

# Dongshan and Shenshan Cross the River

*Dharma Discourse by John Daido Looi, Roshi*  
*Master Dogen's 300 Koan Shobogenzo,\* Case 198*

## The Main Case

**Z**en Master Shenshan was crossing a river with his dharma brother Dongshan.<sup>1</sup> Dongshan said, "Don't make a mistake with your steps and slip into the current."<sup>2</sup> Shenshan said, "If I make a mistake with my steps, then I won't live to cross the river."<sup>3</sup> Dongshan said, "What is the state without mistakes?"<sup>4</sup> Shenshan said, "Now I'm crossing the river with the Elder."<sup>5</sup>

## The Commentary

Face-to-face there is never anything hidden. Yet, fundamentally, there is no way of explaining it all. No self and no other. Then how can we speak of right and wrong? Dongshan and Shenshan are from the same household. Both know well the contents of the kitchen pantry. We should understand that mistake is in reality called learning. The state of no-mistake is called nowness. In nowness there is no before or after, no goals, agendas, or fixed direction. Like the meandering river, it twists and turns in accord with circumstances, but always knows how to find its way to the great ocean. If you wish to travel like this, you must go alone and not carry any baggage. You must trust yourself implicitly.

## Capping Verse

*A hazy autumn moon, solitary and full,  
falls as it may on the winding river ahead.  
There are those who seek perfect clarity,  
yet sweep as you may, you cannot empty the mind.*

\* *300 Koan Shobogenzo* is a collection of koans gathered by Master Dogen during his study in China. The koans from this collection, often called the *Chinese Shobogenzo*, appear extensively in the essays of Dogen's *Japanese Shobogenzo*. These koans have not been available in English translation but are currently being translated and prepared for publication by Kazuaki Tanahashi and John Daido Looi, Roshi. Daido Roshi has added a commentary, capping verse, and footnotes to each koan.

The river — like the mountains, forests and wetlands of the wild — has always been an important vehicle for the teachings of Zen. The origins of Zen practice are deeply rooted in nature. For the first five hundred years in the development of this tradition, from the time of Bodhidharma to about the year 1000, Zen monastics lived in the wilderness. At first they were solitary wanderers. They traveled about, taking refuge in caves and makeshift huts. Later they gathered in groups and built monasteries, but always on some remote mountain peak, far from the city and bustle of everyday



*John Daido Loori, Roshi*

life. Because they were so isolated, monastics in T'ang Dynasty China were not able to beg for their food like their Indian predecessors had done. Instead, they foraged, and when their numbers grew too large to allow for that, they began to grow their food. They planted rice and raised water buffalo. It was a very tough environment in which to survive, but it was this struggle that caused them to gain a deep appreciation for the teachings of the wild.

This appreciation was further cultivated and tested during frequent pilgrimages that Buddhist practitioners undertook in those days. Today we think of pilgrimage in terms of visiting sacred places and teachers. Back then that kind of traveling also took place, but, at least in terms of Zen Buddhism, going on an aimless pilgrimage was a practice in and of itself — a spiritual journey that could last for years. It was a rite of passage. When you completed your training, you went off into the wilderness and you wandered around, with no intention of going anywhere or visiting other teachers.

Many of the traditional koans we study record the travels of monastics on pilgrimage. One of the best known is the encounter between Master Dizang and Fayan. Dizang asked Fayan, "Where are you going?" Fayan said, "I am wandering aimlessly." Dizang asked, "What is the purpose of your wandering?" Fayan answered, "I don't know." The Master said, "Ah! Not knowing. Very intimate, very intimate indeed." That kind of aimless pilgrimage was for the sake of simply being in the wilderness. Nothing else.

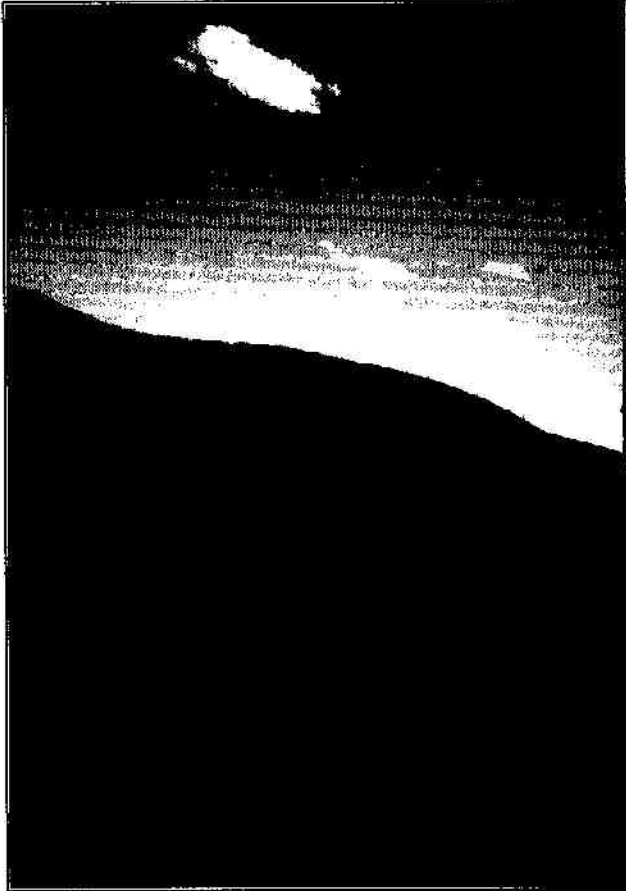
In this koan, Dongshan and Shenshan are wandering about. They were dharma brothers, and apparently they used to travel together quite a bit. In the *Record of*

*Master Dongshan* this same koan appears in a slightly different version. It says, "When Master Dongshan was crossing a river with Uncle Mi (Shenshan), he asked, 'How does one cross a river?' 'Don't get your feet wet,' said Shenshan. 'At your venerable age, how can you say such a thing?' said the Master. 'How do you cross the river?' asked Shenshan. 'Feet don't get wet,' replied the Master."

To get a better sense of how these two teachers worked together it's helpful to look at other koans in which they appear: "The Master was cultivating a tea plot with Shenshan. He threw down his mattock and said, 'I haven't the least bit of strength left.' Shenshan said, 'If you haven't any strength left, how is it that you can even say so?' The Master said, 'I always used to say that you were the one with lots of strength'."

On another occasion, "Shenshan was sewing. He picked up a needle to mend clothes and the Master said, 'What are you doing?' 'Mending,' said Shenshan. 'In what way do you mend?' said the Master. 'One stitch is like the next,' said Shenshan. 'We have been traveling together for twenty years, and you can still say such a thing! How can there be such craftiness?' said the Master. 'How then does the Venerable Monk mend?' asked Shenshan. 'Just as though the entire earth was spewing flame,' replied the Master." In other words, I mend as if I was putting out a fire on top of my head.

Dongshan and Shenshan were adepts, so even though on the surface their dialogues seem pretty ordinary, they should not be taken lightly. The first line in this koan reads, *Zen Master Shenshan was crossing the river with his dharma brother Dongshan*. The spiritual literature of virtually all religions is filled with references to sacred rivers: the Ganges, the Nile, the Yangtze. In America we have rivers with their unique history and sense of specialness. Most of us may not consider them sacred, but those who live by their shores, who feed off their fish, or use their waters for healing, do. The



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But in another sense, it is infinitely more than that.*

Colorado and the Snake, the Hudson and the Mississippi are, in this case, sacred rivers. They capture our imagination in their timeless journey from the highlands to the great ocean.

In one sense, a river is just a river. It is flowing water. But in another sense, it is infinitely more than that. When you look at a river with the eyes of someone like Dogen, these waters take on a whole different meaning. It goes beyond the sacred and mundane:

*Water is neither strong, nor weak, neither wet nor dry, neither moving nor still, neither cold nor hot, neither being nor nonbeing, neither delusion nor enlightenment. Solidified, it is harder than diamond: who could break it? Melted, it is softer than milk: who could break it? This being the case we cannot doubt the many virtues realized (by water). We should, then, study that occasion when the water of the ten directions is seen in the ten directions. This is not a study only of a time when people and gods see water: there is a study of water seeing water. Water practices and verifies water; hence there is a study of water speaking water. We must bring to realization the path on which the self encounters the self. We must move back and forth along, and spring off from, the vital path on which the other studies and fully comprehends the other.*

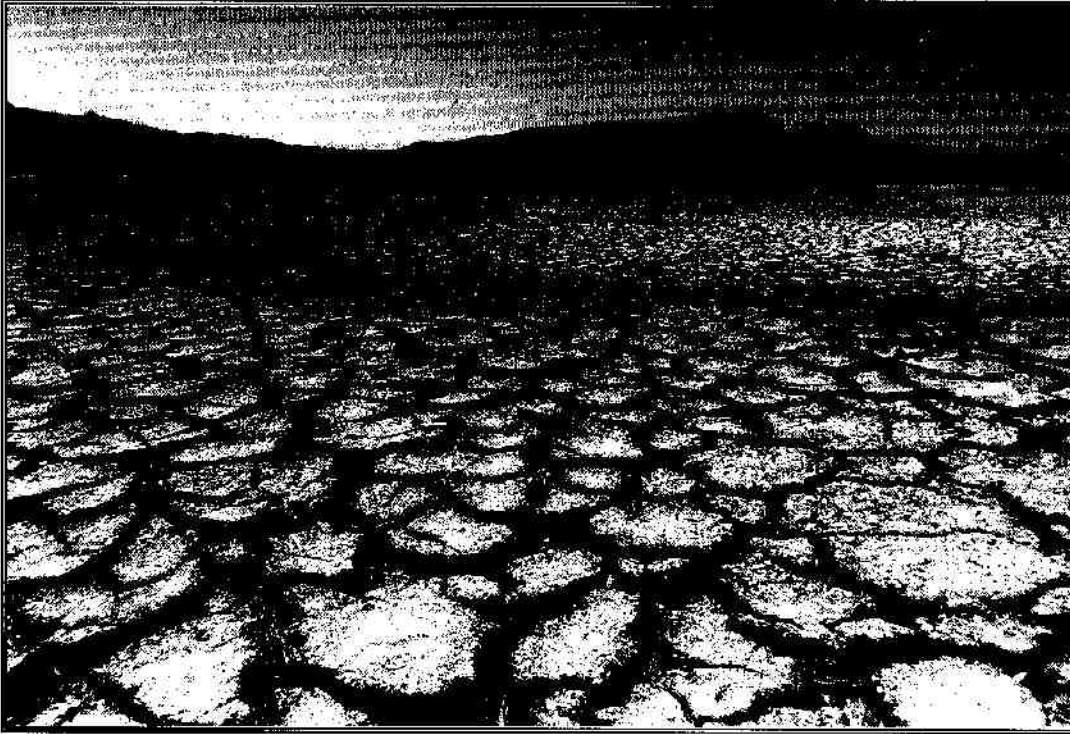
***Water, the rivers, the mountains  
are in and of themselves a sutra.***

This is an excerpt from the *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*. In it Dogen is speaking of absolute intimacy with water. Absolute intimacy with a river. No separation whatsoever. He continues:

*Therefore, water is not earth, water, fire, wind, space, or consciousness; it is not blue, yellow, red, white, or black; it is not form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or idea: nevertheless, the water of the earth, fire, wind, space, and the rest is spontaneously appearing. This being the case, it becomes difficult to explain by what and of what this present land and palace are made... Water flows over the earth; it flows across the sky; it flows up, it flows down. (Water) flows around bends and into deep abysses. It mounts up to form clouds; it descends to form pools... Water extends into flames; it extends into thought, reasoning, and discrimination; it extends into enlightenment and the Buddha nature. Descending to earth, it becomes rivers and streams. We should realize that when water descends to earth it becomes rivers and streams. And the essence of rivers and streams becomes sages.*

Water, the rivers, the mountains are in and of themselves a sutra. That is why Dogen calls this fascicle the *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*. Water is the dharma teaching; it is not something that points to the truth. It is in itself the reality of the Buddhadharmā.

Unfortunately, most of us don't see it that way, and consequently, we have created big problems with water on our planet. Fresh water is perhaps the most critical component of any ecosystem. Human water consumption rose six-fold in the



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past century. That's double the rate of the already explosive population growth. We are now using fifty-four per cent of all the available fresh water, putting incredible pressure on the environment. Additional demands will further jeopardize all ecosystems. So much water has been taken from rivers that some of them dry up completely before they ever reach the ocean.

For fifteen years I've been saying in my talks that nothing can stop the river in its journey to the great ocean. When I say that I am thinking of a dam. Put up a dam and the river builds up behind it. It goes over or around the dam. Build the dam higher, and the river goes higher. No matter how high the structure, the river will get past that dam and find its way to the ocean. I didn't consider the possibility that millions of people could just suck that river dry.

Half of the world's wetlands have been drained, and those habitats are now gone. Then there are the pollutants that we either dump or that find their way into our rivers and lakes: fertilizers, silt, sewage, trash — the list is endless. I did some research and found out that twenty per cent of New York's lakes, ponds, and streams

are unable to support life. Many of the beautiful lakes in the Adirondacks are dead because of the effects of acid rain. If this situation doesn't stop soon, by the year 2040 the number of dead waterways will go up to forty per cent. It's a dismal picture. Yet, New York is at a point where it's done all it can do to combat acid rain. It has protective legislation and it's enforcing it, but the problem is not originating in New York; it's coming from other states. It will take federal legislation to take care of acid rain on a national level, and that's difficult to bring about. Other areas of the country are also being affected. Acid rain is responsible for much of the devastation in the Appalachian and Smoky Mountains, the Colorado Rockies, the Chesapeake Bay, and the southern forests of California. So, what can we do about this?

The environment is all around us. We can't pretend that it is not being affected by our lifestyles. We can't pretend that we are not responsible for its destruction. If we, a group of Zen Buddhists living in the Catskill Preserve, are not able to answer the call, then who's going to do it? But in order to respond to the call at all, the first thing we need to do is hear it. We need to be able to recognize what is needed, and act accordingly. This kind of seeing is the same as an aimless pilgrimage. It is goal-less, all-encompassing, and completely intimate.

In the koan, the first line says, *Zen Master Shenshan was crossing the river with his dharma brother Dongshan.* The footnote to that line comments, *These two traveling together always manage to create complications.* Their dialogue seems quite innocent on the surface, but there is something else going on underneath. The next line says, *Dongshan said, 'Don't make a mistake with your steps and slip into the current.'* The footnote says, *Crossing to the other side, sure-footedness is a definite virtue.* Back then there weren't any bridges. The only way to cross a river was to go in chest deep, with a staff for support, and wade your way to the other side. If it was a fast-moving river and you slipped wearing your robes, you could easily be carried off into the rapids. *Shenshan said, 'If I make a mistake with my steps, then I won't live to cross the river.'* Footnote says, *The river treats all things equally.* It doesn't matter who or how important you are. When the river gets up on its hind legs and moves across the land, when you get caught in its current, it just takes you along with everything else. The next line reads, *Dongshan said, "What is the state without mistakes?"* The footnote to that says, *Though few may know it, there is such a thing as a state without mistakes.* Then the last line, *Shenshan said, "Now I am crossing the river with the Elder."* Footnote to that says, *Arriving as it departs, the moment is always fresh.*

What is the state without mistakes? As a teacher I spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with people who worry about their mistakes. It's a preoccupation especially prominent among high achievers. Recently I saw an ad on TV that illustrates this kind of mentality. It's an ad for BMW. It shows a guy who has just got a brand

***We need to be able to recognize what is needed, and act accordingly.***

new car and is looking pretty satisfied with himself. The voice-over says, "Even though you say it doesn't matter, that you're very cool about having this car, you know that deep within yourself you're saying, 'I'm better than you are!'" BMW does not spend money on an ad unless they've carefully researched their audience. They know the ad is appealing to customers who can buy a BMW, the person who harbors the "I'm better than you are" mentality. People like this think, "I am the best of the best of the best, and if I'm not, then I have failed."

That way of thinking causes endless pain and suffering, and ninety per cent of it is unnecessary. People come into training to alleviate suffering and they end up creating more of it because they get into the goal game, the who-is-better-than-who-game. It's

### ***Wildness is a reality***

***that all of us need to experience.***

such a shame to watch people go through it. Even though Zen is goal-less, on the surface it gives people a sense of having something to do, something to accomplish, and they immediately get caught up in this way of thinking.

This is especially true of Westerners. One of the ways in which a teacher can respond to this game is to use the skillful means of "When you see a cage, build a cage." The teacher will help them drown in their own stuff so they'll wake up at the other end. When I started teaching, I had two students who were in constant competition. Talking to my teacher about them, he said, "Encourage them! Let them kill each other." Augmenting the circumstances is a way to help people see clearer what they are creating. Then they are in a position to change it.

Do you think the Buddha was a superman, some kind of a 'flawless being'? Just look at some of the mistakes he made. He said women could not be monastics. His step-mother begged to be ordained, and he said no. What about "all beings are equal?" Finally Aranda convinced him, and he started ordaining women. He learned from his mistake, and he corrected it. I watched my teacher make mistakes and learn. I watched myself make mistakes and learn. Why shouldn't you be allowed to make mistakes and learn?

A lot of people misunderstand what the teachings mean by "inherent perfection." They think that a Zen practitioner is a perfect being. You see it when you go around Zen centers. Students walk around ramrod-straight, with their cheeks sucked in, eyes rolled back in their head, grunting monosyllabic answers. They act completely dehumanized, like robots. That's not what this practice is about. That's not laughing, dancing, crying Zen. That's not "vast emptiness, nothing holy."

The commentary begins, *Face-to-face there is never anything hidden.* Whether it is in face-to-face interview or in the world around us, there is nothing hidden. Yet we are not always able to see it. When we do our wildness retreats I give people an assignment to go off by themselves for a day, and just explore. Instead of having a guide to prompt them or delineate each move, to name and analyze what they see, they spend time on their own and simply absorb what's around them. How much they see depends on their willingness, openness, and ability to learn from the insentient.

*Face-to-face there is never anything hidden. Yet fundamentally, there is no way of explaining it all. No way whatsoever. We use words, we use ideas, but they don't explain it. They either stir things up, or they create a vessel to receive that which has never been hidden. No self and no other. Then how can we speak of right and wrong? No self and no other means there is no reference system. Dongshan and Shenshan are from the same household. Both know the contents of the kitchen pantry well. That is why, when Dongshan asked a question, Shenshan's answer came immediately. We should understand that mistake is in reality called learning. What is the state without mistakes? Have you ever learned anything without continuous mistakes? The very first thing you do when you learn something is to make a mistake. You put a clarinet to your mouth: BEEP. Mistake. Beep. Okay. Beep, beep. Beep beep, beep beep, beeeep, BEEP. Mistake. Still, you keep practicing over and over again. How many times do you make a mistake? A thousand? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand? That's what practice is. If you want to walk a tightwire over Niagara Falls, you start with wire that is stretched two feet off the ground. You step onto it and you fall off. You get back onto it and you fall off. You repeat that day after day, two, three, four hours a day. After a while, you're able to walk a couple of feet. Months pass, years pass, until the day when you're able to walk across easily. Then you dance across. Then you're completely free. That's practice.*

But you can't teach someone to walk a tightwire by telling them to move their muscles a certain way. The only way to learn is by doing it. Somehow your body acclimates to it, your mind learns, and it seeps into your subconscious. It happens all at once. Is the Dharma any different? Of course you're going to fail; step after step after step. Yet you will learn every time you fail. You say you're going to stay with the breath, and pretty soon you start chasing after thoughts. You acknowledge your distraction, you let it go, and you come back to the breath. You keep doing this until you're able to stay with the breath. After a while you get pretty good at it, but all of a sudden you seem to be back to square one and you can't stay focused for even five seconds. Your mind is all over the place. Then it comes back.

Repeated practice creates learning. Repeated mistakes create learning. That is why *Mistake is in reality called learning. The state of no-mistake is called nowness. It is called "now." It is called "thus." In nowness there is no before; there is no after. There are no goals, no agendas, no fixed direction. There is just the moment. It arrives as it departs, simultaneously. It has no before or after. It is so difficult for us to grasp this truth. We need goals. We want agendas. We crave direction. The notion of wandering aimlessly is very frightening for most of us.*

One of the reasons we offer wilderness trips as part of Zen training is to make people aware of the environment and the things they can do to take care of it. But I also feel it is important to reintroduce modern students to the heritage of just being in the wilderness for its own sake. We rarely experience, the taste of wildness. Our attitude to Zen training would be very different if we had to traverse through miles



of wilderness to get to the Monastery. As it is now, we just hop in our cars and come. Or we take the bus. It's not the same. I want to create an opportunity for modern Zen practitioners to see and taste the wild. That way, it might make sense to them when they read about it. They will appreciate it when they feel it in a koan. They may even fall in love with it and truly protect it. Wilderness is a reality that all of us need to experience.

*The state of no-mistake is called nowness. In nowness there is no before or after, no goals, agendas, or fixed direction. Like the meandering river, it twists and turns in accord with circumstances, but always knows how to find its way to the great ocean. When you are on the river, you may be paddling north for an hour, and suddenly there'll be a bend up ahead. When you look at your compass, you see you're going south. You may have to go the same length, except now you're paddling in the opposite direction. Then you go east, then you go west, then north again. Is the river making a mistake on its journey to the ocean? Should the river be like a*

*pipeline, one straight channel without bends or curves? Think of a river flowing through the forest. It is all curves and bends. It changes from season to season.*

### ***You must trust yourself implicitly.***

*When trees fall down and block it up, it rises up behind them, opening a new path. It twists and turns in accord with circumstances. It responds spontaneously, dealing with each moment as it comes up. Ultimately, the river will make its way to the great ocean.*

*If you wish to travel like this you must go alone. Alone. Not lonely, but alone. All one, containing everything. And not carry any baggage. Put down the backpack, take off the blinders. Whatever you are carrying will affect what you do. Most importantly, *You must trust yourself implicitly.* Give yourself permission to be yourself.*

*The capping verse: A hazy autumn moon, solitary and full, falls as it may on the winding river ahead. It falls as it may, randomly. In its haziness, it is not controlled. The hazy moon of enlightenment is imperfect. Anuttara-samyaksambodhi is imperfect. It has pimples and bumps. It is the Tenth Ox-herding Picture with the old sagely guy stumbling through the marketplace with a bag on his back. He is laughing at falling leaves, playing with children. This is a step beyond the crystal-clear moon of enlightenment. Dogen says, "No trace of enlightenment remains, and this traceless enlightenment continues endlessly." *There are those who seek perfect clarity, yet sweep as you may, you cannot empty the mind.* Keizan Zenji said that. Sweeping itself can sometimes fill the mind. The simple activity of emptying fills it.*

Remember, the whole thing is hopeless. Taking care of the environment is hopeless, but we'll do it. Achieving enlightenment is hopeless, but we'll do it. Clarifying the mind, emptying the mind — impossible. We'll do it. Just like the

Four Vows say: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them." How in the world are we going to do that, if they're numberless? "Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them. The dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them. The Buddha Way is unattainable, I vow to attain it." Utterly hopeless. Yet we're doing it.

We are Don Quixotes, jousting with windmills. That is our practice. The apparent impossibility does not make one bit of difference in our resolve. What is required is the kind of tenacity, the kind of vow that comes out of this practice. Imperfections notwithstanding, we will ultimately take care of this earth, and of each other. That is our vow.

## Footnotes

1. These two traveling together always manage to create complications.
2. Crossing to the other side, sure-footedness is a definite virtue.
3. The river treats all things equally.
4. Though few may know it, there is such a thing as a state without mistakes.
5. Arriving as it departs, the moment is always fresh.

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