

Shobogenzo Chapter [43] – Kuge* Flowers in Space – A Modern Interpretation

Bodhidharma wrote:

*I originally came to this land of China to pass on the teachings of reality,
And to liberate people from their delusions.
Five petals opening – a single flower;
Fruit ripens by itself.*

- [1] We should learn through our practice the time when the flower opens, and look at its brightness, colour and shape. A flower is made up of five petals; five petals opening *is* the flower. Coming to the land of China to pass on the teachings to liberate people from their emotional delusions is clearly Bodhidharma embodying this flower. In learning this through our practice, we should look for his state of brightness and colour. This “*ripens by itself*” means letting the result be as it is. Something ripening by itself is a cause producing an effect. In the Universe, there are causes and there are effects. This Universe is just the causes we produce and the effects we experience.

“*Itself*” doesn’t refer to an abstract “*self*” but to a concrete self made of the real matter of the Universe. Master Rinzai used “*the true person*”

* *Ku* means “sky” or “space” and *ge* means “flowers”. Traditionally, the character *ku* was also used as a translation of the Sanskrit *sunyata*, which is often translated into English as “emptiness”, and so an alternative translation of the phrase *kuge* is “flowers of emptiness”. However, in this chapter, Dogen is using “flowers in space” to symbolise the phenomenal, as opposed to “flowers on the ground” which symbolise what is real.

[1] In this paragraph, Dogen describes the flower as an individual phenomenon composed of its parts. This is from the first of his four viewpoints. For more on Nishijima Roshi’s Four Views, download the booklet “The Four Views in Buddhism” from www.dogensangha.org.uk/downloads.htm

“*without position*” to express this kind of self, because it does not refer to an abstract “*I*” or “*someone*.” “*By itself*” means just as it is. “*Ripens by itself*” is just the moment in which flowers open and fruit ripens; the moment in which Bodhidharma teaches reality and liberates deluded people.

- [2] One example of this natural opening is the blue lotus flower (*utpala*, a symbol of coolness), which opens and spreads itself in places and in seasons that are stiflingly hot – in fire. And conversely, the stifling heat, the flames and fire, exist at the place and season in which that blue lotus flower opens and spreads. One single flame contains hundreds and thousands of blue lotus flowers; they open and spread in space, they open and spread on the earth, they open and spread in the past, and they open and spread in the present. To experience the time and place of this fire is to experience blue lotus flowers. We should not drift by the time and place of blue lotus flowers.

An ancestor says,

*Blue lotus flowers
Open inside fire.*

So blue lotus flowers always open and spread *inside fire*. To understand “*inside fire*,” we must find the place where the blue lotus flower opens and spreads. We should not stay caught up in the ordinary person’s viewpoint or the idealistic viewpoint, or we will not understand what “*inside fire*” means. If you doubt this, you might also doubt the fact that lotus flowers actually grow in water, or your might doubt the fact that flowers actually grow on stems. If we were to doubt, we could doubt the fact that a stable physical world exists in front of us here and now. But we do not doubt it.

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- [2] From here, Dogen describes the relationship between the phenomenon (blue lotus flower) and its circumstances (heat) from the second viewpoint.

[3] Unless we are in the line of the Buddha's truth we cannot recognise that a flower opening *is* the world manifesting itself. And a *flower opening* represents each of the many and varied real phenomena. The Universe *is* all these individual phenomena gathered together to form something bright. Having understood this, we can look at spring and autumn. It is not only in spring and autumn that there are flowers and fruits; time-present is always flowering and fruiting. Flowers and fruits always keep their own time-presents, and each time-present always keeps its flowers and fruits. Thus every phenomenon has its flowers and fruits. Every tree has its flowers and fruits. Material phenomena all have their flowers and fruits. The constituents of those phenomena all have their flowers and fruits. Individual human beings have their flowers, and human beings themselves flower; even old and emaciated people flower.

[4] All this being so, there are the flowers in space spoken of by the Buddha.⁵ Narrow-minded people without insight do not know that flowers in space have colour, brightness, leaves and petals; they can scarcely even hear the words "*flowers in space.*" Remember, people following the Buddha's way speak about flowers in space, but non-Buddhists do not know about them, let alone understand them. Only buddhas and their descendents know how flowers in space and flowers on the ground blossom and fall; only they know how flowers in the world blossom and fall; only they know that these flowers in space, on the ground, and in the world, are used to teach us the truth. They are the

[3] From here, Dogen describes the identity between phenomena and the Universe from the third viewpoint.

[4] In this paragraph Dogen speaks about the real situation from the fourth viewpoint; we live in a world of phenomena and although phenomena are flowers in space, we rely on the phenomenal world.

⁵ See poem on right.

accepted way of studying Buddhism. Because flowers in space are the means by which buddhas and their descendents study, buddhas in the world and the Buddha's teachings rely on these flowers in space.

But when ignorant common people hear the Buddha's words that clouded eyes see flowers in space, they imagine that *clouded eyes* refers to the clouding of the eyes that affects ordinary people. They imagine that those people have diseased eyes and that's why they see non-existent flowers floating in empty air. Because these ignorant people are attached to this explanation, they conclude that the three worlds,⁶ the six realms,⁷ having buddha-nature and not having buddha-nature are all delusions and don't really exist. They get excited about the possibility of curing the disease that has caused their clouded eyes, after which they would not see any flowers in space, saying that this is meaning of the phrase "*space is originally without flowers.*" People like this, who do not know when the flowers in space of which the Buddha speaks exist, when they appear, and when they disappear, are pitiful.

The real meaning of the clouded eyes and flowers in space of which the Buddha speaks cannot be understood by ordinary people who are not buddhists. But it is by studying flowers in space that buddhas and tathagatas receive their robes, take their place as teachers, and realise what reality is and receive the benefit. When the Buddha indicated reality by twirling a flower and winking at Mahakasyapa this was clouded eyes seeing flowers in space. The essence of Buddhism and the serene and clear mind that are passed on to the present without interruption embody clouded eyes seeing flowers in space. Awakening to reality, being in the serene and peaceful state, embodying reality, returning to our original nature, are just a flower in space opening two or three of its petals.

⁶ Mental/spiritual, physical, real.

⁷ World of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, demons, human beings, and gods.

Sakyamuni Buddha said:

It is as if a person who has clouded eyes

Sees flowers in space;

After the sickness in their clouded eyes is cured

The flowers in space vanish.

No scholars have clearly understood what was being said here. Because they do not know what space is, they do not know what flowers in space are. And because they do not know what flowers in space are, they do not know who has clouded eyes, they cannot decide who has clouded eyes, they have not met someone with clouded eyes, and they have never experienced clouded eyes themselves. On meeting a person who has clouded eyes, we can come to know what flowers in space are, and then we can see flowers in space.

Once we have seen flowers in space, we can also see how flowers in space vanish. The idea that once flowers in space vanish they will never reappear is a small belief. But if we don't see flowers in space, what is there to see? If you only know flowers in space as something to get rid of, then you will never come to know the profound matter that follows from flowers in space, or the process by which they germinate, blossom, and fall free.

Among the scholars of the day, most think of space as the sky – the place where yang-energy resides, and a void in which the sun, moon and stars are suspended. For example, they probably think that *flowers in space* refers to colourful shapes floating along in a clear sky like clouds; like floating blossoms being blown here and there by the wind. They do not realise that the constituents of all created things and the things created by them, all that is known in the Universe: our original state of balance, our original nature, and so on, are all flowers in space.

Furthermore, they do not know that the constituents of all created things exist because of those things, and they do not know that the material world exists stably because of the existence of the real things in it. They only think that real things exist because of the material world they are in. They understand that flowers in space exist only when eyes are clouded, and do not see the truth that it is flowers in space that cause clouded eyes to exist.

Remember, as long as you are following the Buddha's way, when your eyes are clouded, you realise your original nature, you realise something subtle, you are a buddha, a person of the three worlds, transcending the state of buddha. We should not be as stupid as to believe that clouded eyes are to be avoided and that reality is to be found somewhere else. That is a restricted view. If clouded eyes and flowers were delusions, the person attaching to that wrong view must also be a delusion, and the attachment must be a delusion. If all is delusion, we can never establish anything true. If we cannot establish what is true, there is no way that we can assert that clouded eyes and flowers are delusions.

When our realisation is clouded, all of the constituents of our realisation are decorated with clouds. And when our delusions are clouded, all the constituents of our delusions are decorated with clouds. For now, let us say that when clouded eyes are balanced, flowers in space are balanced, and when clouded eyes do not appear, then flowers in space do not appear. When all things show themselves as they are, then clouds and flowers show themselves as they are. This is not in the same dimension as time passing from past to present to future, and is not a situation that has a beginning, middle, and end. It is not like a situation that arises and passes; it is the very cause of the arising and passing – flowers arising in space and passing in space, arising in clouded eyes and passing in clouded eyes, arising in flowers and passing in flowers. All other times and places are also like this.

There may be many different ways of seeing flowers in space. There is seeing with clouded eyes, seeing with clear eyes, seeing with buddhist eyes, seeing with the eyes of our ancestors, seeing with eyes of the truth, and seeing with blind eyes. There is seeing with the eyes of three-thousand years, seeing with the eyes of eight hundred years, seeing with the eyes of hundreds of eons, and seeing with the eyes of numberless eons. Although these are all ways of seeing flowers in space, there are also many kinds of space, and many kinds of flowers.

Remember that space behaves just like a plant. And just as flowers bloom on plants, so flowers bloom in space. In explaining how this is, the Tathagata said that space is originally without flowers. Although there are no flowers originally, now there are flowers, exactly as happens for peach and plum trees, apricot and willow trees. For example, we say that yesterday the plum tree has no blossom, but blossom arrives with the spring. When spring arrives, just then the flowers bloom. This can be expressed both as the spring of the flowers, and also as the flowering of springtime. The flowers always bloom just at the right moment. Apricot flowers always bloom on apricot trees, and willow flowers always bloom on willow trees. If we look at the flower we can tell the tree it came from, and if we look at the tree we can tell what the flower will be like. Peach flowers never bloom on apricot trees and plum flowers never bloom on willow trees. Apricot flowers bloom on apricot trees and willow flowers bloom on willow trees; peach flowers bloom on peach trees and plum flowers bloom on plum trees. And in the same way flowers in space always bloom in space; they never bloom on other plants or on other trees.

Looking at all the different colours of space flowers, we can imagine all the different kinds of space fruits. By watching when flowers in space bloom and when they fall, we can get to know when spring comes for them and when autumn comes for them. It may be the same kind of spring that comes for flowers in space as for other flowers. But looking at all the

different colours of flowers in space suggests that there may be many different spring seasons in space. And this may produce springs and autumns in the past and springs and autumns in the present. People who think that flowers in space are unreal, and that only other kinds of flowers are real have never encountered the Buddha's teachings.

When we hear that space is originally without flowers, if we understand it to mean that the flowers that now exist in space were not there originally, our viewpoint is narrow and limited. We should move forward and take a more profound view. An ancestor said "What appears are never flowers." And the real meaning of his words is that flowers have never appeared, that flowers have never disappeared, that the word "flowers" never captures flowers, and the word "space" never captures space. And we should not play around with discussions of whether flowers exist in space or whether flowers do not exist in space, mixing up *before flowering* and *after flowering* at random.

Flowers appear imbued with many different colours, but those many colours do not belong to the flowers; other seasons also have blues, yellows, reds, whites and other colours. Spring brings in flowers and flowers bring in spring.

Cho Setsu was a local government official who was also a lay disciple of Master Sekiso Keisho. On realizing what the truth of this world is, he composed the following poem:

*All the things in the world – as numerous as the grains of sand in the River Ganges – are illuminated in serene brightness.
All people, whether common folk or religious, are my family.
When not a single image arises [in our mind] the whole manifests itself.
But if there is the slightest movement in our senses,
then clouds cover the whole.
Trying to get rid of desires only makes things worse.
But to intentionally approach the truth is also wrong.*

*In following the circumstances there are no hindrances.
Nirvana and living-dying⁸ are just flowers in space.*

It is this *brightness* that makes the Monks Hall, the Buddha Hall, the Kitchen and the Temple Gate real.⁹ This brightness makes real all the things in the world – which are as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges – and they themselves are brightness made real.

All people, whether common folk or religious, are my family.

We cannot deny that common folk and religious persons exist, but labelling them as common or religious denies their real value.

When not a single image arises [in our mind] the whole manifests itself.

Each image arises here in each moment. Thus when no images arise, the whole substance of the Universe manifests itself here. This is why he says when not a single image arises.

*But if there is the slightest movement in our senses,
then clouds cover the whole.*

We have six sense organs: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and nerve centre. But our division of sensory input into six senses can be arbitrary. And *movement* means like the movement of a mountain or the movement of the Earth; the movement in our senses is a subtle movement. In their stillness, mountains are subtly moving, and thus they produce clouds and rivers.

Trying to get rid of desires only makes things worse.

⁸ *Samsara*

⁹ Words of Master Unmon Bun-en, quoted in Shinji-shobogenzo, Part 1, No. 81.

If we want to get rid of desire, the grip of desire only gets stronger. We may not have been free from desire up to now, but the grip it had on us was caused by our desire to become perfect. Our wish to get rid of desire only adds to our desire. Even wanting to get rid of desire is a form of desire. Desire is present in the wish to get rid of desire.

But to intentionally approach the truth is also wrong.

To intentionally approach the truth is wrong, and to turn our backs on the truth is also wrong. The truth appears in the state where we neither approach it nor turn our backs on it. But in real situations, sometimes the truth appears as we approach the truth and sometimes the truth appears as we turn our backs on it. And more than that, although it is almost impossible for us to realise it, even the wrong actions of intentionally approaching the truth and turning our backs on the truth reveal the truth.

In following the circumstances there are no hindrances.

Circumstances following circumstances is what is meant by *no hindrances*. We can learn how to transcend the difference between *hindrances* and *no hindrances* in the state where our eyes just register what is in front of them.

Both nirvana and living-dying are just flowers in space.

Nirvana is the ultimate state of balance. Our Buddhist ancestors and their disciples inhabited this state. Our real body is both living and dying at the same time. Although nirvana and living-dying are real, they are at the same time just flowers in space. Flowers in space bloom with roots and stalks, twigs and leaves, flowers and fruits and brightness and colours. Flowers in space always produce fruits in space and always drop seeds in space.

The three worlds that we are perceiving now are just the five petals of flowers in space opening, and so the Buddha said that the three worlds are all there is; all things in the Universe are showing their real form. All

things in the Universe show their flower-form, and all things, those we know and others beyond our imagination, are flowers in space and their fruits. And experience shows us that those flowers are tangible, just like the blossoms of apricot, willow, peach and plum trees are tangible.

When Zen Master Reikun of Fuyozan Mountain in the Fuchou district of Sung China first became a student of Zen Master Shishin and entered Kisu-ji Temple, he asked the master: "What is buddha?" Master Kisu replied: "If I tell you, I wonder if you will believe me!" Reikun replied: "Why would I not believe the honest words of my master?" To which Master Kisu replied: "You yourself are buddha!" Reikun then asked: "What should I do to keep the state of buddha?" Master Kisu replied: "As soon as you recognise that your eyes are clouded, all the flowers in space instantly fall to the ground."

These words describe how Master Kisu keeps the state of buddha. Remember that buddha becomes real when clouded eyes and flowers all tumble to the ground, but the flowers and fruits seen by those skyward eyes still keep this state of buddha.¹⁰ This is because eyes which are clouded are real eyes. Flowers in space depend on our eyes for their existence, and our eyes depend on flowers in space for their existence. Maybe we could also say "As soon as you recognise that the flowers in space are actually in your eyes, all the clouds instantly fall to the ground," and "If space had its own eye, all the clouds would instantly fall to the ground." This being so, the word *clouded*, the word *eyes*, and the word *space* all describe Zenki.¹¹ And the phrase *instantly fall to the ground* suggests the thousand eyes that make up the body of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. In sum, whenever and wherever eyes exist, there we will find flowers in space, and flowers in our eyes, but we say that these flowers in our eyes are in

¹⁰ That is, when we recognise how we are, the recognition itself grounds us, but at the same time, we stay as we are.

¹¹ Zenki means "total activity" and symbolises all the workings of the Universe.

space. We must be clear about the meaning of the expression *flowers in our eyes*.

To explain this, Master Ekaku of Roya Mountain wrote the following:

*How wondrous are the buddhas of the ten directions!
In essence, they are flowers in our eyes.
And if we want to know what flowers in our eyes are,
In essence, they are the buddhas of the ten directions.
But if we try to analyse what the buddhas of the ten directions are,
They are different from flowers in our eyes.
And if we try to analyse what flowers in our eyes are,
They are different from the buddhas of the ten directions.
When we understand this clearly,
We realise that the concept "buddhas of the ten directions" misleads us.
If we don't understand this clearly,
Intellectual buddhists will start dancing with joy
And materialistic buddhists will start putting on their makeup!*

Remember, this doesn't mean that *the buddhas of the ten directions* are not real. It means that they are in essence just flowers in our eyes. The place where the buddhas of the ten directions exist is in our eyes.¹² And the buddhas of the ten directions do not exist in any place other than in our eyes. The fact that they are just flowers in our eyes does not mean that they don't exist, or that they do exist; it doesn't mean that they are not substantial or not real. They are by their nature just the buddhas of the ten directions.

Now if we try to analyse the buddhas of the ten directions, they are completely different from flowers in our eyes. When we analyse, flowers

¹² That is, our internal representation of the external world.

in our eyes are completely different from the buddhas of the ten directions. Flowers in our eyes and the buddhas of the ten directions are both *understanding this clearly* and *not understanding this clearly*. Both *wanting to know* and *being different from* are wonders of reality; they are really wondrous! The fundamental meaning of flowers in space and flowers on the ground of which the buddhas and ancestors speak is “*giving free play to the elegant ways*”.¹³

Although teachers of buddhist writings and commentaries may understand the concept of *flowers in space*, they can never have the means or experience to realise how crucial flowers on the ground are unless they practice Zazen. Only someone who realises how crucial flowers on the ground are can put the state of the buddhist ancestors into words.

Zen Master Sekimon Etetsu lived in Great Sung dynasty China in a temple on Ryozan Mountain. One day a monk asked him, “*What is ‘the jewel in the mountain’?*” What he is actually asking here is “*What is buddha?*” or “*What is the truth?*” The Master replies, “*Flowers in space unfold on the ground. Throughout the whole of this land, there is no gate to our search for the truth.*” Other descriptions of flowers in space can never match up to this. Run-of-the-mill teachers, who can be found everywhere, in discussing the meaning of the phrase *flowers in space*, say only that flowers appear in space and disappear in space. None of them understand the meaning of *in space*, so they cannot understand the meaning of *on the ground*. Only Master Sekimon understands the real situation.

All events happen *on the ground*; that is where they unfold. Just at this very moment there is a vast ground on which everything is unfolding; everything opens on this vast ground. The words “*Throughout the whole of this land, there is no gate to our search for the truth*” don’t mean that, since

there is no gate we are unable to look for the truth; they mean that when we look for the truth, there is no barrier. Flowers in space open on the ground, and this vast ground itself depends on the opening of flowers.

The principle that we need to recognise is that both the ground and space are flowers in space unfolding.

Shobogenzo Kuge

Preached to an audience at Kannon Dori
Kosho Horin-ji Temple on 10 March, 1243.

This interpretation completed by Eido on
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¹³ “*Dreams gone forever, dreams come true. Holding back and letting go, we give free play to the elegant ways*” – a poem by Master Tendo Nyojo.