

Sandokai, by Shitou Xiqian (Sekito Kisen) – Text translation by Soto Zen Translation Project <i>Explanations and free-association commentary by Domyo Burk, 2017</i>	
<p>The Harmony of Difference and Sameness - <i>San – many, difference, diversity, variety; used as a synonym for “ji” or the concrete, phenomenal aspect of our life (Okumura)</i> <i>Do – one, sameness, equality, commonality, unity; used as synonym for “ri” or the absolute or ultimate reality of emptiness beyond discrimination (Okumura)</i> <i>Kai – promise, agreement, tally; in ancient times, merchants wrote a contract on a tally (piece of wood), then broke it in half; could later confirm agreement by putting together the two halves. (Okumura) Absolute and relative, then, are like two halves of one thing.</i></p>	<p>You might call this teaching poem, “The Apparently Paradoxical Fact that Absolute and Relative are Intimately Related and Mutually Dependent.” It tries to point out how each thing is simultaneously <i>a thing</i> (or <i>being</i>), differentiated from all others, and part of an overall unity within which all things are ultimately equal, and have the same fundamentally empty nature.</p>
<p>The mind of the great sage of India is intimately transmitted from west to east. <i>The <u>insight/reality of awakening</u> (mind) reached by <u>Shakyamuni Buddha</u> (great sage of India) is carefully and authentically passed from person to person, face-to-face (intimately transmitted). There are many differences between countries and cultures (west and east), but the essence of the Buddha’s teaching does not change.</i></p>	<p>We have a chance to encounter the full truth of Buddhism right here and now. Despite its transmission through space and time, it has not dissipated or changed. It’s a living reality affirmed between real people, face-to-face.</p>
<p>While human faculties are sharp or dull, the Way has no northern or southern ancestors. <i>According to sectarian Chan (Zen) thinking in China at Sekito’s time, duller students took the gradual approach to practice (slowly clearing delusion from the mind), while sharper students practiced for “sudden” enlightenment. The gradual path became associated with Chan schools in the north, and the sudden path was associated with southern schools. Sekito is saying the true Buddha Way can’t be divided in this way.</i></p>	<p>What are we to make of our own aptitude for Buddhism? Is awakening something to strive for, or should we simply accept our limitations and do gradual practice? Effort, struggle, slow, fast, realization, no realization... these distinctions are inevitably part of our experience, but the Buddha’s Way isn’t dependent on, or limited by, any of them.</p>
<p>The spiritual source shines clear in the light; the branching streams flow on in the dark. <i>“Ri,” or the absolute, unity, or principle, is the <u>spiritual source</u>, also symbolized by <u>darkness</u> (in the dark, all distinctions fall away). “Ji,” or the relative, many, or phenomena, is the <u>branching streams</u> and <u>light</u>. So even within the relative, the absolute shines unimpeded, and within the absolute, relative phenomena continue functioning without obstruction.</i></p>	<p>It can feel like the absolute and relative dimensions of our lives are very separate. When we perceive the absolute - unity, non-separation, everything complete just-as-it-is – the relative seems to recede, and when the relative intrudes – individuality, separation, conflict, suffering – the absolute aspect seems to disappear. In reality, though, everything exists in both the absolute and relative sense simultaneously, and the two aspects don’t interfere with or impede each other.</p>

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<p>Grasping at things is surely delusion; according with sameness is still not enlightenment. <i>Grasping at things – being caught up in the relative dimension, Ji, and therefore falling into the trap of grasping and aversion; According with sameness - being attached to the absolute, Ri, and denying the relative reality of Ji</i></p>	<p>To believe the distinctions of the relative dimension are inherently real is a mistake that leads to dissatisfaction (dukkha), and yet it is also a mistake to believe <i>instead</i> that “all is one” and differences are merely illusions.</p>
<p>All the objects of the senses interact and yet do not. <i>All the objects of the senses – essentially, everything (all things we can perceive with eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind; mind is considered a sense in Buddhism) Interact and yet do not – are interdependent, or defined by their relative positions and relationships (Ji), and yet are also independent, entirely complete and unique exactly as they are, in the dimension where comparison is irrelevant (Ri)</i></p>	<p>All things, in a relative sense, have their individuality and therefore can be said to interact with one another. Because all relative things define one another, they are interdependent. However, in an absolute sense, everything is part of one seamless whole – no separate “things” to interact!</p>
<p>Interacting brings involvement. Otherwise, each keeps its place. <i>each keeps its place – within a seamless whole that would not be the same without each of its parts, each thing has its unique and undeniable place</i></p>	<p>Relative to one another, things are good and bad, light and dark, etc. As part of a seamless whole, each thing is an essential part of things-as-it-is, and has its own reality and completeness without comparison to anything else. We each have our place.</p>
<p>Sights vary in quality and form, sounds differ as pleasing or harsh. Refined and common speech come together in the dark, clear and murky phrases are distinguished in the light. <i>sights, sounds, speech – shorthand for all things we experience and do differ and distinguish in the light – in a relative sense, things really do have qualities. together in the dark – in an absolute sense, things are just what they are; we make the distinctions ourselves (distinctions are empty of inherent self-nature)</i></p>	<p>We can’t deny the reality of the relative, where things may bring us joy or misery. But if we can also understand the absolute dimension – the vital, intimate reality of things-as-it-is – we will not be so knocked about by conditions, because we will also have a larger perspective.</p>
<p>The four elements return to their natures just as a child turns to its mother; Fire heats, wind moves, water wets, earth is solid. <i>return to their natures – despite their undeniable differences in characteristic and function, the four elements (all things) are fundamentally empty child and mother – emptiness is potential, and actually makes it possible for things to manifest, as a child depends on a mother</i></p>	<p>It’s not that “things” are actually empty, or that despite emptiness there appears to be “things.” Just as there is no child without mother, or mother without child, emptiness defines things and things define emptiness. Therefore, at the <i>same time</i> as all things lack inherent, independent, enduring self-nature, they manifest all the wondrous differences of the phenomenal world in their function and characteristics.</p>

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<p>Eye and sights, ear and sounds, nose and smells, tongue and tastes; Thus with each and every thing, depending on these roots, the leaves spread forth. <i>eye and sight, etc.</i> – all apparently interdependent phenomena (eye depends on sights to be an eye, sights depend on eyes to be sights) <i>thus, with each and every thing, depending on these roots, the leaves spread forth</i> – because of the interaction of interdependent things, new phenomena and manifestations arise and the chain of causation continues</p>	<p>“How does the world get to be the way it is?” we wonder. Is the fundamental cause good or bad? But behind it all is emptiness. Every phenomenon arises from causes, which themselves were simply resultant phenomena. Thus, through the interactions of myriad things we arrive at the present situation. Ultimately, there is no <i>one</i>, no <i>thing</i>, to be blamed. From the absolute perspective, it’s just leaves spreading.</p>
<p>Trunk and branches share the essence; revered and common, each has its speech. <i>trunk</i> (the absolute source) <i>and branches</i> (relative phenomena) <i>share the essence</i> – absolute and relative are aspects of the same thing (as trunk + branches = tree) <i>revered</i> (absolute) <i>and common</i> (relative), <i>each has its speech</i> – at the same time, each has its own manner of expression</p>	<p>The absolute, which can seem so lovely, and the relative, which can seem so complicated and sometimes terrible, are inseparable aspects of the same reality. Still, absolute and relative express themselves differently, and we must respond accordingly, appropriately, and skillfully.</p>
<p>In the light there is darkness, but don’t take it as darkness; In the dark there is light, but don’t see it as light. <i>According to Shunryu Suzuki, this could be translated as “light has darkness,” and “darkness has light,” like we “have hands.” Another description of how intimate and inseparable absolute and relative are.</i> <i>Don’t take it as darkness/see it as light</i> – while this interpenetration is so, if we imagine we perceive “absolute” in the midst of the “relative” or vice versa, we are actually just creating a conceptual separation</p>	<p>It’s natural to look for the absolute when the relative perspective dominates our experience, and vice versa, but when we do, we actually create division instead of allowing the two aspects to harmonize. How do we harmonize absolute and relative? By wholly and directly experiencing the moment we’re in, where absolute and relative fully manifest together. We do this by not getting stuck in any one perspective.</p>
<p>Light and dark oppose one another like the front and back foot in walking. <i>light</i> – relative aspect of reality <i>dark</i> – absolute aspect of reality</p>	<p>It’s true – between absolute and relative there is a dynamic tension. In the relative sense, there is much suffering in the world, and much that needs to be done. In the absolute sense, it’s all a miraculous drama no matter how it turns out. To harmonize these aspects of life, we learn to work with and utilize that dynamic tension in a positive, constructive way – like using two feet to walk.</p>

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<p>Each of the myriad things has its merit, expressed according to function and place. <i>Shohaku Okumura's translation: "All things have their function – it is a matter of use in the appropriate situation."</i></p>	<p>Usually we're either attached to individuality (the relative, our sense of self) or averse to it (parts of our experience we don't like, a sense of separation). Realizing things, including self, are empty, is medicine for attachment and dissatisfaction, but we also need to appreciate, embrace, and use our individuality – there is no absolute aspect separate from the relative aspect.</p>
<p>Phenomena exist; box and lid fit. Principle responds; arrow points meet. <i>Shohaku Okumura says both sentences are about both ji and ri; Chinese poetry just tends to avoid repeating the subjects in the same line. Ji and ri fit together like box and lid, and perfectly align like two arrows meeting in midair.</i></p>	<p>Before we practice, we may be blissfully ignorant of the apparent tension between absolute and relative. When we start practice, this tension becomes apparent and things feel uncomfortable and confusing at times. Eventually we see how the two aspects of reality elegantly fit and work together.</p>
<p>Hearing the words, understand the meaning; don't set up standards of your own. <i>Shohaku Okumura's translation: "Hearing the words, understand the source." He says the source is reality behind the words. Setting up standards of your own means intellectualizing and conceptualizing this teaching instead of practicing with it.</i></p>	<p>Words can only point at reality, but if we drop willful conceptualization they cause something to resonate deep within us – an intuitive, whole-body-and-mind kind of understanding, like recognition.</p>
<p>If you don't understand the Way right before you, how will you know the path as you walk?</p>	<p>There is no way for us break out of our limited, relative, embodied experience in order to taste the absolute or integrate the two aspects of reality. Instead, the answers are found right here, within our direct experience. After all, absolute and relative are not two separate things.</p>
<p>Progress is not a matter of far or near, but if you are confused, mountains and rivers block your way.</p>	<p>If understanding, integration, or liberation seem far away, it's because we're confused about what understanding, integration, or liberation actually are. There is no obstruction except what we create for ourselves. Even so, such obstructions can be hard to overcome.</p>

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I respectfully urge you who study the mystery, do not pass your days and nights in vain.

Our efforts to practice and understand never result in a final, static answer – life remains a mystery. Still, there is so much more to experience. We can become so much wiser, freer, more compassionate. Life is short, so we should practice diligently and not waste time. Although this begs the question: What does it mean to waste time? Sometimes what seems to be a waste ends up being incredibly important and transformative. Sometimes our willful efforts come to nothing and in retrospect look like delusion. As long we turn *toward* life, toward the mystery, with curiosity, energy, and humility, we are practicing.

Sources:

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Suzuki, Shunryu. *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999.