

Shōbōgenzō Zen Essays by Dōgen
translated by Thomas Cleary

The Ocean Seal Concentration (*Kai-in zammai*)

The “ocean seal concentration,” or, as it is sometimes rendered, the “oceanic reflection concentration,” is said to be the concentration from which the Kegon scripture emerged, abruptly revealing the vast panorama of the Buddha’s enlightenment. The treatise *Return to the Source Contemplation*, a Kegon work popular in Chinese Zen schools, says, “The ‘ocean seal’ is the fundamental awareness of true thusness. When delusion ends, the mind is clear and myriad forms simultaneously appear. It is like the ocean: due to wind there arise waves; if the wind stops the ocean water is calm and clear, and all images can reflect in it.” Thus, in terms of mind, the ocean seal concentration may be said to refer to holistic, impartial awareness.

The twenty-fifth book of the *Ratnakūṭa* scripture says, “Just as all streams enter the ocean, all phenomena enter the seal of phenomena, hence the name oceanic seal.” The “seal of phenomena,” or “seal of law,” refers to the treble seal of Buddhism. The twenty-second book of the *Treatise on Great Transcendent Wisdom* says, “The seal of law of Buddhism is threefold: first, all compounded things are born and perish from moment to moment, all are impermanent; second, all things are selfless; third is silent, extinct nirvana.” The twentieth book of the same treatise says, “If one thinks in a discriminatory way, this is the net of the devil; not being moved and not remaining based on this is the seal of the law.”

In this essay Dōgen introduces the ocean seal concentration by a paraphrase based on a passage from the scripture spoken by Vimalakīrti and the recorded sayings of the great master Baso. Following Baso, Dōgen cites the scripture in this way: “Only by the compounding of many elements (or phenomena) is this body made. At the time of its arising, only elements arise; at the time of its vanishing, only elements vanish.” The strategy of analysis into elements is a traditional Buddhist device to dissolve the notion of intrinsic identity of the body (and mind) as a self or person; it also counters the notion of inherent identity of any compounded form. At the same time, in its broad application, this passage refers to the “body” of the universe as being a

single compound or nexus of elements, a typical Kegon view; as Dōgen makes clear later, this seeing of the whole nexus is the ocean seal concentration.

The scripture as quoted by Dōgen goes on to say that the elements do not announce their arising and vanishing. This is like saying that they have no intrinsic identity. The notion of phenomena arising and vanishing depends on discriminating thought. In the terms of the treatise *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, popular in both Zen and Kegon schools, awareness has two aspects: awareness of thusness and awareness of birth and death. Delusion means being trapped in the latter, in discriminating thought, which singles out things as discrete entities and thus is a linear, sequential way of perceiving, marking beginnings and ends. This is called delusion when it is believed—implicitly or explicitly—to be all there is, to be the only way of seeing, to be the true description of reality. This kind of awareness is by nature restrictive and exclusive (and for that reason may be useful and practically necessary at times while being harmful and counterproductive at others); to put it in a wider perspective the awareness of *thusness* (being-as-is, without conceptual glosses) is cultivated in Buddhism. Ultimately, enlightenment includes both aspects, so that one is neither forced to feel that thought and discrimination reveal the whole of reality, nor rendered incapable of orderly perception and discursive reasoning.

The final portion of the scriptural passage hints at the method of arriving at this synthesis: “Prior moment, succeeding moment—each successive moment does not await the next: prior element, succeeding element—the elements do not await each other. This is called the ocean seal concentration.” The word “moment” also can be rendered as “thought,” and in Sanskrit texts the term “thought-moment” or “mental moment” is often found. The point, as it applies to Zen meditation, seems to be awareness of the flux of moments without clinging, without stopping to bind them mentally into fixed structures or images. Thus, without the attention being caught up or dwelling on anything conceptually specified, the holistic awareness remains free and unobscured while the flow of events is clearly and impartially reflected therein. In the latter part of the essay Dōgen goes on to bring up further quotations and allusions from scriptures and Zen lore to develop illustrations of awareness and ways of fostering meditation to arrive at consciousness of the immediate totality.

The Ocean Seal Concentration

In being Buddhas and Zen adepts, it is necessary to be the *ocean seal concentration*. In swimming in this concentration, there is a time of speaking, a time of experiencing, a time of acting. The virtue of traveling on the ocean involves travel on the very bottom; this is traveling on the ocean as being *travel on the bottom of the deepest ocean*. Hoping to return *flowing in the waves of birth and death* to the source is not *what mental action is this?*¹ Though the passing through barriers and breaking divisions hitherto is originally each of the Buddhas and Zen adepts, this is the oceanic reflection concentration returning to the source.

Buddha said that only by the compounding of many elements is this body made. At the time of its appearance, only elements arise; at the time of its disappearance, only elements vanish. At the time these elements arise, they do not say "I arise," and at the time these elements vanish, they do not say "I vanish." Prior moment, succeeding moment—each successive moment does not wait for the next: prior element, succeeding element—the elements do not await each other. This is called the ocean seal concentration.

One should examine and meditate on this statement of Buddha in detail. Attaining the Way and entering into realization doesn't necessarily depend on much learning or a lot of talk. Broad learning still attains the Way in four propositions,² while thorough study of innumerable doctrines after all enters realization in a single line or verse. How much the more so of this statement—it is not seeking fundamental enlightenment in the future, nor is it bringing up initial enlightenment within realization.³ Though causing the likes of fundamental enlightenment to become manifest is the virtue of Buddhas and Zen adepts, that does not mean that the enlightenments such as fundamental enlightenment and initial enlightenment are considered the Buddhas and Zen adepts.

The time of the so-called ocean reflection concentration is precisely

the time of only by many elements. It is the expression of only by many elements. This time is called *compounding to make this body*. The single compounded form which has compounded many elements is this body. This is not taking the body to be one compounded form—it is a compound of many elements; it is expressing *compounding to make this body as this body*.

When it arises, only elements arise—this elements arise never leaves behind arising: therefore arising is not cognitive awareness, not knowledge or perception—this is called *they don't say "I arise."*⁴ In not saying "I arise," it isn't that others perceive or cognize, think or discern that these elements arise. When meeting transcendently there is indeed loss of opportunity in meeting. Arising is necessarily the arrival of the time, because time is arising. What is arising? It must be "arisen." This is already arising which is time, causing *skin, flesh, bones and marrow* to all be *revealed alone*. Because arising is the arising of formation by compounding, it is only by many elements which is the *this body* of arising, which is the "I arise" of arising. It is not just seeing and hearing it as sound and form; it is the many elements of "I arise," it is the unspoken "I arise." Not speaking is not not expressing, because expression is not verbalization. The time of arising is these elements, it is not the twenty-four hours. These elements are the time of arising, not the simultaneous arising of the three worlds.

In ancient times the Buddha said, "Suddenly fire arises." The independence of this arising is expressed as *fire arises*. An ancient illuminant said, "How is it when arising and vanishing don't stop?"⁵ So this *arising and vanishing* is unceasing as *we arise, we vanish*. This statement of not stopping should be comprehended positively by leaving it to itself. It causes this *time when arising and vanishing don't stop* to cease and continue as the life pulse of the enlightened ones. *When arising and vanishing don't stop is whose arising and vanishing? Whose arising and vanishing is it is to those who may be liberated by this body . . . , it is then manifesting this body . . . , it is . . . and teaching them,*⁶ it is the *past mind cannot be found,*⁷ it is you have attained *my marrow*, it is you have attained *my bones*⁸—because it is *whose arising and vanishing*.

“When these elements vanish, they don’t say ‘I vanish’—indeed, the time of *they don’t say ‘I vanish’* is when these elements vanish. Vanishing is the vanishing of elements; though it is vanishing, it must be elements. Because they are elements, they are not adventurous defilements; because they are not adventurous defilements, they don’t defile. Precisely this nondefilement is the Buddhas and Zen adepts. *You too are thus*, (a Zen patriarch) says—who might not be you? This is because the preceding moment and the succeeding moment are both *I*. In this vanishing are arrayed many *hands and eyes*⁹—referred to as “unexcelled great nirvana,” “this is called death,” “clinging to it as annihilation,” “being the dwelling place.” That is to say, many such *hands and eyes* are, as they are, qualities of *vanishing*.¹⁰ Though *not saying* at the time of vanishing being *I* and *not saying* at the time of arising being *I* have the *same birth of not saying*, they cannot be *not saying* having the *same death*.¹¹ Already it is the vanishing of the preceding elements, it is the vanishing of the succeeding elements, it is the preceding moment of the elements, it is the succeeding moment of the elements. They are elements preceding and succeeding momentary elements, they are the preceding and succeeding moments of the elements. *Not awaiting each other* are momentary elements, not relating to each other are elements. That which causes them not to be mutually relative and not to await one another is the expression of eighty or ninety percent. There is *letting go* and there is *gathering* in which make the four gross elements and five clusters of extinction into *hands and eyes*. There is progression and there is meeting which make the four gross elements and five clusters into the itinerary. At this time, *throughout the body is hands and eyes*, but yet it is not enough;¹² *all over the body is hands and eyes*, but yet it is not enough.¹² In general, extinction is a quality of Buddhas and Zen adepts. As for the fact that now there is this statement of nonrelation and nonawaiting, know that *arising* is arising in the beginning, middle, and end; it is a case of *officially not even a needle is admitted; privately, even a horse and carriage can pass*.¹³ It is not making extinction await or relate to *beginning, middle, and end*. Even though elements suddenly arise where there has been extinction, this is not the arising of the extinct, it is the

arising of elements. Because it is the arising of elements, they do not await each other.¹⁴ Also it is not relating extinction to extinction. Extinction is also extinction of beginning, middle, and end. It is a case of *not bringing it forth when meeting, raising the idea you know it exists*. Even though there is suddenly extinction where there has been arising, it is not the extinction of arising, it is the extinction of elements. Though *it may be the this is of extinction*, though it may be *this is of arising*, it is *just the ocean seal concentration being called myriad elements*. The cultivation and realization of *this is not non-existent*, it is *just this nondefilement is called the ocean seal concentration*. *Concentration* is actualization, it is expression, it is the nighttime when one *reaches back for the pillow*. The reaching for the pillow wherein the nighttime is *reaching back for the pillow* is not merely for billions and billions of eons—it is a case of *in the ocean I only expound the scripture of the lotus of the wonderful teaching eternally*.

Because it is *not saying “I arise,” it is I, in the ocean*. The preceding face is *eternally expounding*, which is *as soon as one wave moves, myriad waves follow*; the succeeding face is *the scripture of the lotus of the wonderful teaching of as soon as myriad waves move, one wave follows*.¹⁵ Even though causing a thousand or ten thousand foot string to be rolled up and rolled out, what is to be regretted is its hanging straight down. The “preceding and succeeding faces” are *I, on the face of the ocean*—it is like saying the preceding point and the succeeding point. “The preceding point and the succeeding point” is *putting a head on top of the head*. *In the ocean* is not that there are people; *I, in the ocean* is not the abode of people of the world, it is not what sages love. *I alone am in the ocean*—this is the *expounding of only, eternally*. This is *the ocean* is not the province of in between, inside, or outside: it is *eternally expounding the scripture of the lotus of the wonderful teaching*. Though it is *not dwelling* in the east, west, south, or north, it is *the full boat empty, carrying the moon back*. This true return is *directly returning*¹⁶—who would say this is action lingering in the water? It is just manifesting actualization within the bounds of the Buddha Way, that is all. This is considered the seal that stamps water. Further, we say it is the seal that stamps mud. The seal that

stamps water is not necessarily the seal that stamps the ocean; it must be the seal that stamps the ocean transcendently. This is called the ocean seal, the water seal, the mud seal, the mind seal. Purely conveying the mind seal, it stamps water, stamps mud, stamps space.¹⁷

Master Sozan was asked by a monk, "I understand that in the teachings it says the great ocean does not lodge a dead body—what is the ocean?" Sozan said, "It contains all existents." The monk said, "Why doesn't it lodge a dead body?" Sozan said, "One void of breath is not attached." The monk said, "Since it contains all existents, why isn't one void of breath attached?" Sozan said, "It is not that myriad existents are void of breath in effect."¹⁸

This Sozan was a spiritual brother of Ungo; here the essential message of Tozan was truly accurate. *This I understand that in the teachings it says* refers to the true teachings of Buddhas and Zen adepts; it is not the teachings of ordinary or holy people, it is not the small teaching of transmitting Buddhist doctrines. *The great ocean does not retain a dead body*—this so-called *great ocean* is not an internal ocean or an external ocean, and cannot be like the eight oceans. These are not what the student is questioning. It is not only recognizing what is not an ocean as the ocean, it is recognizing what is an ocean as the ocean. Even though one insists they are oceans, they should not be called the *great ocean*. The *great ocean* is not necessarily a ninefold abyss with salt water or something. *Many elements must compound to form*. How could the *great ocean* necessarily be merely deep water? For this reason, to ask *what is the ocean* is speaking of the *great ocean* because the *great ocean* is as yet unknown to humans and celestials. As for not *retaining a dead body*, not *retaining* must be *when light comes, striking light; when darkness comes, striking darkness*.¹⁹ The *dead body* is dead ashes; it is *how many times encountering the spring without change of mind*. The *dead body* is something nobody has ever yet seen—that is the reason for not knowing.

Sozan's statement *it contains all existents* speaks of the ocean. This expression of the essential message doesn't say that the one thing which is *who* contains all existents; it is *containing all existents*. It is not saying that the *great ocean* contains all existents; to say *it contains all existents* is simply the *great ocean*. Even though not being known

as something, for the time being it is *all existents*. When *containing*, though it be a mountain, it is not merely *standing atop the highest peak*; though it be water, it is not merely *walking on the bottom of the deepest ocean*. *Gathering in* must be like this, *letting go* must be like this. The *ocean of buddha-nature*, the *ocean of Vairocana's treasury*,²⁰ are only *all existents*.

Though the surface of the ocean is unseen, there is no doubt in the act of swimming along. For example, in Tafuku's speaking of a grove of bamboo, even if it is *one stem straight, two stems curved, three of bamboo*, even if it is *one stem straight, two stems curved, three stems, four stems slanted*,²¹ even if it is action causing *all existents* to be missed, why didn't he say it is a thousand curved, ten thousand curved, why didn't he say it is a thousand groves, ten thousand groves? We should not forget the principle that a single grove of bamboo exists in this way. Sozan's saying *it contains all existents* is still *all existents*.²²

As for the monk's saying, *Why is one void of breath not attached?*—while it is the face of mistakenly doubting, it must be *what mental activity is this?* When *I had hitherto doubted this fellow*, this is only meeting with *I had hitherto doubted this fellow*. In *what location?* is *why is one void of breath not attached*, it is *why doesn't it retain a dead body*. Here it is precisely since *it contains all existents, why doesn't it retain a dead body?* We should know that containing is not attachment; containing is *not retaining*. Even though all existents be a dead body, it must be the *simply requiring myriad years of not retaining*. It must be *the single expression of this old monk of nonattachment*. What Sozan was trying to say with *it is not that myriad existents are void of breath in effect* is that whether all existents be void of breath or not, one must be unattached. Even though a dead body is a dead body, as long as there is practice which similarly learns from myriad existents, it must contain, it must be containing. The preceding process and the succeeding process, which are all existents, have their effect—this is not being void of breath. It is what is called one of the blind leading a group of the blind. The principle of one of the blind leading a group of the blind is, further, one of the blind leading one of the blind, it is a group of the blind leading a group of the blind. When

it is a group of the blind leading a group of the blind, it is *containing all existents* being contained by *containing all existents*. In the Great Path one continues to travel on, if it is not all existents, its practice is not actualized—this is the ocean seal concentration.

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Notes

1. "What mental action is this?" is a Zen phrase which is often used to question apparently or actually arbitrary thought or action; or it may be used to question an intention or expression of thought or action without any presupposition.
2. The "four propositions" are existence, nonexistence, both, neither. These are said to underlie all human conception and to have fallacies which make it impossible for any one of them to be unequivocally true. On the other hand, defining existence as relative existence or conditional existence and nonexistence as emptiness of absolute existence, Buddhist logic shows how all of them can be both true and untrue, summing up the foundations of philosophy therein.
3. "Fundamental enlightenment" refers to the inherent buddha-nature which is said to be in all conscious beings; "initial enlightenment" refers to the realization of this nature. Upon initial realization, the distinction between fundamental and initial enlightenment disappears.
4. "*Elements arise never leave behind arising*"—that is to say, each moment is new, becoming is continuous: "therefore arising is not cognitive awareness, not knowledge or perception"—the direct experience characterized by "not leaving behind arising," or continual renewal, cannot be said to be cognitive awareness, knowledge, or perception because these are after-the-fact organizations of data recollected from the preceding moment of the ongoing flux; also they are indicative of subject-object dichotomy, which does not pertain in direct experience. Thus the nondifferentiation of arising elements refers to the immediate experience without conceptualization or labeling.
5. A monk asked Razan, "How about when arising and vanishing don't cease?" Razan said, "Tchi! Whose arising and vanishing is it?" (Or, "Who is it arising and vanishing?") (*Book of Serenity*, case 43)
6. The *Hokke* scripture's book on the "All-Sided One" says the embodiment of universal compassion manifests such and such bodies to people who can be liberated by such and such bodies, in order to teach them; that is, the enlightening beings, the bodhisattvas, appear in different forms according to the mentalities and potentials of the people they teach. Also, in a general sense, "reality" appears differently depending on the perceiver. So Dogen uses "whose arising and vanishing is it" in a sense as an allusion to the relativity of perceiver and perceived.

7. The *Kongo* scripture says, "The past mind cannot be found (or grasped); the present mind cannot be found; the future mind cannot be found." The question "who?" is commonly used in Zen meditation to focus the attention in such a way as to lead to the actual experience of "the mind cannot be found." The singling out of the "past mind" here seems to direct the attention to unidentified immediate awareness.

8. "You have attained my marrow, you have attained my bones"; according to Zen legend, when the Zen founder Bodhidharma was about to depart from China he called his four enlightened disciples together and had them reveal their understanding one by one. In responding to them, Bodhidharma said to the first, "You have attained my skin," to the second, "You have attained my flesh," to the third, "You have attained my bones," and to the last, "You have attained my marrow." The term *skin-flesh-bones-marrow* is often used by Dogen, with the sense of the total being, the total experience or realization. Dogen does not treat these four as different levels of understanding.

9. The bodhisattva, or enlightening being, personifying universal compassion is sometimes represented as having a thousand hands and eyes, to see and save all beings. Case 89 of the *Blue Cliff Record*, to which Dogen repeatedly alludes in this essay, also is supposed to deal with totality: Ungan asked Dogo, "What does the bodhisattva of great compassion do with so many hands and eyes?" Dogo said, "It's like someone reaching back for the pillow in the night." Ungan said, "I understand." Dogo said, "How?" Ungan said, "All over the body is hands and eyes." Dogo said, "You've said quite a bit, but you've said only eighty percent." Ungan said, "What do you say?" Dogo said, "Through-out the body are hands and eyes."

10. "Vanishing" is a word used for "extinction" and "nirvana." In the subsequent text "extinction" is used instead of "vanishing" for convenience.

11. Emptiness ("not saying") is the relativity or conditionality of phenomena, which arise and pass away; hence the temporarily existent and and the no longer existent are the same in terms of emptiness *qua* relativity, but emptiness *qua* relativity is not the same as annihilation.

12. Instead of "not enough," there is a variant reading "not it." Emotional interpretations, or clinging to the side of existence, are not right. See the verse and commentary to case 89 of the *Blue Cliff Record*.

13. This means everything exists conditionally ("privately") while nothing exists absolutely ("officially"). It also means wisdom, seeing through everything, doesn't cling to anything, but compassion may use any appropriate means for enlightenment.

14. Var. lect. "They are not relative to the characteristic of awaiting." Non-relation and nonawaiting refer in a way to both conventional and absolute reality: provisionally, things seem to be discrete; absolutely, there is nothing in essence to relate to or await, because there is no intrinsic reality in elements.

15. This passage can be interpreted in terms of both the Kegon and Hokke teachings. According to Kegon philosophy, the interrelation and interdependence of all things means that the unit implies the manifold and the manifold

implies the unit—so “when one wave moves, myriad follow; when myriad waves move, one follows.” Another interpretation would be to take “one” in a totalistic sense: the one whole contains many elements, many elements make one whole. On this pattern, the first part (myriad following one) represents the Kegon teaching while the second (one following myriad) represents the Hōkō. That is, the Kegon, which is represented as the eternal teaching of all Buddhas as manifestations of the cosmic Buddha, emphasizes many teachings emerging from the holistic realization of Buddha; the Hōkō teaching, which is called “the locus of the wonderful teaching,” emphasizes many teachings leading into the total enlightenment of Buddha.

16. *Annals of the Empty Hall*, a Zen classic of the Chinese parent of the Sōtō school, says in case 17: “Turning around the light of awareness to illumine within, you directly return: clearly arriving at the spiritual root, it is not grasping or rejection.”

17. “Stamping mud, water, space”: according to the Sōtō teacher Tenkei Denson, “Though we divide it into three seals according to the potential of people with greater, middling, and lesser faculties, really it is the Great Way which has one stamp—there is nothing else at all. If you stamp space, there is no clue or trace; if you stamp water, there seems to be some clue; if you stamp mud, the pattern appears evident.” (Hekiganroku Kōgi)

18. This translation is based on a truncated quotation as it appears in some texts of *Shōbōgenzō*. Other versions have a fuller quote, but this truncated version seems to be the form in which Dōgen intended to use it, to convey the notion that nonattachment does not mean annihilation. Cutting a quote to produce something quite different from the original is something Dōgen does at times when it fits his purpose.

19. This passage refers to eliminating attachments to differentiation and nondifferentiation, to being and nonbeing.

20. Vairocana is the main Buddha of the Kegon scripture, representing cosmic buddhahood; the ocean of Vairocana stands for the cosmos, as described in the Kegon scripture.

21. A monk asked Tafuku, “What is Tafuku’s one grove of bamboo?” Tafuku said, “One stem, two stems, slanted.” The monk said, “I don’t understand.” Tafuku said, “Three stems, four stems, curved.” (*Transmission of the Lamp*, vol. 11)

22. Var. lect. “is still the great ocean.”