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"MOUNTAINS AND WATERS".

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues.

Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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MOUNTAINS AND WATERS  
SUBHANA BARZAGHI, SENSEI

Dogen is revered as the founder of the Soto Zen School. He came from a very wealthy background and received such a rigorous education that by the age of seven he was reading ancient Chinese classics. When he was eight his mother died, and it is said that he awakened at that time to the impermanence of life. Dogen revealed later that while his mother was dying she had encouraged him to become a monk. So he studied for some time in the court, and then he sought the help of his uncle to run away and become ordained as a monk, at the age of fourteen. It is said he read the whole of the Buddhist canon, twice, while he was still in his teens. At the age of twenty-one he received transmission in one of the lineages.

Dogen had a number of teachers from different lineages. He spent time in China with his last teacher, Nyojo, and so intensive was it that it is said he did not sleep for two years. Nyojo came into the dojo one day and scolded a dozing monk. "Zen study requires the shedding of body and mind! Why do you sleep?" At that moment, Dogen was completely enlightened.

Dogen left a great body of writing, and one of his classic pieces is the Mountain and Waters Sutra. Here is an excerpt:

The mountains and waters of the immediate present are the manifestation of the path of the ancient Buddhas. Because they are the self before the emergence of signs, they are the

penetrating liberation of immediate actuality. By the height and breadth of the qualities of the mountains, the virtue of riding the clouds is always mastered from the mountains and the subtle work of following the wind as a rule penetrates through to liberation from the mountains. The green mountains are forever walking. A stone woman bears a child by night. If one doubts the walking of the mountains, one doesn't even yet know one's own walking.

So this is his exquisite sutra, which I love because it has such symbolic language. The mountains here mean the phenomenal world, existence. The waters means emptiness and these beautiful Taoist expressions like riding the clouds and following the wind simply mean transcendence or liberation. So we can read it as; form and emptiness of the immediate present are the manifestation of the path of the ancient Buddhas. The mountains and waters are the way of enlightenment. In essence, both are beyond conception. And when he talks about before the emergence of signs, he means before the emergence of conceptualisation, conceptual mind. He goes on to say that the way of transcendence and liberation is none other than of the mountains, of this very world, of this very existence. Ordinary mind is the Tao. So the very heart of the teaching is that emptiness is form, form is emptiness. This sutra is symbolic of the interpenetration of emptiness and form, mountains and waters. So, form is exactly emptiness. Emptiness is not some thing out there, that exists.

It is none other than this rock, this blue tarpaulin, the tree and the wind. "Emptiness is form" means that Buddha nature pervades the whole universe. We wake up to this great vast body. And that fullness of the field of perception comes from the non-dualistic mind. So there are the twin aspects of the realisation of mind, the experience of waking up to this vast body.

Many years ago, I was a very intense yogi and doing a number of Vipassana retreats. In those days in Vipassana practice, you took one-hour vows for sitting without moving. You were not allowed to move for one hour. So I did that. And then I thought, well I've managed to do that, now two hours! And I was interested in just pushing it to the limit. I had heard somebody say that they became enlightened because they sat for three hours, and I accepted this naive idea that this was all I had to do. It was a twenty day retreat and about two-thirds of the way through I was up to three hours, but nothing happened, of

course. I was terribly disappointed. So I sat for four hours, five hours, and eventually I sat six hours without moving or opening my eyes. There was great pain of course, my whole body was on fire and it was like being in the hell-realms for an hour, then there would be an hour of bliss, then another hour of pain, of course, and I became completely absorbed in the body, it became this intense journey and the body became a vast universe. Somehow bells rang, people came and went, I just sat there, completely forgetting at one stage that there was even a world outside. And then in the evening a bell rang and I did open my eyes, and when I opened my eyes it was to my great body. "Oh, this is an interesting part of my body, it's so green!" It took me some years to understand that experience. But that is the truth too. We do wake up to this great vast body.

A stone woman bears a child by night. Again, this is symbolic language. Stone woman also means barren woman, which is a metaphor for emptiness. Bears a child - everything is inconceivably empty yet it exists. Emptiness gives birth to form. The child here means the universe. This stone woman/barren woman bearing a child by night made me reflect too on the Christian image of the virgin birth and I suddenly realised that there were parallels there. The virgin woman is another image of emptiness and she gives birth to the child Jesus, to form.

We were having a women's discussion recently during Easter and we decided to talk about how our Christian roots have conditioned our values and how we felt about that now. I was very involved in the Christian church when I was young, but one of the things that I had a problem with was the notion of original sin, that we were all so sinful in the eyes of God.

Later on, after leaving all of that, one of the things that attracted me about Buddhism was that we are all, at the essence, Buddha-nature. All beings by nature are Buddha. And I thought, "that feels better". But I heard recently of a German Christian philosopher who had explored the Latin roots of the word sin, and he said it meant separation, and then I understood - original sin is about the separation from totality, from God.

I've also been fascinated by this process of birth and death. I was a midwife for seven years, delivering babies in the bush and it was always a great privilege and honour to be invited to a birth. I had many wonderful experiences there. One thing I remember about these births is the energy and excitement, the focus and attention at the moment the baby comes out. At that moment, the baby is often blue and it does not breathe for that few moments. Everybody in the room solemnly looks at this tiny creature and waits for it to breathe and all the adults in the room are holding their breath. I would then say to everyone, "Breathe! How is this poor little creature going to learn how to breathe if we are all holding our breath?" That precious moment seems like an eternity, when we are waiting for the baby to breathe and we need to bring that same attention and precious quality right here to our own breathing to give birth to ourselves, to our own child by night.

Another thing I found about birthing which was quite addictive was this special quality of presence around birth, and usually when you really get into labour and are there for a while, all the things that don't matter just fall away and it becomes a moment-to-moment experience. There's a timeless quality about that energy. I went from delivering babies to spending time with people who are dying, and that same energy, that quality of presence is also true for people who are dying. That same energy is generated in sesshin. And it wasn't just by luck or chance, all those Zen stories where the ancient teachers just said one word and the student was enlightened. It's the same as when you're with a labouring woman, you stay with her through the night, you breathe with her, you can tell when the baby's going to be born, you can tell the stages of labour easily when you're a midwife. And it's the same with those great Zen teachers. They know when the student is ripe. That one word can awaken the mind.

There's another beautiful analogy about form and emptiness that is very simple. It is like the wave and the ocean. The wave has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death, and the Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra says that the wave is full of emptiness but is empty of a separate self. Now the wave is a form created by the wind and the water, but if the wave only sees its form, its beginning and

end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave identifies with the water, with the essence, it will not be afraid of birth and death. The water is free from birth and death.

Through the process of practice, we see there is an exclusive identification with our own body and mind, and this attachment to this body is our greatest limitation. I feel, I think, I am this, I hear, I, I, I. And Dogen said, if you are attached to your body and cannot detach from it, you will not find the way of Buddhas, not even in ten thousand aeons. I did my own contemplation of the impermanence of the body some years ago while sitting with the Tibetan lamas. They had us meditating on death for two weeks, then two weeks on the hell realms. Then I spent time in Benares, arose every morning at four am, went down to the Ganges, found my own special boatman and gave him some rupees to take me up the river to the burning ghat. The river at five am is an intense experience.

A million people descend to bathe in it and chant by it just as the sun rises over the plains of India. Every twenty minutes a body is brought to the burning ghat, carried on a stretcher with four pall bearers, chanting as they come, through the winding back streets down to the river. And the chant was, Rama nama satya hai and it translates as "the only truth is the name of god". And I was fascinated by this chant, because it didn't matter what caste you were, every body got the same chant. Contemplation at the burning ghat was not something ugly, it was an embracing of life and death, that whole process. It's quite sane actually.

So when we sit, we can experience the moment to moment impermanent nature of all the elements. We have the heat, the air, the water, thoughts and feelings. So what elements can you truly consider to be your own body if you truly look at it just as elements arising and passing away on a moment to moment level? Try and grasp hold of any one of those elements, try and hang onto one, just even one sensation in the body and say, "that is me". It is impermanent. When we contemplate the body we can experience that microscopic level of that constant change and flux., bubbles, atoms. And we can experience this directly. There

is no permanent, separate entity called "self" there in all those elements. And that constant changing, that state of flux is what Dogen meant when he says, "The green mountains are forever walking". There is no separation between yourself and the green mountains. Green mountains come forth as self. Turning the light around and looking back is the path of the ancient ones, the mountains and waters of the immediate present.

However there is more to the Buddha's teaching than the realisation of emptiness. We must not stagnate in that realisation of emptiness. That must be replaced by a more comprehensive realisation of integration, and that integration is merging with the world in compassion. Dogen had an analogy here, "It's like stepping back and stepping forward" - stepping back - introspection, and stepping forth - merging with the world. This is like the dance we do - we come to sesshin - introspection - we merge with the world - we come out. We do this dance in many ways continually, back and forth. There's a beautiful rhythm there. Keep up that rhythm, and please do not doubt the walking of the green mountains.

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