous ones (e.g. *Worship*). Deep, focused and meditation will lead us to the recognition of our true self or our own bright nature. When we recognize our true self, the mind will never be settled by the waves of daily life, like the gentle clarity of the moon that is never broken by the waves in the water. Therefore, however busy a day is, if we meditate with utterly still mind, we still find the clarity that glows in our mind that is free from dust (unhappiness) in the world outside us. In utterly still meditation, peace (in our mind) can be found. The concept that the mind (or its stillness) is still the same and remains unchanged has already mentioned in the poem entitled "*Impermanence*."

To assure his point, Dogen teaches how to meditate to find peace at mind amidst our hectic days (as symbolized by waves and dust) in the poem entitled "*Ching-ch'ing's raindrop sound*."

Because the mind is free --

Listening to the rain

Dripping from the leaves,

The drops become

One with me.

When "the mind is free" from dust, clear, calm and still as the moon reflected in the water, the mind is free from all bounda-

ries. When the mind is free, it is said to be truly spiritual. This true spirituality is “Not anyone in particular” but exists in the spiritual essence of everyone and everything as revealed in the poem “True person manifest throughout the ten quarters of the world.” It is numerous and appears everywhere in this world like dews/dewdrops as revealed in the poem entitled “Impermanence.” This truly spiritual, free mind therefore becomes as one with anyone or anything that possesses this true spirituality. This notion of oneness reminds the reader of symbolic reference of dewdrops as revealed in the poem entitled “Impermanence.” The quality of being oneness is the key to meditation practice.

“Because the mind is free,” it can truly be one with anything, including the rain (symbolically, all obstacles to meditation). On the other hand, because our mind is free, the rain – the rhythm of rain, the dripping of water from the leaves and the raindrops – becomes truly one with us. There are no boundaries between the rain and the mind because both are unified as one (“The drops become/One with me.”). This means that, in utterly still meditation, the mind is truly free and becomes as one with the rain; the dividing line between the line and the mind disappears. Therefore, the sound of rain flows into the awareness of our mind, the awareness of the mind flows into the rain; they are one as revealed in the poem “Listening to the rain/ Dripping from the leaves, The drops become/ One with me.”

### Conclusion

The reflection of “**The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace**,” Dogen remarkably reassures that, like Maha Kassapa, all readers – sacred or ordinary – can attain the “buddha” mind that is “in everyone and everywhere in this world” if we recognize or realize the situation which “buddha” mind truly exists. This recognition or realization is not just seeing, hearing, listening, perceiving unconsciously or sitting still. This recognition or realization is not a result of the pursuit of true meditation. This is the true meditation transcendent over these unconscious perceptions. According to Dogen, the “buddha” mind must be conscious of and become the same as one with what the mind sees, hears, listens and perceives consciously. Becoming as one with all around, it becomes

truly free from the “dusty world” (evils). This free mind is the true essence of the Buddha’s enlightenment that Maha Kassapa realized as symbolized by the lotus in the Buddha’s hand. Through (Zazen) meditation, freedom can be found in the mind of all – sacred and common.

Upon the reflection of Dogen’s poetry, it could be concluded that the poetry of Dogen conveys the original, true essence of the mind as revealed in Sutra through Maha Kassapa’s enlightenment and how to practice the mind through various symbols as revealed in this reflection.

### References

- Heine, Steven (1997). *The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*. Boston, MA: Tuttle Publishing. ISBN 0-8048-3107-6.
- Leighton, Taigen Dan, *Visions of Awakening Space and Time: Dogen and the Lotus Sutra*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Nishijima, G. W. (2016, April 9). *Understanding the Shobogenzo. Why The Shobogenzo is Difficult to Understand*. Retrieved from <http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/DogenTeachings/understanding-Shobo.pdf>
- Shushogi (2016, April 11). *What is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment Great Master Eihei Dogen (1200–1253)* Retrieved from [http://www.kanzeon.nl/dogen\\_shushogi.pdf](http://www.kanzeon.nl/dogen_shushogi.pdf)