Dōgen on meditation and thinking: a reflection on his view of Zen

Hee-Jin Kim

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A Reflection on His View of Zen

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Preface

In recent decades, Dōgen's Zen has been relentlessly challenged by scholars of Dōgen studies, especially the proponents of Critical Buddhism within the Sōtō Zen academia who shook Sōtō orthodoxy to its core. Similarly, Zen Buddhism in general has been minutely scrutinized by a number of modern/postmodern Zen scholars, both within and without the Zen sectarian tradition. This scrutiny has involved issues ranging from the subitist (sudden enlightenment) orthodoxy to Zen folk religiosity, and from Imperial Way Zen to the reverse Orientalism of Nishida School philosophers.

Along with these challenges, Zen is experiencing a rude awakening from its spiritual hubris and cultural narcissism. It currently confronts an extraordinarily chaotic and fragmented world borne of the inexorable forces of science, technology, and global capitalism that have become increasingly misguided and dehumanizing, particularly following the demise of the communist world. We in the Northern Hemisphere—in sharp contrast to those in the Southern Hemisphere—are so materially affluent, so technologically advanced, and yet so morally and spiritually disoriented that we are at a profound loss as to how to manage such pressing issues as world peace, economic, social, and ecological justice, cultural and religious diversity, and the possibility of living authentically in today's world. Like other religious traditions, Zen cannot escape the exigency of this worldwide crisis.

Zen now stands at a crossroads. I submit that in such a contemporary context, Dōgen as meditator and Dōgen as thinker challenge us as much as we challenge him and his Zen. In this respect, we live in one of the most intellectually challenging and exciting periods in the history of the Zen religion and of Dōgen studies. Herein lies my desire to present this book with a sense of urgency.

In my previous book *Dōgen Kigen: Mystical Realist*, recently republished as *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*,[1] I endeavored in part to articulate salient aspects of Dōgen's methodology, including how he practiced his

Zen. I realized early on in my study of Dōgen that his sensibilities to, and his ways of dealing with, language, thinking, and reason were key to understanding and assessing the way he *did* his religion. It was, therefore, absolutely critical to uncover Dōgen's fundamental presuppositions of duality and nonduality, as they related to his religious methodology.

A few main points of my investigation were: (1) In contrast to the prevailing Zen tradition that had been founded upon an epistemological dualism between equality and differentiation, intuition and intellect, meditation and wisdom, Dōgen restored language, thinking and reason—the familiar tools of duality—to their fully deserved legitimacy in his Zen. At the same time, he never lost sight of their ultimate limitations, as well as the supreme importance of nonduality. (2) Nonduality in his view did not signify the transcendence of duality so much as the realization of it. The function of nonduality was not to efface duality, as often is the case with that of good and evil, nor to make duality a provisional expedient for attaining a *sui generis* experience, nor to plunge into ineffable reality. (3) Nonduality was always embedded and active within duality itself—as the guider, purifier, and empowerer of duality. The two were appropriated soteriologically, not theoretically or as explanatory concepts. And finally, (4) Dōgen's manner of approaching duality and nonduality was neither hierarchical, teleological, nor reified.

This present work offers some sundry results of my continued efforts to explore and explicate Dōgen's religious method along the aforementioned line of interpretation. I expand upon some issues and points from my previous work, amend others, and offer new observations, reflections, and analyses. In many ways, the present book complements and surpasses its predecessor. My textual analyses and critical reflections, though brief and schematic, center around such topics as original ambiguity inherent in both delusion and enlightenment, the meaning of negotiating the Way in Dōgen's praxis-oriented religion, the dynamic functions of emptiness as illustrated in the steelyard analogy, the realizational view of language, the notion of nonthinking/right thinking as the essence of seated meditation, and a multifaceted, radical conception of reason.

By discussing these subject matters in six short chapters,[2] I wish to bring Dōgen the meditator *and* Dōgen the thinker into relief. The focus of my investigation in this work is on meditation and thinking, an issue that has fascinated me since my first encounter with Dōgen in the late 1950s. More than anything else, however, I have tried to explore and understand the dynamics of duality as they relate to nonduality in the temporality of existence-time.

It has always been a personal delight and challenge for me as a scholar of Dōgen studies to find that such a traditionalist as Dōgen, who often reminded himself and his disciples of "holding the ancients in reverence" (*bōko*), read ancient writings and sayings in such a strikingly original and transgressive manner. For this reason, just as Confucius was famously characterized by Herbert Fingarette as a traditionalist *and* visionary,[3] Dōgen may well be regarded in a similar vein. Indeed, Dōgen seems to embody the qualification of the ideal teacher that Confucius had in mind when he said: "He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher."[4]

Dōgen "reanimated" the archaic tradition of meditation. It was a hermeneutic imperative for him to live on the boundary where ancients and moderns met and to engage them in dialogue. He now challenges us to do the same in a task that has no end. Perhaps that is the only way we can move beyond the ancients (including Dōgen himself), and ultimately move beyond ourselves the moderns (and postmoderns).

In view of this, throughout the present work, I situate myself methodologically and hermeneutically at the intersection of Dōgen's Zen and our contemporary crisis, in an attempt to facilitate mutual communication and understanding as empathetically and critically as possible.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the following people: Nancy Ellegate and the staff at State University of New York Press for making this publication possible; Soo-Jin Kim of Hallym University in Korea for his word processing expertise of glossary terms; Patricia Hall and Pearl Kim-Kregel for their editorial assistance at different stages of the project; and Patrick Charles for his word processing of early drafts. And finally, I thank my wife Jung-Sun for her moral support and immeasurable help throughout the entire project—the present work is dedicated to her.

Hee-Jin Kim
Eugene, Oregon
October 2005

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Chapter 1

A Shattered Mirror, a Fallen Flower

1

It is axiomatic in Zen Buddhism that delusion and enlightenment constitute a nondual unity (*meigo ichinyo*). For the sake of argument, let me formulate this dictum: Enlightenment is construed as seeing things as they really are rather than as they appear; it is a direct insight into, and discernment of, the nature of reality that is apprehended only by wisdom, which transcends and is prior to the activity of discriminative thought. In this view, delusion is defined as all that is opposed to enlightenment.

The problem with this reading is manifold: (1) There is an inherent tendency to bifurcate between "things as they really are" and "things as they appear to be"; (2) its corollary is that there is an unbridgeable chasm between insight/discernment and discrimination; (3) "seeing" is conceived predominantly in epistemological, intuitive, and mystical terms; (4) the pre- or extradiscriminative state of mind is privileged in such a way that creative tensions between delusion and enlightenment are all but lost; (5) nonduality in the unity is virtually the neutralization of all discriminations and thus has little or nothing to encourage and nurture duality as such—that is, discriminative thinking, intellect, language, and reason—in the scheme of Zen's soteriological realization; and (6) the implications for Zen discourse and practice, especially ethics, are seriously damaging. What we see here is a formulaic understanding—and misunderstanding at that—of the nonduality of delusion and enlightenment.

On the other hand, the ultimate paradox of Zen liberation is said to lie in the fact that one attains enlightenment only in and through delusion itself, never apart from it. Strange as that may sound, enlightenment has no exit from delusion any more than delusion has an exit from enlightenment. The two notions need, are bound by, and interact with one another. That said, the *interface* of delusion and enlightenment in their dynamic, nondual

unity is extremely complex, elusive, and ambiguous. Since they are the two foci[1] of realization, we might ask how they interplay with one another. Should and can enlightenment overcome delusion? What does "overcoming" mean? In this chapter, I would like to examine aspects of how Dōgen treats delusion and enlightenment in their nonduality, with the foregoing pointers and issues in mind. In my view, Dōgen deeply delved into this profound mystery.

2

Consider the kōan Dōgen cites in his exposition on great enlightenment (*daigo*):

> A monastic once asked Great Teacher Pao-chih of the Hua-yen monastery in Ching-chao (a successor to Tung-shan; also known as Hsiu-ching): "What is it like when a greatly enlightened person is nevertheless deluded?" The teacher replied: "A shattered mirror never reflects again; a fallen flower never returns to the tree."[2]

Dōgen's praise and enthusiasm for this revelatory occasion is immediate and unreserved: "[This teaching] would never have been presented outside Hua-yen's assembly, nor could [Hua-yen] have provided such spiritual assistance had he not been Tung-shan's rightful [dharma] child. Indeed this [Hua-yen's assembly] was the dharma-seat of a fully realized buddha-ancestor!"

Traditionally, commentators by and large have taken Hua-yen's original kōan as representing the nonattached, self-emptying, traceless state of realization on the part of an enlightened one, who is thoroughly immersed in delusion and yet completely free of it. This conventional interpretation does not sufficiently address issues involved in the *dynamic interplay* of delusion and enlightenment, in their duality and nonduality. Why are delusion and enlightenment qualified as "great"? What is the meaning of being "nevertheless deluded" (*kyakumei*)? Why is it that a shattered mirror "never reflects again" and a fallen flower "never returns to the tree"? As I shall attempt to highlight in a moment, Dōgen's analysis of the kōan deeply penetrates the soteric dynamics of not only the nonduality, but also the duality of delusion and enlightenment.

Dōgen continues to comment:

> The greatly enlightened person in question is not someone who is greatly enlightened from the beginning, nor is the person someone who gets and appropriates it from somewhere else. Great enlightenment is not something

that, despite being accessible to everyone in the public domain, you happen to encounter in your declining years. Nor can it be forcibly extracted through one's own contrivances; even so, one realizes great enlightenment without fail. You should not construe nondelusion as great enlightenment; nor should you consider becoming a deluded person initially to sow the seeds of great enlightenment. A greatly enlightened person is further greatly enlightened, and a greatly deluded person is still greatly enlightened as well. Just as there are greatly enlightened persons, there are also greatly enlightened buddhas, greatly enlightened earth, water, fire, wind and space, and greatly enlightened pillars and lanterns. For now, the [monastic's] question is concerned about a greatly enlightened person. . . .

Consider this further. Is a greatly enlightened person who is nevertheless deluded the same as an unenlightened person? When being nevertheless deluded, does a greatly enlightened person create delusion by exerting that enlightenment? Or by way of bringing delusion from somewhere else, does the person assume it as though still deluded while concealing his/her own enlightenment? While an enlightened person remains the same in not transgressing his/her great enlightenment, does he/she, in any case, partake in being nevertheless deluded? Regarding "a greatly enlightened person is nevertheless deluded," you should also investigate whether the "nevertheless deluded" means fetching another "piece" of great enlightenment. And is the "great enlightenment" one hand and the "nevertheless deluded" the other? In any event, you should know that to understand "a greatly enlightened person is nevertheless deluded" is the quintessence of practice. Note that great enlightenment is ever intimate with the "nevertheless deluded."[3]

Earlier in his *Shōbōgenzō*, "Genjō kōan" (1233), Dōgen set out a broad outline of delusion and enlightenment: "For the self to carry itself forward and practice/verify the myriad things is delusion; for the myriad things to advance and practice/verify the self is enlightenment. Those who greatly enlighten delusion are buddhas; those who are greatly deluded about enlightenment are sentient beings. There are those who are further enlightened beyond enlightenment; there are those who are yet further deluded amid delusion."

Reflecting still further on these matters in the foregoing passages, Dōgen repudiates views of enlightenment as something one is innately endowed with, or as something to be acquired like things or objects, or as a fluke due to chance, luck, or fortune. The relationship between delusion and enlightenment is such that one is not the simple negation or absence of the other, nor does one precede or succeed the other. Enlightenment must neither descend to, nor incarnate as, delusion. It is, in Dōgen's favorite phrase, "ever intimate" (*shinzō*) with and transparent to delusion.[4] This

intimacy (*mitsu*; *shimmitsu*) suggests the nonduality of delusion and enlightenment that, inasmuch as it always intimates lively tensions between the two, and precisely for that reason, makes enlightenment "*great* enlightenment" and delusion "*great* delusion" (*daimei*).

Delusion and enlightenment differ from one another perspectivally, are never metaphysical opposites (such as good and evil, or the one and the many, as ordinarily understood), and are both temporal, coextensive, and coeternal as ongoing salvific processes. In this respect, I would call them "foci" rather than "antitheses" or "polarities." They are orientational and perspectival foci within the structure and dynamics of realization (*genjō*). As such, their boundaries, though provisional, always remain and are never erased. Yet they are "permeable," so to speak, instead of "incommensurable." In light of such an intimate, dynamic relationship, enlightenment consists not so much in replacing as in dealing with or "negotiating" delusion in the manner consistent with its principles. By the same token, delusion is not ordinary by any means; it is constantly illumined and clarified by enlightenment in the ongoing salvific process, ad infinitum.

Parenthetically speaking, within the Zen soteric economy, any two foci are simply methodological designations and, as such, are nonsubstantial in having no independent self-nature. This also connotes that they are dependent on each other, along with all other terms and meanings involved in the whole context. In this empty, interdependent, and open context, foci are neither bifurcatory like metaphysical opposites in eternal struggle, nor do they collapse in the mystical coincidence of opposites (*coincidentia oppositorum*), nor are they polar principles that posit a preordained universal order or harmony above and beyond them. In short, foci are no more than the soteriological tools to guide practitioners in the dynamic workings of realization.

What is then the meaning of the "nevertheless deluded"? As I have observed before, there is no separation whatsoever of delusion and enlightenment. They are not strange bedfellows; on the contrary, they are working companions and need one another, with the shared purpose of actualizing salvific liberation. At this point, I suggest readers view enlightenment as radiant light that illumines delusion far and wide, just as moonlight illumines the earth at night. The radiant light penetrates and unfolds the depths and dimensions of delusion—in brief, human nature and the human condition—that have hitherto been unnoticed, unknown, or unfathomed by practitioners, who in turn become aware of their own emotional, existential, and moral anguishes, doubts and ambiguities. The illuminative

> nevertheless deluded?" [The monastic] is inquiring about *right this moment of being nevertheless deluded*.
>
> Such a moment is uttered as the realization of "a shattered mirror never reflects again" and "a fallen flower never returns to the tree." When a fallen flower is truly a fallen flower, even though it climbs beyond the top of a hundred-foot pole, it is still the fallen flower. Because a shattered mirror is truly a shattered mirror, even if it attains a certain degree of enlightenment in its daily living, its reflected light "never reflects again."[8]

The crux of Dōgen's interpretation consists in "right this moment" (*shōtō immoji*). It refuses to yearn for a paradisiacal state of enlightenment as a way of making sense of the "shattered" and "fallen" state. It does not atemporalize enlightenment so as to make it immune to delusion. Dōgen flatly rejects any manner of privileging enlightenment as opposed to, or as independent of, delusion, in causal, teleological, or metaphysical terms. Delusion has nothing to do with being prior to, posterior to, outside, or peripheral to, enlightenment. It always *co*exists with enlightenment, here and now. Note that the metaphoric vision of being "shattered" or "fallen" signifies the deeply unsettling human predicament that calls for practice right this moment—beyond any explanation, interpretation, or rationalization of it. Thus the urgency to live such a shattered and fallen state thoroughly and penetratingly in a given historical situation is critical.

"Right this moment" underscores the fact that enlightenment is as time bound and time free as delusion. In Dōgen's Zen, the realization of such thoroughgoing temporality and existentiality in which delusion and enlightenment are rooted is the foundation of its salvific project. In this context, "never reflects again" means there was no mirror in the first place that reflected and was then broken. By the same token, "never returns to the tree" is so because there was no tree of any kind from which a flower was fallen and to which it can presumably return. In this soteric economy, there remains only the reality/truth of a vision of the human condition at this very moment as "shattered" and "fallen." Hence, instead of offering the why, Dōgen simply takes the vision to be "the quintessence of practice."

Let me make a few further observations regarding the matter just discussed in the last paragraph. (1) The "never reflects again" and "never returns to the tree" should not be construed in the context of the Buddhist theory of the three ages of the right dharma, imitative dharma, and degenerate dharma (*shō-zō-matsu no sanji*), which was all too often tainted with a deeply fatalistic historical consciousness of romantic pessimism. Those expressions in question imply no nadir or stage in a devolutionary, let alone an evolutionary, scheme of things. Unlike other Kamakura Buddhist

leaders such as Shinran (1173–1262) and Nichiren (1222–1282) to whom the doctrine was foundational to their religions, Dōgen dismissed it as irrelevant and ineffectual.[9] (2) Similarly, the "never reflects again" and "never returns to the tree," as I have briefly mentioned a moment ago, do not represent the state of total depravity in the sense of humanity entirely corrupted and incapacitated beyond redemption. Nor do they show a fall from an idealized or reified state of the "mirror" or "flower" (just as in the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden). Not that one falls from grace and is saved by grace in a theistic framework, but that, as Dōgen writes, "the one who falls because of the ground rises always because of the very ground" (*chi ni yorite taoruru mono wa kanarazu chi ni yorite oku*).[10] For better or for worse, both gravity and countergravity are firmly embedded in the ground itself. "Grace" is found within and around one's self, not outside it. And (3) the "never reflects again" and "never returns to the tree" do not refer to the situation to which some humans are predestined or doomed, as some Buddhists maintain in the doctrine of *icchantika* (*issendai*). Some humans may no doubt be enslaved and fettered by delusional conditions. But in Dōgen's salvific project that rigorously adheres to the doctrine of karma (*gō*), there is no agent or law that predestines a certain class of people to eternal damnation, nor are there sentient beings who are doomed to such condemnation.

Perhaps most noteworthy in Dōgen's analysis is this: The human condition is such that even if we overcome delusion, we cannot eradicate it. Thus Dōgen underlines the fundamental limitations and ambiguities of our moral and religious *overcoming*, namely, enlightenment. This is also the ultimate limitation of Zen as a religion.

Dōgen thus writes:

> This is not to say that being "greatly enlightened" is like becoming a buddha or that being "nevertheless deluded" is likened to the state of an unenlightened person. Nor should you think, as some people do, that [a greatly enlightened person] becomes like an unenlightened person again [as told in the bodhisattva doctrine] or that the original Buddha assumes manifested forms [in the world so as to save sentient beings]. Those people speak as though one overstepped [the bounds of] great awakening and then became a sentient being. For our part, however, we do not say that great awakening is overstepped or it is gone, or that delusion appears. Our view is not like theirs.
>
> Indeed, great enlightenment is elusive; being nevertheless deluded is elusive as well. There is no delusion that obstructs great enlightenment: You create "a half piece" of small delusion by exerting "three pieces" of great enlightenment. Thus the Himalayas are greatly enlightened by virtue of the

> Himalayas; trees and rocks are greatly enlightened by virtue of the trees and rocks. The great enlightenment of the buddhas is such that they are greatly enlightened because of sentient beings; the great enlightenment of sentient beings is greatly enlightened through the great enlightenment of the buddhas. [Delusion and enlightenment, the buddhas and sentient beings] have nothing to do with before and after.
>
> The great enlightenment now under consideration belongs to neither oneself nor others. It does not come [from anywhere], and yet it fills the watercourses and ravines. Although it does not go [anywhere, while its being nevertheless deluded], we should absolutely avoid seeking it elsewhere by acting with others. Why is this? Remember [the saying] "It will go along with the other."[11]

Delusion and enlightenment are both said to be "elusive" (*mutan*), which also means "bottomless." They are indeed bottomlessly elusive and elusively bottomless. As such, enlightenment never functions without delusion whereas delusion is never meant to be without enlightenment. Such nondual unity applies to the relationship between buddhas (and bodhisattvas) on the one hand and sentient beings (ordinary, unenlightened beings) on the other. In their nondual unity, the buddhas (and bodhisattvas) and sentient beings have "nothing to do with before and after" and, by extension, above and below, inside and outside, real and apparent. The buddhas (and bodhisattvas) do not descend, nor do sentient beings ascend; the former do not assume or put on the forms of the latter. In other words, only when the causal, hierarchical, and teleological pretensions collapse, do delusion and enlightenment as well as the buddhas and sentient beings, at last, function wholesomely as foci within the soteriological milieu.

All things considered, the distinction, differences, and tensions between delusion and enlightenment—and between the buddhas and sentient beings—exist without violating nonduality. What I have endeavored to present in the foregoing few sections is Dōgen's analysis of such differences and tensions—that is, duality, which reveals his realistic vision of human nature as thoroughly delusion ridden (as much as it is enlightenment laden). In this light, the notion of realization, often exalted and even ecstatic, should be informed and tempered by such an existential assessment of the human predicament.

4

Before I move on to another closely related aspect of the subject matter under investigation, let me state, as a reminder, that what I have been

concerned with in this chapter is the nature and dynamics of realization (*genjō*) in Dōgen's Zen, with special emphasis on delusion in the nonduality of delusion and enlightenment. It is fair to say that, in Zen religion and scholarship, enlightenment has more often than not overshadowed delusion despite Zen's insistence on their nonduality. This lopsided view has unwittingly led to the aggrandizement and indulgence of enlightenment in one way or another. One of the most significant contributions made by recent Zen scholarship, in my view, is its stripping enlightenment of all traditional pretensions. In particular, the critique of the immediacy, purity, and universality of the enlightenment experience is at once devastating and salutary. After the Socratic aphorism, we might say that an unexamined Zen is not worth living—but then, in the same breath, add that an unlived Zen is not worth examining.[12] In this context, Dōgen's analysis of delusion is extremely instructive for understanding the nature and dynamics of practice that have been grossly overlooked by practitioners of Dōgen's Zen, as well as by scholars of Dōgen studies.

Having said this, let me turn to Dōgen's following thirty-one-syllable poem (*waka*) on impermanence:

Yo no naka wa	To what shall
Nani ni tatoen	I liken the world?
Mizutori no	Moonlight, reflected
Hashi furu tsuyu ni	In dewdrops,
Yadoru tsukikage.	Shaken from a crane's bill.[13]

This poem teaches a familiar Buddhist truth that the moon (Buddha-nature) is completely reflected in each and every one of the countless dewdrops (all things), without discrimination, namely one in all, all in one. The poem, as I see it, however, goes further than such a formulaic understanding exercised in the context of nature and impermanence. The complete reflection of the moon is "shaken"—each dewdrop has a full yet shaken reflection of the moon. In using the words *yo no naka* for "the world," Dōgen does not talk about just life in general but shows his own situatedness in the particular historical and cultural world of tumultuous Kamakura Japan (1192–1333) in which he lived and died. Especially significant is the fact that while critically rejecting the ideology of the age of the degenerate dharma (*mappō*), Dōgen nevertheless lived through the *reality* of *mappō*'s crisis situation, coupled with innumerable natural and social calamities and ruinous chaos and despair. In that milieu, he probed the vicissitudes of existence with a precise, minute eye. That is, Dōgen's sense of impermanence was inseparably interwoven with the *mappō*'s perilous actuality, as seen through

Hee-Jin Kim 光明

Dōgen on meditation and thinking: a reflection on his view of Zen

Thirty years after the publication of his classic work *Dōgen Kigen–Mystical Realist,* Hee-Jin Kim reframes and recasts his understanding of Dōgen's Zen methodology in this new book. Through meticulous textual analyses of and critical reflections on key passages primarily from Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō,* Kim explicates hitherto underappreciated aspects of Dōgen's religion, such as the ambiguity of delusion and also of enlightenment, intricacies of negotiating the Way, the dynamic functions of emptiness, the realizational view of language, nonthinking as the essence of meditation, and a multifaceted conception of reason. Kim also responds to many recent developments in Zen studies that have arisen in both Asia and the West, especially Critical Buddhism. He brings Dōgen the meditator and Dōgen the thinker into relief. Kim's study clearly demonstrates that language, thinking, and reason constitute the essence of Dōgen's proposed Zen praxis, and that such a Zen opens up new possibilities for dialogue between Zen and contemporary thought. This fresh assessment of Dōgen's Zen represents a radical shift in our understanding of its place in the history of Buddhism.

"Kim has been very successful in providing novel, innovative means of interpreting Dōgen's approach to such seminal issues as meditative thinking, nonduality, illusion, language, logical thinking, and realization. A new generation of readers will be eager to learn from the 'grand master' of the field and will benefit from his insightful analysis of key passages from Dōgen's collected works. This book will take its place among other prominent philosophical studies of Dōgen by Masao Abe, Joan Stambaugh, and Gereon Kopf."

—Steven Heine, author of *Dōgen and the Kōan Tradition: A Tale of Two* Shōbōgenzō *Texts*

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