

## Dōgen's "Mountains and Waters as *Sūtras*" (*Sansui-kyō*)

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This poetic and profound chapter of Dōgen's (1200–53) *Shōbōgenzō* was first delivered as a lecture in the year 1240.<sup>1</sup> The title—*Sansui* (literally: “mountains waters”) means “landscape” and *Kyō* refers to the scriptures of the Buddha's oral teachings—expresses a central idea in Japanese Buddhist philosophy: that the natural world can be experienced and understood both as a spiritual sermon and sacred scripture, as a spoken and written expression of the Buddhist teachings. Some background may render this more understandable.

After Buddhism spread from India to China, some Chinese thinkers began to ask—perhaps under the influence of Daoist ideas—whether the Mahāyāna extension of the promise of Buddhahood to “all sentient beings” went far enough. A long-running debate ensued in the eighth century, in which thinkers in the Tian-tai school argued that Mahāyāna universalism undermined the distinction between sentient and nonsentient beings, and that Buddha-nature is to be ascribed not only to plants, trees, and the earth, but even to particles of dust.<sup>2</sup> In Japan, the first Buddhist thinker to elaborate the idea of the awakened nature of all phenomena and make it central to his thought was the founder of Shingon esoteric Buddhism, Kūkai (744–835).

1. Although the title is always translated as “The Mountains and Waters Sūtra,” I don't believe that Dōgen was presuming to write a sacred text. I have inserted “as” in order to bring out the main meaning of the essay (as explained at the beginning of the introduction).

2. For an illuminating account of this debate, see LaFleur 1989.

Kūkai developed a highly sophisticated but very down-to-earth philosophy that emphasized the possibility of “attaining enlightenment in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*). He also argued that the Dharmakāya, which had been regarded as eternal, absolute reality, is nothing other than the “reality embodiment” of the cosmic Buddha Dainichi Nyorai (Skt. Mahāvairocana). Natural bodies thereby become central to Japanese Buddhist practice and thought. Kūkai elaborated this idea into the teaching of *hosshin seppō*: “the Dharmakāya expounds the Dharma,” or “the Buddha’s reality embodiment expounds the true teachings.”<sup>3</sup> Although this exposition does not take place for our benefit (there are other, more directly beneficent Buddhas who see to that), we can become able to “overhear” this expounding through practice in listening with the “third ear.”

Just as the natural world can be heard as Dainichi’s expounding the Dharma, it can also be *read* as a sacred scripture, in which all phenomena are the letters or written characters. In an essay on the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra*, Kūkai writes that the ultimate text of that *sūtra* is the entire universe: “the vast and boundless text that exists spontaneously and permanently, namely, the mandala of the Dharma of all the Buddhas.”<sup>4</sup> More graphically, he writes in one of his poems:

Being painted by brushes of mountains, by ink of oceans,  
Heaven and earth are the bindings of a *sūtra* revealing the truth.<sup>5</sup>

Again, it takes practice to be able to read this *sūtra*, and the emphasis in this case would be on opening the “third eye” through mandala meditation and other forms of visualization.

Dōgen’s philosophy has roots in common with Kūkai’s thought, especially with respect to his understanding of the natural world. Corresponding to Kūkai’s identification of the Dharmakāya qua Dainichi with the physical universe is Dōgen’s understanding of natural landscape as “the body of the Buddha.” In an early chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*, “Voices of the Valleys, Forms of the Mountains” (Keisei-sanshiki), he quotes a verse by the eleventh-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo:

The voices of the river-valley are the Wide and Long Tongue,  
The forms of the mountain are nothing other than his Pure Body.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps in order to avoid the absolutist connotations of the traditional idea of the Dharmakāya, Dōgen substitutes for Kūkai’s *hosshin seppō* the notion of *mujō-seppō*, which emphasizes that even insentient beings (*mujō*) expound

3. For a fine explication of this idea, see Kasulis 1995.

4. Kūkai, cited in Abe 1999: 275.

5. Kūkai, cited in Hakeda 1972: 91.

6. Dōgen 1994: 1:86. One of the Buddha’s distinguishing features is his wide and long tongue.

the true teachings: "The insentient preach the Dharma. In this preaching the Buddhas are present and the patriarchs are present."<sup>7</sup> Dōgen encourages, like Kūkai, practice that effects an opening up of normal, everyday awareness so that such preaching may become audible. "When we each get rid of our husk, we are not restricted by former views and understanding, and things which for vast kalpas have been unclear suddenly appear before us."<sup>8</sup>

Kūkai's notion that the ultimate *sūtra* is the universe itself appears again in Dōgen, who counters an overemphasis on study of literal scriptures in certain schools of Buddhism by maintaining that *sūtras* are more than ancient texts and scrolls containing written characters. In the chapter "The Buddhist *Sūtras*" (*Bukkyō*) he writes:

What has been called "the *sūtras*" is the whole Universe in the ten directions itself; there is no time or place that is not the *sūtras*. They use...the words and letters of the heavens above and the human world; they use the words and letters of the world of animals and the world of angry demons; they use the words and letters of the hundred weeds and the ten thousand trees.<sup>9</sup>

The words and letters of plants and animals differ from those employed by humans, and thus constitute "natural language" in the literal sense. This, then, is the main theme of "Mountains and Waters as *Sūtras*": insofar as we can dissolve our unexamined prejudices and conventional modes of experience, we can come to appreciate the natural world as "the actualization of the ancient Buddha Way" (sec. 1), and to hear and read it as a sermon and sacred scripture expounding the Buddhist teachings. One prejudice to be overcome is that only we humans walk, and that beings such as mountains stand still. But what is our actual experience of walking in the mountains? Well, when one walks the mountains appear to move, and when one stops they appear to stop moving—unless of course one turns one's head, in which case they begin to move again. What is immediately given to one's perception when one walks are mountains in motion: but because we (think we) know that mountains don't really move, we have formed the habit of mentally construing them as standing still. (The geologists tell us that mountains do indeed move, but too slowly for the human eye to perceive.)

Dōgen says that viewing the world from the usual anthropocentric standpoint is like "looking through a bamboo tube at the corner of the sky" (sec. 6). For a fuller experience, he recommends entertaining the perspectives of other beings, such as mountains, drops of water, celestial beings, hungry ghosts, dragons, and fish. "'In the mountains' means the blossoming of the entire world. People outside the mountains do not realize or

7. Dōgen, "Insentient Beings Expound the Dharma," in Dōgen 1994: 3:114.

8. Dōgen, "Voices of the Valleys, Forms of the Mountains," in Dōgen 1994: 1:85.

9. Dōgen, "The Buddhist *Sūtras*," in Dōgen 1994: 3:102.

understand the mountains' walking" (sec. 4). Here he is contrasting the view ("outside the mountains") that regards mountains as objects standing over against a subject, or as representations in a human consciousness, with one that breaks out of the anthropocentric perspective by driving to the heart of the mountain itself. *San chū* ("in the mountains": literally, "mountain center") here refers to experience from the heart, or center, of the mountain itself, thus from a broader—because at least bicentric—perspective.<sup>10</sup> (And so forth, through other beings, to a polycentric perspectivism.)

A brief look at what Dōgen says about water will afford a better sense of his "perspectivism." One reason he focuses on water (as did the classical Daoist thinkers who influenced him) is because it is susceptible to multiple transformations: "When water solidifies, it is harder than a diamond. [...] When water melts, it is gentler than milk" (sec. 11). It can also appear, mysteriously, as dew, and scald unpleasantly as vapor when boiled. After invoking the idea of the "four views of water" from the Indian Buddhist tradition, Dōgen asks: "Are there many ways to see one thing, or is it a mistake to see many forms as one thing?" (sec. 12). The answer: Yes, there are many ways to see, for example, water, and there is no reason to regard any one way as privileged because fully adequate; and yes, it is a mistake to see many forms as one thing, if this view leads to an idea of some essential being of water apart from its myriad manifestations ("there is no original water"). But this does not prevent particular bodies of water from being quite different from, say, bits of earth, since each particular phenomenon, occupying a unique position in the complex web of interrelations that is the world, "abides in its own dharma-position" (sec. 13).

Because Dōgen subscribes to the Kegon (Huayan) Buddhist idea of nonobstruction, when he writes "there is a world in water" (sec. 20), he is talking not only about water but about each and every phenomenon—as a jewel in Indra's Net—in which the entire relational network is reflected. (Not unlike Blake's seeing "the universe in a grain of sand.")

There is no space here to articulate the ecological implications of this gem of an essay, but one thing is clear: insofar as natural phenomena are not only a locus of enlightenment but also sources of wisdom and companions on the Buddha Way, if we wantonly destroy them for our own benefit, we actually thereby diminish our own opportunities for fulfillment.<sup>11</sup> After all, "Such mountains and waters of themselves become wise persons and sages" (sec. 22).<sup>12</sup>

10. One is reminded here, appropriately, of Aldo Leopold's beautiful essay "Thinking Like a Mountain."

11. For a discussion of this issue, see Parkes 2003.

12. The following translation is abridged from "Mountains and Waters Sūtra," translated by Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi, in Tanahashi 1985: 97–107. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

## Translation

1 Mountains and waters right now are the actualization of the ancient buddha way. Each, abiding in its dharma-position, realizes completeness.<sup>13</sup> Because mountains and waters have been active since before the Empty Eon, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose they are emancipation realization.

2 Because mountains are high and broad, the way of riding the clouds is always reached in the mountains; the inconceivable power of soaring in the wind comes freely from the mountains.

3 Priest Daokai of Mt. Furong said to the assembly, "The green mountains are always walking; a stone woman gives birth to a child at night."<sup>14</sup> Mountains do not lack the qualities of mountains. Therefore they always abide in ease and always walk.<sup>15</sup> You should examine in detail this quality of the mountains walking. Mountains' walking is just like human walking. Accordingly, do not doubt mountains' walking even though it does not look the same as human walking. The buddha ancestors' words point to walking. This is fundamental understanding. You should penetrate these words.

4 Because green mountains walk, they are permanent. Although they walk more swiftly than the wind, someone in the mountains does not realize or understand it. "In the mountains" means the blossoming of the entire world. People outside the mountains do not realize or understand the mountains' walking. Those without eyes to see mountains cannot realize, understand, see, or hear this as it is. If you doubt mountains' walking, you do not know your own walking; it is not that you do not walk, but that you do not know or understand your own walking. Since you do not know your walking, you should fully know the green mountains' walking. Green mountains are neither sentient nor insentient. You are neither sentient nor insentient. At this moment, you cannot doubt the green mountains' walking.

5 You should study the green mountains, using numerous worlds as your standard. You should clearly examine the green mountains' walking and

13. I have changed the translation of *hō-i* as "phenomenal expression" to the more literal "dharma-position," since the term refers to the way every phenomenon arises and perishes at a particular point in the vast and dynamic network of interrelations that, for Dōgen, makes up the world.

14. A quotation from a thirteenth-century Chan Buddhist text *Jiatāi pudenglu* (Jiatāi record of the universal lamps), chap. 3.

15. "Walking" in this chapter refers to Buddhist practice, but also more generally to the movement, or impermanence (arising and perishing), that characterizes all phenomena.

your own walking. You should also examine walking backward and backward walking and investigate the fact that walking forward and backward has never stopped since the very moment before form arose, since the time of the King of the Empty Eon.

If walking stops, buddha ancestors do not appear. If walking ends, the buddha-dharma cannot reach the present. Walking forward does not cease; walking backward does not cease.<sup>16</sup> Walking forward does not obstruct walking backward. Walking backward does not obstruct walking forward. This is called the mountains' flow and the flowing mountains.

6 Green mountains master walking and eastern mountains master traveling on water. Accordingly, these activities are a mountain's practice. Keeping its own form, without changing body and mind, a mountain always practices in every place. Don't slander by saying that a green mountain cannot walk and an eastern mountain cannot travel on water. When your understanding is shallow, you doubt the phrase "Green mountains are walking." When your learning is immature, you are shocked by the words "flowing mountains." Without fully understanding even the words "flowing water," you drown in small views and narrow understanding.

Yet the characteristics of mountains manifest their form and life-force. There is walking, there is flowing, and there is a moment when a mountain gives birth to a mountain child. Because mountains are buddha ancestors, buddha ancestors appear in this way. Even if you see mountains as grass, trees, earth, rocks, or walls, do not take this seriously or worry about it; it is not complete realization. Even if there is a moment when you view mountains as the seven treasures shining, this is not the true source. Even if you understand mountains as the realm where all Buddhas practice, this understanding is not something to be attached to. Even if you have the highest understanding of mountains as all Buddhas' inconceivable qualities, the truth is not only this. These are conditioned views. This is not the understanding of the buddha ancestors, but just looking through a bamboo tube at the corner of the sky.

Turning an object and turning the mind is rejected by the great sage. Explaining the mind and explaining true nature is not agreeable to buddha ancestors. Seeing into mind and seeing into true nature is the activity of people outside the way.<sup>17</sup> Set words and phrases are not the words of liberation. There is something free from all of these understandings: "Green mountains are always walking," and "Eastern mountains travel on water." You should study this in detail. [...]

16. "Walking backward" is an allusion to the "step back" that is required in Zen practice to reach our "original nature."

17. Dōgen rejects these pairs of activities as inadequate because they mistakenly regard mind and nature as separate.

11 Water is neither strong nor weak, neither wet nor dry, neither moving nor still, neither cold nor hot, neither existent nor nonexistent, neither deluded nor enlightened. When water solidifies, it is harder than a diamond. Who can crack it? When water melts, it is gentler than milk. Who can destroy it? Do not doubt that these are the characteristics water manifests. You should reflect on the moment when you see the water of the ten directions as the water of the ten directions. This is not just studying the moment when human and heavenly beings see water; this is studying the moment when water sees water. This is a complete understanding. You should go forward and backward and leap beyond the vital path where other fathoms other.<sup>18</sup>

12 All beings do not see mountains and waters in the same way.<sup>19</sup> Some beings see water as a jeweled ornament, but they do not regard jeweled ornaments as water. What in the human realm corresponds to their water? We only see their jeweled ornaments as water. Some beings see water as wondrous blossoms, but they do not use blossoms as water. Hungry ghosts see water as raging fire or pus and blood. Dragons see water as a palace or a pavilion. Some beings see water as the seven treasures or a wish-granting jewel. Some beings see water as a forest or a wall. Some see it as the Dharma nature of pure liberation, the true human body, or as the form of body and essence of mind. Human beings see water as water. Water is seen as dead or alive depending on causes and conditions.

Thus the views of all beings are not the same. You should question this matter now. Are there many ways to see one thing, or is it a mistake to see many forms as one thing? You should pursue this beyond the limit of pursuit. Accordingly, endeavors in practice-realization of the way are not limited to one or two kinds. The ultimate realm has one thousand kinds and ten thousand ways.

When we think about the meaning of this, it seems that there is water for various beings but there is no original water—there is no water common to all types of beings. But water for these various kinds of beings does not depend on mind or body, does not arise from actions, does not depend on self or other. Water's freedom depends only on water. Therefore, water is not just earth, water, fire, wind, space, or consciousness. Water is not blue, yellow, red, white, or black. Water is not forms, sounds, smells, tastes,

18. This is a recommendation to entertain the perspective of the other (phenomenon that one wants to understand) and from there as many other perspectives as are appropriate for the context.

19. Dōgen is alluding here to the "four views of water" in the Mahāyāna tradition. The glossary for the Tanahashi translation cites the following passage from the commentary on Asaṅga's *Treatise on Emerging Mahāyāna* by Asvabhā (450–530): "It is like water, whose nature remains the same. But as celestial beings, human beings, hungry ghosts, and fish do not carry the same effect (from past causations), they each see water differently. Celestial beings see it as jewels, people in the world see it as water, hungry ghosts see it as pus and blood, and fish see it as a palace" (Tanahashi 1985: 285).

touchables, or mind-objects. But water as earth, water, fire, wind, and space realizes itself.

For this reason, it is difficult to say who is creating this land and palace right now or how such things are being created. To say that the world is resting on the wheel of space or on the wheel of wind is not the truth of the self or the truth of others. Such a statement is based only on a small view. People speak this way because they think that it must be impossible to exist without having a place on which to rest.

13 Buddha said, "All things are ultimately liberated. There is nowhere that they abide." You should know that even though all things are liberated and not tied to anything, they abide in their own dharma-position. However, when most human beings see water they only see that it flows unceasingly. This is a limited human view; there are actually many kinds of flowing. Water flows on the earth, in the sky, upward, and downward. It can flow around a single curve or into bottomless abysses. When it rises it becomes clouds. When it descends it forms abysses. [...]

16 Now when dragons and fish see water as a palace, it is just like human beings seeing a palace. They do not think it flows. If an outsider tells them "What you see as a palace is running water," the dragons and fish will be astonished, just as we are when we hear the words "Mountains flow." Nevertheless, there may be some dragons and fish who understand that the columns and pillars of palaces and pavilions are flowing water. You should reflect and consider the meaning of this. If you do not learn to be free from your superficial views, you will not be free from the body and mind of an ordinary person. Then you will not understand the land of buddha ancestors, or even the land or the palace of ordinary people.

Now human beings well know as water what is in the ocean and what is in the river, but they do not know what dragons and fish see as water and use as water. Do not foolishly suppose that what we see as water is used as water by all other beings. Do not foolishly suppose that what we see as water is used as water by all other beings. You who study with Buddhas should not be limited to human views when you are studying water. You should study how you view the water used by buddha ancestors. You should study whether there is water or no water in the house of buddha ancestors.

17 Mountains have been the abode of great sages from the limitless past to the limitless present. Wise people and sages all have mountains as their inner chamber, as their body and mind. Because of wise people and sages, mountains appear. You may think that in mountains many wise people and great sages are assembled. But after entering the mountains, not a single person meets another. There is just the activity of the mountains. There is no trace of anyone having entered the mountains.



When you see mountains from the ordinary world, and when you meet mountains while in mountains, the mountains' head and eye are viewed quite differently. Your idea or view of mountains not flowing is not the same as the view of dragons and fish. Human and heavenly beings have attained a position concerning their own worlds which other beings either doubt or do not doubt. You should not just remain bewildered and skeptical when you hear the words "Mountains flow"; but together with buddha ancestors you should study these words. When you take one view you see mountains flowing, and when you take another view, mountains are not flowing. One time mountains are flowing, another time they are not flowing. If you do not fully understand this, you do not understand the true Dharma wheel of the Tathāgata.

An ancient buddha said, "If you do not wish to incur the cause for Unceasing Hell, do not slander the true Dharma wheel of the Tathāgata." You should carve these words on your skin, flesh, bones, and marrow; on your body, mind, and environs; on emptiness and on form. They are already carved on trees and rocks, on fields and villages. [...]

20 It is not only that there is water in the world, but there is a world in water. It is not just in water. There is also a world of sentient beings in clouds. There is a world of sentient beings in the air. There is a world of sentient beings in fire. There is a world of sentient beings on earth. There is a world of sentient beings in the phenomenal world. There is a world of sentient beings in a blade of grass. There is a world of sentient beings in one staff. Wherever there is a world of sentient beings, there is a world of buddha ancestors. You should thoroughly examine the meaning of this.

21 Therefore water is the true dragon's palace. It is not flowing downward. To consider water as only flowing is to slander water with the word "flowing." This would be the same as insisting that water does not flow. Water is only the true thusness of water. Water is water's complete virtue; it is not flowing. When you investigate the flowing of a handful of water and the not-flowing of it, full mastery of all things is immediately present.

22 There are mountains hidden in treasures. There are mountains hidden in swamps. There are mountains hidden in the sky. There are mountains hidden in mountains. There are mountains hidden in hiddenness. This is complete understanding. An ancient buddha said, "Mountains are mountains, waters are waters." These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains. Therefore investigate mountains thoroughly. When you investigate mountains thoroughly, this is the work of the mountains. Such mountains and waters of themselves become wise persons and sages.

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