

Dōgen as Philosopher, Dōgen's *Philosophical Zen*

“Out at the prow with the sea wind blowing,
I had been wearying many questions...”
William Carlos Williams

The Emptiness of Philosophy

What is philosophy? What is the best way to respond to this question? For, indeed, asking after the nature of philosophy is to engage in philosophy. That is, “What is philosophy?” is itself a philosophical question, one not always explicitly engaged. We might venture that nearly all of the most influential philosophers have had deeply held views on the nature of philosophy, even if those views were not explicated in terms of “metaphilosophy” or even as an answer to the question, “What is philosophy?” Consider just a few figures from what goes by the history of *western* philosophy: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hume, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and in general the Logical Positivists such as Ayer and Carnap, and Quine. Part of what makes these figures and their work so interesting is their insistence upon their own normative view of philosophy; let us note in passing how Dōgen, too, is concerned to make a case for his normative view of Zen. Another way to describe this history is that it demonstrates the emptiness of philosophy, i.e., the fact that what counts as philosophy is largely dependent on and responsive to the changing conditions of society and culture, all while firmly rooted in the human condition and earlier traditions.

I have so far only mentioned western figures because the central question I will address today is whether, and in what way, Dōgen and his work constitute an instance of a philosopher doing philosophy. As with the western figures mentioned above and how they do not, by and large, talk explicitly about metaphilosophy, all while nevertheless doing it, so, too, with Dōgen. He obviously does not use the western term “philosophy” or the Japanese term *Tetsugaku* (哲学), a term coined by Nishi Amane in 1874 in response to the Japanese reengagement with the outside world.

I want to begin laying out my views on the nature of philosophy by thinking about what I take to be the premier philosophical question, namely: How should I live? I take this question to be “premier” because it is rooted in our being human, that is, in the human condition (I don’t mean human *nature*) where we are finite beings ineluctably situated in substantive epistemic uncertainty, and constantly in need, beings that face pain, loss, and death, as well as pleasure, gain, and birth throughout a life.¹ It is thus a

¹ This question is premier also insofar as it calls into question all other areas of philosophy insofar as how we answer it has implications for our pursuing other areas of philosophy—not only whether we pursue them but how we pursue them. And, of course, as is typical in philosophy, the

question humans across culture have and must engage, implicitly or explicitly; and in attempting to figure out how to respond, they have been doing philosophy. At least to this extent, then, philosophy is a human, not a western, activity. In this way, the word “philosophy” and its etymology are not pivot points for us.

Broadly construed, we might conceive of two different types of responses to this premier question of how to live: *one type* that answers it *finally* and *singularly*, if not also *vaguely*, e.g., “Live virtuously!” *Another type* answers it with an awareness of the changing conditions of life, i.e., not a *final* or necessarily *singular* response; for example, “Respond in the best way possible to what comes.” Here, of course, “the best” is continuously itself in question.

Notice an important difference between these two types of responses that stems from the finality of the first. That is, it is not so difficult to imagine a scenario that calls into question the finality of, “Live virtuously, come what may!” For example, we can imagine a collapse of society such that things become brutish, all against all. One, imagine Socrates, might insist that you should nevertheless be virtuous in such a scenario, but it strikes me it is an open question and one that is deserving of philosophical attention. By contrast, “Respond in the best way possible to what comes” leaves open the nature of what counts as the “best” both in terms of what is the best thing to do in a given situation, be virtuous or no, and in terms of what the “best” means more generally. Further, taking the Zen notion of emptiness seriously also pushes us toward the second response.

Thus, we can say that the way one should live is to respond as best as possible to the changing conditions and situations of life. This idea of striving for “the best” may be said to be firmly rooted in a desire not simply to live but to live the best life possible. And this in an analogous sense to Aristotle’s assumption that everyone naturally seeks *eudaimonia*, everyone seeks to flourish, to live well. We can also make sense of it by way of Socratic psychology.² In *Plato’s Socrates*, Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith attribute to Socrates the view that “...we desire only what is really best for us, and pursue only what we think is best for us.”³ Thus, we can pursue X, thinking it is best for us, all the while it is not, and, thus, we pursue that which we don’t (really) desire, even

response to metaphysical, epistemological, axiological, and logic considerations interpenetrate and also have implications for how we live.

² Here I don’t mean to say that we must endorse Socratic psychology, at least not fully. I am using it here more as a heuristic than as a position to be defended.

³ Brickhouse and Smith 1994, 88. The issues raised by such a claim, similar to those raised by Aristotle’s claim that *eudaimonia* is always in the background as a goal at which we aim, are deep and complex. Do we always really aim for what is best or do we not sometimes get caught up, distracted, or simply do something irrational that goes against our best interests? Perhaps we do, but one way to respond is to point out that the claim I’m making about our seeking the best response are rooted not simply in a descriptive claim that this is what we do anyway, for we perhaps do not sometimes; rather, my claim is also normative in that we ought to be seeking the best for ourselves. Perhaps such a claim could be grounded in the further claim that it would be irrational for creatures such as we not to seek what is best. Thus, on pain of irrationality, we ought to seek the best.

though we desire it, (otherwise we wouldn't pursue it). We can perhaps clarify this if we distinguish orders of desire. There is the first-order desire for something, say a donut, thinking it is best for us to experience donut-pleasure at this moment; however, there is the second-order desire to always do what is best for ourselves. Other complications aside, since we have identified the first-order desire as aligning with the second-order desire, we pursue the donut.

In this context we can say that philosophy *as figuring out the best response to what comes* is rooted in the second-order desire for what is best for us and the fact that that can be either rightly or wrongly fulfilled by our first order desires and actions, i.e., how we respond to what comes thus. We must, therefore, work out ever anew which first-order desire/action will fulfill the second-order desire for the *best for us*. Further, “best for us” is itself always in question, not simply because what really is best is unclear, epistemically if not also ontologically, and must be worked out, but also because a) the way in which something can be best is always up for grabs and b) the “us” is itself, as a non-fixed entity, up for grabs as to what it comes to, what it includes, what its boundaries are, etc. All of this must be worked out in real time. Lastly, given that conditions and contexts are always in flux, we cannot simply rest on past ways of responding, past principles for how best to proceed. Our responsibility is continually renewed moment to moment.

In summary, I am suggesting that philosophy concerns figuring out the best response possible to what comes, *specifically* when we cannot know what is best simply by looking. I take this response to be general enough to be as inclusive as possible while also not bringing in too much that is obviously not philosophy; however, it is *not* meant to provide necessary and sufficient conditions. It is meant to be *informative* and *useful*, but nevertheless a *defeasible*, working *explanation*. Philosophy, again, most generally, is *the careful*[where “careful” does not imply any particular length of time taken] *working out of how best to respond to those aspects of life and the world we find confronting us at any given moment that are indeterminate and not settleable by direct observation, where this indeterminacy is due to epistemic limitations and/or intrinsic features of the situation (such as underdetermination), and where the “best” of “how best to respond” is always already itself in question as to its meaning*.

This way of looking at human beings and philosophy has a number of salutary aspects. First, we often hear that philosophy deals with the most general and fundamental questions of human existence. While I do not want to limit philosophy to only what is most general and fundamental, this aspect is captured insofar as human existence ineluctably demands a response—whether in the form of words or non-verbal actions—and in working one out, we've got philosophy.

Second, another central aspect of philosophy is its built in self-referentiality. Figuring out the best response always presupposes what is “best” while also always simultaneously calling it into question—any *best* is always tentative. What philosophy is, and what we think it *should* be, will be determined by what we work out to be “the best” way of responding to the question of its nature in the context of the indeterminate and confounding world that confronts us, moment to moment.

Third, this explanation of philosophy acknowledges that giving reasoned arguments in some format is not going to be the only legitimate way to think one is best responding to the “problematic” aspects of the world demanding a response. Along these lines, this understanding of philosophical activity does not mean that everyone must become academic philosophers or that one must engage texts labeled “philosophy” or that one has to engage texts at all. I want to emphasize the importance of the idea that one need not engage or write explicitly *philosophical* texts to satisfy this explanation of philosophy. We find people engaging in all sorts of ways that wouldn’t count as “philosophical” by many/most academic philosophy departments. For example, in literature and poetry. This leaves open the place of argument in philosophy, but we should remember that arguments come in many forms, most of which are not in explicit terms of “Premise 1, Premise 2, Therefore, Conclusion C.” And thus, authors of literature and poetry may well be engaged in argument and engaged in making a case for a point of view, or, alternatively, “simply” expressing a point of view in a significant and recommending way, or some other way that is from their perspective the best way to respond.

From all that we have seen so far, what we have found is that life confronts us, most basically, with what we can call the *philosophical imperative*. Life demands philosophy. It is a categorical imperative, one that applies to everyone, regardless of whether they acknowledge it or want it or pursue it or what ends they have. And it is a self-referential imperative, one that demands to be questioned as to its nature and consequences.

Putting things together, life is not self-determining or self-interpreting. Being alive as *creatures* such as ourselves requires figuring out things whose answers are not obvious. Further, we do naturally seek to live a good life; perhaps we can say: the best life we can live given our circumstances. Thus, we feel the imperative of figuring out the best response to what comes. Whether a person heeds it is, of course, a different question.

The view of philosophy I have so far put forward is likely to encounter a number of objections. However, let me respond briefly to what I take to be the three most pressing. The first objection is that it essentially makes nearly everything one does the doing of philosophy. Given the Socratic psychology appealed to earlier where one is always doing what one takes to be best for oneself, this, if true, would mean that when the poet writes a poem, when the person opens the door to the car to get out, and when the person shampoos their hair longer than the bottle says they should, etc., they are doing what they take to be the best response to what they find confronting them, say, respectively, the urge to write a poem, the car stopping, the shampoo on the head. Such responses are philosophical because it is not obvious “just by looking” whether they are the best responses. Thus, since they are both a) taken to be the best response and b) not knowable to be the best responses simply by observation, they are philosophical responses and thus constitute the doing of philosophy.

In response, let us note that the cases as described fail to be philosophy because they did not involve a *working out* of what is the best response, whatever form that “working out” might legitimately take. People may have a kind of weakness of will when it comes to actually doing philosophy well. A version of what I mean can be seen in a

near identical comment I received from two different students while teaching at two different schools, namely, they shared with me that they didn't like philosophy because they didn't like having to think so hard. One of the main philosophical issues here up front is what exactly working out comes to. That is, there is the working out that takes place over many days weeks or months; there is the working out that takes place and conversation versus by oneself; there is a working out that takes place in an instant; etc. we might think that the working out takes place over great length of time is the properly philosophical. However, again, this is a philosophical question to be worked out itself.

The second objection can be put: Can we really be expected to work out whether our adjusting our shirt is the best thing to do? That is, are there not limits on what we can be expected to do, just as J.S. Mill had to acknowledge limitations on when one would need to perform utility calculations. In response, we can take this to point to the fact that, due to our limitations, our finitude, we must prioritize which things we work out and which we don't. And this prioritization is a kind of metalevel "best response" to our finitude and the philosophical imperative. That is, the demand produced by our finitude to prioritize is a further aspect of the philosophical imperative. Further, let us remember that we are not considering necessary and sufficient conditions for doing philosophy. Whether or not working out whether to tuck in one shirt is doing philosophy, may itself take doing philosophy. But it likely, I imagine, not to be deemed a philosophical question, as philosophical questions are usually of more import, of greater consequence.

The third objection is that the view of philosophy as working out the best response to what comes thus ultimately makes philosophy into "mere" *reasoning*. That is, someone might say that *working out* the best response is simply *reasoning out* the best response; and, thus, I am equating philosophy with reasoning. Again, it could not be an actual *equating* of *working out the best response* and *reasoning*, since I'm not offering up necessary and sufficient conditions for philosophy. As above, reasoning about whether to tuck in one's shirt is not likely to count as philosophy. However, the real issue in regard to whether or not I'm merely making philosophy into some form of reasoning is the question of how we should conceive of reasoning. If reasoning is the working out of the implications of propositions or the moving from one proposition to another so as to preserve truth, then philosophy is not simply reasoning. As before, for example, I want to make room for the poet's writing of poetry as a form of working out the best response to what they encounter in life or at a given moment, i.e., doing philosophy. My experience of poets and poetry, knowing them and reading interviews with them and conversations between them, tells me that they do not engage solely or mainly in this sort of reasoning described above, i.e., the moving from one proposition to another so as to preserve truth.⁴

The example of the poet is helpful here, one, because I think we usually think of the poet as *not* engaging in philosophy insofar as they are writing poetry. However, two, I

⁴ Two excellent books in regard to the methods and writings processes of poets are *Breaking the Alabaster Jar: Conversations with Li-Young Lee* (2006. Ed. Earl G. Ingersoll) and *Distant Neighbors: the Selected Letters of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder* (2014. Ed. Chad Wigglesworth).

think we can easily imagine that in writing poetry one may engage in all sorts of activities beyond reasoning *qua* moving from proposition to proposition. In writing poetry, one may do scholarly type research or do research by going to a particular locale. One might talk to others, read other poetry, read the dictionary, play with one's children, climb a tree, or whatever form of engaging the world helps one to see what it is that one hopes to see and how to express it in the poem. Often, though not always, of course, the poet seeks to *express* something; in such instances what they see is needed (as the best response) is the expression and so the question is how best to express it. I want to include this as the doing of philosophy, though it's possible it's not in every instance. These are messy boundaries we're exploring.

And, on the other hand, I also want to include the physicist's working out whether or not string theory is the correct view or the physicist's working out which interpretation of quantum mechanics is the best, and even the scientists working out an hypothesis where it involve their working out of the best way to respond to what they find given their desire to understand the world according to physical laws.

I certainly acknowledge that in regard to these objections and responses, I have left much vague and unstated here, much that needs to be worked out. I'd love to discuss any and all of this further.

Dōgen and the Philosophical Negotiation of the Way

Shortly after quoting Dōgen's claim in "Bendōwa" that, "A Buddhist should neither argue superiority or inferiority of doctrines, nor settle disputes over depth or shallowness of teachings, but only be mindful of authenticity or inauthenticity of practice"⁵ Kim goes on to elaborate: "Then what constitutes the authenticity of practice? To put in the simplest terms, it has to do with the manner and quality of negotiating the Way through the dynamic, dialectical relationship of practice and enlightenment as two foci in the soteric context of realization (*genjō*)."⁶ Kim's interpretation of Dōgen stands out in part because of his willingness to confront the messiness of "negotiating the Way," something that stands in welcome contrast to the many popular images of the sage, who, rooted in an unmediated grasp of the ineffable ground of existence, spontaneously and perfectly responds to any situation they are confronted with. Kim takes to heart Dōgen's saying, again in "Bendōwa": "The endeavor to negotiate the way (*bendō*), as I teach now, consists in discerning all things in view of enlightenment, and putting such a unitive awareness (*ichinyo*) into practice in the midst of the revaluated world (*shutsuro*)."⁷ For Dōgen, we defile practice-realization if we construe it in terms of means-ends; in light of this, to practice, to enact enlightenment, is to negotiate the Way; here we might appropriate two senses of "practice," namely, practice as the ritualized, i.e., repeated, enactment of enlightenment and practice as repetition aimed at perfection. Only, as Dōgen acknowledges, there is no *final* point of perfection: "there is the principle of the

⁵ Quoted in Kim 2007, 22.

⁶ Kim 2007, 23.

⁷ Quoted in Kim 2007, 21.

way [that we must] make one mistake after another.”⁸ Practice as perfecting and practice as enlightenment-enacted are unending just as the Bodhisattva’s vows—“Beings are innumerable, I vow to waken them...”—are unending. In this context we must negotiate the often subtly precarious path of the Way as its constituted by various, and variously messy, nondual dualities: practice-enlightenment, self-other, delusion-awareness, thinking-not-thinking, words-silence, etc.

Fully in line with nondefilement of practice-realization is the idea that this negotiating is not a means to some end but the end itself. And this negotiating as its own end is what happens both on and off the cushion. In the context of reading Dōgen’s Zen as zazen-only, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that for all the time spent on the cushion there is more of life spent off of it. Further, as Dōgen’s wonderful *Tenzo Kyōkun* fascicle makes clear, practice-realization is not something that can happen only on the cushion, anyway. Using “zazen” as a general term for practice-enlightenment, we can capture the end in itself conception of negotiating the Way in particularly provocative terms borrowed from Kodo Sawaki, namely, “Zazen is good for nothing.”⁹ To say of something that it is “good for something” is to attribute instrumental value to it and to confront it as a means, one that is distinct from the goal—as money is distinct from the car bought with it. By contrast, practice-realization at each moment is its own point or end.

We might note in this context an important parallel with Socrates’ view of philosophy in the *Apology*. When Socrates gives the well-known lines, “...if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less”¹⁰ I suggest we read “discussing virtue and those other things you hear me conversing about” as *philosophical discussion*. This gets us the claim that *daily* philosophical discussion is the greatest good. By implication, this means that discussing philosophy is not a means to achieving some other, greater good, such as the truth. In other words, it is *not* to have solved philosophical problems that is the greatest good *but rather* doing philosophy (which for at least one version of Socrates was philosophical discussion). Philosophy, then, if we are inclined to agree with this reading of the *Apology*’s Socrates, is an end in itself; hence, we might say: *Philosophy is good for nothing*.

Practice-Realization, Practicing Philosophy: “What is this that thus comes?”

But, of course, just as zazen’s good-for-nothingness is tied to enacting practice-enlightenment, bringing suffering to an end, philosophy’s good-for-nothingness is tied to achieving the truth about how best to respond. I want to suggest now that we can bring these two together, practice-realization and philosophy, by way of considering one of

⁸ Dōgen 2010, Vol. 1, §88.

⁹ Sawaki 2014, 138ff.

¹⁰ Plato 2002, 41 (38a).

Dōgen's favorite kōans, and one found in Dōgen's collection of 300 kōans called the *Mana Shōbōgenzō*. In John Daido Loori's edition, the kōan is called "Nanyue's 'It's Not Like Something'." In Dōgen, it is found multiple times in the *Kana Shōbōgenzō* and in the *Eihei Kōroku*; based on a quick look at the cross references chart in Loori's edition of the *Mana Shōbōgenzō* it would seem to be Dōgen's third most referenced kōan after "Bodhidharma's 'Skin, Flesh, Bones, and Marrow,'" which is first, and "Sākyamuni's Flower," which is second. Here is one version from the *Eihei Kōroku*:

374. Dharma Hall Discourse

Here is a story. When Nanyue [Huairang] first visited the sixth ancestor [Dajian Huineng], the ancestor asked him, "Where are you from?"

Nanyue said, "I came from the place of National Teacher Songshan [Hui]an.

The ancestor said, "What is this that thus comes?"

Nanyue never put this question aside. After eight years he told the sixth ancestor, "[I,] Huairang can now understand the question 'What is this that thus comes?' that you received me with upon my first arriving to see you."

The sixth ancestor said, "How do you understand it?"

Nanyue said, "To explain or demonstrate anything would miss the mark."

The sixth ancestor said, "Then do you suppose there is practice-realization or not?"

Nanyue said, "It is not that there is no practice-realization, but only that it cannot be defiled."

The sixth ancestor said, "This nondefilement is exactly what the buddhas protect and care for. I am thus, you are thus, and the ancestors in India also are thus."¹¹

I want to focus on two aspects of this dialogue. The first is the apparent question, "What is this that thus comes?" and the second is the non-defilement of practice-realization.

First, concerning the question, "What is this that thus comes?" Kim writes, "Dōgen, like other Zen Buddhists, was fond of using such interrogative pronouns as "what," "how," and "that," (*nani, ga, ka, nanimono, shimo, somo, immo*, etc.) to denote the ultimate truth of thusness and emptiness."¹² Commenting on "Nanyue's 'It's Not Like Something'" in the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle "*Immo* (Thusness)", Dōgen writes:

This saying [containing] "thus" is not actually a question, because it is beyond comprehension [and incomprehension]. We should investigate thoroughly that, because "this" [particularity] is the "What," all things are always the "What," and each and every thing is always the "What." The "What" is not a question; it is the "coming of thusness."¹³

¹¹ Dōgen 2010, p328.

¹² Kim 2004, 134.

¹³ Kim 1985, 204.

The What that comes thus is reality rolling on the crest of the wave of emptiness-manifesting, i.e., in all of its everchanging interdependent flux and flow. *Just this is it*, we might say, moment to moment, to borrow something from Dongshan.¹⁴

One way to understand the claim that what comes thus is beyond comprehension is that it is beyond any final, fixed comprehension, not that it is beyond a comprehension firmly rooted in emptiness—in terms that we'll take up later, we might say that from the standpoint of the *deconstructive aspect* of emptiness it is beyond comprehension, well characterized by the rhetoric of the *Heart Sutra*, but from the reevaluated perspective of the *reconstructive aspect* of emptiness comprehension is possible. Kim: “Just as the self is always questionable and problematic, so is the world we live in. Nevertheless, that very questionableness is a challenge and an opportunity for practitioners to discern and realize ‘what’ as ‘thusness’s coming.’¹⁵ While Dōgen denies, at least in the above quote, that “What is this that thus comes?” is really a question—and is instead a statement pointing at emptiness come at *this moment thus*—we can read such a denial as a provisional understanding, the other half of which is that the What that comes thus demands the question, “What is this that thus comes?” in the sense of our central philosophical question of “What is the best way to respond to what comes thus?” “What is this that thus comes?” is both a statement and a question. It is a statement as to the nature of self and world in emptiness, but one that is ever already a question as to what exactly that self is and what is demanded of it, given its everchanging and interdependent *not-one/not-two* nature. One cannot go forward assuming to have achieved a final understanding of what that entails. In the dialogue, “Nanyue never put this question aside” during the eight years of study; and we now can see that it is a statement-question never to be put aside as long as one enacts practice-realization.

Second, I take it that Nanyue’s saying “To explain or demonstrate anything would miss the mark” alludes to the fact that “the mark” is always the thusness of What coming, and to try to explain it, or otherwise “hit it,” would be to try to fix that which cannot be fixed; it would be to introduce a duality between this moment of explanation and the next moment of What come thus. Instead, what is called for by the What come thus is a never ending “explaining,” i.e., the continuous practice of a never ending grappling with the What and not some once and for all, fixed “explanation.” Similarly, that practice-realization cannot be defiled means that practice is not to be seen as a means to realization but the enactment of it. To see practice as a means to realization makes them into a duality, defiling them. There is “always” only this particular What come thus, moment to moment, as nondual with before and after as it may be. Realization is not some future state dependent upon present moment practice as a means—as Dōgen says, “Do not wait for some great enlightenment experience, for the great enlightenment is synonymous with our everyday tea and meals.”¹⁶ Practice is the continuous negotiation of the Way that enacts enlightenment in the mundane moment to moment time of our

¹⁴ See Leighton 2015.

¹⁵ Kim 2007, 91.

¹⁶ Dōgen 2007, p392, “On Ceaseless Practice.”

lives—it is Baoche of Mt. Mayu waving his fan. This practice is not for the sake of something else other than itself—it is good for nothing. Just as philosophy is done, not as a means to achieve some fixed and final Truth, I am maintaining, but rather as the continuous practice of asking “What is the best way to respond to what comes thus?”—it is good for nothing. There is no final point of having achieved and made fixed *the* best response. Practice-enlightenment is continuous practice; practicing philosophy is continuous practice.

Both Dōgen’s Zen and philosophy are the continuous practice of probing and penetrating what comes thus. We can see, then, an aspect of how enacting practice-realization implies practicing philosophy as I have characterized it here. That is, practicing Dōgen’s Zen is to have a questioning disposition toward each moment, not “questioning” in the sense of doubt but in the sense of *open receptivity* directed at *penetrative understanding*, both of which are always in question as to what they will become in the flux and flow of life. This penetrative understanding is aimed at the d/Dharma as teaching and world, as Buddha-nature, as Thusness, but this is all in the context of skillfully negotiating the Way to alleviate the suffering of oneself and others. To iterate, the penetrative understanding in question is in the sense of understanding how to skillfully negotiate the Way in a world where the best response is not obvious and obstacles are myriad—which manifests opportunity for mistake after mistake.

However, against the claim that practicing Dōgen’s Zen is to have a questioning disposition toward each moment that entails simultaneously practicing philosophy, I can imagine the following objection: Zen practice is grounded on letting go moment to moment, which is rooted in (absolute?) nonjudgmental acceptance, such that to continuously probe the What with an eye of how best to respond is to try too hard to control what comes, going against, for example, Dōgen’s, “...whatever way objects come, do not try to change them. ... Even if you try to control what comes, it cannot be controlled.”¹⁷

In response to this objection, consider that to take this more passive approach as characteristic of Dōgen’s Zen is actually to go against what that approach claims more broadly. That is, it sets up a dualism of ‘past understanding’ and everchanging present moment engagement: a kind of resting on *one*’s laurels. This is in contrast to what is demanded by emptiness, namely, continuous practice in enacting an ever deepening understanding moment to moment of each moment as it comes thus; the mountains *do* walk along their way, in the clouds, toes in the water. To fall into the passive quietistic approach is to hold fixed one’s “penetrative” understanding and to elide the difficult complications needing engagement (though complications may not come anytime soon—one never knows for sure the when of the What).

Finally, in contrasting a more “passive” with a more “active” approach to practice-realization, we do well to note an important complication, and one pointing toward the necessity of philosophy in practicing Dōgen’s Zen. In the Christian context where one might adhere to the idea that whatever happens is God’s will, there is a danger of quietism, for if we perceive injustice, we might well shrug and say, “It’s God’s will”

¹⁷ Dōgen 1985, 164.

and not move to attempt to stop the injustice. I take it that such concerns are central to the *Serenity Prayer*, which reads in its most popular form:

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.

When to let things be, recognizing they cannot be changed, at least not by oneself alone, and when to attempt to effect change, this is wisdom. Similarly, in Zen, we can conceive of wisdom (*prajna*) as, in part, the skillful ability to negotiate the Way, where we astutely perceive and/or work out when to press and when to release. Here's the point, however: understanding when to press and when to release will not always be a matter of spontaneous judgment, but may well, and often, require some sort of "figuring out"; and we should remember that this "figuring out" comes in myriad forms, not simply reasoning from "premise" to "conclusion."¹⁸ One aspect of this "figuring out" we ought to consider involves Kim's distinction, on Dōgen's behalf, between *deconstructive* and *reconstructive* aspects of "weighing emptiness."

Weighing Emptiness

There is a tendency in Zen Buddhism, at times at least, to overly privilege equality and non-discrimination, as though enlightenment meant escaping delusion/suffering by way of one-sidedly experiencing all things as equal and one, free of concepts, conceptions, and distinctions. Kim writes:

The proclivity to privilege equality, as often pointed out by scholars in Zen, tends to devalue or erase differentiation, thereby entailing the weakening and, at worst, the disavowal of critical thinking in the ethical, political, and social spheres. ... [The view of Zen as having] an excessive adaptability or flexibility...to a given situation is due, at least in part, to its flawed view of the soteriological significance of emptiness.

The nonduality that is delusion/enlightenment in emptiness does not fuzz out distinctions and differences, much less the need to differentiate/discriminate. Kim emphasizes this by distinguishing between what he calls the *deconstructive* and *reconstructive* aspects of Dōgen's views on emptiness. The *destructive aspect* is that of recognizing that there is no *unchanging, independent* nature to anything, including emptiness. The apparent persistence of selves and their apparent separation are simply that, namely, appearances "aided and abetted" by memory and conceptual reification. Ignorance of this is the root of suffering. The Heart Sutra is an excellent example of the deconstructive aspect of

¹⁸ We might note, too, that spontaneous judgment at one time may be the result of a prior period of pertinent reflection.

emptiness. According to Kim, the *reconstructive aspect* is that: “Emptiness cares about differences in worldly truth so as to bring about fairness.”¹⁹ In fleshing this out, Kim makes much of Dōgen’s use of the analogy of a steelyard in the fascicle *Muchū Setsumu*, “Expounding a Dream in a Dream.” The steelyard is a scale one can hold up that has uneven arms. On one side is placed that which is to be weighed; on the other there’s a moveable weight and scale. By adjusting the moveable weight, one attains equilibrium with the weight of the object. Dōgen writes:

Study a steelyard in equilibrium. When we study it, our power to discern minute differences in weight manifests itself without fail, and thus puts forth the expounding of a dream within a dream. Unless we consider weight differences, and thereby attain the equilibrium [of the steelyard], no fairness [in the ascertainment of weight] is accomplished. Only when equilibrium is obtained, do we see fairness. Once we have obtained equilibrium, it does not hinge upon the object [to be weighed], the steelyard, or its workings. You must investigate the following thoroughly: Although [the object, the steelyard, and its workings] hang in empty space, if you do not bring about equilibrium, fairness is not materialized. ... [By virtue of this principle of fairness] we weigh emptiness and things; whether it is emptiness of form, [we weigh it to] meet fairness.²⁰

As Kim reads this passage, and I follow Kim here,²¹ the point is that we do not *realize* and *actualize* emptiness appropriately if we do not make note of differences, if we do not take the focus of form (delusion) seriously. On this point, Uchiyama comments:

The problem...concerns the meaning of not discriminating. In our day-to-day lives, it is impossible to live without discriminating between good and evil, likes and dislikes. To say that giving is important does not mean we go around giving our house key to a burglar, or a rifle to someone who is crazy. ... There is no human life in which there is no difference drawn between *miso* [soybean paste] and *kuso* [human excrement].²²

¹⁹ Kim 2007, 43.

²⁰ Kim 2007, 42.

²¹ Kim notes that in regard to the steelyard passage, “commentarial works in the Sōtō tradition have conveniently muted and trivialized its true significance to the extent that they have virtually buried it, instead favoring the static, uncritical, transcendentalistic meaning of emptiness in the name of equality.” (Kim 2007, 43)

²² Uchiyama 2005, 38 & 46. A similar point is made by Leighton and Okumura, commenting on Dōgen’s instructions for the cook and the cooks dividing grains of rice in relation to the number of people to feed: “Zazen practice usually emphasizes nondiscrimination. But this nondiscrimination also does not discriminate against the careful calculations and consideration necessary for attentive practice amid the diversity of ordinary everyday life” (1996, 52-53, en. 19).

The *deconstructive* aspect of emptiness obliterates the idea that *miso* and *kuso* are, so to speak, two selves whose identities are unrelated and persist unchanging through time. The *reconstructive* aspect acknowledges the deconstructive side but also acknowledges that saying they are interdependent and in flux does not make them one and the same, like “1=1.” We might say that there is a correspondence between the deconstructive and the reconstructive aspects of emptiness and the idea of non-duality being expressed as “not one, not two.” The *deconstructive* is the “not two” aspect and the *reconstructive* is “not one” aspect. As Shunryu Suzuki notes: “This is the most important teaching: not two, and not one. in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each of us is both dependent and independent.”²³ We might say, then, that the steelyard comes into play in the navigation, in the *negotiation*, of not one/not two, of the deconstructive and reconstructive foci of moment to moment existence.

As an example, in 1991 Thich Nhat Hanh published a piece in the *LA Times* after the Rodney King police beating. After saying how he identified with King, he writes:

But looking more deeply, I was able to see that the policemen who were beating Rodney King were also myself. Why were they doing that? Because our society is full of hatred and violence. Everything is like a bomb ready to explode, and we are part of that bomb. We are co-responsible for that bomb. That is why I saw myself as the policemen beating the driver. We all are these policemen.²⁴

How can we achieve fairness, i.e., justice for King and possible future victims, if we do not *weigh the situation with our steelyard hanging in emptiness*? That is, if we do not deconstruct the apparent separation, the apparent distance, between ourselves and Rodney King, recognizing that we are nondual with King, the policemen, and the social fabric partially constitutive of the causes and conditions that give rise to them and what happens, then we cannot begin to make progress in fairness, in justice. But we cannot linger in “I am the beater; I am the beaten.” We must discriminate between the various factors, causes and conditions, that operate to produce injustice.²⁵ We must assess them, take them apart with emptiness and put them back together, reevaluated through emptiness. We cannot, then, properly realize enlightenment without realizing that it in fact requires discriminating, weighing differences, it requires lingering in delusion while being nevertheless free of delusion. We are not awake if we simply negate, and fail to reconstruct in emptiness, valuations and judgments.

Insofar as enlightened activity, i.e., the activity of a Buddha in the world, requires weighing emptiness, then, we can say that enlightened activity is philosophical activity. That is, weighing emptiness as we’ve described it here is a paradigm example of “figuring out how best to respond.”

²³ Suzuki 2002, 25.

²⁴ Hanh 199.1

²⁵ And, of course, exactly what justice *is* is a central philosophical question and one terribly complicated to adjudicate in the context of Buddhist ethics and the dangers of antinomianism.

Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* as Supersaturated with Philosophy

I have argued that Dōgen's conception of Zen practice-realization has at its heart the heart of philosophy, namely, the question, "What is this that thus comes?" in the sense of "What is the best way to respond to what comes thus?" I have also argued that there is a philosophical imperative, which is a categorical imperative applying to every human insofar as they are human. In an important sense, one cannot be human without trying to figure out the best way to respond to what comes; it is just that the degree and extent to which one takes seriously that question, along with developing a skillfulness in engaging it, may vary, and vary radically between people and groups. This is similar to how Zen practice emphasizes an aspect of human existence everyone engages, namely, (self-) conscious awareness; it is just that the degree and extent to which one takes seriously the importance of (self-) awareness, along with developing a skillfulness in utilizing it, may vary, and vary radically between people and groups. The point is that my attribution of philosophical activity to Dōgen's Zen is not riding on the mere fact that a Zen practitioner is going to be human and the claim that all humans practice philosophy. That would be a misreading of the position outlined here. Rather, as Zen develops and refines the nature and function(s) of (self-) awareness, so, too, it develops and refines what it means to figure out the best way to respond to what comes thus, for example, through the de- and re-constructive aspects of emptiness. In this context, Dōgen's Zen can be seen as a response to the philosophical question: How should I/we live? We might summarize his answer, in part, thus: We must carefully negotiate (respond to and weigh) the variegated and multifaceted not-one/not-two-ness of the What-come-thus, which we do via *non-thinking* (*hi-shiryō*) which actualizes/enacts a penetrative and compassionate understanding of the Way, thereby manifesting *prajna*, wisdom beyond wisdom.²⁶

In closing, let us turn from the discussing specifically the philosophical nature of Dōgen's *Zen*, to a brief summary of some of the ways in which the *Shōbōgenzō*, and Dōgen's work more generally, can be seen as, so to speak, supersaturated with philosophy. Consider first that Dōgen goes to China because he figures that it is the best way to pursue the authentic Dharma, something he worked out over many years in his travels around Japan in search of the authentic Dharma. On his return to Japan from China, Dōgen is faced with the question of what to do. In an early text, "Bendōwa," he tells us that he returned wanting to spread the teaching of the authentic Dharma and to save sentient beings.

Central to Dōgen's personal bodhisattva practice was the question of how best to go about saving sentient beings. Given the situation he knew existed in Japan, this could not be done simply by engaging zazen in a preexisting monastery. Practicing the Way in Japan, as he understood it, would require a great deal more. Founding temples and practice communities was obviously important but so was the creation of a new textual

²⁶ If there were more time, I'd discuss the complexities of Dōgen's understanding of non-thinking (*hi-shiryō*) (in relation to thinking (*shiryō*) and not-thinking (*fushiryō*)) and its role in the philosophical nature of Dōgen's Zen. But see Kim 2007, chapter 5, and Heine 2020, 188ff, for important discussions of Dōgen's views on non-thinking.

basis for practice. The *Shōbōgenzō* is a philosophical response to the What that unfolded thus to Dōgen. That is, writing it was a philosophical response and one that is itself a philosophical expression, while also being an expression of the authentic Dharma. That is, not only did Dōgen enact his enlightenment by writing and teaching the various fascicles making up the various editions of it, but they were each written as the best response to what came thus at a particular time. Moreover, as they were not dictated to him by a God or daemon, but carefully composed by Dōgen, the writing itself required answering the question at each stage, “How best to do this?” that went beyond the “How best to wear my shirt?” form of the question. Lastly, the content itself of the various fascicles never simply describes facts or instructions, but also interprets and reinterprets, draws out the significance of various ideas from various sources, makes connections between ideas that are seemingly unconnected, and implores the reader/listener toward a penetrative understanding of practice-realization and all of its aspects.

In reading the *Shōbōgenzō*, whether as someone practicing philosophy or someone practicing Zen (or both), one is called upon to do philosophy, i.e., one must figure out the best response to what comes thus, line after line, or whether the best response to the text is to read it line by line.²⁷ Such a figuring out implicates questions of what one should believe, what one should understand, do, etc. While such is true of many texts (even an Ikea instruction booklet for putting together a bookshelf) the way in which one must figure out the best response to the *Shōbōgenzō*, particularly from the perspective of a practitioner, is of another level. For example, while one might ponder the best response to an Ikea instruction booklet, the fact that it is not a philosophical text in itself is obvious; however, the fact that one can sensibly ask the question, “Is the *Shōbōgenzō* a philosophical or religious text?” indicates that its contents provoke philosophical reflection in a way that the Ikea booklet cannot.

Thus, if we are careful, we should note that it is not that the *Shōbōgenzō* is a philosophical text *simply* because it prompts a philosophical response, since clearly non-philosophical texts can do that. Rather, what makes the *Shōbōgenzō* (and other Dōgen texts) philosophical is:

- 1) Dōgen’s writing the *Shōbōgenzō* is itself *a part of his philosophical response* to what he finds upon his return from China and going forward in his establishing monasteries;
- 2) Writing it required *doing philosophy*, as he had to endeavor to express his understanding of the true Dharma and do so in a very particular context with a whole host of challenges (for example, it being the degenerate time of *mappo*, the age of the last Dharma, and facing competition from other sects, and drawing many of his monks from other sects where they had already practiced for some time). Kim addresses these issues, in part, in a lovely passage:

²⁷ Steven Heine has, for example, related how the monk Kazumitsu Wako Kato utilized, what I’ll call, non-analytic reading methods that focus more on tone and feel to great realizational effect.

Departing radically from the mystic method of *via negativa*, Dōgen was confident in what was yet to be expressed, in what had already been expressed, as well as in what had not yet been expressed or allegedly could not be expressed. Here he concurred with John Wisdom, who wrote: “Philosophers should be constantly trying to say what cannot be said.” Philosophic and religious enterprises consisted in fidelity to the inexpressible and in the search for expressibility; fundamentally speaking, it was an impossible task, yet it had to be carried out, because it was a mode of compassion that Dōgen so eloquently expounded as “loving speech” (*aigo*).²⁸

- 3) The content of many of the fascicles in the *Shōbōgenzō* is itself philosophical. As before, the texts never simply describe facts or instructions; rather, in addition, they interpret and reinterpret, draw out the significance of various ideas, make connections between ideas that are seemingly unconnected, and implore the reader/listener toward a penetrative understanding of practice-realization and all of its aspects, among other things we can justly call philosophical.
- 4) Reading the *Shōbōgenzō*, even if one is “merely” a Zen practitioner, is something that requires doing philosophy in that one must interpret the meaning of the text and work out what it demands of one and *how one should live*. That is,
- 5) the *Shōbōgenzō* content contains answers/responses/guidance to/for the premier philosophical question, “How should I live?”

²⁸ Kim 2004, 95.

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