

# The Essential Dōgen

Dōgen Zenji - 1200-1253  
Kazuaki Tanahashi and Peter Levitt - 2013

## **Preface and Acknowledgements (Kazuaki Tanahashi)**

- ❑ Dogen wrote two types of poems—waka and Chinese-style poems. Waka is an old style of Japanese poetry consisting of thirty-one syllables: five, seven, five, seven, and seven.

## **A Walk with Dogen into Our Time (Peter Levitt)**

- ❑ As the poem begins, Ginsberg says: Under the burden of solitude, under the burden of dissatisfaction the weight, the weight we carry is love.
- ❑ Suffering under such a weight is often accompanied by longing, as the poet well knew, and so his poem expresses the longing to return to that human possibility known by many names, including wholeness, oneness, unity, and Self, though Ginsberg simply called it love.
- ❑ There may be true students who are not concerned with fame and gain, who allow their aspiration for enlightenment to guide them and earnestly desire to practice the buddha way. They may be misguided by incapable teachers and obstructed from the correct understanding; intoxicated in confusion they may sink into the realm of delusion for a long time. How can they nourish the correct seed of prajna and encounter the time of attaining the way?
- ❑ Dogen points in this direction in his essay “The Point of Zazen”: Yaoshan, Great Master Hongdao, was sitting. A monk asked him, “In steadfast sitting, what do you think?” Yaoshan said, “Think not-thinking.” “How do you think not thinking.” Yaoshan replied, “Beyond thinking.”

- ❑ We practice because we do not yet know who or what we are. But as a result of many causes, including the suffering we experience and the longing engendered by that suffering, we aspire to know. That aspiration leads many people to begin the practice of zazen. Dogen expressed this beautifully when he said, “Wisdom is seeking wisdom.” Perhaps we might paraphrase and say that wholeness is seeking wholeness, self is seeking self.
- ❑ The Japanese words Dogen used to express “intimate” are shimmitsu or shinsetsu. For Dogen, “intimate means close and inseparable. There is no gap. Intimacy embraces buddha ancestors. It embraces you. It embraces the self. It embraces action. It embraces generations. It embraces merit. It embraces intimacy.”
- ❑ The ability to be fully present yet not controlled by conditions creates a stable mental and emotional foundation even in the midst of turmoil.
- ❑ “An enlightened person is someone who embodies the deep understanding of nonduality while acting in accordance with ordinary boundaries, not being bound to either realm but acting freely and harmoniously.”

### **Practical Instruction**

- ❑ “An enlightened person is someone who embodies the deep understanding of nonduality while acting in accordance with ordinary boundaries, not being bound to either realm but acting freely and harmoniously.”
- ❑ “Aspiration for enlightenment” is called “hotsu bodai shin” in Japanese, or in short, “hosshin.” It is sometimes translated as “beginner’s mind.” “Way-seeking mind” (doshin) is another name for it (in this case, way means enlightenment).
- ❑ You should stop searching for phrases and chasing after words. Take the backward step and turn the light inward. Your body-mind of itself will drop off and your original face will appear. If you want to attain just this, immediately practice just this.
- ❑ To study with mind means to study with various aspects of mind, such as consciousness, emotion, and intellect. After resonating with the way and arousing the aspiration for enlightenment, take refuge in the great way of buddha ancestors<sup>11</sup> and devote yourself to the practice of way-seeking mind.
- ❑ Sit zazen wholeheartedly, conform to the buddha form, and let go of all things. Then, leaping beyond the boundary of delusion and enlightenment, free from the paths of ordinary and sacred, unconstrained by ordinary thinking, immediately wander at ease, enriched with great enlightenment.
- ❑ RULES FOR ZAZEN: Practicing Zen is zazen. For zazen, a quiet place is suitable. Lay out a thick mat. Do not let in drafts or smoke, rain or dew. Protect and maintain the place that contains your body. There are examples from the past of sitting on a diamond seat and sitting on a flat stone covered with a thick layer of grass. Day or night, the place of sitting should not be dark; it should be kept warm in winter and cool in summer.

- ❑ Set aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest. Zazen is not thinking of good, not thinking of bad. It is not conscious endeavor. It is not introspection. Do not desire to become a buddha. Let sitting or lying down drop away. Be moderate in eating and drinking. Mindful of the passing of time, engage yourself in zazen as though saving your head from fire.
- ❑ When sitting zazen, wear the kashaya and use a round cushion. The cushion should not be placed all the way under the legs but only under the buttocks. In this way the crossed legs rest on the [soft] mat and the backbone is supported by the round cushion.
- ❑ Sit either in the half-lotus position or in the full-lotus position. For the full-lotus put the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh. The toes should lie along the thighs, not extending beyond. For the half-lotus position, simply put the left foot on the right thigh.
- ❑ Loosen your robes and arrange them in an orderly way. Place the right hand on the left foot and the left hand on the right hand, with the ends of the thumbs lightly touching each other. With the hands in this position, place them close to the body so that the joined thumb tips are at the navel. Straighten your body and sit upright. Do not lean to the left or right; do not bend forward or backward. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders, and your nose in line with your navel.
- ❑ Rest your tongue against the roof of your mouth and breathe through your nose. Lips and teeth should be closed. Eyes should be open, neither too wide nor too narrow. Having adjusted body and mind in this manner, take a breath and exhale fully.
- ❑ Sit solidly in samadhi and think not thinking. How do you think not thinking? Beyond thinking. This is the art of zazen. Zazen is not learning to do concentration. It is the dharma gate of great ease and joy. It is undivided practice-realization.
- ❑ Samadhi is a Sanskrit word indicating the one-pointed state of body and mind in meditation (zazen). It is translated as ding in Chinese, which means “stability.”
- ❑ Mindfulness and a respectful heart in each moment are applied equally in meditation and other daily activities including work, interaction with others, and cleansing one’s body. Practicing and living in this way helps us to clearly see, understand, and value what is right before us as none other than the wholeness of life itself. As Dogen says, even our eating bowls are the body and mind of buddha ancestors.
- ❑ Where there is no discrimination, how can there be distaste? Thus, do not be careless even when you work with poor materials, and sustain your efforts even when you have excellent materials. Never change your attitude according to the materials. If you do, it is like varying your truth when speaking with different people; then you are not a practitioner of the way.

## History

- ❑ Know that the buddha way, which has been transmitted from past buddhas, is not called Zen meditation, so how could there be the name “Zen School”? Clearly understand that it is an extreme mistake to use the name “Zen School.”

- ❑ Bodhidharma went to China and entrusted dharma to the great master Huike; this was the beginning of dharma transmission in the eastern country. In this way, by direct transmission, it reached Huineng, the Sixth Ancestor, Zen Master Dajian. Then the authentic buddha dharma spread in China and the teaching that is not concerned with concepts and theories took form.
- ❑ For Dogen the most crucial criterion for teaching, including his own, is authenticity, which consists of the direct experience of reality passed on from an awakened one to another, supported by scriptural teachings. Ironically, this experience is also described as “realization without a teacher and scripture.” This phrase may be understood to mean no separation between the self and the teacher or scripture.

### **Gates of Dharma**

- ❑ “The wisdom flame of the beginner’s mind is complete at the outset. The all-inclusive samadhi of buddha ancestors is the completion of that same wisdom over time, burning down the confusion of ignorance till the candle is no more. Can you see how this practice has no beginning and no end, how now and later are not really different? This is the essential teaching correctly transmitted by buddha ancestors.
- ❑ “Those who vow to steal a precious treasure, to defeat a powerful enemy, or to know a beautiful woman will follow their intention and keep it in mind on each occasion under all circumstances while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down. Nothing is left unachieved with such a commitment. If you seek the way with genuine intention as you practice just sitting, as you work on koans about ancient teachers, or as you face the teacher, then you can shoot a bird however high in the sky or catch a fish however deep in the water.
- ❑ “Upon arousing this mind, you should reflect on the impermanence of the world. Impermanence is not something you merely visualize or something you create and think about. Impermanence is the truth that is right in front of you.
- ❑ To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.
- ❑ Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide.
- ❑ Enlightenment does not divide you, just as the moon does not break the water.
- ❑ Great enlightenment is the tea and rice of daily activity.
- ❑ Dogen’s teaching of the microcircle of the way is one’s experience of practice-enlightenment in each moment of meditation. The macrocircle of the way is one’s meditation together with all awakened ones throughout space and time. For Dogen, “Nirvana” is a nondual experience in

meditation. “Intimacy” means nonseparation. As Dogen explains, continuous practice is essential for an awakened life.

- ❑ By your continuous practice, the continuous practice of all buddhas is actualized and the great road of all buddhas opens up. Your continuous practice creates the circle of the way.
- ❑ “Buddha nature” is the capacity to become a buddha, inherent in all sentient beings according to the Mahayana teaching. Dogen interprets it as the reality of all things. A line from the Great Pari-nirvana Sutra is traditionally translated as “All living beings have buddha nature.” Because of the flexible ambiguity of the Chinese language, Dogen translates it as “Living beings all are buddha nature.”
- ❑ There is the eighteenfold prajna: the prajna of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind; the prajna of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and objects of mind; and the prajna of the corresponding consciousness of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.
- ❑ There is the fourfold [noble truth] prajna: suffering, craving, freedom from suffering, and the path. There is the sixfold [manifestation] prajna: generosity, precepts, patience, vigor, contemplation, and prajna.
- ❑ There is the singlefold prajna: unsurpassable, complete enlightenment, actualized at this very moment. There is the manifestation of the threefold prajna: the past, present, and future. There is the sixfold [great element] prajna: earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness. And there is the fourfold [bodily posture] prajna: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, common in daily activities.
- ❑ Know that kind speech arises from kind heart, and kind heart from the seed of compassionate heart. Ponder the fact that kind speech is not just praising the merit of others; it has the power to turn the destiny of the nation.
- ❑ Even when you are clearly correct and others are mistaken, it is harmful to argue and defeat them. On the other hand, if you admit fault when you are right, you are a coward. It is best to step back, neither trying to correct others nor conceding to mistaken views. If you don’t react competitively, and let go of the conflict, others will also let go of it without harboring ill will. Above all, this is something you should keep in mind.
- ❑ In ancient times, someone helped a caged tortoise; another took care of a sick sparrow. They did not expect a reward; they were moved to do so only for the sake of beneficial action.
- ❑ Foolish people think that if they help others first, their own benefit will be lost, but this is not so. Beneficial action is an act of oneness, benefiting self and others together.
- ❑ There is a simple way to become a buddha: When you refrain from unwholesome actions, are not attached to birth and death, and are compassionate toward all sentient beings, respectful to seniors and kind to juniors, not excluding or desiring anything, with no thoughts or worries, you will be called a buddha. Seek nothing else.
- ❑ “Kind mind” is parental mind. Just as parents care for their children, you should bear in mind the three treasures. Even poor or suffering people raise their children with deep love. Their hearts cannot be understood by others. This can be known only when you become a father or a mother.

They do not care whether they themselves are poor or rich; their only concern is that their children will grow up.

- ❑ Trust, also translated as faith, is one of the four pillars of Buddhism: teaching, practice, trust, and realization (kyo, gyo, shin, sho, in Japanese).
- ❑ Know that the root of trust is not self, not others. It is not forced by the self, nor is it created by the self or led by others. Because it is not established by the self, it has been intimately entrusted throughout east and west. The entire body embodying trust is called trust. Trust invariably follows and is followed by the stage of the buddha fruit. Without being at the stage of the buddha fruit, trust is not actualized.
- ❑ Now take the three universal pure precepts. [The officiate asks the recipient each of the following questions three times. The recipient affirms each question each time.] One: The precept of observing guidelines. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Two: The precept of taking wholesome actions. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Three: The precept of benefiting all beings. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. None of these three universal pure precepts should be violated. Will you maintain them from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain them. Please maintain them.
- ❑ Now receive the ten [prohibitory] precepts. These are the great pure precepts of all buddhas and bodhisattvas. [The officiate asks the recipient each of the following questions three times. The recipient affirms each question each time.] One: Not to kill. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Two: Not to steal. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Three: Not to misuse sex. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Four: Not to make false statements. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Five: Not to sell or buy alcohol. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Six: Not to discuss the faults of other home-leaver bodhisattvas. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Seven: Not to praise yourself and insult others. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Eight: Not to withhold dharma treasure. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Nine: Not to be angry. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. Ten: Not to slander the three treasures. Will you maintain this precept from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain it. None of these ten precepts should be violated. Will you maintain them from now until you attain a buddha body? Yes, I will maintain them. Please maintain them.
- ❑ Loving fame is worse than breaking a precept. Breaking a precept is a transgression at a particular time. Loving fame is like an ailment of a lifetime. Do not foolishly hold on to fame, or do not

ignorantly accept it. Not to accept fame is continuous practice. To abandon it is continuous practice.

### **Philosophical View**

- ❑ Time is experienced in a paradoxical way in meditation. Dogen's investigation of time was unique in ancient times. It is also useful for everyday life in the contemporary world. For Dogen, time is inseparable from self, from existence, and from space. Time is being. Time is no other than "time being."
- ❑ The reason you do not clearly understand the time being is that you think of time only as passing.
- ❑ At the time the mountains were climbed and the rivers crossed, you were present. Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not go away.
- ❑ Mountains are time. Oceans are time. If they were not time, there would be no mountains or oceans.
- ❑ For Dogen, "space" means the all-inclusive empty space that has neither boundary nor limitation. All phenomena are embraced in one moment of meditation, going beyond any distinction between small and large, near and far.
- ❑ In meditation, all things can be experienced as one and not separable, which is the experience of nonduality. This is the source of compassion. At the same time, we discern things as separate with differences and boundaries. Dogen calls for the full experience of duality, of nonduality, and of freedom from duality and nonduality while maintaining integrity.
- ❑ Know that water is life and air is life. The bird is life and the fish is life. Life must be the bird and life must be the fish.
- ❑ Moment by moment a thought appears and disappears without abiding. Moment by moment a body appears and disappears without abiding. Yet the power of practice always matures.
- ❑ According to Buddhist teaching, mind is inseparable from all things or all phenomena. Subject is inseparable from object. Thus, mind is all-inclusive.
- ❑ On Nondependence of Mind Waterbirds come and go, their traces disappear— yet they never forget their path.
- ❑ Life is often called "birth" in Buddhism, since a person is seen as being born and dying many times at each moment. Thus birth and death are experienced not in opposition but as one. To indicate this unity, we sometimes translate them as birth-and-death. In meditation one may experience a state beyond birth and beyond death.
- ❑ "Emancipation" means that in birth you are emancipated from birth and in death you are emancipated from death.



- ❑ In birth there is nothing but birth, and in death there is nothing but death. Accordingly, when birth comes, face and actualize birth, and when death comes, face and actualize death. Do not avoid them or desire them.
- ❑ Karma is a Sanskrit word meaning an action and its visible and invisible effect. Dogen had a deep belief that any action can become a cause that brings forth an effect sooner or later.
- ❑ Freedom in Zen practice is not to do whatever one wants but to break through the seeming boundaries of subject and object as well as the distinctions between delusion and enlightenment that hinder us from the realization of things as they are.
- ❑ Moment by moment a thought appears and disappears without abiding. Moment by moment a body appears and disappears without abiding. Yet the power of practice always matures.
- ❑ Encompassed by the power of great miracles, minor miracles occur. Great miracles include minor miracles, but minor miracles do not know great miracles. Minor miracles are a tuft of hair breathing in the vast ocean, a mustard seed storing Mount Sumeru, the top of the head spouting water, or feet spreading fire.
- ❑ Layman Pangyun was an outstanding person in the ancestral seat. He not only trained with Mazu and Shitou but met and studied with many other enlightened teachers. One day he said, “Miracles are nothing other than fetching water and carrying firewood.”
- ❑ The buddha dharma is always actualized through miracles. When actualized, a drop of water swallows the great ocean and a speck of dust hurls out a high mountain.

### **Students and Teachers**

- ❑ Furthermore, it is an error to discuss others' shortcomings and make accusations in their absence. Be extremely cautious of this. When you see others' faults, use skillful means not to arouse their anger. If you talk about their fault as if it were somebody else's, it will be easier for them to accept your point.
- ❑ The Buddhist community consists of four types of practitioners: monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Dogen's statement on lay practitioners changes from the time he wrote “Recommending Zazen to All People” in his early teaching career to the later period when he dedicated his life to training monastic practitioners.
- ❑ Do not run around after fame and gain in the realm of sound and form. Not to run around is the continuous practice that has been transmitted person to person by buddha ancestors.

### **Expression**

- ❑ For Dogen, intimate means direct, close, without separation and without intermediary words and concepts. Silence and gesture are part of direct communication.



- ❑ A number of mistaken people think and say that speech and movement are temporary phenomena, while silence and stillness are real. To speak in this way is not buddha dharma. This is a conjecture by those who have heard the scriptures of Brahma<sup>128</sup> and Indra. How
- ❑ Dogen was an extraordinarily inventive teacher. This can be seen in his creative, perplexing, and poetic use of language, where he would use ordinary words in unusual ways to help the thinking mind leap past itself to realization.