

# Transmit Faith in Awakening

Pierre Dôkan Crépon

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Dear Friends,

Thirty years ago at the funeral ceremony for Master Deshimaru here at La Gendronnière, a banner was deployed over his tomb on which these words were written, “Continue Zazen Eternally”. Today, the title of this talk, “Transmitting Faith in Awakening”, echoes that slogan. Does not “continue” – as we grow older – become “transmit”? And does not the “eternal zazen” that we evoked then refer to the religious experience that we call “awakening”? Wasn’t it “faith” that inspired us to write that slogan? So we are still working at, practising, and mulling over the same thing. Although those who practise the Buddha Way have moved around over the centuries – in India, China, Japan, and the West – they have always been moved by the same deep principle that ceaselessly renews us. What we do today, as we gather together to express our gratitude for the man who brought us to the ancient path discovered by the Buddhas of old, is no different.

The words transmission, faith, and awakening are at the heart of the Way. They manifest the way in we live the Dharma. Taking them as my points of departure, following their threads and exploring their knots and tangles, I would like to try to go a little deeper into certain points of our practice. Although some say that the Zen tradition is beyond words and scriptures, I believe that words – like all the phenomena of the universe – are expressions of the Dharma and that they light our way when we perceive them as such.

Awakening, bodhi in Sanskrit, bodai in written Sino-Japanese, is the foundation of our practice, of our salvation. The monotheistic religions are religions of the one God; Buddhism is the religion of awakening. We used to translate bodhi as “illumination”. André Fouchet, the scholar of Indian Studies, translated it “clairvoyance”, seeing clearly. Today we more often use the word “awakening”, while in English we find the term “enlightenment” which contains the notion of light, of lighting up. Linguists tell us that the meaning of the Sanskrit verb oscillates between “awaken” and “understand” while the Greek verb derived from the same root, “budh”, signifies “learn by questioning”. We can see here two ways of perceiving

reality. Indian civilisation emphasises intuitive understanding while Greek civilisation puts the accent on discursive understanding. In Chinese, particularly in the Zen tradition, there is (aside from the transliteration “bodhai”) the term *wu* which is read as *satori* in Japanese and which signifies “understand”, “become aware”, “see clearly”; there is also *jian xing*, read as *kensho* in Japanese, which signifies “seeing one’s original nature” or “original nature”.

In any case, Bodhi, Awakening, designates first of all the experience of Shakyamuni beneath the bodhi tree. That experience is both a human experience practised for generations and an experience that, understood as the ultimate reference, has become the stuff of myths, the experience by which the man Shakyamuni became the Buddha who surpasses men and gods and who appears but once in every kalpa. Between that experience and our own experience thousands of sutras, commentaries, sermons, and poems have flourished, produced by our ancestors and that we continue to produce. Just as Christianity developed a theology, a discourse about God, so have we developed a discourse about awakening.

Thus, there is the awakening of the auditors, the sravaka, the awakening of solitary buddhas, the pratyekabuddhas, the supreme awakening of the Buddhas who opened the bodhisattva Way, supreme awakening (anuttarasamyakusambodai) with the ten specific qualities. There is original awakening and emergent awakening, small awakenings and great awakenings, gradual and sudden awakening, silent awakening and awakening through koans. There is the mind and the heart of awakening, the auxiliaries of awakening, and beings of awakening with their vows and precepts and lands. There are also questions about awakening: is it omniscience? Is it without backsliding? Is it extinction or emergence? Is it active or passive? Innate or acquired? Does it come from within or without? Is it produced or not produced? Can we or can we not say that there is awakening or that there is not awakening? Do we awaken to awakening or to the absence of awakening? Even if it is merely a question of awakening to one’s illusions, the fact is that all this is the matter of awakening about which we have talked for 2500 years.

We could, of course, close this discussion by sitting down in zazen, screaming a kwatz, or getting busy with something else. But we can’t help but open fresh eyes upon the world from our practice, and enter into that world of awakening there to have discourse with all the Buddhas. So from our experience we come in contact with Shakyamuni’s experience and we rejoice to hear that magnificent dream from the *Lotus Sutra* cited by Dogen in the chapter from the *Shobogenzo* entitled *Muchu Setsumo (Dream Talk Within a Dream)*

*The bodies of the awakened were golden and adorned with the marks of a hundred blessings.*

*When I hear and preach the Law there is always this good dream!*

*It is again in a dream that I become king and leave my palace and my vassals,*

*As well as the five most subtle desires, and that I go to the place of the Way,*

*There to sit under the tree of Awakening upon the lion seat,*

*I spend more than seven days seeking the Way, then obtain the Wisdom of the awakened,*

*Having made real the Way beyond which there is none other, I rise and turn the Wheel of Law,*

*I preach the Law to the four congregations for tens of millions of eons,*

*I preach the sublime, unstained Law and ferry countless beings to the other shore,*

*I finally enter total Extinction like smoke dissipating, like a lamp going out.*

That our experience mingles with that of Shakyamuni as well as with that of countless Buddhas, is strikingly illustrated in the translation of the passage that I have just read. In fact, I consulted three different translations (into French and English) of this passage originally written in Chinese. The original gives no grammatical subject and does not specify who, in the dream, becomes a king, leaves his palace, sits upon the lion seat, preaches the Law, and enters nirvana. So each of the three translators opted for a different solution, deciding that the subject is either Shakyamuni (in the version I have just read), or the one who reads and maintains the *Lotus Sutra* (in other words a person who practises and who might be any one of us), or the multitude of golden-bodied awakened ones.

Truth be told, that is what happens when, carried by practice and awakening, we lose our baggage and are seized by Reality as it is. Although it is an intimate experience, it is not simply a personal awakening in the sense of acquiring something, but rather a clarification by which we harmonise with the supreme awakening of Shakyamuni and the Buddhas of the past. That is expressed in another sentence from the *Lotus Sutra* which also serves as the title to another chapter of the *Shobogenzo (Yuibutse Yobutsu)*, “only a Buddha with another Buddha is able to get to the bottom of the real aspect of all that exists”.

So our practice cannot be simply mechanical – a sort of zazen as the callisthenics of awakening as some say – but from the start it is a question of putting into play our very depths. Thus, right from the first step, walking on this path means walking with faith.

The *Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom* says:

*The Buddha Law is a great sea. Faith is its gate, knowledge is its guide. A man whose heart is filled with a pure faith can enter the Buddha's Law but without faith he cannot.*

*Faith is like a hand. If he has hands a man can enter the precious mountain and gather gems at will. Just so may a believer enter the Buddha Law and take as he wishes. Not believing is like not having hands.*

*In addition, the Buddha said, "if a man has faith he can enter into the ocean of my great Law and gain the fruit of religious life. He does not shave his head and put on the kesa in vain. If he does not have faith then he cannot enter the ocean of my Law. Like a dead tree that puts forth neither flowers nor fruit, he will not gain the fruit of religious life. He may shave his head, dye his clothes, and study all manner of sutras and shastras, but he will not draw any profit from the Buddhist law.*

This text forcefully asserts the essential, primal, character of faith for acceding to the Dharma. Yet we know by experience that people often come to the practice out of a wide variety of motives, generally having something to do with personal gain but very far, in appearance, from any expression of faith. However, that faith might appear little by little and grow strong over time. So from being a sort of pre-requisite for approaching Buddha's teaching – as the Treatise indicates, for example, with the phrase *faith is its gate* – faith might manifest itself and wax strong as a consequence of practice. Dogen emphasises that in *Bendowa* when he cites zazen as the principal gateway to the Dharma.

My feeling is that we are all impregnated with an original, latent, faith inherent to our human nature, just as we are impregnated with an original, fundamental awakening that is manifested in practice. The idea of original faith is evoked by the term *shinkon*, root of faith. The Japanese monk Myoe, a contemporary of Dogen from the Kegon school (avatamsaka) remembered for his *Journal of Dreams*, wrote on this subject: "As a general rule, a person who starts with obtuse faculties but who accumulates the impregnations of the practice will be able to obtain knowledge, and a non-believer will have to be provided with the root of faith."

I truly believe that original faith and original awakening bring us to the practice when the causes and conditions allow it, even if we are not aware of it. Master Deshimaru said that faith was *funi*, or not-two, and he also talked about non-fear. That means that, deep down, faith has no object; it is calm certitude. When it manifests itself, it offers its own object which, in our tradition, will be the Three Jewels, the kesa, the transcendental Bodhisattvas, zazen, all of which are themselves manifestations of that calm certitude.

The Sanskrit word that we translate as “faith” is *sraddha* (*shin* in Sino-Japanese) which is related to the Latin *credo* and thus to the French verb *croire* and the English *believe* in their religious dimension. *Sraddha* brings together the ideas of trust, faith, and fidelity and, doing so, covers to a certain degree the content that, here in the West, we put into the word faith. But it also covers other meanings that have been explored by the commentators. Just as there is a discourse about awakening, there is a discourse about faith.

Thus it is said in the *Abhidharmakosa* that: “Faith is the dharma by which thought, troubled by emotions, becomes clear” or again: “Faith is the clarification of thought”. In these citations the meaning of faith distances itself from emotional expression to become a faculty of the mind. That’s because heart and mind are not separate. There is not faith on one hand, a sort of feeling or more or less blind belief, and on the other hand awakening and wisdom shedding light on all things. Faith and awakening are deeply mingled, knitted together.

Unlike what Saint Paul says in the *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, “We advance by faith and not by sight”, we might say that we advance both by faith and by sight, or better still, that we advance in the mingling of faith and sight.

But another force nourishes us like a vital vein and that is transmission. Here again discourse and stories of transmission are many. Eto Sokuo, one of the great scholars of Dogen during the last century, uses an image to talk about the transmission of the Buddhist sutras in China and the coming of Bodhidharma. He compares the transmission to moving house. First the texts arrive like the furniture and the boxes, and then comes the Patriarch from the West, the owner of the furniture and the boxes.

To prolong the metaphor, we might say that it is the owner who opens the boxes and poses their contents because he knows how to use them and can teach others to use them. Of course, a smart person might figure out on his own how to use what is in the boxes while a slower person might have trouble even if someone explains to him. But in order to feel that we have

really become, in our turn, an owner, we need to have someone tell us, “Now you are the owner”. The truth is that the question of transmission, in all its different forms, is at the heart of all traditions and societies in which generation follows generation. But in our school it takes on a particular dimension, for aside from the concrete question of transmitting techniques and knowledge, there is manifested the essential aspect of the line incarnated in the face to face encounter where the Dharma and its power are passed on. The lines of transmission display the names of the successors to Shakyamuni Buddha in a list of which the historicity gives way to a symbolic value as we go further and further back in time. By the warm, blood-red, family tie that runs through the generations on the ketsumyaku, our practice joins in a common circle with that of Shakyamuni and, beyond him, with that of the Buddhas of the past. Transmission links our historical practice with the mythical practice of the ancient Bouddhas.

Thus the terms transmission, faith, and awakening reveal one and the same dimension of the practice which, beyond any personal conception, leads us to set into movement the founding principle. That is, to what we call religious practice. The three words – transmission, faith, awakening – are facets of the same precious gem, and we could play with the order of the terms used in the title of this talk: Have Faith in the Transmission of Awakening, Awaken to the Transmission of Faith, Transmit the Awakening of Faith, Awaken to Faith in Transmission.

But that is not enough, for obstacles are forever arising along the way. For example, the elders knew that one of the obstacles commonly encountered in the beginning is an attachment to our personal dignity. We cling to our image, to what we represent, as if we wanted to turn ourselves into objects, things, and make of our karmic personage something solid and real, thus refusing to hear and receive the teaching. That sort of obstacle dissolves when we continue to practise, just as a number of other attachments dissolve. But it can also happen that we objectify certain aspects of the Way that then become obstacles. We might, for example, grow rigid in certain forms of the practice – zazen, rituals, rules – and it might also happen that the deepest expressions of the Way become obstacles.

For example, the quest for awakening can become the greatest of illusions when we consider awakening to be something outside ourselves that needs to be caught or trapped. Masters of different traditions have always warned against spiritual illusions, and the Zen tradition is full

of stories about disciples trying to get awakening. Rinzai Zen has even made a specialty of such stories.

Manifestations of faith are powerful stimulants along the Way – faith really can move mountains – but they can become vague superstitions or tools used for material gain. All observers of Buddhism in Southeast Asia have been struck by the out and out materialism of the mechanics of Buddhist devotion. One prays and gives in order to get material merits. In real life the notion of “no thought of profit” scarcely exists. The situation is different in Europe but faith in a person or in symbolic objects can also become a source of attachment that can blind and hobble us.

Our relation to transmission is also delicate. Sometimes idealised and sometimes denigrated, the process of transmission gives rise to complications and diverse reactions in which we find envy and mistrust mixed together. It is hard to be natural and trusting, ready to give and receive without trying to get.

So it is that the most fertile expressions of religious life may lead us astray when they remain objects outside ourselves. The practice of the Way consists in making them ours. Just as we take in food, digest it, and evacuate it, in such a way as to make its essence a part of ourselves, so does advancing in the Way consist in ingesting the practice and the doctrine, digesting and evacuating them in such a way as to make them ours while leaving nothing behind. That’s what we call taking one more step. Then, our discourse is no longer a discourse about awakening, or about faith, or about transmission, but rather a discourse of awakening, of faith, of transmission.

The founding principle is non-dual. That means that the myriad existences, including sentient beings and the world of ideas, can be produced without hindrance. They are without substance and they are all tied together. So it is in an open and moving universe that we awaken, that we feel trust, that the Dharma is handed on. That is done by carrying on the codified forms of one timeless tradition that gives us access to understanding and freedom. There’s the paradox.

Taisen Deshimaru opened the Way to that open universe by handing on faith in awakening to us. In the dedication that we recite during ceremonies in his honour we use the word *kaisan* which means “open the mountain”. He was a paradoxical man who joined the inwardness of the ancient Way to the charismatic outwardness of an open universe.

Thirty years later, as disciples, we continue to transmit that and to deepen the Way by going forward step by step. His teaching is not closed and the Dharma is not shut away. We respectfully practise a living tradition that adapts naturally to every place and every circumstance. It is a great chance for us and we express our deep gratitude to him.