

Masao Abe

GOD, EMPTINESS, AND THE TRUE SELF

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A Zen master said, "Cleanse the mouth thoroughly after you utter the word Buddha." Another master said, "There is one word I do not like to hear, and that is, 'Buddha.'" Wu-tsu Fa-yen (Hōen, d. 1104), a Chinese Zen master of the Sung dynasty, said, "Buddhas and Patriarchs are your deadly enemies; Satori is nothing but dust on the mind. Rather be a man who does nothing, just leisurely passing the time. Be like a deaf-mute in the world of sounds and colors." At the close of his life, Daitō (1282–1338) of the Kamakura era of Japan left the following death-verse :

I have cut off Buddhas and Patriarchs ;
The Blown Hair (Sword) is always burnished ;
When the wheel or free activity turns,
The empty void gnashes its teeth.

Chao-Chou (Jōshū, 778–897), a distinguished Zen Master of T'ang China, while passing through the Main Hall of his temple, saw a monk who was bowing reverently before Buddha. Chao-Chou immediately slapped the monk. The latter said, "Is it not a laudable thing to pay respect to Buddha?" "Yes," answered the master, "but it is better to go without even a laudable thing."

What is the reason for this antagonistic attitude toward Buddhas and Patriarchs among the followers of Zen? Are not Buddhas

enlightened ones? Is not Shakyamuni Buddha their Lord? Are not the patriarchs great masters who awakened to Buddhist truth? What do Zen followers mean by "doing nothing" and "empty void"?

There is even the following severe statement in the *Lin-chi lu*, one of the most famous Zen records of China.

Encountering a Buddha, killing the Buddha ;
Encountering a Patriarch, killing the Patriarch ;
Encountering an Arhat, killing the Arhat ;
Encountering mother or father, killing mother or father ;
Encountering a relative, killing the relative,
Only thus does one attain liberation and disentanglement from all things, thereby becoming completely unfettered and free.

These words may remind some of you of madman described in Nietzsche's *The Joyful Learning* who shouts, "God is dead! God stays dead! And we have killed Him." Are Zen followers who kill Buddhas to attain liberation madmen such as Nietzsche described? Are they radical nihilists in Nietzsche's sense? Are they atheists who not only reject Scriptures but also deny the existence of God? What do they mean by "liberation" which is attained only by killing Buddhas and Patriarchs?

To answer these questions properly and to understand Zen's position precisely, let me call your attention to some more Zen words.

A Zen master once said: "Let a man's ideal rise as high as the crown of Vairochana Buddha (highest divinity), but let his life be so full of humility as to be prostrate even at the feet of a baby."

In the "Verses of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures," K'uo-an Shih-Yuan (Kakuan), a Zen master of the Sung Dynasty, said:

Worldly passions fallen away,
Empty of all holy intent
I linger not where Buddha is, and
Hasten by where there's no Buddha.

What do all these examples mean? When a Zen master said

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“Cleanse the mouth thoroughly after you utter the *word* Buddha,” or “There is one *word* I do not like to hear, and that is, Buddha.” he sounds like a recent Christian theologian who, by means of linguistic analysis, insists that the *word* God is theologically meaningless. The ancient Chinese Zen master, though unfamiliar with the discipline of linguistic analysis, must have found something odious about the *word* ‘Buddha.’ The Christian theologian who emphasizes the inadequacy of the *word* ‘God’ still points to the ultimate meaning realized in the Gospel. In other words, he seems to conclude that not God but the *word* ‘God’ is dead. Zen’s position, however, is more radical. Statements such as: “Buddhas and Patriarchs are your deadly enemies,” and “I have cut off Buddhas and Patriarchs,” (emphasizing “doing nothing” and the “empty void,”) take us beyond the Death-of-God theologians. This seems especially to be true of Lin-chi’s above mentioned saying :

Encountering a Buddha, killing the Buddha.

What is the real meaning of these frightful words? The fourth and fifth lines of Lin-chi’s saying, i.e., about encountering mother, or father, or a relative, and killing them, remind me of Jesus’ words :

“If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14 : 26)

With these words Jesus asked his followers to follow Him even if this meant opposing earthly obligations.

Lin-chi’s words (encountering mother or father or a relative, kill them,) mean much the same as Jesus’ words — though Lin-chi’s expression is more extreme. The renunciation of the worldly life and the hatred for even one’s own life are necessary conditions among all the higher religions for entering into the religious life.

Thus Jesus said :

“Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the

kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life." (Luke 18 : 29, 30)

In contrast to Jesus' emphasis on doing things "for the Kingdom of God's sake," Lin-chi said, "Encountering a Buddha, killing the Buddha ; and so on, only thus does one attain liberation." This is simply because, for Lin-chi to attain real Liberation it is necessary not only to transcend worldly morality but also to rid oneself of religious pietism. Zen does not teach that we come to the Ultimate Reality through encountering and believing in Buddha. This is because even then we are not altogether liberated from a dichotomy between the object and the subject of faith. In other words, if we believed in Buddha, Buddha would become more or less objectified. And an objectified Buddha cannot be the Ultimate Reality. To attain Ultimate Reality and Liberation, Zen insists that one must transcend even religious transcendence such as Buddha, Patriarch, and so forth. Only when both worldly morality and religious pietism, both the secular and the holy, both immanence and transcendence, are completely left behind, does one come to Ultimate Reality and attain real Liberation.

The fundamental aim of Buddhism is to attain emancipation from all bondage arising from the duality of birth-and-death. Another word for this is Samsara, which is also linked with the dualities of right-and-wrong, good-and-evil, etc. Emancipation from Samsara by transcending the duality of birth-and-death is called Nirvana, the goal of the Buddhist life.

Throughout its long history, however, Mahayana Buddhism has emphasized, "Do not abide in Samsara, nor abide in Nirvana." If one abides in so-called Nirvana by transcending Samsara, it must be said that one is not yet free from attachment, namely, attachment to Nirvana itself. Being confined by the discrimination between Nirvana and Samsara, one is still selfishly concerned with his own salvation, forgetting the suffering of others in Samsara. In Nirvana one may be liberated from the dualities of birth-and-death, right-and-wrong, good-and-evil, etc. But even then one is not liberated

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from a higher-level duality, i.e., the duality of Samsara and Nirvana, or the duality of the secular and the sacred. To attain thorough emancipation one must also be liberated from this higher-level duality. The idea of Bodhisattva is essential in Mahayana Buddhism. Not clinging to his own salvation, the Bodhisattva is one who devotes himself to saving others suffering from various attachments — attachments to Nirvana as well as to Samsara. It teaches that true Nirvana is found by returning to Samsara — by negating or transcending the so-called “Nirvana” which is attained simply by transcending Samsara.

Therefore, Nirvana in the Mahayana sense, while transcending Samsara, is nothing but the realization of Samsara as really Samsara, no more, no less, by a thoroughgoing return to Samsara itself. This is why, in Mahayana Buddhism, it is often said of true Nirvana that, “Samsara-as-it-is, is Nirvana.” This paradoxical statement is based on the dialectical character of the true Nirvana which is, logically speaking, the negation of negation, that is, absolute affirmation, or, the transcendence of transcendence, that is, absolute immanence. This negation of negation is no less than the affirmation of affirmation. The transcendence of transcendence is nothing other than the immanence of immanence. These are verbal expressions of Ultimate Reality, because Ultimate Reality is neither negative nor affirmative, neither immanent nor transcendent in their relative senses. It is beyond these dualities. Nirvana in Mahayana Buddhism is expressed as “Samsara-as-it-is, is Nirvana” and “Nirvana-as-it-is, is Samsara.” This is simply the Buddhist way of expressing Ultimate Reality. Since Nirvana is nothing but Ultimate Reality, to attain Nirvana in the above sense means to attain Liberation from all sorts of duality.

Zen takes this Mahayana position in its characteristically radical way. “Killing a Buddha” and “killing a Patriarch” are Zen expressions for “not abiding in Nirvana.”

Now we can see what Lin-chi meant when he said, “Encountering a Buddha, killing the Buddha ; encountering a Patriarch, killing the Patriarch ; — *only thus* does one attain liberation and disentangle-

ment from all things." In this way, Zen radically tries to transcend religious transcendence itself to attain thoroughgoing Freedom. Therefore the words and acts of the Zen masters mentioned earlier, though they seem to be extremely anti-religious and blasphemous, are rather to be regarded as paradoxical expressions of the ultimate truth of religion.

Since the ultimate truth of religion for Zen is entirely beyond duality, Zen prefers to express it in a negative way. When Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty asked Bodhidharma, "What is the ultimate principle of the holy truth?" the First Patriarch replied: "Emptiness, no holiness."

In his "Song of Enlightenment" Yung-Chia (Yōka, 665-713) said:

"In clear seeing, there is not one single thing:
There is neither man nor Buddha."

On the other hand, in Christianity, when Jesus emphasized action for the sake of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of God is not simply transcendent. Being asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, Jesus answered them, "Behold, the Kingdom of God is within you." With this answer Jesus declared that God's rule is a new spiritual principle already operative in the lives of men, and perhaps referred to His own presence in the midst of his followers. We might say, therefore, that the Kingdom of God is both immanent and transcendent.

This may be especially true when we remind ourselves of the Christian belief that the Kingdom is within only because it has first entered this world in Jesus who was the incarnation of God. Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God may be said to be a symbol of "Transcending even the religious transcendence." In the well-known passage of the letter to the Philippians, St. Paul said, "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but *emptied* himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death,

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even death on a cross." (2: 5~8)

As clearly shown in this passage, Jesus Christ is God who became flesh by emptying or abnegating Himself even unto death. It is really through this *kenotic* negation that flesh and Spirit, the secular and the sacred, the immanent and the transcendent became identical in Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus Christ may be said to be the Christian symbol of Ultimate Reality. So far, this Christian idea of the kenotic Christ is close to Zen's idea of "neither man nor Buddha." At least it may be said that Christianity and Zen equally represent Ultimate Reality in which the immanent and the transcendent, the secular and the sacred, are paradoxically one.

In Christianity, however, Ultimate Reality as the paradoxical oneness was realized in history only in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God. Indeed, Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God and man, the Redeemer of man's sin against God, and the only historical event through which man encounters God. Accordingly it is through faith in Jesus as the Christ that one can participate in Ultimate Reality.

In this sense, being the Ultimate Reality, Jesus Christ is somewhat transcendent to man. He is the object, not the subject, of faith. Therefore, the relation between Christ and his believer is dualistic. A kind of objectification still remains. In this respect Zen parts company with Christianity.

Of course, as Paul admirably stated, "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2: 20) Christian faith has a mystical aspect which emphasizes the identification of the faithful with Christ.

Further, as Paul said, "We are always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies," (II Cor. 4: 10) Paul died Jesus' death and lived Jesus' life. And this, for Paul, was "Being baptized into Christ" (Gal. 3: 27) and "Being changed into his (Jesus') likeness" (II Cor. 3: 18) through Spirit.

Being "in Christ" in this way, i.e., identification with Christ as Ultimate Reality is, if I am not wrong, the quintessence of Christian faith. The essence of Zen, however, is not identification with Christ or with Buddha, but identification with Emptiness. For Zen, identification — to use this term — with an Ultimate Reality which is substantial, is not true realization of Ultimate Reality. Hence Zen's emphasis on "Emptiness, no holiness," and "there being neither man nor Buddha."

So far Zen is much closer to the *Via negativa* or negative theology of Mediaeval Christianity than to the more orthodox form of the Christian faith. For instance, in his "The Mystical Theology," Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite wrote about God as follows :

Ascending higher, we say
 not definable,
 not nameable,
 not knowable,
 not dark, not light
 not untrue, not true,
 not affirmable, not deniable,
 for
 while we affirm or deny of those orders of beings
 that are akin to Him
 we neither affirm nor deny Him
 that is beyond
 all affirmation as unique universal Cause and
 all negation as simple pre-eminent Cause,
 free of all and
 to all transcendent.¹

This is strikingly similar to Zen's expressions of the Buddha-nature or Mind.

In Pseudo-Dionysius, identification or *union* with God is for man to enter the Godhead by getting rid of what is man — a pro-

¹ Elmer O'Brien: *Varieties of Mystical Experience* p. 86-8.

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cess called *theosis*, i.e., deification. This position of Pseudo-Dionysius became the basis of subsequent Christian mysticism. It may not be wrong to say that for him, the Godhead in which one is united is the "Emptiness" of the indefinable One. The words "nothing, nothing, nothing" fill the pages of "The Dark Night of the Soul," written by St. John of the Cross. For him nothingness meant "sweeping away of images and thoughts of God to meet Him in the darkness and obscurity of pure faith which is above all concepts."¹

Despite the great similarity between Zen and Christian mysticism we should not overlook an essential difference between them. In the above quoted passage, Pseudo-Dionysius calls that which is beyond all affirmation and all negation by the term "Him." Many Christian mystics call God "Thou." In Zen, however, what is beyond all affirmation and all negation — that is, Ultimate Reality — should not be "Him" or "Thou" but "Self" or one's "True Self."

I am not concerned here with verbal expressions, but the reality behind the words. If Ultimate Reality, while being taken as nothingness or Emptiness, should be called "Him" or "Thou," it is, from the Zen point of view, no longer ultimate.

For in this case "Nothingness" or "Emptiness" is still taken as something *outside of oneself*; in other words, it is still more or less objectified. "Nothingness" or "Emptiness" therefore becomes *something* merely named "Nothingness" or "Emptiness." It is not true Nothingness, or true Emptiness. True Emptiness is never an object found outside of oneself. It is what is really *unobjectifiable*. Precisely for this reason, it is the ground of true subjectivity. In Christian mysticism, it is true that God is often called nothingness or the unknowable. However if this is taken as the ultimate, or the object of the soul's longing, it is not the same as true Nothingness in Zen. In Zen, this is found only by negating "Nothingness" as the end, and "Emptiness" as the object of one's spiritual quest.

To reach the Zen position, one must be re-converted or turned

¹ William Johnston, "Zen and Christian Mysticism," *The Japanese Missionary Bulletin* Vol. XX, 1966, pp. 612-3.

back from "Nothingness" as the end to "Nothingness" as the ground, from "Emptiness" as the object to "Emptiness" as the true Subject. Ultimate Reality is not something far away, over there. It is right here, right now. *Everything starts from the here-and-now.* Otherwise everything loses its reality.

Consequently, while Zen emphasizes Emptiness, it rejects mere attachment to Emptiness. While Zen insists on killing the Buddha, it does not cling to what is non-Buddha. As quoted earlier, K'uo-an said in his "Verses of the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures":

Worldly passions fallen away,
Empty of all holy intent.

Here both worldly passions and holy intent are left behind. Then he said,

I linger not where Buddha is, and
Hasten by where there's no Buddha.

With these words K'uo-an tried to show that if one takes what is non-Buddha as the Ultimate, what is non-Buddha turns into a Buddha. Real Emptiness which is called in Buddhism "Sunyata" is not a nihilistic position which simply negates religious values. Overcoming nihilism within itself, it is the existential ground of Liberation or Freedom in which one finds for himself liberation even from what is non-Buddha, liberation even from a rigid view of Emptiness.

Zen's strong criticism of attachment to Emptiness or non-Buddhaness is seen in the following stories:

A monk asked Chao-chou,

"When I bring nothing at all with me, What do you say?"

Chao-Chou said, "Throw it away!"

"But," protested the monk, "I said I bring nothing at all; what do you say I should throw away?"

"Then carry it off," was the retort of Chao-chou.

Of this D.T. Suzuki says, "Jōshū [Chao-chou] has thus plainly

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exposed the fruitlessness of a nihilistic philosophy. To reach the goal of Zen, even the idea of 'having nothing' ought to be done away with. Buddha reveals himself when he is no more asserted; that is, for Buddha's sake, Buddha is to be given up. This is the only way to come to the realization of the truth of Zen."¹

Another story is this :

When Huang-po (Ōbaku, d. 850) was bowing low before a figure of Buddha in the sanctuary, a fellow disciple saw him and asked :

"It is said in Zen 'Seek nothing from the Buddha, nor from the Dharma, nor from the Sangha.' What do you seek by bowing?"

"Seeking nothing from the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha, is the way in which I always bow," replied Huang-po.

But his fellow disciple persisted : "For what purpose do you bow?"

Huang-po slapped his face. "Rude fellow!" exclaimed the other.

To this Huang-po said, "Where do you think you are, talking of rudeness and politeness!" and slapped him again.

In this way, Huang-po tried to make his companion get rid of his negative view of non-Buddhanness. He was anxious to communicate the truth in Zen in spite of his apparent brusqueness. While behaving and speaking in a rude and negative way, the spirit of what he says is affirmative.²

As these stories clearly show, the standpoint of Emptiness or Sunyata in Zen is not a negative one, but an affirmative one. Zen affirms the ground of complete Liberation — Liberation from both the secular and the holy, from both morality and religion, from both theistic religion and atheistic nihilism.

Since the Zen position regarding true Emptiness (Sunyata)

¹ D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, Rider and Company, London, p. 54-5.

² See D.T. Suzuki, *ibid.* p. 52-3.

transcends both the secular and the sacred (through a negation of negation), it is, itself, neither secular nor sacred. Yet, *at the same time*, it is both secular and sacred. The secular and the sacred are paradoxically identical, coming together as a dynamic whole, outside of which there is nothing.

I, myself, who am now writing about the dynamic whole as the true Emptiness do not stand outside of, but within this dynamic whole. Of course, the same is true of all the readers.

When you see a Zen master, he may ask you,

"Where are you from?"

"I am from Chicago," you may reply.

"From where did you come to Chicago?" may ask the master.

"I was born in Chicago. Chicago is my home town," may be your answer.

"Where did you come from, to your birth in Chicago?" the master may still ask. Then what will you answer?

Some of you may reply, "I was born of my parents. And their background is Scotland," and so forth.

Others, falling back upon the theory of evolution, may answer, "My origin may be traced back to the anthropoid apes and from them back to the amoeba, or a single cell of some sort."

At this point, I do hope the master is not so unkind as *not* to slap your face. Anyhow he will not be satisfied with your answers.

Science can answer the question, "How did I get here?", but it cannot answer the question "Why am I here?" It can explain the cause of a fact but not the meaning, or ground of a fact.

Socrates' philosophy started from the oracle's admonition: "Know thyself!" and King David once asked, "But who am I, and what is my people," (that we should be able thus to offer willingly?) (I Chron. 29 : 14)

Zen is also deeply concerned with the question, "What am I?", asking it in a way peculiar to Zen, that is: "What is your original face before you were born?" Science seeks for the origins of our existence in a temporal and horizontal sense — a dimension which

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can be pushed back endlessly. To find a definite answer to the question of our origin we must go beyond the *horizontal* dimension and turn to the *vertical* dimension, i.e., the eternal and religious dimension.

St. Paul once said, "For in him (i.e., the Son of God) all things were created..... and in him all things hold together." (Col. 1 : 16 ~7) In Christianity it is through creation as the eternal work of the only God that all things hold together. Zen, however, raises a further question. It asks, "After all things are reduced to oneness, to what must the One be reduced?" Sunyata or Nothingness in Zen is not a "Nothing" out of which all things were created by God, but a "Nothing" from which God Himself emerged. According to Zen, we are not creatures of God, but manifestations of Emptiness. The ground of my existence can and should not be found in the temporal dimension, nor even in God. Although this groundlessness is deep enough to include even God, it is by no means something objectively observable. On the contrary, groundlessness, realized subjectively, is the only real ground of our existence. It is the ground to which we are "re-converted" or turned back by a negation of negation.

In the *Lin-chi lu*, there is a story about Yajnadatta. Being a very handsome young man, Yajnadatta would look in a mirror every morning and smile at his image. One morning, for some reason, his face was not reflected by the mirror. In surprise, he thought his head was lost. Thrown into consternation, he searched about everywhere for it, but with no success. Finally, he came to realize that the head for which he was searching was nothing else but that which was doing the searching. The fact was that being a careless fellow, he had looked at the backside of the mirror. Since his head had never been lost, the more he searched for it outside of himself, the more thwarted he was. The point of this story is that that which is sought is simply that which is seeking. Yajnadatta had searched for his head with his head. Our real head, however, is by no means something to be sought for in front of us, but is something which always exists for me here and now. Being at the

center of one's searching, it can never be objectified.

You can see my head. When you see my head from where you are, it has a particular form and color; it is indeed *something*. But can you see your own head? Unless you objectify your head in a mirror you cannot see it by yourself. So, to you, your head has no particular form and color. It is not *something* which can be seen objectively by you. It is in this sense formless and colorless to yourselves. We call such a thing *mu* or "*nothing*" because it is not something objective. It is called "*nothing*" not because, in the present case, our heads are missing, but because our heads are now functioning as the *living* heads. As such they are *unobjectifiable*.

The same is true of our "*self*." We often ask ourselves, "What am I?" And we are used to searching for an answer somewhere outside of ourselves. However, the answer to the question "What am I?" lies in the question itself. The answer to the question can only be found in this *here-and-now* where I am — and which I am fundamentally.

The Ground of our existence is nothingness, Sunyata, because it can never be objectified. This Sunyata is deep enough to encompass even God, the "object" of mystical union as well as the object of faith. For Sunyata is not the nothingness from which God created everything but the nothingness from which God Himself emerged. Sunyata is the very ground of the self and thereby the ground of everything to which we are related. The realization of Sunyata-as-such is nothing but the Self-Awakening of Dharma. Sunyata as the unobjectifiable ground of our existence *expands endlessly into all directions*. The same is true of our Self-Awakening of Dharma. Can we talk about the relationship between ourselves and the world without being, ourselves, in the expanding of Self-Awakening which embraces the relationship itself? Can we even talk about the divine-human relationship without a still deeper ground which makes this relationship possible? And is not the still deeper ground for the divine-human relationship the endlessly *expanding* Sunyata or Self-Awakening?

All I-Thou relations, including man-to-man and man-to-God

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relations, are possible only within an endlessly expanding Self-Awakening. Zen calls this our "Original Face," the face we have before we are born. "Before we are born" does not refer to "before" in its temporal sense, but in its ontological sense. The discovery of one's pre-natal face — in its ontological sense — places us within an endlessly expanding Self-Awakening.

So long as we are men, all of us, whether from the East or from the West, this is equally true. We should not think that we will come to our Self-Awakening sometime and somewhere in the future and will then *have* Self-Awakening. On the contrary, we *are* originally, and right now, right here, *in* the expanding of Self-Awakening which spreads endlessly into all directions. This is why we can talk about relations with the world and about I-Thou relation with God. Nevertheless, just as Yajnadatta looked for his head outside of himself, we are used to seeking for our true self externally. This is our basic illusion which Buddhism calls *māyā* or *avidyā*, i.e., Ignorance. When we realize this basic illusion for what it is, we immediately find that in our depths, we are grounded in endlessly expanding Self-Awakening.

The "Song of Zazen" by Hakuin, an outstanding Zen Master of the middle Tokugawa era of Japan, well expresses this point.

Sentient beings are really Buddha.
Like water and ice —
Apart from water, no ice ;
Outside of sentient beings, no Buddha.
Not knowing it is near
They seek for it afar !
Just like being in water —
But crying for thirst !

.....

Taking as form the formless form
Going or coming you're always there
Taking as thought the thoughtless thought

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Singing and dancing are Dharma's voice.
How vast the boundless sky of Samadhi,
How bright the moon of Fourfold Wisdom.
What now is there to seek ?
With Nirvana revealed before you,
This very place is the Lotus Land,
This very body is Buddha.