

# The Dharma Teachings of Kodo Sawaki

## From: The Notebook of Kodo Sawaki

Eternal satori is included, and rests only in the practice of the moment. Zazen means to practice that which cannot be explained.

During zazen bonnos, monen, appear.

Most people think that zazen is to put an end to illusions, to thoughts. This is a mistake. During zazen, sometimes thoughts, bonnos arise, and sometimes they do not arise. When you sleep, thoughts do not arise. When you sleep in zazen, you don't think at all.

You must be beyond good and evil, good luck and bad luck, happiness and unhappiness, true and false. As formless, they are ungraspable.

Everyone wants to obtain the merits of religion and tries to run after satori, even during zazen. They only want to have satori. So satori without zazen appeared, satori without Zen, lectures without zazen, writings without zazen.

Many books are made like this, without the experience of zazen.

When a drop of water falls in the ocean,  
When a speck of dust falls on the ground,  
At that moment the drop of water is no longer a drop of water,  
It becomes the ocean,  
And the speck of dust is no longer a speck of dust,  
It becomes the entire earth.

The Zen of Master Dogen is not the wish to become more than human, a special being, Buddha or God. No more is it the hope to have a vision of emptiness, nor to perform miracles. It is to return to the normal condition of the human mind.

There are many seekers who analyze but never practice zazen. They just keep the books, like bankers who count money without themselves being rich.

## Zazen Poem

Doing zazen calmly in the dojo,

Putting aside all negative thoughts,

Obtaining nothing but a mind without desire,

-This joy is beyond paradise.

The world runs after fame, honor,

Beautiful clothes and comfort.

But these pleasures are not true peace.

You run and stay unsatisfied until death!

Wear the kesa and black robe and practice zazen.

Concentrate with a single mind, whether still or in motion.

See with your own eyes deep inner wisdom.

Observe and know intimately the true aspect of all action and all existence.

Be able to observe balance.

Understand and know with a mind that is perfectly still.

If you are like this,

Your spiritual dimension,

The highest in this world,

Will be beyond compare.

## The Kesa

*Drizzle and dew, mist and clouds  
cover our bodies.*

This garment is the kesa.

We saw earlier that Buddha nature is the pearl of defenses. We now learn that it is also the kesa.

One day an unsui asked me the meaning of the kesa. When I replied, "The kesa is something which is not clear," he looked at me as though I were talking rubbish. But the kesa truly is something indefinite, both in its muted color (the indefinable color of ruins or rags) and in its measurements that obey no exact rules. Its color and measurements have no outward appearance. For this reason it has been called the garment of the rice-field of unlimited happiness.

It is said that Shakyamuni's kesa measured ten foot one inch, and that of Maitreya one thousand feet. It is neither large nor small, but without appearance. It really is very odd.

The kesa is the symbol of the substance of the Buddha's Law, the garment of "drizzle and dew, mist and clouds." Heaven and earth, the entire universe, are one single kesa. No world exists outside of the kesa. We do not fall into hell or rise up to heaven—we go no-where, we come from nowhere. There is only one kesa. The towns of Kyoto and Nara were laid out in the pattern of a kesa. "Drizzle and dew, mist and clouds cover our bodies." We owe it to ourselves to wear the kesa.

Prince Shotoku, who introduced Buddhism to Japan, wore the kesa to run the affairs of state and to comment on the three Mahayana sutras. The emperor Shomu also wore it for governing. Generations of emperors have had faith in the kesa. It was the same in the world of warriors: Kikuchi Taketoki, Takeda Shingen and Uesegi Kenshin all benefited from the infinite virtues of the kesa. Wearing the kesa and transmitting the kesa is the supreme happiness of mankind.

People who think this is just a load of narrow formalism are the playthings of their bad karma. But those who rejoice in wearing the kesa have their full share of happiness.

The great happiness that the kesa brings from the entire universe was best expressed by Daichi Zenji:

*I am happy in my kesa,  
Calmly I possess the universe.  
I stay or leave as it wishes.  
The pure breeze drives the white clouds.*

And in another poem:

*Wherever it goes,  
The snail is at home when it dies.  
There is no world outside the kesa.*

When "Drizzle and dew, mist and clouds cover our bodies" we are calm and unworried. By wearing the kesa, we find peace of both mind and body.

## Discrimination

Nowadays, all zazen groups or masters who transmit the law have signs indicating their presence.

A long time ago in India, large banners were put up. And even now, in certain regions, flags of all colors hang and fly in the breeze, a souvenir of ancient times.

In our language nowadays, hanging flags indicating Dharma, and establishing true doctrine, means expressing one's own experience relating to satori. Those who speak of Dharma without ever having experienced it are like parrots. They quote words and expressions of others, just like a dictionary. Teaching the Dharma means relating your personal experience.

All day long, we use expressions which mean absolutely nothing, like saying, "I'm fine, thank you," even when we are really not feeling well. These are words, which reflect nothing at all.

Progress? Regression? Who knows what goes in the right or wrong direction? What's good and what's bad? A cure can be a poison and a poison can be a cure.

In the Gion section of Kyoto, Ikkyu Ocho had a disciple named Chigoku Taiky who was a high-class prostitute. When she realized that hell didn't exist and that she was Buddha, all her customers left her feeling totally illuminated and became, shortly thereafter, fervent followers of the Way.

I often hear people say that they prefer a certain yoken [sweet bean paste] as compared to another. They are imported from Kyoto to Osaka and vice versa. Why always seek elsewhere? As far as I'm concerned, rice balls and radishes with Saumur satisfy me just fine.

A long time ago, I was traveling by train in the Kansai region. I remember reading an article in the local newspaper about the vast quantities of sardines caught in the sea of Isu, and what was done with them. There was a photo of a beach covered with these sardines.

Sardines are considered to be very ordinary fish because there are great quantities of them in our seas. If they were fished only once a year, I'm sure they would be considered as a great delicacy. Trout, on the other hand, is considered to be a luxury as it is very rare.

I once joined some fishermen in the Tama-gawa River, but I didn't see one single trout hanging from a line. Sardines swim in schools and with one swipe of the net, you can catch mountains of them. They are transported by truck, salted, dried, and canned. The surplus sardines are sold to be used as fertilizer. We don't have a very high regard for these fish, but they are really rather tasty. In fact, they would certainly be considered even better than trout if they were more rare.

Good and bad are relative concepts, which don't really exist. It's the same for truth and illusions. The good could not exist without the bad. It's simply man's karma, which produces dualism and determines what's good and bad. What makes men happy in their tiny little world? They like to have fun and receive gifts. They consider a birth to be a happy event -whereas it could be something very unfortunate if the baby is ill or becomes a hooligan. Marriage is also considered to be a reason for congratulating-even if the bride might be marrying a long time drunkard.

Joy and suffering are relative notions, which can change and be deceiving. Nothing allows anyone to say that they are 100% sure that an event is a happy one and another an unhappy one. There is bad within the good and goodness within the bad. Good and bad within themselves don't really exist. For the time being, the following comment by Shinran is evident:

One must not find virtue in glory, nor feel fear of evil.

Each and every man is neither good nor bad.

## No Difference

Zazen is practicing, with a human body, that which is no different from Buddha.

As cellular organisms, we are like all other animals, but only humans can practice what is identical to Buddha. This means becoming one with the universe, one with heaven and earth.

The task of our life is: not to waste what we have in common with Buddha; to manifest this Way when lifting the hand, when advancing the foot; and to absorb our total being into each place at each instant. To be immobile and unshakable in our life, this is to fill our present.

This here and now cannot be imitated. So create the present from your true self, the one, which pours out unceasingly, free and unhindered, without thoughts, without mind- hishiryō.

However, through illusion and discrimination, some people imitate last year and the years before and run their life with old calendars.

Understand what religion is: the place where there is no high or low, left or right, back or front. It is transparent from the sky to the earth. It is achieving the Way. Fear, anxiety and deceit are absent. When deceit disappears, the universe becomes pure as crystal.

Having this mind makes all difficulties disappear and clears the way for absolute happiness. Whatever you do, wherever you go, you will always be happy. The mind of the Way is a very pleasant thing.

Friends and enemies, flatterers and critics, bury them in this universal medicine chest and use them to follow the Way.

This is the power of looking within, the only power which creates the self, penetrates the total emptiness of the five personal aggregates and overcomes all suffering.

This Way makes everyone happy-without exception. Everything becomes better. Everything becomes the Way.

An old song says, "My face in the mirror frowns when I frown." This goes for humans too. When one smiles, the other smiles. It is like they are connected with an electric wire.

Whoever doesn't understand this truth lives a constipated life. Understanding this principle is to see the world transparent like a glass building.

The sutras call this, "To penetrate and fill an exact and pure world."

I myself fill the entire universe.

## Good and Bad

The human race is set apart by their intelligence and their manual dexterity. With these, they can build all sorts of machines. They also like to fight one another and they use language with skill. Put simply, humans have been given many talents. Unfortunately, it seems not many use these faculties well.

The saying goes, "Don't use your gifts poorly." I would even say that it is essential to do everything possible to use our talents to the best. A fraud makes bad use of his talents, so does a loan-shark, and so does the man with three sets of holiday homes and mistresses! Each one of us in our own way is an example of badly used talent. Starting with myself, when I look closely I see I am mediocre too. Those whose paths are without error are extremely rare.

Making the best of your abilities-this is to identify yourself with Buddha or God.

I would say that before anything else, you must know yourself to the core. Then make manifest the best in yourself and cut the passions, which make us tend to use ourselves poorly. Like this, holding the sharpened sword of wisdom, we climb our own summit, to the peak of light that contains the entire universe. "Seizing the sword of wisdom" means taking human capacities to their highest potential.

One day, a long time ago, someone saw Shariputra urinating in a field. The man who saw him had such a powerful experience that he put his hands together and did sampai. The story says that at that instant he saw the true nature of Buddha.

It seems that just seeing Shariputra in the posture of urinating naturally inspired deep respect. Whether we are doing zazen or reading sutras, we should summon respect. The same goes for all our daily gestures, like eating or urinating, which we don't generally pay much attention to. This way infinite benefits flow from each instant of our daily life-like dragons and elephants who stomp and play without ever needing to hear the Dharma.

When I look back on my life, I see I could have been anything. When I was young, I thought of doing many different things. Is it just chance that I became a monk and dedicated all my energies to that? I could have worked on the railroads. All day long I'd throw my pick to dig the earth; and when I'd leave at night, I'd drink lots of sake. I would have liked this life, since it would have been my life. I could have been a singer (I don't know if I'd be any good), or a storyteller. I could have become anything, a good guy, or a crook. A life is like a vise, it can hold this or that, it has many uses. The same goes for illusions or satori.

Mount Fuji is considered a big mountain, but seen from the top of the Himalayas, it seems pretty small. They say the Pacific is huge, but it's only a part of the globe. Seen from the universe, it looks like a foothold. (It's not even unfathomable; we know how deep it is). It is difficult to imagine man as a minuscule little animal. Seen with a microscope, an amoeba looks like a diver swimming at the bottom of the sea. She can't even see the edges of the slide she moves on, to her it's as big as the Pacific Ocean. To say that something is big or small is to look with a defective vision. It's up to us to look at our world differently.

What really makes them happy, these little humans in their minuscule little world? They like to have a good time and get presents. They consider a birth a happy event (though it could be a disaster if the baby is deformed or becomes a good for nothing), and that a marriage is cause for congratulations (though they don't know if the groom won't end up to be an incurable drunk). Joy and suffering are relative ideas, indefinite and deceiving. Nothing allows anyone to say with any certainty that this event is happy and that one unhappy. The good carries in it the bad, and vice-versa. So:

*Truth is without foundation;  
the root of illusion is empty.*

*In abandoning having and not having,  
the non-empty becomes empty.*

The whole universe is contained in those two verses.

The good and the bad have never existed. So Shinran's remark stands true:

*Don't be proud of virtue;  
don't be afraid of the bad.*

All humans, without exception, are neither good nor bad.

## True Religion

Most think that a religion is belonging to a group that shares a system of beliefs. In reality each individual has their own religion.

Religion is the peace of mind felt when you are truly yourself. It structures your daily life, but it can't be explained or shown to anyone. I think religion is this stability hidden deep in one's self. Different for everyone, it's what allows someone to keep to the way without anyone else's help.

It is obvious that if religion is our own essence, the disputes between different branches of Zen seem totally insignificant. Likewise, it is useless to try to imitate Shakyamuni or any other master. At other times there were other ways. What is essential is for everyone to seize their own peace of mind, here and now.

The lives of the ancients show that they all had the power of maka hannya. For example, the great patriarch Kanadaida didn't give conferences, or even commentaries on the texts; he deepened his wisdom by living it each day.

Grasp the self, the ultimate in ourselves, the true ego - whatever you call it. It is absolutely necessary to seize it, for as it is, it is the nature of Buddha.

The young girl will find happiness in her state as young girl; and as a woman, in her state as woman; next as a grandmother and finally in death.

Too often, the young girl is in a hurry to become a woman; and when she's a woman, she wants to be a mother. The servant girl hates cooking and right away wants to be boss; but as a boss she finds the work too stressful. I wish that everyone would fully enjoy their life.

One day I got a postcard from a policeman telling me that he was trying to live fully his life as a police inspector. When I read this, I had to laugh. That's exactly it! He perfectly realized my teaching. Becoming Buddha is becoming oneself completely. When you are not yourself, life is hell.

Suppose a jackal tried to imitate the lion's roar, he could open his mouth and howl as he wanted. Being who he is, his voice won't carry.

The Nirvana Sutra says, "A jackal, imitating the roar of the lion, will take 100 years, 1000 years before he finds his voice. Yet a little, three year old lion cub roars like his parents."

The law of the Buddha teaches how to become a god, that is to say: how to live authentically one's true nature. Thanks to this, we can lead a life worth the pain of having lived.

Whether roaring or meowing, if it's your true nature, it is a life that works for the good of all.

The Buddha eats, but why does he eat? He eats to work for the good of all beings. He wakes up early in the morning for the others. He sleeps at night for the others. Laughing or crying, everything he does is to save all humanity.

Kodo Sawaki, unlike most other Masters, refused to take charge of a wandering monastery offered him during his lifetime. Nor did he ever settle in a Temple or Dojo. Even after receiving the Shihō from his own Master, Kodo Sawaki remained to the end an unsui-that is, a monastic monk.

Both his parents having died when he was still a child, Kodo Sawaki was left in the charge of a severe and brutal uncle. His youth was spent working as a cleaning boy in a brothel and as an overseer at the gambling tables. (His uncle, who was a gambler, engaged the boy to ferret out the cardsharps and swindlers from among those with whom he gambled.)

When the Sino-Japanese war broke out, he was immediately packed off to the war front. What was the good that the boy, who was then just fourteen, should show the respect due his country by dying for it, the uncle warned Kodo Sawaki that he had better not come back alive if he knew holding was notion for him.

The fourteen-year-old boy proved himself to be a highly competent soldier, throwing himself into dangerous situations to save the lives of his fellowman, and so he received many honors and was decorated for distinguished action on the Sino-Japanese front. One day, after being shot in the mouth, Kodo Sawaki was declared dead and flung into a pit for corpses. Seriously wounded and unable to move (the boy was trapped under the weight of thirty-odd corpses above him), he remained under the rotting bodies for several days. Discovered when the bodies were about to be incinerated, Kodo Sawaki was rescued and returned to Japan as a war casualty.

Now sixteen years old, without family or friends, without food or money, without anything but the shirt and pants that clung to his body, he traveled by foot to the Temple of Eiheiji. It was a long and arduous trip, and it took him four days and nights to get to Eiheiji. The monks, taking Kodo Sawaki for a beggar-tramp (his clothes were but rags) and a madman (the bullet wound he had received in the mouth impaired his speech and made it difficult for him to speak), refused to listen to him. Undaunted, the youth persisted in his request to be admitted to the Temple. The Chief of the Temple, worn down by the young man's insistence, finally took him in. So grateful was he to have been allowed admittance to the Temple that, though very hungry (he hadn't had a bite to eat for days), Kodo Sawaki kept his hunger to himself and so remained for another two days without food and without sleep. Despite the lack of food-he was almost starving by then-he was so filled with joy that he could not close his eyes, even if he had wished to. Delegated to pounding rice in the kitchen, as was the Sixth Patriarch in the seventh century, Kodo Sawaki remained at Eiheiji for a few years before taking to the road. It was during these subsequent wanderings that he met the Soto Master Koho Roshi, from whom he eventually received the Transmission.

After receiving the Shihō from his Master, Kodo Sawaki went to live in an unbooked hermitage. Rarely sleeping for fear of wasting time, the Master spent his days practicing Shikantaza and his nights studying the Shobogenzo. And for food he ate nothing but rice and beans-uncooked-to save time.

After many years of this, and as ever refusing to affiliate himself with any Temple or monastery, Kodo Sawaki again took up the life of a wandering monk. Followed by a few devoted disciples (among them Taisen Deshimaru), the Master brought the teaching to the people in the distant corners of Japan, from the cities to the fishing villages, from the universities to the prisons.

In 1965, while on his deathbed, he gave Taisen Deshimaru the Kesa, along with the Shihō.

Today two statues, one of Kodo Sawaki and one of Taisen Deshimaru, stand at the entrance to the Buddhist University of Komazawa.