Dōgen

The Japanese monk Dōgen (道元; 1200–1253; also known as Dōgen Kigen [道元希玄], Eiheī Dōgen [永平道元], Kosō Jōyō Daishi [高祖承陽大師], or Busshō Dentō Kokushi [佛性傳東國師]) is a kaleidoscopic figure, representing many different things to many different people. For some he is the founder of the influential Sōtō (曹洞) Zen school, while for others he is one of the greatest thinkers in Japan has ever produced, a philosopher whose importance far exceeds the confines of both his sect and his country. But no matter how he is approached, there is always one difficulty that must be recognized: the complex web of extant manuscripts and later printed versions of his writings that makes it difficult to trace the development of his thought with any degree of certainty. Because the Sōtō Zen institution was only beginning to develop at his death, and because of the haphazard history of its early growth, Dōgen’s writings were largely ignored for over 400 years. When his role as founder was rediscovered in the Tokugawa period, the man chiefly responsible, Menzan Zuihō (面山瑞方; 1683–1769), had his own agenda, driven by the need to clarify the essence of Sōtō Zen in relation to other, rival Zen schools. The image of Dōgen that emerged from this tendentious process proved to be both convincing and long-lasting (Riggs, 2004), which purports to be a record of notes from the Baoqing era (1225–27) dating from 774–835) had returned to Japan 400 years earlier having introduced Song period Chan (禪) to Japan and founding the Rinzai sect (臨濟, Chn. Linji). In 1223 Dōgen accompanied Myōzen to China, to the Jingde si (景德寺) on Mount Tiantong (天童山), where they both studied under a Linji master called Wujī Liao'ai (無際了派). Myōzen died there two years later. Dōgen found considerable difficulty in finding a Chan master with whom he felt affinity, and traveled to a number of monasteries, including Tiantai and Jingshan (徑山), before he found the right teacher. After searching in vain for two years, he was guided by three dreams to return to the Jingde si in 1225, where he discovered the Chan master Rujing (如淨; 1163–1227). Rujing, it turned out, was a trenchant critic of many Southern Song monks, considering their practice far too lax; as a monk of the Caodong (曹洞, Jpn. Sōtō) lineage, he had a particular dislike of the use of gong'an (公案, Jpn. kōan) so typical of Linji Chan practice, preferring to stress the virtues of “just sitting” (zhiquan dazuo [只需打坐]), Jpn. shikan taza. Dōgen immediately recognized he had found a master with whom he could achieve enlightenment, and was allowed unprecedented access to Rujing for instruction. He soon succeeded in “sloughing off body and mind” (shenzin tuolu [身心脫落], Jpn. shinjin datsuraku). Just before Rujing died, Dōgen received from him a certificate of succession and the master’s robe, and so was able to return to Japan as a Zen master in his own right. Just as Kūkai (空海; 774–835) had returned to Japan 400 years earlier embodying within himself the succession of Shinon (真言), so Dōgen now returned to Japan carrying with him the lineage of Caodong/Sōtō.

The problem with this account, as with so many other narratives of Japanese monks in China, is that very little of it is verifiable. It is based on two sources: the Hōkyōki (寶慶記, A Record from the Baoqing era [1225–27]), which purports to be a record of notes...
taken during sessions with Rujing; and the Kenzeiki (建厳記, Kenzei’s record), a hagiography written by the monk Kenzei (1415–1474), the 14th abbot of Eiheiji (永平寺). Both of these sources are unreliable. The Hōkyōki is said to have been discovered by Dōgen’s successor Ejo (源俊; 1198–1280) soon after Dōgen died (facsimile of MS in E-SBGZ-ST 26), but until very recently it was only available in a reprint of Menzan’s woodblock edition of 1771. Menzan claimed to have based this reprint on a manuscript dated 1226 (E-SBGZ-STZS 4), but we now know that in the process he subjected it to heavy and intrusive editing (DZZ 7, 2–5; trans. Kodera, 1980, 113–140; see note on sources below). Menzan was also responsible for making the Kenzeiki available in printed form in 1754, in a version he entitled Teiho Kenzeiki. This was accepted as the standard biography until the research of Kawamura Kōdo (河村孝道; 1933–) revealed that here too Menzan’s interventions had been substantial (Kawamura, 1975).

No one has tried to argue that Dōgen never went to China, but there is little sign in his writings that he traveled as widely as he is reputed to have done, or that he left Jingde si for any length of time (Heine, 2003). What is more, the image of Rujing as a revered master who passed on to his successor Dōgen the one, true form of Chan practice only appears in writings by Dōgen that date to well after his return to Japan; the printed edition of Rujing’s “recorded sayings” (Jpn. goroku [語錄]), for example, is known to have reached Dōgen as late as 1242 (Teiho Kenzeiki, entry for 1242/8/5). Rujing himself is hardly mentioned in standard histories of Chinese Chan, and seems to have been little more than one of the abbots of an important monastery (Kagamishima, 1983). In much the same way that Huiguo (惠果) is defined as →Kūkai’s master, Rujing essentially belongs to history as Dōgen’s teacher. What remains of Rujing’s teachings, preserved in two short collections that only survive in Japanese editions of the 17th and 18th centuries, gives little sign that he was as dismissive of normal Linji practice as the hagiographies would indicate (Bielefeldt, 1985, 27; Nakaseko, 1997). His lineage was certainly that of Caodong, but his Chan practice was in no way remarkable. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that “Rujing” was largely a construct developed by Dōgen after his return, in fact much later, during the 1240s and 1250s, as he tried to carve out a distinct identity for himself in Japan.

Back in Kyoto in 1227, Dōgen returned to Kenninji only to move three years later to Fukakusa in the south of Kyoto, where he occupied the grounds of the Gokurakuji (極樂寺), which had fallen into disrepair, and which he began to transform into the first independent Zen monastery in Japan (Bielefeldt, 1988, 32). It was probably here in 1231 that he wrote the Bendōwa (頌道話, A Discourse Distinguishing the Way; NST 12, 9–31; partial trans. Bodiford, 2001, 319–325). Although this tract was subsequently forgotten and not widely disseminated until the mid-Tokugawa period, it reads like a manifesto, arguing for the primacy of zazen (坐禅; seated meditation) over all other forms of practice, such as the study of the scriptures, recitation, offerings, and devotion. Zazen, Dōgen argued, was not meditation as normally understood but “the actualization of the perfect enlightenment enjoyed by all Buddhhas” (Bodiford, 1993, 24). Another early work was the short Fukan zazengi (普勸坐禪儀, Universal Exhortation to Practice Seated Meditation; trans. Bielefeldt, 1988, 173–187), which deals with the theory and practice of zazen. Although it is possible that this was written even earlier, immediately after his return in 1227, the earliest example we have is an autograph dated 1233 (known as the Tenpu [天福] manuscript), which turns out to be little more than a revision of the “Zuochan yi” (坐禪義) section of Changlu Zongze’s (長蘆宗策; d. c. 1107) standard rules (Chanyuan qinggui [禪苑清規, X. 1245]) of 1103. The version that is now studied, memorized, and recited at the end of Sōtō meditation sessions is a much revised edition of 1757 that was published with a commentary, Fukan zazengi monge (普勸坐禪儀聞解; E-SBGZ-ST 17; SZ 12), written by the monk Fusen Gentotsu (釜山玄鈯; d.u.), and so does not reflect the Dōgen who had just returned from China (Bielefeldt, 1988, 36).

From the very beginning, Dōgen was determined to assert his independence from both the Tendai and Shingon (真言) schools, which inevitably made him few friends among the powerful, who owed much to the existing social structures. Nevertheless, he managed to raise enough funds to start rebuilding Gokurakuji where, in 1234, he was joined by Ejo. Two years later he renamed his monastery Köshōji (興聖寺), after the Xingsheng wanshou sì (興聖萬壽寺) on Jingshan. Ejo belonged to the Daruma-shū (達磨宗), a group that claimed its lineage from the monk Dainichi →Nōnin (大日能忍; II 189). Nōnin had managed to establish himself as a Zen master despite never having been to China: as early as 1189 he had sent two students on a (successful) mission to request certification from the Chan
master Zhuoan Deguang (指庵德光; 1121–1203). Deguang's lineage came from, in turn, the Linji master Dahui Zonggao (大慧宗杲; 1089–1163), who was well known for his large collection of gong’an, the *Zhengfa yanzang* (正法眼藏, Treasury of the Essence of the True Dharma). He was also famous for making a series of vituperative remarks directed at certain Caodong masters who espoused the practice of "silent reflection" (*mazhaochan* [默照禪], *Jpn. mokushō zen*), which he saw as being dangerously close to mere quietism.

The Daruma-shū were under pressure from the Tendai authorities not just because of Nōnin's claim to have received a lineage without direct transmission, but because they had a reputation of denying the necessity of discipline and practice; they were believed to harbor antinomian ideas based on an oversimplified interpretation of such concepts as innate awakening and *bonnō soku bodai* (煩悩即菩提) – "defilement is itself awakening". They were therefore treated as undesirables, and in the end a large number of them, including women, decided to follow Ejō and seek refuge with Dōgen at Kōshōji in 1241. It is noteworthy that in a number of his works, including *Raihai tokuzui* ([禮拝得髓], *Bowing [to the teacher] to obtain the marrow*; NST 12, 317–330) of 1240, Dōgen went out of his way to ignore gender when it came to the question of whether or not a Zen teacher was worthy of veneration (Levering, 2015). The Daruma-shū were eventually to form a substantial subgroup among Dōgen's followers, although it was to take some time before they became fully integrated, and much of Dōgen's writing while he was at Kōshōji (1236–1243) appears to have been written with this anomalous group in mind (Faure, 1987, 39).

Many of Dōgen's best-known writings come from this period. At first they dealt with monastic ritual and routine: such works as *Tenzo kyōkun* (典座教訓, Rules for the Cook; DZZ 6, 2–25) 1237, *Jiūndō shiki* (重雲堂式, Rules for the Monks’ Hall; DZZ 2, 482–486) 1239, and *Senjō* (洗淨, Rules for the Use of the Lavatory; NST 13, 131–142; DZZ 2, 80–91) 1239. For teaching purposes, he also chose some three hundred Zen *kōan* for his own *Shōbōgenzō* collection, which later became known as the *Mana* (真名) or *Shō* (肖) *Shōbōgenzō* (Kawamura, 1987). This work contained no commentaries, but from about 1240 there was a change, and he began to write discursive essays on these and similar *kōan*, many of which were eventually collected in his most famous work, also called *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼藏, see below). Dōgen wrote in vernacular Japanese rather than Chinese, which would have been the usual language of choice for Buddhist works in pre-modern Japan. The result is unique, making full use of the resources of both Chinese and Japanese to produce disquisitions which often take a *kōan* as the starting point, but which then expand the discussion in idiiosyncratic fashion so as to develop what many modern admirers consider to be the finest philosophical writing Japan has ever produced (Bielefeldt, 1988, 47).

It is in these *Shōbōgenzō* essays that Dōgen starts to shift from the earlier manifesto *Bendōwa*, in which Zen was set against Tendai, to concentrate on creating a self-image for the Sōtō sect by contrasting it with other Zen lineages, in particular the home-grown Daruma-shū and its parent, Linji/Rinzai Zen. There is a strong sense here of Dōgen attempting to "convert" these new arrivals to his own practice, and it is precisely at this point that the image of "Rujing" is brought into play, and that intemperate criticism of the Linji lineage appears. Not only does Dōgen openly criticize the concept of indirect transmission used by Nōnin (*Menju* [面授]), NST 13, 109–118; DZZ 2, 54–64), branding Deguang a hypocrite in the process (*Gyōji* [行持], DZZ 1, 145–202) (Bielefeldt, 1988, 48), but he argues that no teacher other than Rujing (and by extension Dōgen himself) had really understood the meaning and purpose of *zaizen*. It was not merely a method for beginners, a practice whereby one simply emptied the mind and avoided thought, for that would be little more than "mental vacuity" (*kyōkin bujī* [胸襟無事]) or "suspending thoughts and freezing the mind" (*sokuryo gyōshin* [息慮凝心]) (Bielefeldt, 1988, 136). *Zazen* was an activity in which an individual should try to achieve a state of spontaneous "being" untrammeled by thought. As he tried to express it in the characteristically difficult essay that is often placed at the beginning of *Shōbōgenzō*:

But if a bird or a fish tries to fly through the air or swim through the water with intent, it will obtain neither way nor place. To grasp place, this activity must be spontaneously real, here and now; to
grasp the way this activity must be spontaneously real, here and now (Genjō kōan [現成公案]; NST XII, 38; DZZ I, 5).

Intention and intellectualization is the enemy of true being, and zazen involved the difficult enterprise of using the mind against itself, of thinking of non-thinking, an active procedure whereby every thought that arises is not so much killed as dissolved within itself, turned back on itself in a radical form of reflexivity. That said, however, there is little sign that Dōgen ever felt Buddhist practice should be zazen and nothing else; he himself was open to using kōan and understood the importance of ritual (Foulk, 2015).

Dōgen stayed at Kōshōji for 13 years until late in 1243 when, without much warning, he moved everyone north to an extremely isolated area in Echizen (越前) in what is now Fukui Prefecture, difficult to access even today. This was an area where the Daruma-shū happened to have considerable lay support, and from this time on his main patronage came from an Echizen man of the warrior class called Hatano Yoshishige (波多野義重), who offered him both land and the resources to start building. But he may well have been influenced to move for another reason: when the powerful minister Kujō Michiie (九條道家; 1177–1249), Dōgen decided to move north, and by 1246 was ensconced in the newly created monastery of Eiheiji (永平寺).

As Eiheiji began to take shape, Dōgen turned his attention back to the nature of the monastic community itself, and his writing again concentrates on the rules of the community, regulations on how a monk should comport himself on a daily basis. He never produced a full set of monastic rules for the group, but it is clear that he believed in the principle that all activity was connected to enlightenment, and that one of the best ways to express the concept of non-self was to subject oneself to strict regulations. One of the most important of these essays was Bentōhō (別道法), which sets down rules on how monks were to sit, sleep, move about in the meditation hall, and meditate (DZZ 6, 26–45; Bielefeldt, 1988, 50), and while at times he seems to have encouraged the participation of local lay men and women in rituals such as reciting the precepts, he continued to maintain a clear distinction between monk and layman, and stressed the vital importance of the Vinaya for the practice of true Zen.

When Dōgen died in 1253, the community at Eiheiji was faced with a problem. He left no obvious successor and had shown little interest in creating a “school” or an “order.” Ejō took over the leadership but lacked Dōgen’s authority, and was not immune to challenge. There were many times when it seemed that the community would not survive. Dōgen’s senior students, men like Giin (義尹; 1217–1300) and Gikai (義介; 1219–1309), both of whom used the character gi that identified them as coming from the Daruma-shū, spread out into various parts of Japan to found a series of monasteries, so that soon there were as many as five independent groups based on five large monasteries: Dajjiji (大悲寺) in Kyūshū; Daijōji (大乗寺) in Kaga; Eiheiji and Hōkyōji (寶慶寺) in Echizen; and Yōkyōan (永興庵) in Kyoto. It was thanks to the arrival of →Keizan Jōkin (兼山紹瑾; 1264–1325), who joined Eiheiji in 1298, and who is now celebrated as the “second founder,” that Sōtō itself began to look like a viable institution. In the end, Sōtō was to have a dual system of two head monasteries, Eiheiji and Sōjji (總持寺), but the latter was not founded until c. 1323.

By this time, the figure of Dōgen had all but disappeared from view. This was not the case at Eiheiji, of course, but as the order grew in strength and numbers and as power moved elsewhere, Eiheiji became a backwater. Dōgen remained important and was memorialized on a regular basis, but his writings were ignored and left to accumulate dust, and numerous manuscript copies were scattered throughout the major monasteries, treated as symbols of authority rather than as objects of study. This state of affairs continued until the mid-Tokugawa period when, thanks to the work of two scholar-monks, Manzan Dōhaku (明算道白; 1637–1715) and Menzan, his writings finally became a subject of interest. The catalyst in this case was institutional change.

In 1696, as part of an attempt to rationalize a very complex situation that had arisen with respect to lineages in the Sōtō school, the reformer Manzan used some passages from Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō to bolster his case not only for the necessity of face-to-face transmission but also to argue that the house rules (kakun [家訓]) that Dōgen had supposedly designed for Eiheiji should be used in all Sōtō monasteries. A somewhat artificial split, nonetheless
official, had been imposed on the Sōtō and Rinzai orders by the Tokugawa authorities as part of their drive to exert control over Japan's religious landscape, and Manzan now saw the importance of unifying what was still a very uncoordinated group of Sōtō monasteries. The problem was that Dōgen's writings, which had never been printed, had also never been properly examined, and were certainly not in a fit state to be used as "proof" of anything. This was, in fact, the first time that anyone had tried to use a passage by Dōgen as an authority, and the idea that a randomly chosen text might take precedence over habits established over centuries caused considerable concern. As the arguments continued, such was the turmoil that in 1722 the more conservative among the Sōtō abbots took the precautionary step of requesting the authorities to impose a ban on the copying or publishing of any part of Shōbōgenzō (Bodiford, 1991, 450), a ban that was not lifted until 1796, because no one really knew what the consequences of opening up these sources might be.

In the end it was mainly due to the writings of Menzan, the "chief architect of modern Sōtō dogmatics" (Bielefeldt, 1988, 4), that Dōgen was given the central role he now holds in the Sōtō tradition. His tendentious Teiho Kenzeiki became the accepted biography of Dōgen for the next 250 years. The picture of Dōgen that emerged from Menzan's writing was highly colored by the drive to clearly distinguish Sōtō Zen from other traditions such as Rinzai or Ōbaku (黄檗) Zen. Dōgen's comments about the Linji lineage, and his criticism of Dahui in particular, were therefore given pride of place, and zazen was presented as the defining characteristic of Sōtō Zen, set against a putative Rinzai infatuation with the use of kōan. The fact that Dōgen himself had clearly made use of kōan was underplayed, because it was in Menzan's immediate interest to stress the polarity of the difference between the two rivals. It has only been recent historical research, less driven by sectarian motives, that has allowed the emergence of a more balanced understand of Dōgen's actual practice and writings.

There was always a symbiotic relationship between Dōgen and Eiheiji. The founder became the object of popular veneration, and Manzan now saw the importance of unifying what was still a very uncoordinated group of Sōtō monasteries. The problem was that Dōgen's writings, which had never been printed, had also never been properly examined, and were certainly not in a fit state to be used as "proof" of anything. This was, in fact, the first time that anyone had tried to use a passage by Dōgen as an authority, and the idea that a randomly chosen text might take precedence over habits established over centuries caused considerable concern. As the arguments continued, such was the turmoil that in 1722 the more conservative among the Sōtō abbots took the precautionary step of requesting the authorities to impose a ban on the copying or publishing of any part of Shōbōgenzō (Bodiford, 1991, 450), a ban that was not lifted until 1796, because no one really knew what the consequences of opening up these sources might be.

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were becoming of interest in the West, and whose work could be legitimately classed as "philosophy" (Kasulis, 1978; for recent examples see Raud, 2012; 2015; Kopf, 2015; Maraldo, 2015). Perhaps the most influential work in this regard has appeared in the writings of Abe Masao (阿部正雄; 1915–2006), who succeeded Suzuki Daisetsu (鈴木大拙; 1870–1966) as the foremost interpreter of Zen to Western audiences (Abe, 1985). Abe worked with N. Waddell on a series of translations of the Shōbōgenzō in the 1970s, which were published in the Otani University (大谷大學; interestingly, affiliated with the True Pure Land sect [淨土真宗]) English language journal The Eastern Buddhist, and during a period of over 20 years, from 1963 to 1985, produced a series of important comparative essays that make a strong case for seeing Dōgen as a philosopher of world stature (Abe, 1992).

In Japan there was the expected sectarian backlash. In 1944 Etō Sokuo (衛藤即應; 1888–1958), professor and eventually president of Komazawa University (駒澤大學), the higher education institution in Tokyo founded by the Sōtō school in the 1880s, provided a spirited defense of the sectarian standpoint in his book Shūso toshite no Dōgen Zenji (宗祖としての道元禅師, Zen Master Dōgen as Founding Patriarch). While acknowledging some limited merit in the universalist approach, he pointed out the dangers of ignoring the historical context (Etō, 2001, 19).

Today, different approaches to Dōgen remain in somewhat uncomfortable proximity. The universalists are content to study Dōgen for what he might offer in terms of theoretical approaches to the never-ending question of the nature of being, and they lay particular emphasis on his unique approach to the use of language. Lay Sōtō supporters remain wedded to the sectarian vision and are not particularly interested in re-writing his biography, which is still celebrated in many forms, including even manga. The monks of Eiheiji rely on the presence of Dōgen as founder to maintain their position within the Sōtō organization, despite the fact that through an accident of history the vast majority of temples still owe direct organizational allegiance to Sōjōji (宗祖としての道元禅師). While acknowledging the experience of awakening in words rather than simply practice.

A Note on Sources

It should be clear from the foregoing that great care must be taken to know the status and history of the sources one is using. What follows is a very short introduction to the basic texts, drawn from Bodiford, 2012b, which must be the first stop for any serious scholar.

Bendōwa (辯道話): Not originally part of Shōbōgenzō, it was written in 1231 as a basic introduction to Zen. According to Menzan’s commentary, the Bendōwa monge (辯道話聞解), the first person to learn of its existence was Manzan’s teacher Gesshū Sōko (月舟宗胡; 1630–1698). There are two facsimiles available (both in E-SBGZ-ST, IV), one of the woodblock edition of 1788 (used for NST, XII; trans. Bodiford, 2001, 39–325) and another of a 1515 copy of an MS dated 1332.

Shōbōgenzō (正法眼藏): A collection of Dōgen’s famous essays, kept secret until two of them were finally published in 1976, although it took until 1815 to publish most of the rest. The majority of these essays are dated, but Dōgen himself repeatedly revised individual parts and rearranged the order a number of times. What is more, modern editors have mixed and matched at will, so that the textual genealogy of this work is extremely complicated (Bodiford, 2012b, 29–40). It is published in DZZ, II–III, but the most convenient version is in NST XII–XIII, but this too is inevitably a hybrid (trans. Kim, 1985; Waddell & Abe, 2002; Nearman, 2007; Nishijima & Cross, 1994–1999; see also the ongoing Sōtō Zen Text Project).

(Shōbōgenzō) zuimonki (正法眼藏語錄): A record of Ejō’s interviews with Dōgen at Fukakusa, edited by Ejō’s students after his death, it reflects the fact that Ejō had just been converted from the Daruma-shū. There is a woodblock edition of 1651 (E-SBGZ-ST IV) and Menzan’s edition of 1770, which is the best known and forms the basis for all English translations to date (eg. Matsunaga, 1971), but it is less reliable than a facsimile of a 1380 MS, recopied in 1644 (E-SBGZ-ST IV), which is now used as the standard source (DZZ, VII).

Dōgen’s goroku (語錄, “recorded sayings”): These are collections of Dōgen’s lectures and sermons (with some added material such as poems), most
of them given at Eiheiji. It must be assumed that the lectures were given in Japanese and then reproduced in Chinese to stand as a formal record.


3. *Dōgen Oshō Kōroku* (道元和尚廣錄): A ten-fascicle MS copied in 1598 by Monkaku. This is closest to the original format (reprinted in DZZ II; trans. Leighton & Okumura, 2004; Heine, 2004).


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Website
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