

DŌGEN AND THE FIVE RANKS

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To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things. When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization exists, and this no-trace continues endlessly.¹

Zen Master Dōgen’s famous passage on the self from the Genjo Koan quoted above unveils a broadened understanding of his introspective intent. Dōgen insists on a thorough going and rigorous examination of the functioning of the self in order to overturn deeply entrenched unquestioned assumptions regarding its nature. The introspection contained in these five statements points toward a penetrating insight demonstrating how to structure the study and practice of Buddhist teachings. The five statements are an outline of Zen practice, and in a surreptitious way, mirror the Five Ranks without mentioning them by name.

The Five Ranks were promulgated in the teachings of Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-869), the founder of the Soto Zen School. Its dialectic formula may have its roots deep within and inspired by the I Ching the ancient Chinese Book of Changes.² Tung-shan and his followers adapted the Five Rank’s into a practical means to teach the Buddhadharmā. The Five Ranks can be considered a Chinese expression of the Indian path to enlightenment.

Tung-shan’s Five Ranks spread through the Zen Schools of China and Japan. The prominent Japanese Rinzai teacher Hakuin (1686-1768) held them in high esteem calling them “that supreme treasure of the Mahayana.” Dōgen outwardly rejected the formulaic approach of the Five Ranks as a teaching method. However, he covertly (maybe unconsciously) inserted them into many areas of his writings. He probably understood their inherent value in undermining

¹ Eihei Dōgen, trans by Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, Page 70

² See Sheng Yen, *The Infinite Mirror*, pp 103-110 for an introduction to how the Five Ranks arise from Hexagram #30 Li of the I Ching. If Master Sheng Yen is correct in his analysis, the Five Ranks can then be understood to predate Buddhism in China, and adapted by Buddhists to explain the enlightenment process.

deep-seated misconceptions, but considered systematic forms to be inconsistent with his teaching of all-inclusive wholeness.

What follows is a comparison of the Five Ranks of Tung-shan and Dōgen's five statements from the Genjo Koan. A brief description of the Five Ranks will be presented first and then the message of the five statements will be contrasted with the interpretations of the Five Ranks.

The Five Ranks

The terms Personal and Universal were chosen to depict the worlds of Relative and Absolute, respectively. They describe the halves of our dualistic mind that the teaching of the Five Ranks addresses.

- Personal refers to the distinct and unique components of an individual, products of an individual's education, quality of nurturing, volitional acts, and the immediate cultural environment.
- The Universal is made up of collective and ultimate characteristics, defined as the shared action of the universe conditioning an individual's life, arising from the actions of beings presently alive and all those antecedent from deepest antiquity.
- The interpenetration of the Universal and Personal manifests in a Complementary Relationship. The Personal and Universal aspects of the self, taken together, compose the unified structure of an individual.

The First and Second Ranks prepare the mind for the Third Rank where the pivot point of Zen practice—the fully revealed Universal—penetrates and imbues life with its principles of impermanence, interdependence, and intimacy. The Fourth Rank integrates the now fully revealed Universal with the Personal, cultivating and refining the Personal's attributes, and initiates the movement toward perceptual and behavioral freedom. The Fifth Rank establishes unity of the Personal and Universal as the norm.

First Rank – The Personal within the Universal

At this level, the Universal dawns within the Personal. The new perspective reveals the information arising from Alaya consciousness in the form of a continuous flow of mental, emotional, and physical events. Awareness of Alaya consciousness maintains the self from

identifying with our usual mental patterns. An alert attitude of mind promotes a continuity of awareness of mental activity.

The First Rank is characterized as a breakthrough of the Universal Mind (Alaya consciousness) into the Personal.

Second Rank – The Universal within the Personal

Here the Universal is the dominant sphere acting as a container for the thoughts, feelings, and aspirations of the Personal. The influence of the Universal becomes powerful enough to permit the practitioner to use its positive and thoroughgoing vision to overcome inherent mistrust and skepticism. Consistent and diligent application of the observational mind begins to liberate thinking from bondage imposed by condition states. Being able to articulate what is observed—a viewpoint that trusts the intuitive information that arises from contact with the previously unknown Alaya consciousness—begins the process of freeing oneself from the afflictive influences of conditioned states. This process is based on transcendent knowledge, where practitioners develop awareness of faculties of mind, consequences, paths in life, the nature of relationships, and the intimacy of meditation.

The Second Rank's major realizations are the interpenetration of the sacred (noumenon) and the mundane (phenomenon), and the ability to impartially embrace the inner and outer worlds without judgment or preference.

Third Rank – Coming from within the Universal

The inconceivable mind comes compellingly to the forefront introducing the new world of fully revealed Universal. It is an intuition of something new, an outcome of an inquiry whose immediate response answers the inquirer with complete appropriateness. The accompanying transformation announces that the old way of being has passed, and that now a new spiritual dimension animates the core of one's efforts. The Universal is reflected within the Personal as its unifying force, granting language, reason, creativity, human sentiment, and ethical relations their proper and deserved places as integration proceeds.

In the Third Rank the Personal and Universal Minds begin to act in concordance in creating compassion for self and others.

Fourth Rank – Arriving within the Personal

Within this rank, the Universal and Personal beneficially interact, refining the attributes of the Personal. One attains a life of liberation when one learns how to know both sides of every proposition, discern their commonalities and differences, and to live within and admire the harmony of their mutually beneficial relationship. Harmony is learning to live Complementary Relationship, liberating the person from conditioned states and their habit energies, as well as opening up new avenues for individual and social creativity.

The refined mind of Complementary Relationship bridges the knife-edge separation between the Fourth and Fifth Ranks.

Fifth Rank – Attainment in both the Personal and Universal

Unity of the Personal and Universal is attained, so that they act with unobstructed harmony and complementary activity with each other and the world at large. It is the middle way of Buddhism where the Personal (the mind of discrimination) and Universal (the mind of unity) manifest with equal importance.

The Genjo Koan’s Five Statements

The Fukanzazengi (Universal Recommendations for the Practice of Zazen) was Dōgen’s first writing upon his return to Japan after his training in China. In it he documented the physical and mental instructions of Zazen. His succinct directions for the mental side of practice were, “Think of Not-thinking. How do you Think of Not-thinking? – Nonthinking.” These three, Thinking, Not-thinking, and Nonthinking, can be considered close to equivalents of the Personal, Universal, and Complementary Relationship of the Five Ranks:

- Thinking arises from an individual’s idiosyncratic makeup.
- The mind of Not-thinking advances awareness of the reality and interplay of ordinary dualistic pairs such as such as pleasure-pain, ambiguity-clarity, and confidence-insecurity, as well as dualities requiring deeper insight such as delusion-enlightenment, birth-death, or Buddhas-ordinary beings.
- Nonthinking—the wisdom mind of Nonduality—realizes and creatively partakes in the complementary association of Thinking and Not-thinking and all other dualities of our inherently dualistic nature.

“To study the Buddha Way is to study the self.”

Dōgen intended the five statements to be understood as guides for everyday life and practice. Mere knowledge about the Buddha Way does not relieve one of suffering. Negotiating the Way in Zazen is Dōgen’s “study,” providing a discerning insight that promotes the ability to monitor the self in action, and to gain the ability to describe its makeup and operation.

Beginning Zazen practitioners notice the impermanent and independent nature of the thinking process. Before taking up Zazen, most often they regarded themselves as being in control of their thoughts. However, this assumption is almost immediately compromised in Zazen practice when they begin to notice that their thoughts come and go, mostly apart from their volition and intent. They discover that their mental life consists mainly of habitual patterns of thought and affect that arise from pre-existing conditioned states. When an environmental stimulus triggers a conditioned state, the habitual response connected with that state appears within the mental landscape.

The practice of Zazen is the first step of “study” wherein the arising of the continuous flow of the mental, emotional, and physical aspects of the Thinking Mind is observed. Not-thinking is the term for gaining this observational space. Not-thinking at this stage is a perspective that observes the difference between being unconsciously trapped by Thinking and being consciously aware of how thoughts appear and pass away. Not-thinking is the emergence of a new way of this awareness discovered and cultivated within Zazen.

The first buds of Nonthinking begin to appear within the relationship between Thinking and Not-thinking. Nonthinking is the experience of the world of nonduality that is produced by the complementary relationship of the personal Thinking with the universal Not-thinking.

“To study the self is to forget the self.”

“*To forget*” means to penetrate to the core of the self where Not-thinking gains strength and influence. It becomes powerful enough to permit practitioners to use its positive and thoroughgoing vision to directly perceive what Tung-shan terms the non-fabricated voice of nature. Becoming able to “*forget the self*” of accumulated habits and conditioned states permits that voice to resound clearly. The strong Not-thinking perspective allows a vigorous and close examination of conditioned states without getting trapped by them. Not-thinking embraces the

internal world without making preferential distinctions. Not-thinking is an all-encompassing attitude of mind, one that does not attempt to modify thoughts and feelings as they arise.

The *Song of the Jewel Mirror Awareness* is Tung-shan's poem that describes the process required to attain and maintain the Jewel Mirror Awareness. In it, one of the verses explains the nature of the nonfabricated voice:

Although it is not fabricated,
It is not without speech.
It is like facing a jewel mirror: Form
and image behold each other.

It is not fabricated by human agency. It has no beginning or end. Yet it has the means to intimately communicate. When form and image behold each other, the Jewel Mirror insight of Nonthinking is the natural result. The nonfabricated voice of Nonthinking is the outcome of the authentic relationship of dualistic pairs. It acts in us as a unified vision free of conflict.

“To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things.”

“*To be actualized by the myriad things*” spreads out a new worldview because a change-of-being transformation has taken place. The “myriad things” manifest within an individual. To try to make the world conform to the self is hopeless, painful and disappointing; when the “myriad things” are capable of full range of access is fulfilling, stimulating, and satisfying.

One of the most difficult tasks is learning to trust the source and content of information that arises from within the relationship of Thinking and Not-thinking. The beneficent activity of the universe lies beyond doubt within an accepting trust based on experiential understanding. “*To forget the self*” establishes an open and intimate relationship between the individual's life of Thinking and the “*myriad things*” of Not-thinking.

The transcendent meditation of Nonthinking acts in the spiritual realm where myriad beings exist.

“When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others will drop away.”

“*Body and mind ... will drop away*” occurs when freedom replaces conditioning. The “*myriad things*” inform and refine the intellect, emotions, speech, reason, intuition, and physical form. An abiding

sense of accomplishment replaces the ascendancy of mental obscurations. One gains the capability to recognize, accept, and take pleasure in the joy of freedom. The dropping of bodies and minds of self and other consciously cultivates and integrates the experience of freedom.

The dualistic pair of Thinking and Not-thinking is seen to be, and always has been a creative complement communicating with the same intimate relationship that takes place between a master and disciple. This intimate communication is Nonthinking itself.

No trace of realization remains and this no-trace continues endlessly.

Effortless living is at the heart of “*no-trace*” realization.” “*No-trace*” means to fully engage with the world liberated from the unceasing demands of the self. In the Genjo Koan, Dōgen asserts that enlightenment exists when the self is pervious to the myriad beings and events of the world. Delusion insists the world match the needs of an individual’s assumptions; enlightenment opens the self to the free activity with myriad beings. Upon attainment of unity one becomes truly ordinary.

The Five Statements and the Five Ranks

Dōgen’s statements and the Five Ranks communicate the heart of Zen practice—how to relieve the mental afflictions of conditioned states by cultivation of an internal dialogue that ultimately leads to “the turning-about that takes place in the deepest seat of consciousness” (Buddha in the Lankavatara Sutra). The Five Statements and the Five Ranks are both prescriptions for making this an actuality in one’s life.

The following is a descriptive summary of the outcomes of the awakening process.

Establishing the Relationship

“*To study the Buddha Way is to study the self.*” – The Personal within the Universal

A change of perspective, Awakening “a” is produced within Zazen practice that transforms one’s worldview from mundane only to witnessing the sacred.

Principles of the Relationship

“*To study the self is to forget the self.*” – The Universal within the Personal

A transformative change of being, Awakening “A” creates the understanding of compassion for self and others based on a deep intuitive understanding of the absolute equality and intimate connection of all beings.

Entering into the Relationship

“To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things.” – Coming from within the Universal

A change of perspective, Awakening “Aa” engages the power of empathetic concern that opens the gateway to all beings and all worlds everywhere.

Cultivating the Relationship

“When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others will drop away.” – Arriving within the Personal

A transformative change of behavior, Awakening “AA” attains the view that the Personal and Universal minds are inseparable, of equal value, and engaged in intimate and unending relations.

Living the Relationship

No trace of realization remains and this no-trace continues endlessly. – Attainment in both the Personal and Universal

Wisdom and caring impulses arise continuously, bestowed like a gift. The *Brahma Viharas* of kindness, compassion, nonspecific gratitude, and intimacy express themselves effortlessly in small and grand ways.