

Chapter 5

Revitalizing the Familiar

A Practical Application of Dōgen’s Transformative Zen

George Wrisley

A central aspect of Dōgen’s Sōtō Zen that sets it apart from other forms of Zen—and Buddhism more generally—is his soteriological approach to language. That is, instead of seeing language as merely a means or, worse, the main obstacle to enlightenment, Dōgen views language as integral to the salvific process and the realization, the enactment, of enlightenment. In his *Shōbōgenzō*, the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, the mainstay of Dōgen’s literary approach is to take a kōan¹ or a passage from Buddhist texts, quite often from *Chan*² (禪; Jpn. Zen) sources, and comment on it extensively. This is a vital component in Dōgen’s own Zen practice. That is, he not only teaches thereby but actualizes his own enlightenment by way of composing these texts. One of the things that makes Dōgen’s approach so interesting and influential is that he, as Steven Heine emphasizes following Hee-Jin Kim, “exhibits a kind of alchemical capacity to alter literature significantly by twisting and even distorting conventional expressions in order to uncover the underlying theoretical significance embedded in speech acts.”³ Dōgen will take a passage and pull it apart, word by word, line by line, to use it to express his understanding of the true Dharma. In doing so, he often takes passages that would be familiar or well known and imbues them with new meaning, revitalizing them with new significance using his “literary alchemy.”

In this chapter, I attempt to convey Dōgen’s unique understanding of the Dharma by demonstrating Dōgen’s approach on something with which an English language reader is likely to be quite familiar, namely, the nursery rhyme “Row, row, row your boat.” Doing so has the following pedagogical advantages over a more conventional approach to conveying Dōgen’s Zen. First, the nursery rhyme itself is *akin* to a kōan and has many of the elements that can be found in Zen texts and Dōgen’s own writings, for example, boat imagery, streams and water, an activity (here, rowing), the question of emotion (“merrily”), and the idea of the dreamlike nature of life and reality, something Dōgen takes up explicitly in his *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle “Talking of a Dream within a Dream.” Second, commenting on the nursery rhyme will take something familiar to the reader and memorably make it new, revitalizing it, and thereby making it a fruitful doorway into a better understanding of Dōgen’s methodology and Sōtō Zen. Third, as Dōgen expresses, for example, in his fascicle “Buddha Sutras,” “The sutras are the entire world of the

¹ Generally speaking, kōans are enigmatic sayings formulated by master practitioners of Chan/Zen. Their nature and use will be discussed further below.

² “Chan” refers to the Chinese school that is the source of Japanese Zen.

³ Steven Heine, “Dōgen on the Language of Creative Textual Hermeneutics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. B. W. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 215.

ten directions. There is no moment or place that is not sutras.”⁴ That is, all things might function, if properly attended, as Buddhist sutras, that is, Buddhist texts. Hence, we should feel confident in appropriating the nursery rhyme as a kind of Buddhist text. Thus, though the nursery rhyme was not written by a Zen master or as a Buddhist text at all, its imagery and familiarity make it highly attractive for the pedagogical purposes for which it will be used.

After a brief look at Dōgen’s biography, this chapter lays out the central aspects of Dōgen’s Zen, situating it in relation to other forms of Buddhism and Zen; it lastly demonstrates Dōgen’s method by way of a “Dōgen-esque” commentary on, “Row, row, row your boat,” indicating that the student reader should use the earlier parts of the chapter, its exposition on Dōgen’s Zen, to try to unpack the meaning of the commentary on the nursery rhyme. To help facilitate this, questions are given at the end of the chapter to help guide the student through the process.

Dōgen’s Biography

In line with Buddhism’s notion of dependent co-arising, when considering Dōgen’s biography we should note the broader social-historical context in which he lived. First, his birth (1200 CE) coincided with the beginning of Japan’s Kamakura period (1192–1333), following on the Heian period (710–1192 CE). This period shift is marked by the aristocracy’s waning power, based in Kyoto, and the increasing power of the military class, based in Kamakura. The aristocracy in the Heian period was marked, as it had been for some time, by a deep aesthetic appreciation of life. As Hee-Jin Kim notes, “Despite its outward pomposity, the aristocratic way of life was permeated by an awareness of beauty shadowed by a sense of sorrow due to beauty’s inherently ephemeral character.”⁵ Further, while beauty and religion went hand in hand for the Heian aristocracy, this was not so for aesthetic and ethical considerations. The aristocracy understood themselves to be karmically privileged and thus did not seriously consider the lot of the underprivileged masses.⁶ These two aspects coming into the Kamakura period were important for Dōgen. First, since he was born into the aristocracy, his education included literary and aesthetic material, whose influence would later become apparent in his masterful use of language, both Chinese and Japanese. Second, he, like several other Buddhist innovators of his time, would be concerned to put forward a religion accessible to the masses, though here, too, Dōgen’s aristocratic background would show.

Another important aspect of the period of Dōgen’s life was that it was widely held that the time of the Degenerate Law (*mappō*) had begun. *Mappō* was purportedly prophesied by the Buddha as a time when society and morality would decline; it would be a time of great difficulty, including difficulty in making progress along the Buddhist path. Social, political, and climatic turmoil in the late Heian and early Kamakura heavily reinforced the idea that *mappō* was truly at hand. While many bought into these ideas, Dōgen refused to give in to the idea that enlightenment was any harder to achieve than it had been before.

⁴ Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen’s Shobo Genzo*. Ed. K. Tanahashi (Boston: Shambhala, 2012), 538.

⁵ Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Boston: Wisdom, 2004), 14.

⁶ Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, 14.

With these basics of Dōgen’s historical context in place, we can begin Dōgen’s biography by noting that he was born in 1200 CE into an aristocratic family in Kyoto. He quickly came to know the truth of impermanence, as he lost his father at the age of two and his mother at the age of seven. On her deathbed, his mother is supposed to have expressed to Dōgen her desire that he become a Buddhist monk seeking the truth and the way to help all people.⁷ Dōgen is said to have been deeply moved by the expression of impermanence made by the rising smoke from the incense sticks at his mother’s funeral.

In 1213, at the age of thirteen, Dōgen became a monastic and began his formal study and practice of Buddhism at Mt. Hiei, northeast of Kyoto. At this time, Buddhism was flourishing in Japan, with Tendai being the most dominant of the schools and with a number of “new” schools coming into existence. It has been said that in 1191 Myōan Eisai transmitted *Rinzai Zen* (Chinese: Linji School of Chan) from China to Japan; however, Steven Heine emphasizes that “[Eisai] always thought of himself as a Tendai monk who featured meditation mixed with various traditional ritual elements.”⁸ Nevertheless, Eisai did found Kenninji temple in Kyoto in 1202, where he remained until he died in 1215. Kenninji was “at the time not only the center of Zen, but was also the center of studies for Tendai, Shingon, and other schools of Buddhism,”⁹ while being a rival of Mt. Hiei. Having traveled to China in 1223, Dōgen would return in 1227 to establish what he saw as the authentic Dharma, what became Sōtō Zen, staying at Kenninji for the first several years upon his return. However, before we get there, we should take care to note what seems to have been the impetus for Dōgen’s journey to China.

At the age of fourteen, Dōgen is said to have begun to have his crisis of “great doubt” in his Buddhist practice. The crisis concerned the “time-honored Mahāyāna”¹⁰ doctrine of original enlightenment (*hongaku*); this doctrine holds that all things, not just humans, are intrinsically enlightened. Dōgen’s great doubt was: Why practice with great effort if everything *is already* the awakened state of Buddhahood? As Kim notes in this context, faith without real practice, “which required no strenuous religious or moral exertion, became readily associated with the antinomian cynicism inspired by the Age of Degenerate Law [*mappō*].”¹¹ Even at such a young age, Dōgen was disturbed by the antinomian temptations of (possible interpretations of) the doctrine of original enlightenment.

Dōgen traveled around to different teachers, looking for an answer to his question regarding the necessity of intense, difficult Buddhist practice in the face of the *hongaku* doctrine. He apparently could not find a satisfactory answer to this question wherever he went in Japan, whomever he asked. After wandering for some time, Dōgen returned to Kenninji in 1217 where he studied with Eisai’s disciple Myōzen until 1223, at which point Dōgen, Myōzen, and a small group of others, left for China. As much as Dōgen appreciated Myōzen’s understanding of the Dharma, his “great doubt” had not been assuaged by him.

In China, during his first two years there, Dōgen would continue to wander from temple to temple in the Five Mountains Temples area, looking for a true teacher of the authentic Dharma. It was not until 1225 that Dōgen found his true teacher, namely, Tiantong Rujing.

⁷ Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, 19

⁸ Steven Heine, *From Chinese Chan to Japanese Zen: A Remarkable Century of Transmission and Transformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 82.

⁹ Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, 24.

¹⁰ Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, 22.

¹¹ Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, 23.

During the three-month practice period of intense zazen that year (1225), it is said that Dōgen was practicing zazen next to a monk who had fallen asleep. Rujing, upon seeing the sleeping monk admonished him severely, saying, “In zazen it is imperative to cast off the body and mind. How could you indulge in sleeping?”¹² Dōgen is said to have had at this moment a deep realization concerning his great doubt and the need for practice.

Rujing conferred Dharma transmission to Dōgen, certifying his awakening. Dōgen became the first Japanese monk to receive transmission from the Caodong School of Chan Buddhism, and the Zhenxie Qingliao line. In 1227, Dōgen returned to Japan, purportedly “empty-handed,” that is, without the various things traveling monks would usually return with, for example, sūtras and other documents and iconography.

Back in Japan, Dōgen slowly began to orient himself and his mission of establishing the true Dharma. Moreover, he was interested in a religion open to all, regardless of social rank, intelligence, or ability. Further still, like other new Buddhist schools in Japan, Dōgen had a purportedly singular method for achieving enlightenment, namely, zazen-only. That is, it was through seated meditation that enlightenment is enacted. We’ll see more later what this means. Here, let us note that while others in Japan, such as Shinran and Nichiren, had singular methods, as well, theirs were more aimed at ease of use by the common folk living, as they believed, in the Age of Degenerate Law (*mappō*).

Despite his desire to establish a widely accessible form of practice, Dōgen’s zazen-only approach to enlightenment was more rigorous and less easily enacted than, for example, putting one’s faith in the recitation of a Buddha’s name, as was practiced in the Pure Land school of Shinran. Moreover, as is clear from his writings, Dōgen did not write for the non-erudite. Moreover, he early on had a kind of ambivalence regarding whether lay practitioners can attain enlightenment. This ambivalence seems to have faded into apparent pessimism, as Dōgen, in his later years, focused ever more on the monastic community.¹³ However, one aspect we should note in this context is that Dōgen wrote primarily in vernacular Japanese, especially in the informal talks collected as the *Shōbōgenzō*, where he utilized his knowledge of Japanese literary techniques to great advantage in expressing his understanding of the Dharma. He was the first to write in vernacular Japanese; as Kazuaki Tanahashi notes, “Until then Buddhist teachings had been studied and written almost exclusively in the Japanese form of Chinese.”¹⁴ Thus began Sōtō Zen by way of Dōgen’s earnest pursuit of the authentic Dharma in answer to his great doubt.

From Duality to Nonduality

A helpful way to begin grappling with Dōgen’s Zen is by examining his treatment of a number of seeming dualities—for example, *samsāra*/enlightenment, self/other, practice/enlightenment, and so forth. Through a thorough application of emptiness (San. *śūnyatā*), Dōgen deconstructs and then reconstructs them as nondualities. As Dōgen’s expositions show, a purported duality is nondual when the existence of two *seemingly separate* “things” is not truly separate, since their existence is entangled; yet they are not one and the same thing either.

¹² Quoted in Kim, *Eihei Dōgen*, 36.

¹³ These issues are well dealt with in Steven Heine, *Did Dōgen Go to China?: What He Wrote and When He Wrote It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)—a highly recommended text.

¹⁴ Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, lii–liii.

Once we understand a duality as nondual, we can “jump off both sides”¹⁵ and not fall into the trap of being attached or averse to either “side,” or extreme, for instance, *form* or *emptiness*. It is all too easy to mistake the Zen path as one of movement from understanding/behavior that takes the world to divide into fixed, unchanging *forms*, to behavior and understanding that takes the world to consist of radically unfixed and continually changing *emptiness*. In Zen practice properly understood, we don’t linger on either focal point/duality, nor does either exist without the other; there is both form and emptiness, but they are nondually one. Hence, Dōgen’s statement of nonduality, “Though not identical, they are not different; though not different, they are not one; though not one, they are not many,”¹⁶ which can be applied to every duality, every “thing” that appears separate/different. It is because of both the transitory and interdependent “nature” of things in emptiness that Buddhism, and Zen in particular, has this understanding of nonduality. And it must be applied to everything (including emptiness itself), including the large set of apparent dualisms found in Zen Buddhism, for example, *saṃsāra*/enlightenment, substance/emptiness, practice/enlightenment, self/other, self/self (over time), language/silence, among others.

A tempting way to see these dualities is that the lefthand side is problematic or incomplete (in the case of practice) and the righthand one is desirable/complete, such that one needs to transition (via some method such as zazen) from the one to the other. But these dualisms are not to be affirmed such that the correct soteriological practice is to move from the left to the right, but rather, the idea is that these dualities are to be nondually taken up and navigated, explored and creatively engaged so as to *actualize* their soteriological potentials for *enacting* enlightenment. And, thus, there is, for Dōgen, never any *absolute* affirmation of the one “side” over the other.

Enlightenment is awakening to the true nature of *saṃsāra*, to all of its complexities and “entangled vines” of language and concepts and myriad relationships. This is why Hee-Jin Kim, for example, sees Dōgen’s Zen as thoroughly philosophical: it is a form of religio-philosophical practice where all difference is critically engaged nondually. This is the practice of grappling with what Kim calls both the deconstructive and reconstructive aspects of emptiness.¹⁷ *Deconstruction* is in service of removing substantialist views and attachments; *reconstruction* is the *negotiating* of reality in light of a rehabilitated understanding of a world of “things.”¹⁸ In this light, we can understand Dōgen’s writing: “The endeavor to negotiate the Way (*bendō*), as I now teach, consists in discerning all things in view of enlightenment, and putting such unitive awareness (*ichinyo*) into practice in the midst of the revaluated world (*shutsuro*).”¹⁹ Let’s explore some of the above dualities in more depth and what it means to engage them nondually through the reconstructive lens of emptiness.

¹⁵ Nishiari Bokusan, “Commentary on Dogen’s Genjo Koan,” in *Dōgen’s Genjo Koan: Three Commentaries*, trans. S. M. Weitsman and K. Tanahashi (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2011), 33.

¹⁶ Quoted in Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on His View of Zen* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 67.

¹⁷ See Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 44ff.

¹⁸ See Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 92.

¹⁹ From “Bendōwa”; Quoted in Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 21.

Samsāra and Enlightenment

In Buddhism, *samsāra* is “the world” of *dukkha*, of suffering, of dissatisfaction rooted in delusion; it is “the world” of birth, death, and rebirth, such that *enlightenment/Nirvana (Bodhi)* is “the world” of freedom from *dukkha*, from delusion, and the rest. The *duality* of this distinction is found explicitly in such imagery as the Buddha’s teachings being a raft to get to the other shore (enlightenment). This imagery goes well with a common assumption that the Buddha’s teachings outline a method, a means (the raft), for getting from one shore to the other. Such a means-end conception of practice is problematic in Zen generally, but in particular for Dōgen, as we will examine in detail below. For Dōgen, *samsāra* and enlightenment are not different places or times; the world of *samsāra* is the *same* world as that of enlightenment/*nirvana*—moreover, Dōgen’s teachings do not outline a method or means to *achieve* enlightenment but rather explicate how enlightenment is to be *enacted* in this very *sahā* world (mundane world) in which practice and enlightenment are (nondually) one; this nonduality will be discussed in detail below along with Dōgen’s view of a means-ends conception of practice. *Enlightened activity is the skillful negotiation of the nonduality of delusion and enlightenment.* Hence, for Dōgen, Buddhas greatly enlighten delusion and “those greatly deluded amid enlightenment are sentient beings.”²⁰ And, further: “Just understand that birth-and-death itself is nirvana, and you will neither hate one as being birth-and-death, nor cherish the other as being nirvana. Only then can you be free of birth-and-death.”²¹

Sentient beings are greatly deluded amid enlightenment because of how they comport themselves in a world that is empty. Ignorant of, or flaunting, emptiness, “sentient beings” take the dream nature of the world as solid, projecting their fixed concepts, expectations, and desires onto it, attempting to bend it to their will; rejecting the empty, dreamlike nature of the world, labeling it as “bad” when it does not conform to their wills, their desires and expectations; labeling it as “good” when it does. As we will see, for Dōgen, it is not so much a matter of *ridding* ourselves of delusion once and for all—for there is no “once and for all” in life—but rather of skillfully and continuously navigating the reality of delusion.

The world in all of its aspects is enlightenment itself, but, as Dōgen indicates with the story of Zen Master Pao-ch’e,²² though the wind (enlightenment) may be everywhere that does not mean that we do not have to fan ourselves, that is, that does not mean that we do not have to continuously practice, negotiating the nondual reality of delusion and enlightenment.²³ Liberation (enlightenment) occurs only through overcoming delusion continuously. This is particularly the case given the recognition of continuous change. That is, there is never a fixed point where reality does not present unique situations that prompt the overcoming of delusion.

²⁰ See “Genjokoan” in Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, trans. N. Waddell and M. Abe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 40.

²¹ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 46.

²² See “Genjokoan” in Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 44. “Pao-ch’e” in the Wade Giles system; “Baoche” in Pinyin.

²³ See “Genjokoan” in Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*. See also Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, ch. 2, for example.

Substance and Emptiness

A fundamental way we are deluded is by our taking the world to be composed of substances, of things, each of which exists as the same, identical “thing” over time, and whose nature is what it is independently of everything else. The tree that grows in the yard today was planted thirty years ago when I was a child; it is the *same* tree now as the one planted all those years ago. And it exists, is what it is, because of its intrinsic “tree” nature. Dug up and transplanted across the country or the world, it’s still the *same* tree. However, this way of viewing the tree constitutes delusion, since, in Zen Buddhism, everything is *empty* of substantial natures of that kind. Emptiness (*śūnyatā*) characterizes everything. That is, nothing persists as the same, identical “thing” over time—the tree today isn’t *straightforwardly* the *numerically same* tree that was there thirty years ago—and everything that is, is what it is in complete dependence on all the things ordinarily taken not to be it—the tree’s existence is completely dependent upon non-tree elements such as the rain, the sun, the soil and its nutrients, carbon dioxide, the producers of carbon dioxide, etc. Take any of those elements away and you take away the tree.²⁴

Here we see an important point that Dōgen likes to emphasize regarding the dreamlike (empty) nature of existence. On the one hand, we might think that enlightenment is waking up from the dream of ignorance, delusion, and suffering. Yet, from a different angle, we can see a kind of paradox, but one whose grasping is central to enlightenment. For we also speak of dreams as nonsubstantial, not real, and not (fully) in our control. Yet in our deluded, “unenlightened” dreamlike position, we take things in the world to be substantial, “real,” and (largely) in our control, which is to say, *not like dreams at all*. Thus, “waking up” in Zen means *awakening to the dreamlike nature of everything in emptiness*.

A perhaps surprising point here is that it is only *in the dream* that some “thing” can exist—there is not a more substantial reality possible. Without time, without interdependence, nothing could exist, nothing could be an experience or a happening—this is one reason that Dōgen insists upon seeing existence as time/time as existence. Hence, too, Dōgen’s point that it is only a painted (i.e., empty) rice cake that can satisfy hunger. Dōgen transforms—*makes new*—the ideas some in Zen had that the dreamlike, empty nature of everything means that no desire can be satisfied, since trying to satisfy a desire in the context of emptiness is like trying to satisfy hunger with a painted rice cake. Dōgen recognizes that there is no such thing as a rice cake (i.e., anything) that is not “painted.” It is exactly with “painted rice cakes” that one becomes satisfied, if one is going to find satisfaction at all (through authentic practice).²⁵

Practice and Enlightenment

Building on what we have seen so far, we can well grasp now a pivotal duality that Dōgen deconstructs and reconstructs according to his view of authentic practice of the Way, namely, the duality of practice and enlightenment. Again, it is all too easy to think of practice as a necessary means to achieving *the special state of mind* that is enlightenment (consider the Buddha under the Bodhi tree)—practice is how we move from the deluded world of conventional truth to that

²⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh has a lovely discussion of this in *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), 3.

²⁵ See “Painting of a Rice Cake,” in Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*.

of ultimate truth. On this view, you must diligently work at perfecting the skills needed to awaken the mind to the true nature of reality so that you no longer suffer. This may take years, a lifetime, or many lifetimes of rebirth to achieve. For example, if zazen or seated meditation is taken to be a primary mode of practice, then one must engage in zazen until one has achieved awakening. Further, the fundamental truth of Buddhism is that there is nothing that can be grasped, as everything is continuously changing according to the interdependent web of being/process of which it is a part and has its being. Hence, we suffer when we negotiate the world with a grasping mind that attaches to ideas, expectations, desires, etc. The sooner we come to see into the nature of this situation, the sooner we'll be able to let go of our attachments. Studying the sutras and sitting zazen are means, then, to insight and wisdom that will facilitate letting go. Similarly, the Eightfold Path outlined by the Buddha gives a method and means for achieving enlightenment, or so we might think.

We find, however, Dōgen thoroughly repudiating this complex picture, going so far as to call it “non-Buddhist”: “The view that practice and enlightenment are not one is a non-Buddhist view. In the Buddha-dharma they are one, “for practice itself is original enlightenment.”²⁶ What does it mean to say that practice and enlightenment are “one.” In the fascicle “*Bussshō*,” Dōgen puts forth one of his most well-known linguistic transformations. That is, he purposefully “misreads” the line, “All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature” as “*entire being is the Buddha-nature.*”²⁷ The original line from the *Nirvana Sutra* is usually understood to mean that inherent to sentient beings’ nature is the *potential* to become Buddhas. But it is a potential that requires practice to develop and actualize. Dōgen’s purposeful “misreading” says instead that all that exists, “entire being,” is the Buddha-nature. As we saw earlier, one way of focusing on Buddha-nature is as the transitory aspect of all existence. We can further identify Buddha-nature as *emptiness* such that to speak of Buddha-nature is to speak of the emptiness of things. Insofar as we might think of enlightenment as the deep realization of the emptiness of all things, we can think of enlightenment itself, original enlightenment, as the emptiness of things itself, that is, Buddha-nature. Thus, we ourselves *are already enlightenment itself insofar as we are Buddha-nature*—yet while we are enlightenment itself, we are continually having to practice not falling into delusion, that is, the denial of Buddha-nature in the context of lived life. Practice, then, is the enacting of emptiness; this is not simply a state of mind, but a particular kind of activity, namely, letting go, moment to moment. What does this mean?

The twentieth-century Japanese Zen master Kodo Sawaki had a wonderful saying: “Zazen is good for nothing.”²⁸ What he means is that we often think of things in terms of their instrumental value, what they can get us. The job is *good for* earning money, the bike is *good for* getting around, zazen is *good for* practicing concentration and gaining insight. By saying that zazen is good for nothing, Sawaki is trying to jar us out of the all too easy temptation of thinking of zazen as an instrument, *a means*, for attaining enlightenment. For such means-ends thinking makes them two; we end up with (1) the means (zazen), and (2) the end (enlightenment), that is, a duality. Sawaki wants us to let go of that way of thinking and to understand the way in which practice and enlightenment are not two, while not numerically identical either.

²⁶ “Bendowa” quoted in Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 23.

²⁷ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 60 and 61.

²⁸ Kosho Uchiyama and Sohaku Okumura, *The Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo* (Boston: Wisdom, 2014), 138.

Whenever we conceptualize (explicitly or not) something as a means to an end, we split our minds, so to speak. If we hang the clothes up *so that* they may dry, then when we do the hanging, our minds are (often unconsciously) in two places. We are doing the hanging, but we are also thinking of (we are implicating) the future point when they will be dry. The only way to be fully in the moment with whatever *is*, is to treat each moment as an end in itself. While we, of course, know that hanging up the clothes is to dry them, it is possible to be fully present to the hanging of the clothes whereby one views the hanging as an end in itself. One lets go of all that is future, all the possible results of hanging the clothes, and simply hangs them (after all, they may fail to dry). This would, in a sense, be to treat the hanging of the clothes *as good for nothing*.

If we think of sitting in zazen *as good for* something, then we are treating the sitting as a means to achieve something outside of, or separate from, the sitting. In many books on Zen, this is how practice is discussed. For example, in the important and influential *Three Pillars of Zen* by Philip Kapleau, Zen is a matter of achieving, through zazen, “concentration and absorption by which the mind is first tranquilized and brought to one-pointedness, and then awakened.”²⁹ Here, “awakening” is *satori*, a Japanese term, which Kapleau defines as “enlightenment, that is, Self-realization, opening the Mind’s eye, awakening to one’s True-nature and hence of the nature of all existence. See also ‘kenshō.’”³⁰ The term he references at the end, *kenshō*, he explains thus, “kenshō (literally, ‘seeing into one’s own nature’): Semantically, kenshō and satori have virtually the same meaning and are often used interchangeably. In describing the enlightenment of the Buddha and the patriarchs, however, it is customary to use the word *satori* rather than kenshō, the term *satori* implying a deeper experience.”³¹ However, practicing zazen as a means to achieve the end of *kenshō/satori* means that when one sits, one’s mind is divided between the moment of sitting now and the future moment of hoped for attainment of *satori*.

For Dōgen, by contrast, as we saw above, you *are already enlightenment itself*, since you are the Buddha-nature; but, again, this does not negate the need for practice. Remember, the issue of “original enlightenment” was at the heart of Dōgen’s great doubt, the central question that drove him to China in search of the authentic Dharma. While we are through and through enlightenment, that is, Buddha-nature, what must be done is to *practice this enlightenment by just sitting*, what Dōgen calls in the Japanese, *shikantaza*. This is “the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment.”³² “If you concentrate your effort single-mindedly, you are thereby negotiating the Way with your practice realization undefined.”³³ For Dōgen, we defile practice (zazen) by using it as a means. What he wants us to do is to treat practice as an end in itself. You sit just to sit and this *just sitting (shikantaza)* is actualizing Buddha-nature by letting things simply be what they are, unfolding in time, as time, in their interdependent web of process/being. For Dōgen, *satori* is not best thought of as a particular mental state that is the experiential/phenomenological apprehension of Buddha-nature, but rather the continuous practice of enacting Buddha-nature by letting go, moment by moment, again and again.

²⁹ Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen: 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1989), 385.

³⁰ Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, 377.

³¹ Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, 369.

³² Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 4.

³³ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 5.

Similarly, with the Eightfold Path, it can be viewed not merely as a means to enlightenment but *enlightenment itself*—the “endless” path is the goal itself.

While there may be a sense of *satori* that is a particular experience of deep insight into the nature of reality in all of its nonduality, such experiences are just something else to become attached to.³⁴ The danger is that we will come to *prefer* enlightened (*satori*) experiences over nonenlightened (*deluded*) experiences. But as Dōgen writes, “If the least like or dislike arises, the mind is lost in confusion.”³⁵ Typically, to “like something” is to want to hold onto it; to “dislike something” is to want to be rid of it. We have a “bad,” busy-mind experience, and we dislike it; we have a “good,” ecstatic *satori* experience, and we want to hold on to it. But this is not the reality of Buddha-nature. Nothing is fixed. Nothing persists unchanging. To enact that reality, to enact Buddha-nature, to enact enlightenment, there is nothing to do but let go, again and again, and allow the changing, interdependent reality to unfold. Hence, Uchiyama Roshi writes, “Whether fantasies arise one after another or whether you sit there with a perfectly clean slate, let go of either one. Seeing both, illusions or realizations, with the same eye is what is critical here.”³⁶ As Okumura Roshi writes, though he’s been sitting zazen for more than forty years, sometimes his mind is perfectly still and sometimes it is clouded with much thought, but whatever happens, the point is to let go.³⁷

Regarding practice, we have focused here primarily on the idea of seated meditation. However, we should note that there are two important aspects of practice that we have had to leave aside but which should be mentioned. The first is that Dōgen makes clear that his Zen of “zazen-only” of “just sitting” does not mean that the only kind of practice is literal sitting. For one thing, you can practice “zazen-only” off the cushion in the context of ordinary activities. This he makes clear, for example, in the fascicle “Instructions for the Head Cook” (“Tenzokyōkun”), as the cook does not have the same opportunities to sit as the rest of the sangha. The cook’s “sitting” is the various tasks associated with the planning and preparing of meals. The second thing we should note is that Dōgen’s Zen is that of Mahāyāna Buddhism and as such it is the Bodhisattva vehicle. This might have been another point of focus for us; if we had done so, then we would have emphasized the role of compassion in enacting enlightenment.³⁸

Self and Other, and Self and Self, through Time

“Self” in Buddhism is a way of referring to (separate) identities. That is, there is a “self” when there is an *identifiable* “thing” that exists as distinguishable from other such things. For example, a chair is a *self* insofar as it has a purported identity/existence that is separate from the self of the

³⁴ See Uchiyama Roshi’s lovely discussion of these issues in Kosho Uchiyama and Sohaku Okumura, *Deepest Practice, Deepest Wisdom: Three Fascicles from Shōbōgenzō with Commentaries*, trans. D. T. Wright and S. Okumura (Somerville: Wisdom, 2018), 103–104.

³⁵ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 3.

³⁶ Uchiyama and Okumura, *Deepest Practice, Deepest Wisdom*, 123–24.

³⁷ Sohaku Okumura, *The Mountains and Waters Sūtra: A Practitioner’s Guide to Dōgen’s “Sansuikyo”* (Somerville: Wisdom, 2018), 139.

³⁸ See George Wrisley, “The Role of Compassion in Actualizing Dōgen’s Zen,” *Japan Studies Review* XXIV (2020): 111–36. This work takes up the role of compassion in actualizing Dōgen’s Zen, and in doing so draws the connections between “just sitting” and compassion.

table and the person sitting, eating at the table. A further aspect of “selves” is that in addition to being identifiable and separate, they persist through time. The chair that is separate from the table this morning is the same chair that was there last night at dinner. It is this sense of self as a separate *and* persisting “thing,” that Buddhism, and Dōgen, challenge so vehemently through various deconstructive applications of emptiness. The two central foci of emptiness are unceasing transitoriness and interdependence: nothing persists and every “thing” exists interdependently with everything else.

In this way, the dualities of self/other and self/self-over-time are taken apart (deconstructive aspect of emptiness) and put back together (reconstruction aspect of emptiness) and, thus, rendered nondual. For example, Dōgen quotes approvingly the line “Old man Zhang drinks, and old man Li gets drunk”³⁹ as a way to express the interdependence of all things. Drinking alcohol is an interesting image here, since it implicates both body and mind. One drinks the alcohol with one’s body-mind and very quickly one’s body-mind is affected. The drunk person is drunk in both bodily and mental behavior together.

Yet, as Dōgen writes, “not one of the four great elements or the five skandhas can be understood as self or identified as self.”⁴⁰ The five *skandhas* are a central way Buddhists have traditionally analyzed a person into parts; they are: form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. I, *myself*, drink a beer, and you, *yourself*, don’t get drunk—we ordinarily think. And while there is an appropriate sense of *you* as separate from *me*, nevertheless, in emptiness, my *self* is nondual with your *self*: self and other interpenetrate. I drink and stumble around; in your mind-body there arises compassion and concern—the five *skandhas* referred to by your name change. Thus, your existence is interdependent with mine: the nature of your mind, its content, the you (self) that exists in this moment is what it is only because of my drinking, my stumbling body-mind (and, of course, the rest of the world, past and present, and future). And your body-mind then acts to help me along. Our very being, *our-self* is what it is only in relation to our “separate” selves and their interactions. Self and other as a duality are interwoven, *entwined like vines*, in nonduality. The apparent duality is deconstructed in emptiness and reconstructed as a nondual “unity.” And it is in this way that our understanding does not fall into the mistake of taking each self to be “truly” a separate, independent self, nor does it fall into the mistake of thinking that there is no sense of self with which you may identify. You do not literally get drunk when I drink, yet in my drunkenness and your reaction/response, we are nondually one.

We can see that for Dōgen the nonduality of self and other is not “merely” that of *persons*, but rather all purportedly separate “selves.” That is, every “thing” that exists is nondual with every other “thing.” This has radical implications for how we are to come to understand “our” *selves*. Dōgen makes this clear with such passages as: “Everything that comes forth from the study of the way is the true human body. The entire world of the ten directions is nothing but the true human body. The coming and going of birth and death is the true human body.”⁴¹ In the nondual context of self and other, I might start with this body birthed by my mother, but when I appropriately apprehend interdependence, I come to understand that the entire earth, all that exists, as it unfolds moment to moment is my true body: all aspects of my “I” exist only because

³⁹ Dōgen, *Dōgen’s Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Kōroku*, trans. T. D. Leighton and S. Okumura, ed. T. D. Leighton (Boston: Wisdom, 2010), Vol. 1, no. 32, 101.

⁴⁰ Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, “Only a Buddha and a Buddha.”

⁴¹ Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, “Body and Mind Study the Way.”

“that” exists, and thus *I* and *that* are nondually one. However, this does not erase the body-mind that goes by my name. If that were the case, then we would fall into the mistake of taking one half of the duality of self and other (entire earth/unity of reality) as the one true thing. Instead, we must come to see the way in which this body-mind (this lump of red flesh, as Dōgen likes to say) is interdependent with the rest of the world, each making the other what they are through the reciprocating interactions of causes and conditions. Thus, the following boat metaphor from Dōgen:

Quietly think over whether birth [life] and all things that arise together with birth are inseparable or not... Birth is just like riding in a boat. You raise the sails and you steer. Although you maneuver the sail and the pole, the boat gives you a ride, and without the boat you couldn't ride. But you ride in the boat, and your riding makes the boat what it is... Thus, you make birth what it is, you make birth your birth. When you ride in a boat, your body, mind, and environs together are the undivided activity of the boat. The entire earth and the entire sky are both the undivided activity of the boat.⁴²

Riding in the boat, you make the boat a boat but the boat makes you a “boater”—hence, reciprocal conditioning and the dynamic inseparableness of you and the boat at any given moment. At the time of sailing the boat—i.e., at any given moment, as the boat is metaphor—there is, from your perspective, nothing but the world of the boat, the world of this given moment, with all of its interpenetrating particulars.

As we usually take “you” to be a different self from “me,” we also usually take ourselves to be the *same* selves over time, to persist through time. Counter to this, Dōgen employs another boat analogy; this time, we are to note that if we look at the world, it seems as if it, like the shore seen from a boat, is what changes/moves, while we stay the same/unmoving. Yet, if we look at ourselves, we'll see that we *are* changing/moving: “If he turns back within himself, making all his daily deeds immediately and directly his own, the reason all things have no selfhood becomes clear to him.”⁴³ It is all too easy to see the transitoriness of the world around us but fail to see the transitoriness of ourselves. After all, we seem to feel a sense of continuity over time. We remember doing and thinking and saying, and so forth, a large variety of things, not only from yesterday but from last year and many years before that. This is like being on the boat with the shore passing us/the boat by. Yet, if we pay attention, cultivating and practicing awareness, in *zazen* and daily life, we see that we are “moving.”

Again, for Dōgen, just as with interdependence, impermanence does not flatfootedly negate your existence over time. He expresses this forcefully in his firewood analogy,⁴⁴ where he makes clear the nonduality of each moment in time. Let's say you practice diligently and one day realize the truth of Dōgen's Zen and you thereby actualize enlightenment in your realization. In doing so, the fire of your desires burns itself out in the peace of your realization. One way to think of this story is that there was a time when you were not enlightened and a later time in which you became enlightened. Here, we have a kind of duality of *unenlightened* self-at-one-time and *enlightened* self-at-a-later-time and these “two” selves are really one, really numerically identical. Dōgen finds this way of understanding things to be deeply deluded. The

⁴² Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, “Zenki.”

⁴³ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, “Genjokoan,” 42.

⁴⁴ See Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, “Genjokoan.”

problem he has here is with the idea of subsequent, discrete moments simply following each other (in time), and, in particular, ones where the selfsame person persists across them.

Yet, it is not that he wants to say that there is *no* sameness over time. Again, we must understand each moment's nonduality. At the moment of firewood, there is nothing but firewood, which is firmly located in what Dōgen calls its *dharma-position* [*hōi* 法位]⁴⁵ and cut off from everything else that is not it. Each moment, each particular, is all that exists—there is no before or after to speak of at any given moment. Nevertheless, there is a before and after rooted in the moment of the firewood. After all, the firewood is what it is only interdependently with the rest of the world: the sun, the soil, the air, the water, that gave rise to the tree that became the wood; there is the ash of “the future.” Now, there is nothing but the firewood, it is cut off from all else; yet, because of emptiness, the firewood is nondual with the before (the tree, etc.) and after (the ash, etc.). Similarly, the *you* that is the unenlightened self-at-one-time and enlightened self-at-a-later-time is that particular *you* because at each given moment, that moment is both cutoff from all other moments while being interdependent with them “over time.” Therefore, in emptiness, we have a kind of temporal unity of selves *over time*.

Given the above, one way, then, to express a fundamental implication for Dōgen is that in practice, one forgets, that is, one lets go of, one's separable, limited self-concern and in the realized context of emptiness, one's (small-) self-concern is now concern for the self that is the entire world, entire being. And in the reconstructed understanding of each moment and each particular, one realizes that the entire world is engaged by engaging *this* moment and *this* particular, whether *this* cup of coffee or *this* dog, or *this* political problem. Thus, to neglect this moment and its particulars is to neglect all being. It is in this way that we are *the nondual unity of all particulars*; and we avoid falling into either extreme in our understanding of particularity and unity.

We are now in a position to understand how it is, in Dōgen's thorough application of emptiness, that when we authentically practice and realize emptiness, it is not only a denial, a “no” (deconstruction), of individuality or self. Rather, it is simultaneously a complete affirmation, a “yes” (reconstruction), of each particular, each moment, such that each moment, each particular, “pops out” as the only particular, the only moment, there is, yet “containing” all else—this is Buddha-nature; this is time; this is existence; this is you; this is me. In this way, the ordinary becomes extra-ordinary, the familiar becomes new and unfamiliar in its radical temporality of denial and affirmation, moment to moment.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Hee-Jin Kim, “Existence/Time as the Way of Asceticism: An Analysis of the Basic Structure of Dōgen's Thought,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, New Series 11, no. 2 (1978): 43–73.

⁴⁶ For further interesting and helpful discussions of issues concerning (Zen) Buddhism and the self, see Joan Stambaugh, *The Formless Self* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Leah Kalmanson, “Buddhism and bell hooks: Liberatory Aesthetics and the Radical Subjectivity of No-Self,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012), 810–27; Erin McCarthy, “The Embodied Ethical Self: A Japanese and Feminist Account of Nondual Subjectivity,” in *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue*, ed., J. McWeeny and A. Butnor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 203–22; and Hsiao-Lan Hu, “Kamma, No-Self, and Social Construction: The Middle Way Between Determinism and Free Will,” in *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue*, ed., J. McWeeny and A. Butnor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 37–56.

Language and Enlightenment

To fully appreciate Dōgen’s views on language,⁴⁷ it is important to understand the view(s) that one usually finds in Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhism and other forms of Zen. For example, Mario D’Amato notes that “a dominant theme in Mahāyāna soteriological thought is that language and conceptualization are at the root of the problem with sentient existence.”⁴⁸ Further, discussing what he takes to be the third of three ways one may describe something, Garma C. C. Chang writes that direct pointing, as with a finger, *without employing concepts*, is “the best and in fact the only genuine way to describe Emptiness....It is this approach which is frequently applied in Zen Buddhism.”⁴⁹ And not only are concepts supposedly unnecessary for describing/pointing to emptiness, but concepts and explanations are taken to actually occlude how things really are—most notably the reality of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The latter is a point that Thomas Kasulis emphasizes numerous times in his *Zen Action, Zen Person*. For example, he writes, “Concepts are *samvrti*; they literally ‘cover’ or ‘obstruct’ the way things are actually experienced.”⁵⁰ Further: “The Zen Buddhist view is that intellectualizations, concepts, even language itself are inadequate for expressing our experience as it is experienced.”⁵¹ As Toru Funaki puts it, “In Zen Buddhism...the practitioner aims at reaching an absolute stage where language is of no import as that stage lies beyond linguistic understanding.”⁵²

Let’s be clear about what is at issue in these claims. First, we have the idea that language lies at the root of suffering, presumably because its use creates a reification of emptiness, that is to say, it seems to make “solid” that which is in truth empty; put differently, since language creates the illusion of individual and persisting objects, it allows for the projection of “selves” onto the world, and, thus, is a precondition of craving. Second, language/concepts are not simply unnecessary for “pointing to,” for example, emptiness, but the only genuine way to do so is without language/concepts. Third, language/concepts occlude reality as it really is. Fourth, language is inadequate to describe reality as we actually experience it. Fifth, there is a stage of understanding that is nonlinguistic/nonconceptual, and that is the “place” where you want to get to with your practice—*prajñā* (wisdom) is nonlinguistic.

It is certainly true that our use of language and concepts⁵³ can be problematic. Our use of noun words, for example, can give the impression that the world is populated by individual,

⁴⁷ The following discussion is merely supplemental to the far greater discussion of Dōgen and language by others. See, for example, Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, ch. 4, and Heine, “Dōgen on the Language of Creative Textual Hermeneutics.”

⁴⁸ Mario D’Amato, “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word,” in *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, ed. M. D’Amato, J. L. Garfield, and T. J. Tillemans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 41–42.

⁴⁹ G. C. C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 63.

⁵⁰ T. P. Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai’i, 1981), 23.

⁵¹ Kasulis, 55.

⁵² Toru Funaki, “The Notion of the ‘Words that Speak the Truth’ in Merleau-Ponty and Shinran,” in *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, ed. J. Y. Park and G. Kopf, 113–32 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

⁵³ And from now on I will write simply of language and take that to include concepts; while there might be concepts that we use that do not have words associated with them, I am going to simply fold that possibility into my discussion of language.

persisting things—cats, cars, countries, donuts—when, in fact, anything we call a cat is a complex, dynamic process that we label “cat” as a helpful way to engage reality over time. Along these lines, we discriminate between things, preferencing one thing over another by using language to divide the world into kinds of things, some we like, some we don’t. Further, we often get caught up in the future with our plans that we formulate in language; we get caught up in the past, using language to help form a picture of what (we take to have) happened. We use language to conceptualize one thing as a means to another, thereby defiling the nonduality of the moment. Indeed, we could go on and on in regard to all of the ways we are deluded through language.

However, we have already seen a number of things from Dōgen that challenge the above five points raised against language. Going in reverse order, first, for Dōgen, *prajñā*/wisdom, enlightenment, is not a matter of achieving some special mental state, but rather is the continuous practice of letting go with full presence. And as he makes clear in his “Instructions for the Tenzo,”⁵⁴ there is enlightened activity that employs concepts and makes discriminations.

Second, while the uninitiated may not be able to know what exactly it is like to drink coffee simply by my describing it, that does not mean that such a description cannot help prepare one for what to look for when first drinking coffee. The same applies to describing aspects of enlightened practice. Further, one of the things Dōgen is often doing in the writings he presents to monks and lay followers is not simply describing but rather acting like a kind of cheerleader. He admonishes, encourages, gives warnings, and presses question after question.

Third, while it is possible that language can function to occlude the nature of reality, namely, its emptiness, words do not have to do so. For one thing, as we have done here, we can use words to describe the true nature of reality (according to Zen) in all of its emptiness. Further, we can have at least two different attitudes toward a thing and the word we use to pick it out. That is, when I use “cat” to refer to one of the furry animals in our home, I can have either of the following two attitudes: (1) this “cat” is a separate, persisting thing or (2) this “cat” is a dynamic, interdependent, transitory process. Using “cat” does not force me to comport myself along the lines of (1). I can use “cat” to keep track of this collection of *skandhas* over time and to discriminate between it and the dog without that meaning I’ve deludedly hypostatized a separate, persisting thing.

Fourth, it is not clear what it would mean to point to emptiness outside a linguistic/philosophical/cultural context. The example that Chang appeals to is that of a Zen master “enlightening” a student by asking him to kneel down and then unexpectedly kicking him in the chest. Suddenly the student has a breakthrough (*kenshō*) type experience and is awakened to the true nature of reality (emptiness/Buddha-nature).⁵⁵ While these issues are complex and we cannot fully address them here, let’s simply note that outside the broader context of Buddhism, its teachings, and so on, and the more specific context of a Zen master and disciple, all of which are through and through a complex linguistic/philosophical/cultural context (as Dōgen would say, with many entwined vines), we’ve no reason to think a kick to the chest would give rise to such an experience of awakening. A person with no knowledge of Buddhism and Zen could not

⁵⁴ In Dōgen, *Dōgen’s Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of Eihei Shingi*, trans. Taigen Daniel Leighton and Shohaku Okumura (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ G. C. C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism*, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 63.

be led to understand all that it is about simply by nonlinguistic means, much less be led to an experience of awakening by a kick to the chest.

Fifth, we have already seen how language can, indeed, be a contributing factor to delusion and suffering. However, we have also seen how it need not be. And, in fact, Dōgen is often taken to be *the one* to show how language can be most productively harnessed to encourage authentic practice. As with everything else for Dōgen, we must apply both the deconstructive and reconstructive aspects of emptiness to language and concepts. Further, it is, actually, quite possible that something Dōgen writes might be all you need to have a deep realization into a point central to practice.

Consider, as a kind of summary note on the above five points about the importance of language for enlightened practice, Kim: “Enlightenment, from Dōgen’s perspective, consists of clarifying and penetrating one’s muddled discriminative thought in and through our language to attain clarity, depth, and precision in the discriminative thought itself. This is enlightenment or vision.”⁵⁶

The other main aspect of Dōgen and language to consider is his treatment of kōans. Kōans are often taken to be short enigmatic, if not incomprehensible, sayings, questions, or dialogues, often between Zen masters or masters and students. One way, often in Rinzai Zen, they are utilized is as objects on which to focus the practitioner’s attention; their enigmatic/nonsensical content is like a giant rock that the practitioner’s conceptual thought crashes against, breaking apart, allowing the practitioner to have a *kenshō*-type experience of seeing things as they truly are: empty.

Dōgen, however, does not treat them this way in his writings. Many of his writings, particularly in the *Shōbōgenzō*, consist of extended commentary on kōans, treating them as perfectly understandable (at least to those with the proper understanding of the Dharma).⁵⁷ It is in these contexts that Dōgen expresses his understanding of the authentic Dharma by way of his creative and masterly use of language. Waddell and Abe nicely summarize a key aspect of Dōgen’s writing. In their introductory comments to Dōgen’s “Bussho” fascicle, which, as we’ve seen, is where he transforms “All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature” into “entire being is the Buddha-nature,” they write: “Perhaps the most striking feature of his treatment of the theme [of Buddha-nature] is the clear priority he gives to religious meaning over grammatical syntax, often reading the passages he quotes from various texts in ways that are, in strict grammatical terms, dubious at best. He does this to focus attention on what he feels are inadequacies in the traditional ways the texts are read and to rectify those inadequacies based on his own understanding.”⁵⁸ What I want to emphasize is that one of the central things Dōgen is doing by appropriating and modifying the language in the kōans and sutra passages he treats is to make them, in a sense, new. That is, not only does he seek to do what Waddell and Abe suggest above, but he also seeks to make that which is familiar, *unfamiliar*, thereby *revitalizing* it, and in the process bring the listener/reader into a deeper realization of the Dharma.

Along these lines, I want to do something similar. However, for most Western students, particularly beginners, many of the kōans/passages Dōgen might use and comment on are not already familiar such that they can be *made new* and *revitalized* for the reader. Nonetheless, we

⁵⁶ Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking*, 63.

⁵⁷ See Dōgen’s “The Mountains and Waters Sutra” (for example, in Okumura, *The Mountains and Waters Sūtra*) for an explicit repudiation of the view that kōans have nonsensical “content.”

⁵⁸ Dōgen, *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 59.

can try to demonstrate Dōgen’s method of commentary by using a short “kōan” that the reader is likely to be familiar with, namely, the nursery rhyme, “row, row, row your boat.” While the nursery rhyme is obviously not an actual kōan, it has the character of kōans in many ways, and it has the further advantage of being familiar to contemporary English readers. I take it that it is familiar to the point of being unremarkable to the reader, thus making it ripe for reinterpretation and revitalization in the way Dōgen does with kōans that would have been familiar to his audience, as well.

What I would like the reader to do is to first study carefully all that we’ve discussed so far about Dōgen’s Zen and then go on to read my attempt to recreate a Dōgen-like kōan commentary on the nursery rhyme, thereby demonstrating some typical moves Dōgen makes while also giving the reader a chance to make connections with what has been straightforwardly described above. Teachers may use the set of questions that follow the commentary to guide students in drawing connections with what they have learned about Dōgen’s interpretive method and the practice of Sōtō Zen.

Dream Rowing / The Rowing of a Dream

A monk once asked a Master, “How should I understand the unity of practice and enlightenment and the reality of time?” The Master turned, walked away, and broke into a short song, “*Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.*” The monk’s mouth dropped open and then with tear-filled eyes he began to sing the same song.

You should enter the Buddha’s eye, ceaselessly studying these words “row row row your boat.” Consider, what is rowing? Consider, where is your boat? Does *merrily* exclude *non-merrily*? Who is the dream that rows the boat? Ask these questions and enumerable more until you have thoroughly mastered the truth of *row, row, row your boat*.

Is there ever a time that is not *row, row, row*? Is *row, row, row* not just Zen Master Pao-ch’è fanning himself? Does rowing not exhaust the activities of Buddhas and Patriarchs? If you say that you do not need to row because the current is swift and permanent, then you understand neither swiftness nor permanence—neither time nor impermanence. Where is your continuous practice if all is not *row, row, row*? *Row* such that you go *beyond rowing*.

Penetrate unceasingly *gently down the stream*. Do not mistakenly think this stream is a stream. Time does not simply flow. Each moment is all time, all being, *all being is time*. This we must practice diligently. Yet, what does it mean to practice being as time? It means to move *gently down the stream* with your rowing. But this *movement* is what we fail to understand. *Time does not rush* if you paddle faster; *time does not drag* if you hold the paddle against the water. Does *this* moment move anywhere?

How do we go *merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily*? Is *merrily* a boat full of laughter? At the time of neither liking nor disliking, is *merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily* not the same as crying, crying, crying, crying? Only fools who are ignorant of the authentic Buddha eye believe that *merrily* is nothing but merrily. What is the full range of merrily? Is it not simply *what comes thus*? Sitting facing the wall, letting the sky be the sky, whether cloudless or full of low, dark billows? The sun peeking through or the sun not seen for days? Is the full range of the sky’s colors not *merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily*?

Seeing into the truth of *life is but a dream* requires plucking out the Buddha’s eyeball and replacing your own with your own, as you replace your body with the true human body. It is *just*

this. Penetrate unceasingly: In a dream are you not awake? Ordinary people view a dream as unreal and waking up as reality. Do not be so foolish! When you fall down in a dream, having tripped over the ground, do you not pick yourself up using the same ground? Is that ground not solid? Is it not a dream? Just remember: If *life* were not *but a dream* then there would be no awakening. Time is dreaming; dreaming is time. Thus, *life* cannot be *but a dream*.

Questions to Answer Regarding “Dōgen’s”: *Dream Rowing / The Rowing of a Dream*

1. What is the connection being made between “rowing” and the fanning of Zen Master Pao-ch’e who demonstrated the need for continuous practice by fanning himself even though the wind is everywhere?
2. In what ways are the boat “metaphors” and their meanings, as discussed in the section “Self and other and self and self-over-time,” found in the commentary here on the “Row, row, row. . .”?
3. In what way is time not like a river? How does this relate to the question of self/selves?
4. How is the meaning of “gently down the stream” transformed in the commentary?
5. We might think that being enlightened makes everything joyful or “merry.” However, how does the commentary transform this understanding of “merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily”?
6. In what, perhaps, negative sense is life called “but a dream” in the original nursery rhyme? How is this transformed in the context of this “Dōgen-esque” commentary?
7. What does it mean to say that when one falls because of the ground it is the ground that one must use to pick oneself up? What is the point of talking about dream ground?
8. In what ways do we see the nonduality of dream and non-dream (solidity) in the commentary?
9. What other connections can you make between the “Row, row, row...” piece and other aspects of Dōgen’s Zen?

Bibliography

- Bokusan, Nishiari. “Commentary on Dogen’s Genjo Koan.” In *Dōgen’s Genjo Koan: Three Commentaries*. Translated by S. M. Weitsman and K. Tanahashi. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2011.
- Chang, G. C. C. *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971.
- D’Amato, Mario. “Why the Buddha Never Uttered a Word.” In *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, edited by M. D’Amato, J. L. Garfield, and T. J. Tillemans, 41–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Dōgen. *Dōgen’s Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of Eihei Shingi*. Translated by Taigen Daniel Leighton and Shohaku Okumura. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

- . *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*. Translated by N. Waddell and M. Abe. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- . *Dōgen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Kōroku*. Translated by T. D. Leighton and S. Okumura. Edited by T. D. Leighton. Boston: Wisdom, 2010.
- . *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Shobo Genzo*. Edited by K. Tanahashi. Boston: Shambhala, 2012.
- Funaki, Toru. "The Notion of the 'Words that Speak the Truth' in Merleau-Ponty and Shinran." In *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, edited by J. Y. Park and G. Kopf, 113–32. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009.
- Heine, Steven. *Did Dōgen Go to China?: What He Wrote and When He Wrote It*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- . *From Chinese Chan to Japanese Zen: A Remarkable Century of Transmission and Transformation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- . "Dōgen on the Language of Creative Textual Hermeneutics." In *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, edited by B. W. Davis, 215–29. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Hu, Hsiao-Lan. "Kamma, No-Self, and Social Construction: The Middle Way Between Determinism and Free Will." In *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue*, edited by J. McWeeny and A. Butnor, 37–56. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Kalmanson, Leah. "Buddhism and bell hooks: Liberatory Aesthetics and the Radical Subjectivity of No-Self." *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012). 810–27.
- Kapleau, Philip. *The Three Pillars of Zen: 25th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1989.
- Kasulis, T. P. *Zen Action, Zen Person*. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai'i, 1981.
- Kim, Hee-Jin. "Existence/Time as the Way of Ascesis: An Analysis of the Basic Structure of Dōgen's Thought." *The Eastern Buddhist*. New Series 11, no. 2 (1978): 43–73.
- . *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*. Boston: Wisdom, 2004.
- . *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on His View of Zen*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Leighton, Taigen Dan. *Faces of Compassion: Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression: An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2012.
- McCarthy, Erin. "The Embodied Ethical Self: A Japanese and Feminist Account of Nondual Subjectivity." In *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue*, edited by J. McWeeny and A. Butnor, 203–22. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988.
- Okumura, Sohaku. *Realizing Genjōkōan: The Key to Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*. Boston: Wisdom, 2010.
- . *The Mountains and Waters Sūtra: A Practitioner's Guide to Dōgen's "Sansuikyo"*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2018.
- Stambaugh, Joan. *The Formless Self*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Uchiyama, Kosho, and Sohaku Okumura. *The Zen Teaching of Homeless Kodo*. Boston: Wisdom, 2014.
- . *Deepest Practice, Deepest Wisdom: Three Fascicles from Shōbōgenzō with Commentaries*. Translated by D. T. Wright and S. Okumura. Somerville: Wisdom, 2018.

- Wrisley, George. "The Nietzschean Bodhisattva—Passionately Navigating Indeterminacy." In *The Significance of Indeterminacy: Perspectives from Asian and Continental Philosophy*, edited by Robert H. Scott and Gregory Moss, 309–29. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- . "The Role of Compassion in Actualizing Dōgen's Zen." *Japan Studies Review* XXIV (2020): 111–36.