

## *Philosophies of Happiness*

### **Appendix 19: Dogen and Suzuki: One Continuous Mistake**

In the “Marrow of Zen,” Suzuki recounts the story of four horses, as told in the *Samyuktāgama Sūtra*; Dōgen also has a discourse on this theme.<sup>i</sup> The best horse runs before it sees the shadow of the whip; the second best runs as well just before the whip reaches its skin. The third runs when it feels pain on its body; the fourth only after pain penetrates to the marrow of its bones. This makes it very difficult for the fourth to learn how to run. Suzuki notes that we all want to be the best horse. But in Zen training, it does not matter whether you are the best or the worst horse. The Buddha would have more sympathy and compassion for the worst horse.<sup>ii</sup>

He goes on to note that when one practices *zazen* with the great mind of Buddha, we discover that the worst horse is the most valuable one. It is our very imperfection that leads to our growth, to the way-seeking mind. When we can sit perfectly with no physical strain, it can take a longer time to obtain the true feeling or marrow of Zen. Those who find practice more difficult will also find it more meaningful. Thus we cannot use the ordinary evaluative terms “good” and “bad,” since those who have more difficulty actually flourish in their practice in the end.<sup>iii</sup> We tend to evaluate where we are day to day, and to continually feel ashamed of where we are and how we are doing. Dōgen offers a different perspective, with the saying “to succeed wrong with wrong,” or “one continuous mistake” (*shoshaku jushaku*). The life of “one continuous mistake” can also be the life of a Zen master, since one is always in single-minded effort.<sup>iv</sup>

#### **One Continuous Mistake (*Shoshaku Jushaku*) in Dōgen**

The Chinese phrase *shoshaku jushaku* is a multivalent expression that appears in many passages of Dōgen. It seems that this is a case in which one phrase can both mean itself and its opposite, a beautiful expression of the dialectic of Zen. It appears to have two meanings. One is that when we make a mistake, in order to fix the mistake, we make another mistake, thereby adding error to error. On the other hand,

when a skilled craftsperson makes a mistake, he or she takes advantage of the mistake, to make the work even better.<sup>v</sup>

Thus Zen teachers seem to be using a colloquial Chinese expression that was common during the period of the Song dynasty; it appears in many passages in a well-known collection of Ch'an/Zen koans, the *Blue Cliff Record*, mostly in the capping words of the master Yuanwu. Thomas Cleary translates the expression as "adding error to error." Dōgen uses the expression at least six times in the *Shōbōgenzō* and twice in his Dharma Discourses. For example, he uses the expression in a positive way in his discourse "The Mind itself is Buddha" (*Sokushinzebutsu*). Dōgen explains that because many students misunderstand the teaching that "the mind itself is Buddha" they do not continue to transmit its true meaning (literally: hold the mistake and make another mistake, *Shoshaku jushaku*). Because they do not transmit its true meaning (hold the mistake and make another mistake), they fall into the path of non-Buddhist."<sup>vi</sup>

The plain sense of *the mind itself is Buddha* is that the ordinary mind just as it is is Buddha; people believe that their thoughts and awareness as ordinary beings are synonymous with the Mind of enlightenment before they have awakened to it, and therefore they think themselves to already be a Buddha. Such people think that the mind in its ordinary activities, however distorted or distracted, with no awakening of the aspiration to enlightenment, is itself Buddha Mind, that they are Buddhas just as they are. In fact, the teaching that the mind itself is Buddha is much more subtle and complex.

If we have not actualized our aspiration for Buddhahood through practice, enlightenment, and nirvāṇa, we do not have the experience captured by the phrase "*the mind itself is Buddha*." However, even if we arouse that aspiration and actualize practice and realization for just one moment, that one moment is a genuine experience of the fact that "*the Mind itself is Buddha*." One's very mind is Buddha whenever we arouse the aspiration for Buddhahood.<sup>vii</sup>

How is it that holding a mistake and making another mistake allows one to transmit the true meaning of this subtle teaching?" Making mistakes is key to learning. The quiet student who sits in the back of the classroom nodding and is afraid to admit that she doesn't understand is not going to learn; she

will remain without understanding. In contrast, the student who is willing to raise her hand and make mistake after mistake will be corrected until she arrives at genuine understanding. It is by making one mistake after another that life can guide us on the path of true learning. Thus we understand Suzuki's comment that "the life of "one continuous mistake" can also be the life of a Zen master, since one is always in single-minded effort," and we see a possible source for his tracing this phrase to Dōgen.

Another passage from Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* that may have been a source for Suzuki is the chapter *On the Cypress Tree (Hakujushi)*, which underscores the point that mistakes are key to learning:

Now "For what [purpose] did our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma come from the West?" [This famous Zen *koan*] was not the monk's asking some idle question, nor was it a matter of two people being able to see things alike. It was a matter of one person—namely Joshu's monk—who had still not been able to experience a mutual encounter with his Master, so how much could he himself have actually realized? <sup>viii</sup> . . .

Therefore, even though he was mistaken time after time, because he was mistaken time after time, he was paying close attention to his mistakes in making mistakes. Would this not be his hearing what is false and his taking its ramifications in hand? Because his openhearted spirit was devoid of any attachment to duality, the monk was a veritable 'cypress tree in the courtyard.' [the answer to the Koan: "For what [purpose] did the ancestor Bodhidharma come from the West? The cypress tree in the courtyard!"] When there is no physical object, there can be no 'cypress tree in the courtyard.' <sup>ix</sup>

It is through making mistakes that we can learn and transmit our understanding; as Herbert Nearman explains, "a disciple who is a genuine vessel for the Dharma will persist in making mistakes through misunderstanding what the Master is pointing to until he sees where he is wrong, which he can only do by being willing to make mistakes in the first place."<sup>x</sup> It is persisting in our errors and allowing ourselves to be corrected that leads to our understanding. This is an important corrective to our fear of making mistakes and being seen as stupid or in error. We should welcome mistakes, for they guide us along the path to genuine growth.<sup>xi</sup>

This passage brings out the theme of non-duality as the goal of genuine understanding; when we are unattached to duality, we are one with the cypress tree in the courtyard or any other aspect of our experience. This theme emerges in an additional passage in the *Shōbōgenzō* in which the phrase *mistake upon mistake* appears, in the chapter “On the Everyday Behavior of a Buddha Doing his Practice” (*Gyobutsu Iigi*). The term *iigi* in common speech means dignified behavior; in Buddhism it means specifically the four modes of everyday human bodily behavior—moving, standing still, sitting, and reclining:<sup>xii</sup>

Whatever thoughts or things we are now grasping and clinging to as ‘real’ are not supported by our practice of letting go, and yet they are our dreams and illusions, or ‘flowers in the sky.’ Who of us can see as mistaken these persistent dreams and illusions, these manufactured ‘flowers in the sky’? Because to step forth is a mistake and to step back is a mistake, because taking one step is a mistake and taking two steps is a mistake, we make one mistake after another. For we have made Heaven and Earth strangers to each other.

We need to keep in mind that our coming forth into life is at one with our coming forth into the Way and that our entering death is at one with our entering the Way. In the head to tail rightness of that state, our everyday behavior manifests before our very eyes as if the turning of a jewel or the revolving of a pearl. To make use of, and be possessed of, one aspect of a Buddha’s everyday behavior is to be the whole of the great earth in all directions, as well as the whole of birth and death and coming and going; it is to be a dust filled mundane world and to be a lotus in full bloom. This dust filled mundane world and this lotus blossom are each an aspect of it.<sup>xiii</sup>

We make heaven and earth distant from one another by our discriminatory thought and perception of duality. Everything from the dust filled mundane world to the lotus blossom is an aspect of Buddha nature. Whatever we say or do in dual awareness is a mistake; everything we do cognitively within the world of duality adds error to error. It is only when we take the leap out of the world of duality that we enter into the spacious world of Buddha Nature. Likewise in *koan* practice, struggling with a *koan* only digs the rational mind deeper into itself. The mind steps forward and misses; it steps backwards and misses. It is only when the mind thoroughly lets go that it finds Buddha nature.

We find another reflection on the hazards of dualistic language in the discourse *In the Great*

*Practice (Daishugyō)*:

One day on Mount Bizhang a student asked, “Does a person who has cultivated great practice still fall into cause and effect?”

Investigating great practice is nothing but cause and effect itself. Because cause and effect are invariably comprehensive and completely full, they are beyond a discussion of falling or not falling, or considerations of ignoring or not ignoring. If not falling into cause and effect is a mistake, not ignoring cause and effect may also be a mistake. Wherever mistakes surpass mistakes, there is falling into a ‘wild fox’ body and there is liberation from a ‘wild fox’ body. It is possible that not falling into cause and effect was a mistake during the time of Kashyapa Buddha [a Buddha who preceded the historical Buddha, known as Shakyamuni Buddha] but not a mistake during the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is also possible that even though there is liberation from a wild fox’s body during the present time of Shakyamuni Buddha, during the time of Kashyapa Buddha a different principle was actualized.<sup>xiv xv</sup>

The Great Practice is the orientation of someone on the path of the Great Vehicle, the Mahāyāna path, who is acting as a guide and teacher for others, while a ‘wild fox’ is someone who gives false teaching. The question of this discourse is whether or not someone who has realized enlightenment and is doing the Great Practice is freed from causality or is still subject to cause and effect. As Herbert Nearman explains, “Dōgen will ultimately argue that both views, though seemingly contradictory, are accurate. That is, someone who has realized fully perfected enlightenment is not subject to causality because such a person is living in total accord with the Precepts, and at the same time, such a person, as a sentient being, is subject to the causal consequences of being a sentient being.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Thus what is true in one era may be a mistake in another era; what is a mistake in one context is not so in another context. To say that a Buddha is not subject to cause and effect is both true and false, just as to say that a Buddha is subject to cause and effect is both true and false. Each side has something true and something mistaken. Likewise in the *koan* “Does a dog have Buddha nature?” each side misses the mark. To say a dog does have Buddha nature is from one perspective true, while to say a dog does not

have Buddha nature is true from another. Once again, Dōgen uses this phrase to signal that within the world of duality, to use language to describe what is beyond language is to add error to error.

Indeed, we see Dōgen applying the phrase “mistake upon mistake” in the context of *koan* practice in a *dharma* discourse in his *Extensive Record (Eiheikōroku)*. In one discourse, at the end of a mysterious *koan*, Dōgen adds, “if you state your understanding, you are making mistake after mistake. If you say you do not understand, even the five precepts are not maintained.”<sup>xvii</sup>

Finally, we find this phrase used poignantly in the later version of “Ungraspable Mind,” in the *Shōbōgenzō*. Apparently, this was a teaching first delivered orally for students in the monastery; Dōgen later revised the lecture in a written version. The treatise is somewhat controversial, as Dōgen criticizes certain revered ancient Chinese masters for insufficient understanding of some key points of Buddhist doctrine. And then he himself puzzles on this fact: “It is hard to believe that those who did not understand this one teaching do understand other teachings. Know that ancient teachers sometimes made mistake after mistake (*shoshaku jushaka*).”

Dōgen is apparently lamenting the fact that even great masters can make mistakes, that we are capable of misunderstanding in some areas, even while we have great understanding in other areas. Suzuki, however, stresses the positive function of learning from errors that we saw in some of the earlier passages. Suzuki reiterates this point in his commentary on Dōgen’s *Genjokoan*, and contemporary teachers of Zen have followed suit.<sup>xviii</sup>

For example, Tagien Dan Leighton emphasizes that we can never learn anything if we don’t make mistakes, that this is part of Beginner’s Mind or not knowing, what Ellen Langer has called creative uncertainty. It is important to know how to make mistakes, to be willing to “meet, engage, assess, and celebrate the mistake;” this is the ongoing practice.<sup>xix</sup> This practice is like the martial artist who learns how to fall effectively, so that the mat embraces and shields her fall. Then we can learn from every mistake we make, and life can be one joyous mistake after another---that is, one joyful process of learning.

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<sup>i</sup> See Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, “On ‘The Four Horses (*Shime*)’ *Treasury*, 792-96; tr. Nearman, 1044-49.

<sup>ii</sup> *Zen Mind*, 38.

<sup>iii</sup> Dōgen has a fascinating essay on the evaluative moral language of good and bad. See “Do Not Do Anything Evil,” in Cleary, “Rational Zen, ‘ 85-103; “Refrain from Unwholesome Action,” *Treasury*, 95-103; and see Kasulis, 93-99.

<sup>iv</sup> *Zen Mind*, 39. See also the unedited version from the archive for January 26, 1966: “You sent me a calendar and I am trying to follow the good message of the calendar and I find the calendar undaunted by failure. The calendar is a calendar of failure -- the calendar become a calendar of failure. “Dogen zenji said, “*Shoshaku jushaku*”. *Shaku* means mistake or wrong. With wrong -- succeed wrong with wrong. To succeed wrong with wrong or to succeed mistake with mistake. It means continuous mistake. Continuous mistake is Zen according to him. And yet he is a founder of Zen. But his life was a life of continuous mistake. *Shoshaku jushaku*. Some Zen master says, “*Shoshaku jushaku (Ti junan)*. {?}It means my eighty years of life is succession of mistakes. But there is Zen in it.”

<sup>v</sup> I thank Shohaku Okumura for this explication and express my deep appreciation for his research into the phrase and for the references from *Blue Gate*, Dōgen’s *Extensive Record*, and the *Shōbōgenzō*. I also thank Kazuaki Tanahashi warmly for sharing his explication and interpretation of the phrase.

Kazuaki Tanahashi translates the phrase as “to file a file.” He notes that the character *shoshaku* is defined in Chinese dictionaries as a “grindstone” or a file to grind things with. He ventures that this was the original meaning, and that the word came to mean a mistake. From this hypothesis, he reasons that the literal meaning of the phrase *shoshaku jushaku* is to grind off something by using something very hard, rather than the usual wood, metal, or something softer than a file. Thus the literal sense of the expression would be to take a file or rasp—a metal tool for shaping wood or other material, used to polish rough edges—and work on the file. The image would be that one is filing away a file with another file, thus making each one duller; we would not want to file our file off, because it will not be able to do its work of filing. However, we can note that the image may suggest that if one is a master craftsman, one could use the file to actually improve the work, as in the image in Talmudic study, where two study partners become like two swords sharpening one another. One can either add error to error by filing a file until it becomes too dull to use, or use an error to hone one’s understanding. If we are terrified of mistakes, we can try to erase them away—like trying to get a stain out of a carpet, but actually digging the stain in deeper. However when we realize the value of mistakes, we discover that friction can actually be fruitful for growth. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen’s Shōbo Genzo*, Volume 2, 1070.

Shohaku Okumura offers a different, historical perspective on the phrase. He agrees that one meaning of the character *jushaku* that shows up in Chinese lexicons is a grindstone or file. However, he was not able to find the interpretation of *shoshaku jushaku* as “to file a file” in any commentaries on the *Hekiganroku* or *Shōbōgenzō* or in Zen dictionaries. He was also not able to find the expression *shoshaku jushaku* in Buddhist texts other than those of the Song Dynasty or later. Among ninety-three hits in the SAT Daizokyu Data base, there are three or four Pure Land Buddhist texts; the remainder are Zen texts. His suggestion is that Song Dynasty Zen Masters used the colloquial expression to suggest that language is always a double-edged sword; “any word cannot be the reality itself, but the reality cannot be expressed and shared with others without using words.” Thus using language always adds error to error; we need to use language to express, but by using language we cannot fail to fall short of the reality in some way. We will see this theme in some of the passages I analyze below.

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<sup>vi</sup> Translation of Shohaku Okumura, in e-mail correspondence. Translation of Kazuaki Tanahashi: “many students misunderstand this teaching, as they do not file a file about it [examine it thoroughly]. Because they do not file a file, they fall outside the way.” Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Treasury*, 43. Hee-Jin Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness*, 104, “failed to exploit it to their advantage.”

<sup>vii</sup> In other words, we need to actualize our potential for Buddhahood to experience the fact that our mind itself is Buddha. But any one moment in which we actualize this aspiration is a genuine experience that our mind itself is Buddha.

<sup>viii</sup> Tr. Rev. Hubert Nearman, O.B.C. The translator explains that a mutual encounter not only refers to a disciple meeting a Master who recognizes him as a worthy vessel for the Dharma, but it also refers to the mutual recognition of each other’s Buddha Nature, that is, Buddha recognizes Buddha, and Buddha bows to Buddha.

<sup>ix</sup> Tr. Nearman, 478-479. Kazuaki Tanahashi: The question *What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from India?* is not only a question, or the teacher and student sharing the same view. At the very moment of asking, has not one of them seen through? How much as the other attained? In further give and take, neither one is wrong.

Thus, there is missing the mark on top of missing the mark. Because it is missing on top of missing, it is continuous missing. Is it not receiving voidness and sending back an echo? Because vast spirit has no contradiction, *The cypress tree in the garden*.

Tanahashi does not seem to take the phrase in a positive spirit in this passage.

<sup>x</sup> Nearman, 479, note 14.

<sup>xi</sup> See below, Chapter 10, for Ellen Langer’s application of this principle to Western education.

<sup>xii</sup> Nearman, 280. Other translations of the title: *On the Awesome Presence of Active Buddhas; On the Dignified Conduct of Practicing Buddhas*. Dōgen is actually commenting on a poem:

Whenever I go out the gates, just grass,  
And whenever I come in the gates, just grass,  
So for a myriad leagues  
There is not even an inch of grass  
And the words ‘come in’  
And the words ‘go out’  
Do not apply here  
Nor do they apply there.

Tr. Herbert Nearman, The translator paraphrases this poem: whenever I look either outside or within myself, there are only the transient images that my senses perceive and which my mind gives substance to. Hence, all there is in an experience is what I describe as arising, temporarily persisting, and dissipating, and that is of my own constructing. In this sense, the ‘myriad blades of grass are not real, no matter how far I travel within or without. And since there is no ‘I’ that ‘goes out’ or ‘comes in’ these terms are useless in describing or directly knowing That Which is real, 284, note 3.

<sup>xiii</sup> Hubert Nearman interprets the poem as follows: “Whenever I look either outside or within myself, there are only the transient images that my senses perceive and which my mind gives substance to. Hence, all there is in any experience is what I describe as arising, temporarily persisting, and dissipating, and that is of my own constructing. In this sense, the ‘myriad blades of grass’ are not real, no matter how far I travel within or without. And since there is no ‘I’ that ‘goes out’ or ‘comes in,’ these terms are useless in describing or directly knowing That Which is Real.”



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Translation of Tanahashi: “Leaving the gate there is grass, entering the gate there is grass, though there is not a bit of grass for myriad miles. Such “entering” and “leaving” are not essential. Grasping by entering does not wait for the letting go of leaving; these are mere apparitions of blossoms in the sky.”

Who would regard this apparition of blossoms in the sky as taking up a mistake and settling in with the mistake? Stepping forward misses, stepping backward misses, taking one step misses, taking two steps misses, and so there are mistakes upon mistakes.

Heaven and earth are far distant [due to our mistakes], and yet the ultimate way is not difficult. Thoroughly understand that in the awesome presence, and the presence of awe, the great way is wide open.

Know that upon emerging in birth, all emerge together on the way, and that upon entering death, all enter together on the way. From the head down to the tail, the awesome presence of rolling the pearl and of turning the jewel is manifested.

That which allows one part of a *buddha*'s awesome presence is the entire universe, the entire earth, as well as the entirety of birth and death, coming and going, of innumerable lands and lotus blossoms. Each of these innumerable lands and lotus blossoms is one part. *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, Volume 1, 263.

<sup>xiv</sup> Tanahashi, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, Volume 2, 706-7.

<sup>xv</sup> Nearman translates:

When we search for, and find, the Great Practice, this will be the Great Cause and Effect. Because this Cause and Effect is invariably the full perfection of the cause and the complete fulfillment of the effect, there is nothing to debate concerning ‘being subject to’ or ‘not being subject to’ and there is nothing to discuss concerning ‘being blind to’ or ‘not being blind to.’ If ‘not being subject to,’ and there is nothing to discuss concerning ‘being blind to’ or ‘not being blind to.’ If ‘not being subject to cause and effect’ is a mistaken view, then ‘not being blind to cause and effect’ might also be a mistaken view. Even if we were to say that this is adding a mistake atop a mistake, still there as the old man’s being reduced to the life of a wild fox and there was his dropping off of the life of a wild fox. It may appear reasonable that, even though ‘not being subject to cause and effect’ may have been a mistaken view in the past during the eon of Kasho Buddha, it may not be a mistaken view in the present during the eon of Shakyamuni Buddha. And it may also appear reasonable that, even though ‘not being blind to cause and effect’ during the present Shakyamuni Buddha’s eon may have rid the old man of the attitude of a wild fox, it would not necessarily have done so during Kasho Buddha’s eon. Nearman, 825-6.

<sup>xvi</sup> Nearman, 823.

<sup>xvii</sup> Dōgen, *Dōgen’s Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei koroku* tr. Taigen Daniel Leighton; Shohaku Okumura; Steven Heine; John Daido Looi (Volume 3, discourse 229 (p. 233). The other instance in a dharma talk: (Volume 2, discourse 138, p. 167) If you desire to play the music of Shaolin [the temple of Bodhidharma] you will fall into playing “Enticing Plum Blossoms” [a piece of Chinese secular music]. If you want to play the music of *Jetavana Vihara* [the temple donated to *Shakyamuni* where his monks practiced] you will fall into playing a Persian melody. Like this, making mistakes, we produce more mistakes, and hang our nostrils on the entryways of sun face and moon face, exhaling the energy that drills through our nostrils, and emitting light from our eyes to open our eyes.” The translators explain: “even though we desire to emulate the ancient *buddhas*, we fall into karmic patterns. We try to make our nostrils, or true self, into an instrument of Buddha Dharma, but we lack skill and end up with pop music.”

The phrase also appears many times in the *Blue Cliff Record*, a collection of *koans* that became a favorite

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among Zen Buddhists. Dōgen was the first to introduce this collection to Japan; he hand copied the manuscript on his last night before leaving his five years of study in China, and included a fourth of its cases for his own collection of *koans*. The phrase usually occurs in Yuan Wu's notes on each *koan* case. See *The Blue Cliff Record*, tr. Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1982), xi-xii. I thank Shohaku Okamura for pointing me to the cases in which it appears: 8, p. 54. capping words 4; cases 16, 28, 32, 36, 38, 39, 50, 55, 64, 85, 89, 91, 96.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Dōgen's Genjo Koan: Three Commentaries*, tr. Mel Weitsman, Michael Wenger, and Shohaku Okamura, 101-102.

<sup>xix</sup> "Forum: Understanding Dōgen," a roundtable discussion with Bonnie Myotai Treace, Taigen Dan Leighton, Norman Fischer, and Steven Heine in *Buddhadharma: the Practitioner's Quarterly*, summer 2204.