

Dōgen's Zazen as Other Power Practice

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IT IS CERTAINLY TRUE that Japanese Sōtō Zen founder Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253) encouraged his students to apply themselves diligently to *zazen*, the sitting meditation that he espoused as a primary practice throughout his career. Dōgen frequently challenged his students to active inquiry into the teachings and to a vivid meditative awareness informed by penetrating questioning. And Dōgen was not seeking for an “easy practice” as a response to concerns about *mappō*, in the spirit of his fellow Kamakura period innovators. But none of this means that Dōgen was advocating a self-power practice with which its practitioners could accomplish great realization through their own efforts. On the contrary, many aspects of Dōgen's meditation teaching assume the practitioner's devoted acceptance of and support from “other” sources.

This is not to claim that Dōgen was relying solely on some Other Power with the same humble and insistent devotion as his contemporary Shinran. But in this paper I will focus on the aspects of Dōgen's *zazen* practice that do imply receiving support from Other Power. “Other Power” here does not refer to reliance on any single other source such as the Vow of Amitābha, but Dōgen did see the necessity for awakened realization of receiving support and strength from a variety of external “other” sources and the importance of sincere devotional gratitude to these benefactors. The material in this paper does not relate directly to Jōdo Shinshū devotional traditions. But we will see some of how Dōgen's *zazen* is deeply grounded in a strong devotional orientation. It is hoped that some aspects of this context might perhaps be informative to the formulation of an appropriate modern Shinshū meditative praxis.

For Dōgen, external support derives from three main sources: the lineage of historical (or quasi-historical) buddhas and ancestors, the cosmic buddhas and bodhisattvas, and perhaps most importantly, the phenomenal world of the environment informed by buddhadharma. This latter energy source, which we might trace back to the early teaching of the buddha-field or *buddhakṣetra*, has striking parallels with the role of Sukhāvati (the Land of Bliss) of Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism. Dōgen emphasized in his teaching of nonduality the ultimate nonseparation of self and other,

but he did at times acknowledge the aspect of these sources as “other,” conventionally at least.

Before exploring these three sites of his devotion, we may note that Dōgen makes clear in many of his writings that the zazen he advocates is not a meditative skill for his students to learn, or a technique for achieving some future heightened or exalted state. In his “Universally Recommended Practices for Zazen” (“Fukanzazengi,” the earliest version of which was written upon Dōgen’s return from China in 1227), he says, “The zazen I speak of is not meditation practice [in the traditional Buddhist sense]. It is simply the Dharma gate of peace and bliss, the practice-realization of totally culminated awakening.”¹ Dōgen’s zazen is a ritual expression and celebration of awakening already present. He repeatedly emphasizes the oneness of practice-realization, in which practice does not lead through one’s own efforts to some subsequent realization. For example, in 1241 he said, “Know that buddhas in the buddha way do not wait for awakening.”²

For Dōgen, zazen is not an activity aimed at results. In 1234 he said, “A practitioner should not practice buddha-dharma for his own sake, to gain fame and profit, to attain good results, or to pursue miraculous power. Practice only for the sake of the buddha-dharma.”³ Practice is the effect of realization, rather than its cause. In this way, Dōgen’s meditative praxis is a faith expression of the beneficial gift of grace from the buddhas and ancestors, analogous to how nenbutsu and shinjin are provided to the Shinshū devotee thanks to the Vow of Amida.

The first locus of an otherly power for Dōgen, and indeed in most of the Zen tradition, is the lineage of ancestral teachers going back to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. The structure of Dharma transmission, which is central to the Zen Buddhist lore and tradition, itself expresses a type of Other Power reliance. Without the guidance and power of the realization of previous historical teachers, the ancestral teachers going back generation after generation to ancient buddhas including but not limited to the historical Śākyamuni Buddha, realization in the current generation would be impossible. Modern scholarship has clarified how the lineage of names venerated in Zen, especially in the traditionally accepted Indian lineage, was concocted later and is not historically accurate. However, the persons who kept alive the practice in each generation, sometimes not known with historical accuracy, may remain for present practitioners not only the object of gratitude, but also an active source to call upon for support.

Dōgen regularly expresses deep gratitude to all the buddhas and ancestors for transmitting the teaching and invokes their support for current practice. In his *Shōbōgenzō* essay, “Only a Buddha Together with Another Buddha” (“Yuibutsu yobutsu”), he expands on a line from chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra*, “Only a buddha and a buddha can thoroughly master it,” to describe how realization depends on interaction with the realization of

other buddhas. He begins by saying, "Buddha-dharma cannot be known by a person."⁴ Here Dōgen is not only acknowledging indebtedness to the lineage of buddha ancestors and the personal teachers of each practitioner, but also starkly clarifying the limitations of self-power. He says, "What you think one way or another is not a help for realization.... If realization came forth by the power of your prior thoughts, it would not be trustworthy. Realization does not depend on thoughts, but comes forth far beyond them; realization is helped only by the power of realization itself."⁵

In his 1243 essay from *Shōbōgenzō*, "The Ancient Buddha Mind" ("Kōbusshin"), Dōgen talks of the pervasion of the buddha-mind throughout the world, for example that, "Its ten directions are totally the world of Buddha, and there has never been any world that is not the world of Buddha."⁶ And yet he gives various cases in which noted historical Chan masters referred to the assistance and inspiration of their predecessors with profuse gratitude and called them "ancient buddhas." Commenting on an instance when Xuefeng referred to the great Zhaozhou as an ancient buddha, Dōgen says, "In his action now, as he relies on the influence of an ancient buddha and learns from an ancient buddha, there is effort beyond conversing, which is, in other words Old Man Xuefeng, himself."⁷ The exertion and practice from the buddha ancestors themselves thus provide a reliable external power that allows buddha practice now.

In his *jōdō* (dharma hall discourses) in *Eihei Kōroku*, Dōgen frequently refers to zazen as a practice bestowed by the buddha ancestors and the buddhas and bodhisattvas. For example, he emphasizes this in discourse 516 in 1252, in which he cites Nāgārjuna (from the *Dazhidulun* attributed to him) criticizing other forms of sitting meditation by those who "seek to control their own minds, and have the tendency of seeking after nirvāṇa."⁸ For Dōgen, zazen is already the expression and benefit received from the buddhas and ancestors, and is not about seeking to gain some other state thereby.

In a slightly subsequent *jōdō* 522, Dōgen cites his own teacher Tiantong Rujing's saying, "Right at the very time of sitting, patch-robed monks make offerings to all the buddhas and ancestors in the whole world in ten directions. All without exception pay homage and make offerings ceaselessly." Dōgen then avows that, "I have been sitting the same as Tiantong," simply as a ritual of devotion and gratitude for this practice, an offering to all buddhas and ancestors. He concludes by equating this zazen to "taking a drink of Zhaozhou's tea for oneself,"⁹ referring to the great Tang dynasty Chinese master who is celebrated in a notable *kōan* for kindly offering tea to all students who arrived before him, regardless of their level of experience.

Dōgen's devotion to and reliance on Śākyamuni as primary Buddha is fully exhibited in his strong emotional responses in his many memorial discourses in *Eihei Kōroku* on the occasions of commemorating Śākyamuni's

birthdays and *parinirvāṇa* days. But clearly he expresses devotion to all buddhas as well.

One of the dozen final essays in *Shōbōgenzō*, edited after his death by Dōgen's successor Koun Ejō, is a lengthy discussion of "Veneration of the Buddhas" ("Kuyō shobutsu"), which concludes with ten methods for venerating a buddha.¹⁰ These include building a *stūpa* or various ways of making offerings to one, but also include offering one's meditative practice as gratitude to the buddhas. Throughout this long essay Dōgen praises practices of making offerings, clearly indicating his strong devotional attitude, as he says, for example, "Making venerative offerings in this way is the essence and life of the Buddhas in the three times."¹¹

As a second primary locus of devotion, Dōgen certainly speaks of relying on the cosmic buddhas and bodhisattvas for assistance, and even in totally entrusting them. In the undated *Shōbōgenzō* essay "Birth and Death" ("Shōji"), Dōgen says simply, "Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of buddha; then all is done by buddha."¹² Dōgen frequently uses a similar phrase, dropping off body and mind, *shinjin datsuraku*, to indicate both zazen and complete enlightenment itself. But the *Shōji* passage clarifies that his critical notion of *shinjin datsuraku* is not something one does through one's own effort, but it "is done by buddha."

Dōgen's trust in the buddhas and bodhisattvas is indicated, for example, on an occasion in 1250 when he gave a dharma hall discourse appealing to the power of buddhas and bodhisattvas for clear skies. He ends by quoting his own teacher in appeal, "Make prostrations to Śākyamuni; take refuge in Maitreya. Capable of saving the world from its sufferings, wondrous wisdom power of Avalokiteśvara, I call on you."¹³

Dōgen especially invokes the power of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion who is attendant to Amida Buddha. For example, after relating a dream or vision he had that included Avalokiteśvara, Dōgen says poetically, "When Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva makes an appearance, mountains and rivers on the great earth are not dead ashes. You should always remember that in the third month the partridges sing and the flowers open."¹⁴ For Dōgen the vitality and renewal of awakening practice arises with the grace of Avalokiteśvara's presence.

One traditional Mahāyāna expression of devotion to the buddhas and bodhisattvas is the formal practice of taking refuge in the three treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and sangha. In an undated *Shōbōgenzō* essay "Mind of the Way" ("Dōshin"), which may perhaps have been among his last writings, Dōgen emphasizes devotion to these three jewels. He says to "Aspire to respectfully make offerings and revere the three treasures in life after life."¹⁵ He also encourages chanting the three refuges, and specifically the practice as the end of life approaches of ceaselessly reciting "*Namukie Butsu.*" Among

the various other devotional practices he then extols, including making offerings, making Buddha images, revering the *Lotus Sutra*, and wearing Buddha's robe, *okesa*, Dōgen concludes by mentioning zazen, which he says is the dharma of buddhas and ancestral teachers, rather than of the three worldly realms.¹⁶ In this late writing, chanting homage to Buddha and zazen are grouped together as compatible and in some sense equivalent practices. It is said in Sōtō sources (though with uncertain historical accuracy) that as Dōgen's own health was failing in Kyoto in 1253, he himself recited the three refuges while walking around his room, before dying in zazen.

The third source of "Other Power" for Dōgen is the world itself, seen as a buddha-field providing nourishment for practitioners in a mutual interconnected relationship. Dōgen's worldview or cosmology sees the phenomenal world as an agent for awakened awareness, a dynamic, living force supporting the soteriological unfolding of the buddha-nature. This worldview is rooted in the teachings of the bodhisattva path, the sutras and commentaries of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Without providing a detailed discussion of philosophical history, far beyond the scope of this paper, I note that sources for Dōgen's Mahāyāna worldview include the writings of Tiantai figures such as Chanran (711–782), who articulated the teaching potential of grasses and trees, seen in earlier Buddhism as inanimate and thus inactive objects.¹⁷ Another source for this view of reality is the Chinese Huayan teachings, based on the *Avatamsaka*, or *Flower Ornament Sutra*, which describes the interconnectedness of all particulars. Thereby the world is a site of radical intersubjectivity, in which each event is the product of the interdependent co-arising of all things. Huayan teachers such as Fazang (643–712) developed and elaborated this vision. It can be described with their philosophical fourfold dialectic of mutual nonobstruction of the universal and the particular, and beyond that, the mutual nonobstruction of particulars with "other" particulars.¹⁸

This Huayan dialectic was elaborated in Chinese Chan with the five-degree or five-ranks philosophy of the interrelationship of universal and particulars that was first enunciated by Dongshan Liangjie (807–869), considered the founder of the Chinese Caodong (Japanese Sōtō) lineage, which Dōgen brought from China to Japan.¹⁹ Dōgen only occasionally refers directly to this five-rank dialectic of interfusion of the ultimate within the particular phenomena of the world. But it is clearly pervasive as a background in much of his philosophical teachings.

Other expressions of a similar worldview are apparent in Pure Land teachings. Here in an introduction to Shinran's teaching is a description of the background of Amida Buddha's Pure Land:

In the Mahāyāna tradition, fulfilled- or enjoyment-body Buddhas are said to occupy fields of influence in which their wisdom acts to save beings. Bodhisattvas vow to establish such spheres, and their

attainment of Buddhahood is, at the same time, the purification of their lands and the beings in them, resulting in a Buddha realm or pure land. These lands are characterized above all by the bliss of enlightenment, and in the sutra literature, this bliss is depicted in such concrete terms as jewel trees and palaces, pools strewn with golden sands, soft breezes and mild climate. These features are manifested to awaken and guide beings throughout the universe to enlightenment.²⁰

As in the Huayan vision of lands, the Pure Land constellated through the practice or vows of bodhisattvas upon full awakening includes landscape features that function as liberative guides to beings. The lands themselves then become sources of benefits to devotees.

This cosmological perspective of the world as an active buddha-field or in some ways a pure land is evident even in Dōgen's earliest writings. His "Talk on Wholehearted Engagement of the Way" ("Bendōwa"), written in 1231, is his fundamental text on the meaning of zazen. In this writing Dōgen avows that when even one person sits upright in meditation, "displaying the buddha mudra with one's whole body and mind," then "everything in the entire dharma world becomes buddha mudra, and all space in the universe completely becomes enlightenment."²¹ The notion that space, the surrounding world of the practitioner, can itself become enlightenment or awakening is profoundly subversive to conventional modern viewpoints. In this passage Dōgen continues to elaborate on this awakening of all things. He adds that "earth, grasses and trees, fences and walls, tiles and pebbles, all things in the dharma realm in ten directions, carry out buddha work." Not only are the landscape features of the world dynamically active, but they also are agents of enlightening activity. Moreover, the meditator and the phenomenal elements of the world "intimately and imperceptibly assist each other."

According to Dōgen there is a clear and beneficial mutuality in the relationship between practitioner and the environment. "Grasses and trees, fences and walls demonstrate and exalt it for the sake of living beings; and in turn, living beings, both ordinary and sage, express and unfold it for the sake of grasses and trees, fences and walls." This world is very far from being an objective, Newtonian realm of dead objects that humans hold dominion over in order to manipulate and utilize for their human agendas. Rather, the myriad aspects of phenomena are all energetic partners in spiritual engagement and devotion, in what is in effect a kind of pure land.

Thus the role of meditation is not to create, achieve, or obtain some enlightened state through the power of one's personal effort. Rather, meditation is the necessary expression of this interactive event of awakening. The practitioner is gifted with the opportunity and responsibility to express

this together with grasses and trees, fences and walls, and space itself. As Dōgen says almost at the very beginning of "Bendōwa," "Although this dharma is abundantly inherent in each person, it is not manifested without practice, it is not attained without realization. When you let go, the dharma fills your hand."²² The upright sitting he describes is the manifestation of letting go of one's self-clinging and the simultaneous acceptance of the abundant Dharma of the surrounding buddha-field.

In his practice instructions Dōgen emphasizes dignified, upright posture or manner. He particularly discusses this in his 1241 essay "Gyōbutsi Igi," "The Awesome (or Dignified) Presence of Active (or Practicing) Buddhas." But in this essay Dōgen also points to the support of the *dharmadhātu*, or buddha-field, "What allows one corner of a buddha's dignified presence is the entire universe, the entire earth, as well as the entirety of birth and death, coming and going, of innumerable lands, and lotus blossoms."²³ Dignified presence is not accomplished through the strength of self-power or personal efforts.

In a memorial discourse for one of his leading monks in 1252, Dōgen asserts that zazen is sufficient in itself to offer entry into the buddha land. He says, "For adorning his reward in the Buddha land, nothing is needed besides the slight fragrance of practice during one stick of incense."²⁴ Zazen here is not a means to resultant entry into the buddha land through the self-power of one's personal effort, but the slight fragrance of practice is here celebrated as itself an adornment of this buddha land provided by the buddhas, ancestors, bodhisattvas, and the buddha land itself.

We see that Dōgen developed a full meditation praxis not based on accomplishing some awakening or liberation through any self-power or effort. Rather, his meditation teachings are deeply involved with devotional gratitude for support from buddhas, ancestral teachers, bodhisattvas, and from the awakened buddha land. Turning from the Zen meditation teaching of Dōgen, there is no question that some branches of Zen do appear to rely on "self-power." This may be most present in the context of Zen lineages that emphasize acquisition of *kenshō*, with the idea that some dramatic experience of realization is desirable, a view that Dōgen strongly criticized.

But the implications of Dōgen's "other" reliance in his zazen, and especially his view that zazen cannot be accomplished through one's own self-power, can still be readily seen in significant portions of modern Sōtō Zen. Kōshō Uchiyama Rōshi, a successor of Kōdō Sawaki Rōshi who revitalized zazen practice in twentieth-century Japanese Sōtō, has proclaimed the saying, "Gaining is delusion, losing is enlightenment."²⁵ Such a saying resonates in spirit for me with Shinran's, "If even a good person can enter the Pure Land, how much easier for a bad one."

Modern American Sōtō Zen already includes a variety of strands and approaches to practice. But something of the spirit of the devotional side of Dōgen remains. This is evident in some of the teachings of Shunryū Suzuki

Roshi in the American Zen classic, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Suzuki clarifies the limitation of self-power and expresses total reliance on Buddha's power when he says, "Everything is Buddha's activity. So whatever you do, or even if you keep from doing something, Buddha is in that activity. Because people have no such understanding of Buddha, they think what they do is the most important thing, without knowing who it is that is actually doing it. People think they are doing various things, but actually Buddha is doing everything."²⁶ Suzuki expresses the appreciation of the Pure Land when he advises seeing buddha-nature in everything and in each individual. "Just this [zazen] posture is the basic one or original way for us, but actually what Buddha meant was that mountains, trees, flowing water, flowers and plants—everything as it is—is the way Buddha is."²⁷

On a personal note, my very first seven-day Zen *sesshin* (meditation retreat) thirty years ago in New York was led by my first teacher, Rev. Kandō Nakajima, a Sōtō Zen priest who I believe may have been raised in a Shinshū family. The retreat was held in the Bronxville home of Nakajima Sensei's friend, Rev. Hōzen Seki, the founder and minister of the Jōdo Shinshū New York Buddhist Temple. I remember Rev. Seki's warmth and kindness as he spoke to welcome we young students of Buddhism during *sesshin*; also how impressed I was with Rev. Seki's large Buddhist library upstairs. In those days I also used to enjoy walking by Rev. Seki's temple on nearby Riverside Drive just to see the large statue of Shinran out front, even though I knew little about him then.

Dōgen's *zazen*, without gaining ideas or reliance on self-power, remains available. But the first generations of American Zen practitioners probably still lack full appreciation of the devotional depths of Buddhist practice. This is due in part to the influence of some Western psychotherapeutic orientations that promote ideals of mere self-improvement. Consumerist conditioning has also led practitioners to seek to acquire dramatic meditative experiences as products. It may well be that American Buddhism will not become fulfilled until the value of "Other Power" is recognized. In my humble opinion, it will be an indication of American Buddhism's maturity when American Zen students appreciate the subtle teachings and perspective of Shinran.

NOTES

1. Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, trans., *Dōgen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Kōroku* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 534. *Eihei Kōroku* is one of Dōgen's two major (massive) works, along with the better known *Shōbōgenzō* (True Dharma Eye Treasury). *Eihei Kōroku* includes a later version of "Fukanzazengi" from 1242 (the popular version most often cited), but the majority of the lengthy *Eihei Kōroku* is composed of formal *jōdō* or dharma hall discourses from Eiheiiji, which is the primary source for Dōgen's mature teachings.
2. Taigen Dan Leighton and Kazuaki Tanahashi, trans., "The Awesome Presence of Active Buddhas" ("Gyōbutsu igi"), in *Beyond Thinking: A Guide to Zen Meditation by Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), p. 79.
3. Shohaku Okumura and Taigen Daniel Leighton, trans., "Guidelines for Studying the Way" ("Gakudō yōjinshū"), in *The Wholehearted Way: A Translation of Eihei Dōgen's Bendōwa, with Commentary by Kōshō Uchiyama Rōshi* (Boston: Charles Tuttle and Co., 1997), p. 112.
4. Ed Brown and Kazuaki Tanahashi, trans., "Only Buddha and Buddha," in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (New York: North Point Press, 1985), p. 161.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 161–162.
6. Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross, trans., *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo: Book 3* (Woods Hole, MA: Windbell Publications, 1997), p. 27.
7. See *ibid.*, p. 25.
8. Leighton and Okumura, *Dōgen's Extensive Record*, pp. 459–460.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 465.
10. Yūhō Yokoi with Daizen Victoria, *Zen Master Dōgen: An Introduction with Selected Writings* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), pp. 113–127.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
12. Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi, trans., "Birth and Death," in Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop* (see note 4), p. 75.
13. Leighton and Okumura, *Dōgen's Extensive Record*, p. 332.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
15. Mizuno Yaoko, ed., *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993), p. 471.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 474.

17. For Chanran, see Linda Penkower, "T'ien-t'ai During the T'ang Dynasty: Chan-jan and the Sinification of Buddhism" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1993).
18. See Thomas Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Huayen Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), pp. 24–42, 147–169; and Garma C. C. Chang, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), pp. 18–21, 136–170.
19. See Taigen Dan Leighton with Yi Wu, *Cultivating the Empty Field: The Silent Illumination of Zen Master Hongzhi* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), pp. 8–10, 62–63, 76–77; and William Powell, *The Record of Tung-shan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 61–66.
20. Yoshifuma Ueda and Dennis Hirota, *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1989), p. 122.
21. Okumura and Leighton, *The Wholehearted Way*, p. 22.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
23. Tanahashi, *Beyond Thinking*, p. 83.
24. Leighton and Okumura, *Dōgen's Extensive Record*, p. 452.
25. Kōshō Uchiyama, *Opening the Hand of Thought: Foundations of Zen Buddhist Practice*, rev. ed. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), p. 153.
26. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 126.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 131.