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The Presencing of Truth

Dōgen's *Genjōkōan*

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Dōgen Kigen (1200–1253), founder of the Sōtō school of Japanese Zen Buddhism, is widely recognized as one of the most original and profound thinkers in the Buddhist tradition. The text translated here, *Genjōkōan*, is the core fascicle of his major work *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye).¹ It is the “treasury of the true Dharma eye” that Śākyamuni Buddha is said to have transmitted to his successor, Mahākāshyapa, by silently holding up a flower. This event is held to mark the beginning of the Zen tradition, which is characterized by Bodhidharma as “a special transmission outside the scriptures; not depending on words and letters; directly pointing to the human mind; seeing into one’s nature and becoming a Buddha.” Like Bodhidharma, who is said to have sat in meditation for nine years after bringing Zen (Chin. Chan) from India to China, Dōgen, too, placed great emphasis on the silent practice of “just sitting” (*shikantaza*).

Yet Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* is not just an expedient means to practice and enlightenment, a finger pointing at the moon; it is also a literary and philosophical masterpiece in its own right. Indeed, Dōgen is considered by many to be the single greatest “philosopher” in the tradition of Zen Buddhism. Beyond merely insisting on the limitations of language and reason,

1. My references will be to the following scholarly and readily available Japanese edition: Mizuno Yaoko, ed. *Shōbōgenzō*, four volumes (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990). The *Genjōkōan* appears in vol. 1, pp. 53–61. Although translations of quoted passages will be my own, for the reader’s convenience I will also cross reference Waddell and Abe 2002.

he poetically and philosophically manifests their expressive potential. The “entangled vines” (*kattō*) of language are not treated simply as impediments to be cut through with the sword of silent meditation and ineffable insight. Rather, they are taken to have the potential to be “expressive attainments of the Way” (*dōtoku*) that present aspects of the truth of the dynamic Buddha-nature of reality.

Nevertheless, Dōgen stresses that any expression of truth always involves both a revealing and a concealing. In Dōgen’s own words, “When one side is illuminated, the other side is darkened.” This epistemological principle is one of the central themes of the *Genjōkōan*, and it can be found at work throughout the text, beginning with its famous opening section. The first three sentences of the text could be thought to correspond to Tiantai (Jap. Tendai) philosophy’s Three Truths: the provisional, the empty, and the middle. The fourth sentence, on the other hand, is pure Zen; it abruptly returns us from the nondual dialectical reasoning (*ri*) of Mahāyāna philosophy to the concrete factuality (*ji*) of living in the midst of the world of passionate entanglements. The text then proceeds to describe the crucial differences between a deluded/deluding and an enlightened/enlightening engagement in this world.

A deluding experience of the world, according to Dōgen, occurs when one “carries oneself forth to verify-in-practice (*shushō*) the myriad things.” On the other hand, “for the myriad things to come forth and verify-in-practice the self is enlightenment.” Before discussing these definitions of delusion and enlightenment, a few remarks on the peculiar notion of *shushō* are in order. In this key term, Dōgen conjoins two characters to convey the inseparable non-duality of “practice” and “enlightenment (verification).”² This crucial aspect of Dōgen’s teaching is poignantly addressed in the concluding section of the *Genjōkōan*, where the action of the Zen master fanning himself (practice) is demonstrated to be one with the truth that the wind (Buddha-nature) circulates everywhere. The character for *shō*, which is Dōgen’s favored term for enlightenment, normally means to verify, prove, attest to, confirm, or authenticate something. As a synonym for enlightenment, *shō* is a matter of *verifying* (“showing to be true” and literally “making true”) and hence *realizing* (in both senses of the term) that one’s true self (*honbunjin*), one’s “original part,” is originally part and parcel of the dynamically ubiquitous Buddha-nature.³

Delusion occurs when the ego posits itself as the single fixed center—rather than understanding itself as one among infinitely many mutually expressive focal points—of the whole.⁴ In delusion, the myriad things are seen, not according to the self-expressive aspects through which they show

2. See Mizuno 1990: 1:28; Waddell and Abe 2002: 19.

3. Dōgen famously rereads the *Mahāparinirvāna Sūtra*’s claim that “all sentient beings have the Buddha-nature” to mean that “entire being/all beings is/are the Buddha-nature [*shitsu-u wa busshō nari*]” (Mizuno 1990: 1:73; compare Waddell and Abe 2002: 61).

4. As with much of Zen thought, Dōgen’s perspectivism is heavily influenced by Huayan (Jap. Kegon) philosophy, which in turn draws on the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*’s image of the “jeweled net of Indra” wherein each jewel reflects all the others.

themselves, but rather only as they are forced into the perspectival horizon of the self-fixated and self-assertive ego. The deluded and deluding ego willfully projects its categories of perception onto the world. On the other hand, when practicing the Buddha Way, one comes to realize the empty (i.e., open and interdependent) nature of the true self. Thus, a thoroughgoing “study of the self,” which involves taking a radical “step back that turns the light around,”⁵ paradoxically leads to a “forgetting of the self” as an independent and substantial ego-subject. Dōgen speaks of this “forgetting” most radically in terms of his own enlightenment experience of “dropping off the body-mind” (*shinjin-datsuraku*). Only through this ultimate experience of letting go and letting be does one become open to the self-presentation of things. The true self is an openness to the presencing of truth.

But this openness must be realized, and this realization is neither static nor simply passive. When Dōgen says that “things come forth and verify-in-practice the self” (elsewhere he even claims that “original practice inheres in the original face of each and every thing”),⁶ he is countering the willful self-assertion of human subjectivity by calling attention to the “objective side” of the “total dynamism” (*zenki*) of a nondual event of enlightenment. For our part, in order to authentically participate in this event we must not only liberate ourselves from a self-assertive fixation on our body-mind by letting it drop off; we must also spontaneously pick it up again in an energetic yet nonwilling “total exertion” (*gūjin*) of “rousing the [whole] body-mind to perceive forms, rousing the [whole] body-mind to listen to sounds.”

This intimate nondual perception of forms and listening to sounds is, however, never a shadowless illumination of all aspects of a thing. The epistemology of Dōgen’s understanding of enlightenment is decidedly not that of simultaneous omniscience. Enlightenment is not a static and omniscient view from nowhere, but rather an endless path of illuminating the innumerable aspects of reality, an ongoing journey of appreciating the “inexhaustible virtues” of things. Enlightenment is not a state of final attainment, but rather a never self-satisfied process of enlightening darkness and delusion. Indeed, setting out on this never-ending Way of enlightenment entails awakening to the ineradicable play of knowledge and nescience. And thus, paradoxically, Dōgen tells us that “if the Dharma fills the body-mind, one notices an insufficiency.”

Dōgen makes this principal epistemological point most clearly and forcefully in the section of *Genjōkōan* where he speaks of the inexhaustible potential aspects (or virtues) of the ocean. If a human being, sitting on a boat in the middle of the ocean, looks out in all four directions, he or she sees only a vast empty circle. Dōgen is perhaps alluding here to a meditative experience of emptiness. We might refer to the “empty circle” or “circular shape”

5. Kagamishima Genryū, *Dōgen Zenji goroku* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990), p. 170; compare Waddell and Abe 2002: 3.

6. Mizuno 1990: 1:18; compare Waddell and Abe 2002: 14.

(*ensō*) that appears as the eighth of the *Ten Ox Pictures*, which is often interpreted as a symbol for the absolute emptiness of the Dharmakāya (the Truth Body of the Buddha), or the Buddha-nature (*Busshō*) understood—as Dōgen and other Zen figures sometimes do—in terms of *mu-Busshō* (“no-Buddha-nature” or the “Buddha-nature-of-Nothingness”). What is crucial is that neither the *Ten Ox Pictures* nor Dōgen’s Zen stops here at the empty circle; even emptiness is a perspective to which one must not become attached. In the all-embracing perspective of identity, differences are concealed.

Hence, even though one may perceive the ocean as a vast empty circle, Dōgen proceeds to write: “Nevertheless, the great ocean is not circular, and it is not square; the remaining virtues [or qualities] of the ocean are inexhaustible. It is like a palace [for fish]. It is like a jeweled ornament [to gods]. It is just that, as far as my eyes can see, for a while it looks like a circle.” Dōgen is drawing here on the traditional Buddhist notion that different sentient beings experience the world in different manners, depending on the conditioning of their karma. He is likely alluding specifically to a commentary on the *Mahāvāna-samgraha*: “The sea itself basically has no disparities, yet owing to the karmic differences of *devas*, humans, craving spirits, and fish, *devas* see it as a treasure trove of jewels, humans see it as water, craving spirits see it as an ocean of pus, and fish see it as a palatial dwelling.”⁷ Dōgen writes elsewhere that one “should not be limited to human views” and naïvely think that what one views as water is “what dragons and fish see as water and use as water.”⁸

The epistemology implied in Dōgen’s view of enlightenment as an ongoing practice of enlightening, as an unending path of discovery, is thus what I would call a nondualistic and nonwilling perspectivism. It is a perspectivism insofar as reality only shows itself one aspect at a time. From a deluding standpoint, this aspect gets determined by the will of an ego-subject that goes out and posits a horizon that delimits—filters or “schematizes”—how a thing can reveal itself. From an enlightening perspective, the aspect is allowed to reveal itself through an event wherein the self has “forgotten itself” in an engaged yet nonwillful openness to the presencing of things. This engagement is neither simply passive nor simply active. For at every moment there is—for the time being—but a single nondual middle-voiced event of “being-time” (*uji*)⁹ as a self-revelation of a singular aspect of reality. And just as such singular events are infinite, so is the path of their verification-in-practice.

Let us finally consider the title of Dōgen’s text, *Genjōkōan*, which I have ventured to translate “The Presencing of Truth.”¹⁰ The term *kōan* (Chin.

7. Waddell and Abe 2002: 43; see also Mizuno 1990: 1:440.

8. Yaoko 1990: 2:198.

9. In the “Uji” fascicle (Mizuno 1990: 2:46–58 ; Waddell and Abe 2002: 48–58), Dōgen famously reads the compound *uji* not simply as “for the time being,” but as a nondual event of “being-time.”

10. Other noteworthy translations of the title include “Manifesting Suchness” (Waddell and Abe 2002), “Manifesting Absolute Reality” (Cook 1989), “The Realized

kungan) originally meant “official record” or “public law.” A *kōan* in this sense would be a publication of a particular rule that is universally binding. According to Dōgen’s own disciples, in his thought “the *kō* in *kōan* refers to fairness and identity, while the *an* suggests apportionment and differentiation,” such that the compound “*kōan* signified the nondual oneness of identity and differentiation, of emptiness and form, of one and all.”¹¹ Today, however, the term *kōan* is most often used to refer to *kosoku-kōan*: the classic episodes or paradigmatic “cases” that present the practicing student with the words and actions of ancient Zen masters as past instantiations of enlightenment, instantiations that the student must somehow verify in the present. While Dōgen does very often reflect on these *kosoku-kōan*, with the notion of *genjō-kōan* he is referring rather to the living presence of truth in the here and now of everyday reality. Each singular event of our lives presents us with a *kōan*, a challenge and chance for awakening to the truth of things. *Kōan* in this sense is truth as such, not just the truth of epistemological correspondence, but the truth (reality) of things as they present themselves right now for verification, the ubiquitous truth of reality as it presents itself for realization in singular events.

Genjō, short for *genzen-jōju*, means “complete manifestation” or “presentation of completeness.” *Genzen* literally means “to appear/manifest/presence in front [of one].” This term could be rendered “manifesting” (which etymologically means “grasping by the hand”) but is perhaps best translated as “presencing” (which derives from “being [*esse*] in front of [*prae*-]”). In any case, the manifesting or presencing at issue here is itself an original event—not a subsequent appearance—of reality. There is no truth other than that which presences here and now. Dōgen does not speak of a futuristic salvation or a transcendent Pure Land, but rather of awakening to the truth that is always presencing beneath our feet. Truth presences completely right here and right now, and this living moment (*nikon*) of being-time is all there ever is to life, and to death.¹²

And yet, as we have seen, this event of presencing is not “complete” in the sense of a fulfillment beyond all absence and insufficiency. (Hence I have refrained from translating the title as “The Complete Presencing of Truth.”) Moreover, presencing does not simply refer to a pure present that is wholly uncontaminated by the past and the future. As Dōgen writes with respect to firewood and ashes, the presencing of something in its singular “Dharma-position” both “has its before and after” and yet is “cut off from them.” The presencing that Dōgen speaks of neither simply excludes nor

Universe” (Nishijima and Cross 1994), “Actualizing the Fundamental Point” (Tanahashi 1985), and “Offenbarmachen des vollen Erscheinens” (Ōhashi and Elberfeld 2006).

11. Kim 1985: 56. Kim attributes this interpretation to Senne’s *Kikigaki*, whereas Waddell and Abe refer us to Kyōgō’s *Shōbōgenzō shō* (Waddell and Abe 2002: 39–40).

12. See “Shōji,” Waddell and Abe 2002: 106.

is simply consumed by the past and the future. In one sense it is cut off from them: the past is always already gone and the future is never yet here. But in another sense it integrally implies them: what presences is always essentially open to and interconnected with its before and after, just as it is open to and interconnected with its environs. The *kōan* that Dōgen's text ultimately presents us with for verification is that the presencing of truth is always fully realizable—without ever being closed off and self-satisfied—in each singular moment of our being unceasingly under way.

Translation

When the various things (*dharma*s) are [seen according to] the Buddha Dharma, there are delusion and enlightenment; there is [transformative] practice; there is birth/life; there is death; there are ordinary sentient beings; and there are Buddhas.

When the myriad things are each [seen as] without self [i.e., without independent substantiality], there is neither delusion nor enlightenment; there are neither Buddhas nor ordinary sentient beings; and there is neither birth/life nor death.

Since the Buddha Way originally leaps beyond both plentitude and poverty, there are arising and perishing; there are delusion and enlightenment; and there are ordinary sentient beings and Buddhas.

And yet, although this is how we can say that it is, it is just that flowers fall amid our attachment and regret, and weeds flourish amid our rejecting and loathing.

Carrying the self forward to verify-in-practice (*shushō*) the myriad things is delusion; for the myriad things to come forth and verify-in-practice the self is enlightenment. Buddhas are those who greatly enlighten delusion; ordinary sentient beings are those who are greatly deluded amid enlightenment. Furthermore, there are persons who attain enlightenment on top of enlightenment, and persons who are again deluded within delusion. When Buddhas are truly Buddhas, there is no need for them to be conscious of themselves as Buddhas. Nevertheless, they are verified Buddhas, and they go on verifying this Buddhahood.

Even though by rousing the [whole] body-mind to perceive forms, rousing the [whole] body-mind to listen to sounds, they are intimately apprehended, this is not like a mirror hosting an image, or like the moon and [its reflection in] water. When one side is illuminated, the other side is darkened.

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by the myriad things [of the world]. To be verified by the myriad things is to let drop off the body-mind

of the self and the body-mind of others. There is laying to rest the traces of enlightenment, and one must ever again emerge from resting content with such traces.

When one first seeks the Dharma, one distances oneself far from its borders. When [one realizes that] the Dharma has already been rightly transmitted to one, one straightaway becomes a person [established in his or her] original element.

A person riding in a boat looks around at the shore, and mistakenly thinks that the shore is drifting along. When one fixes one's eyes closely on the boat, one realizes that it is the boat that is moving forward. In a like manner, if one tries to discern the myriad things with confused assumptions about the body-mind, it can mistakenly seem as though one's own mind and nature are permanent. If one intimately engages in everyday activities, returning to *here*, the concrete principle that all things are without self is evident.

Firewood becomes ashes; it cannot return to being firewood. However, you should not hold the view that something is ashes afterward and firewood before. You should understand that firewood dwells in its Dharma-position, and has its before and after. Yet even though it has a past and a future, it is cut off from them. Ashes are in their Dharma-position, and they have their after and before. Just as this firewood, having become ashes, does not turn back into firewood, after a person dies he does not come back to life. Hence, according to an established teaching of the Buddha Dharma, one does not say that life becomes death. Thus we speak of the "unborn." And it is an established Buddha-turning of the Dharma wheel that death does not become life. Thus we speak of the "unperishing." Life is one temporal state, and death is one temporal state. For example, it is like winter and spring. We [Buddhists] do not think that winter becomes spring or say that spring becomes summer.

For a person to attain enlightenment is like the moon inhabiting water. The moon does not get wet, and the water is not disrupted. Although the moonlight is vast, it inhabits a small measure of water. The entire moon and even all the heavens inhabit the dew on the grass; they inhabit even one drop of water. That enlightenment does not disrupt the person is like the moon not boring a hole in the water. That the person does not obstruct enlightenment is like the drop of dew not obstructing the heavens and moon. The depth [of the one] shall be the measure of the [other's] height. As for the length or brevity of the time period, one should examine whether the water is great or small, and discern whether the heavens and moon are wide or narrow.

When the Dharma does not yet saturate the body-mind, one thinks that it is sufficient. If the Dharma fills the body-mind, one notices an insufficiency.

For example, if one rides in a boat out into the middle of the ocean where there are no mountains [in sight] and looks in the four directions, one will see only a circle without any other aspects in sight. Nevertheless, the great ocean is not circular, and it is not square; the remaining virtues of the ocean are inexhaustible. It is like a palace [for fish]. It is like a jeweled ornament [to gods]. It is just that, as far as my eyes can see, for a while it looks like a circle. It is also like this with the myriad things. Although things within and beyond this dusty world are replete with a variety of aspects, it is only through a cultivated power of vision that one can [intimately] perceive and apprehend them. In order to hear the household customs of the myriad things, you should know that, besides appearing as round or square, there are unlimited other virtues of the ocean and of the mountains, and there are worlds in all four directions. And you should know that it is not only like this over there, but also right here beneath your feet and even in a single drop [of water].

Fish swim through water, and swim as they may there is no limit to the water. Birds fly through the sky, and fly as they may there is no limit to the sky. And yet, fish and birds have never once left the water or sky. It is just that when the required activity is great the use is great, and when the need is small the use is small. In this manner, although they never fail to exhaust the borders of each and every point, turning about [freely] here and there, if a bird were to leave the sky, or if a fish were to leave the water, they would die instantly. One should know that [for a fish] life *is* by means of water, and [for a bird] life *is* by means of the sky. It is [also] the case that life *is* by means of birds and fish. And by means of life birds and fish are able to be. Moreover, we should proceed a step further. That there is the verification-in-practice of [human] lives is also just like this.

Thus, if there were a bird or a fish who aimed to move through the water or sky only after having completely surveyed the water or sky, it could not find its way or attain its place in them. If it attains this place, then, in accordance with this everyday activity, truth presences. If it finds its way, then, in accordance with this everyday activity, there is the presencing of truth. Because this way, this place, is neither great nor small, neither self nor other, neither already in existence nor [first] manifesting now, it is just as it is.

In this manner, when a person verifies-in-practice the Buddha Way, attaining one thing he or she becomes thoroughly familiar with that one thing; encountering one activity he or she [sincerely] practices that one activity. Since this is where the place is and the Way achieves its circulation, the reason that the limits of what is knowable are not known is that this knowing arises and proceeds together with the exhaustive fathoming of the Buddha Dharma. Do not think that attaining this place necessarily entails the self's own knowledge or that it can be understood intellectually. Although

right away the ultimate verification presences completely, the intimately concealed being is not necessarily completely presented. And why would it need to be completely visible?

As Chan Master Baoche of Mount Mayu was using his fan, a monk came and asked, “It is the wind’s nature to be constantly abiding and there is no place in which it does not circulate. Why then, sir, do you still use a fan?”

The master said, “You only know that it is the nature of the wind to be constantly abiding. You don’t yet know the reason [more literally: the principle of the way] that there is no place it does not reach.”

The monk said, “What is the reason for there being no place in which it does not circulate?”

At which time the master just used his fan.

The monk bowed reverently.

The verifying experience of the Buddha Dharma and the vital path of its true transmission are like this. To say that if it is constantly abiding one shouldn’t use a fan, that even without using a fan one should be able to feel the wind, is to not know [the meaning of] either constantly abiding or the nature of the wind. Because it is the nature of the wind to be constantly abiding, the wind [i.e., ways] of the Buddha household lets the great earth presence as gold and ripens the Milky Way into delicious cream.

Bibliography and Suggested Reading

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