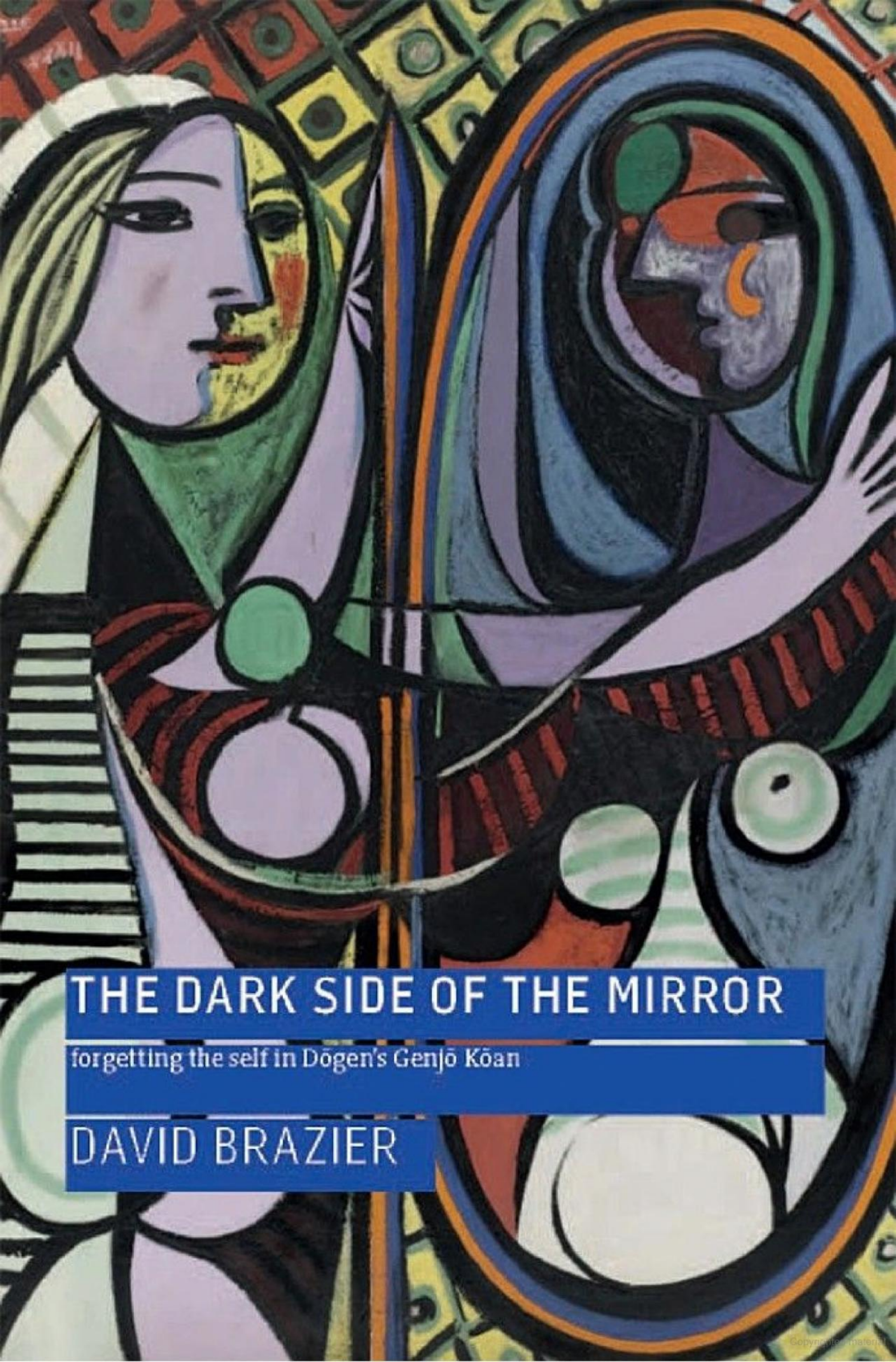
THE DARK SIDE OF THE MIRROR
forgetting the self in Dōgen's Genjō Kōan
DAVID BRAZIER

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PREFACE

Life is a near-paradox: one needs to take care of it and at the same time, in view of its transiency, relinquish attachments. A young Japanese boy, Ehei Dōgen, born 1200 AD, experienced this when he became an orphan at the age of eight. He then vowed to become a Buddhist monk to find solace and ordained at the age of thirteen. Some of the teachings he received stated that all humans have Buddha nature, implying that nothing needed to be done. Other teachings stated that becoming enlightened was too difficult for ordinary humans. This confused Dōgen. He practised without solving his pain. In 1223 he went to China as a senior monk in search of more original teachings. There he experienced humiliation, not being recognized as a monk. After several years, when there was a new abbot, Ju Ching, he was admitted, but only as a layperson. After witnessing an interaction between Ju Ching and another monk, unexpectedly enlightenment happened to Dōgen. From that moment his aim in life became to teach liberation by practice and transmission.

Back in Japan, in 1233 Dōgen wrote the enigmatic *Genjō Kōan*, consisting of just seventy-seven lines, describing the near-paradox and how to live it. Enlightenment transforms grief into energy to practise. Forget the obstructing self. After enlightenment blossoms still fall and weeds do grow, but one experiences these differently. Dōgen's work is a valuable bridge between Theravada and Mahāyanā Buddhism. Posthumously Dōgen's teachings brought forth the Soto school of Zen Buddhism, still thriving in several parts of the world.

In this wonderful book, David Brazier gives a historic background, a new translation, extensive comments and a convincing interpretation of *Genjō Kōan*, clarifying the provocative language of Dōgen. Brazier uses words that are clear like the bright moon and intimate like a subtle poem. Many remarks in this book are essential for practitioners today. Meditation intent on self-enhancement will not bring enlightenment: one needs to be humble, practise and then surrender. Then, when one forgets the self, it may happen.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My purpose is to write a readable volume, accessible and useful to the general reader and the Buddhist practitioner, that, nonetheless, contains enough precision for scholarly criticism to be possible. It is unlikely that every point that I make in this book will be the final and last word on the subject. Debate will continue and I hope my book will be a useful contribution.

My numbering of lines in the text is idiosyncratic as Dōgen did not number them. My numbers are simply for ease of reference to the text within this book. Other authors may number the lines differently or not at all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Brazier, aka Dharmavidya, born in 1947 in England, now lives in a hermitage in France when not lecturing internationally. He is a founder member and chief priest of the Order of Amida Buddha. Trained in Vajrayana with Chögyam Trungpa, then in Sōtō Zen with Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett, he became a member of the Tiếp Hiện Order of Thích Nhất Hạnh, until the founding in 1996 of Amida Trust under the patronage of Pure Land Sensei Gisho Saiko and other Japanese teachers. Brazier's published works include *The Feeling Buddha, The New Buddhism* and *Love and its Disappointment*.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

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I

CONTEXT

I.1 *GENJŌ KŌAN*

Genjō Kōan is a small masterpiece of religious writing composed in medieval Japan by Eihei Dōgen (1200–53), de facto founder of Sōtō Zen, the monk who went to China. In a series of analogies and memorable figures it succinctly sets out the gist of Dōgen's personal integration of Chinese and Japanese religion and is a manifesto for a life of propriety, naturalness and liberation that is coincident with a sudden change of religious consciousness. Many modern people might not put propriety, naturalness, liberation and religious consciousness together, but to Dōgen this was the solution both to his own personal spiritual problem and to the main religious questions current in his world in his time. Also, in his own mind, the designation 'the monk who went to China' probably had a great deal more meaning to him than the notion of being founder of a sect. He felt his mission to be that of bringing back the wisdom that he had found across the sea and, as we shall see, that wisdom was not narrow or sectarian, but partook of the whole universe of Chinese religious sensitivity.

Dōgen was Buddhist. He was not eclectic, nor was he woolly in his thinking. He was not saying that all religions are the same, nor even that the three religions of China were the same. Yet he was deeply influenced by Chinese styles of thought and spiritual vision, and these had their roots as much, or more, in Daoism and Confucianism as they did in Buddhism itself.

Although Dōgen's work was not greatly acknowledged in his time, he is now widely regarded as the most important writer on Zen in Japanese history. *Genjō Kōan* can be seen as the key to all his other writings and, consequently, is one of his most translated works.[1] As Sōtō Zen has become popular in the West, his message has spread to continents that he himself did not know existed. According to De Bary, Keene, Tanabe and Varley, "Although Dōgen died in relative obscurity, in modern times his writings have achieved wide recognition as works of religious and philosophical genius."[2]

Although *Genjō Kōan* is of enduring importance, it is impossible to fully understand Dōgen's text without an appreciation of the social, cultural and religious context of the time. There follows, therefore, an introduction that provides this background. Along the way we shall encounter some of the leading Buddhist figures of the period and I provide brief tables that explain who they are, when they lived, what they did and why they are relevant

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here.

I.2 WORKING WITH THE TEXT

As one reads the many translations of this work one can hardly escape the feeling that there is something here of great importance. The radiance of the spiritual experience of the author shines through, warms the heart and tantalizes the mind. Nonetheless, after reading many renderings of the text into English, one can still be left wondering. What is Dōgen really saying? How do the beginning, middle and end of the text fit together? Are the wonderful figures and analogies in it all saying the same thing, or are they saying a variety of different things? If the former, why the repetition? And if the latter, why such diversity?

People writing about the text tend to use it as a starting point for saying what they want to say, but sometimes these expositions can seem more to be digressions than explanations. I was often left with the impression that much of what they did say, true and interesting as it might be, was only tangentially related to Dōgen's original thought. Now all of this may simply be due to my own ignorance and misunderstanding, but I have found that I am not alone.

The text is like a code insofar as virtually everything in it is an allusion to one or another aspect of established Buddhist thinking – and not just Buddhist, as we shall see. Dōgen's style is to rework existing terms, metaphors and well-established tropes of religious discourse to suit his purpose. For modern students of the text, therefore, the amount of possible research in teasing out all the implied meanings is virtually limitless. Furthermore, as I have repeatedly found, these discoveries can substantially revolutionize one's understanding of the whole text.

Given my experience of this text to date, I would not be surprised if I go on having further new ideas about it as long as I live. I hope that you will find it as fascinating. In order to tempt you in that direction I have included many notes, comments and reflections on translation difficulties as we go along. If you want to come near to replicating my experience, unless you are already familiar with it, I suggest that you could now pause in reading this book and go and read at least two other translations of the text and see what you make of them before continuing. They can easily be found on the internet.

One of the fundamental aspects of discovering the text is that it is full of images. There is the moon reflected in a dewdrop; there are the fish in the sea and the birds in the air; there is wood and ash. There is a tendency, natural to the Western reader – this was certainly my case – firstly, to read these as a series of separate metaphors and, secondly, to take them as telling us something about how the world is. We evaluate them to see how they 'work' as metaphors. A metaphor depends upon a parallel process, extending meaning from one process that one knows well to a new one that the author wants to elucidate. However, Dōgen's images do not always work that well

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when taken in this way. He says that birds never leave the sky. Is that true? He says that ash has a past and a future, but firewood is cut off from its past and future. What does that mean? At first reading, it all seems a bit strange. Then the whole text ends with a cryptic little story about a fan in which the vital point seems to be that the wind is everywhere. What does that mean?

Another problematic aspect arises from the fact that the text is called a *kōan*, which loosely means 'problem'. My own Zen teacher spoke of *genjō kōan* as 'the problem of everyday life', which seems like a very useful concept, but how does it relate to the actual text? Dōgen does mention daily life in the text a couple of times, but it does not seem to be the central concept. All these and many similar questions are challenging and at first nothing seems entirely clear.

As I worked on the kōan I gradually started to get a feel for Dōgen's distinctive manner of expression. I started to see that the material is not a series of metaphors so much as of allusions. Dōgen was evidently well-read and deeply versed not only in Zen, but in Chinese religion as a whole. The text is not so much about the nature of the world, but more specifically and precisely a description of satori, 'enlightenment', its nature and how it functions. All this, I hope, will become clear as we go on.

I.3 WHO WAS DŌGEN?

TRAGIC CHILDHOOD

Dōgen came from a well-connected family, but suffered early misfortune. This is a common pattern with many significant Buddhist figures, from Śākyamuni onward. Dōgen's father died when he was two years old and his mother when he was eight. Thus, the first stage of Dōgen's life was a sad childhood in which the truth of impermanence was borne home very strongly. It is said that he decided to become a monk as he watched the incense smoke rise over his mother's coffin. During his infancy he must have imbibed some aristocratic values of nobility and perseverance, so he would have tried to be brave when his parents died, but it cannot have been an easy childhood.

A YOUNG MONK

The second stage, mid-adolescence, he spent at the great Tendai monastery of Enryaku-ji on Mount Hiei near Kyoto, the then capital of Japan. He was ordained at the age of thirteen and spent four years in a highly institutional environment learning the teachings of Tendai Buddhism, which gave rise to a strong inner conflict for him. The Tendai teaching of 'original enlightenment' – of which more below – suggested that fundamentally all is well with the world, yet for young Dōgen all had certainly not been well. Dōgen became a monk in order to deal with his grief and he was willing to work hard and practise hard with a view to spiritual liberation. Teachings

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that undermined this effort caused him confusion.

While at Mount Hiei, he came under the influence of a master called Kōin who told him that he might find the answer to his problem by specializing in Zen practice and that the very best course in this respect would be, if he could, to visit China. In those days, China was the prestigious source of ideas and practices, which gradually percolated from there to Japan. If one wanted to learn the best and most up-to-date practice, it was to China that one needed to go. Perhaps Kōin saw that this young man, who had a lot of drive, needed to put his energy into strenuous training and that Zen practice could meet that need.

STUDYING WITH MYŌZEN

People grew up earlier in those days. At age seventeen, Dōgen left Mount Hiei and went to the Rinzai Zen monastery at Kenninji, which was at that time under the direction of a thirty-three-year-old teacher named Myōzen, successor of the founder, Eisai, who had died two years earlier. Kennin-ji had the most Chinese style of Zen then available in Japan. Dōgen got on well with Myōzen, settled in at Kennin-ji and practised there, but did not manage to resolve his pain.

In 1223, Myōzen himself decided to go to China and Dōgen jumped at the chance to go with him. Myōzen's idea was to follow in Eisai's footsteps and bring the best practice back to Japan. However, he was never to return, dying in China in 1225. It is possible that some of Dōgen's later zeal to bring teachings back to Japan was driven by a sense of needing to fulfil the mission that Myōzen had been unable to complete.

IN CHINA

When they arrived in China, the Chinese immediately recognized Myōzen as a monk and he went to Tiantong monastery, where he remained until he died. Dōgen, however, had the humiliation of being told he was not a monk because he had not taken the right precepts in Japan. He was, therefore, left in the port at a loose end. This gave him time to read and to travel and he visited several important monasteries, had some illuminating encounters with various monks, and learnt a lot about Zen practice and organization, knowledge that would later stand him in good stead. At the time, however, his experience must have been frustrating as he waited for replies to his petitions to be treated as a monk, which, after considerable delay, were turned down.

Eventually, full of disappointment, he was about to find a boat back to Japan when he heard that a new abbot, Rujing, had been appointed at Tiantong. Dōgen thought it worthwhile to try once more and returned to Tiantong. Rujing had some sympathy for the situation of the foreigner and admitted him. On ceremonial occasions, Dōgen still had to stand with visiting Daoists rather than in the monastic ranks. However, he was admitted

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to the abbot's quarters – a privilege that he appreciated hugely.

One day, Dōgen was sitting in meditation in the hall. The monk next to him had dozed off to sleep. The master, Rujing, appeared and chastised the monk, saying to him, how could he sleep when the purpose of sitting in *zazen* was to cast off body and mind. Hearing these words, Dōgen had a great awakening experience. This satori was in due course confirmed by Rujing. Dōgen had found what he was looking for.

Dōgen stayed a further year or so studying with Rujing before returning to Japan. We can, therefore, see the period from age seventeen to age twenty-nine as the third major phase of Dōgen's life: a period of searching, wrestling with his personal spiritual problem, and arriving at a sense of meaning and direction through the experience of the care and patronage of his Chinese master. From then on Dōgen often referred to Rujing as 'the old Buddha'.

RETURN TO JAPAN

When Dōgen returned to Japan he was full of inspiration, enthusiasm and Chinese ideas. He went back to Kennin-ji, but found that he did not have scope there to practise in the way that he now wished. In 1230 he left and, as the famous poet monk Saigyō and the great controversial saint Hōnen had both done half a century earlier, he went to practise in a small hermitage in the mountains east of Kyoto.

Here he refined his ideas on the right way to practise and he gradually drew a following. Perhaps he hoped that history would repeat itself and he would achieve the same acclaim as his famous predecessors had done. They too were erudite monks who settled for a simple way of presenting the Dharma, and both, just as he, had been orphaned at a young age and become monks at Enryaku-ji, though Saigyō had spent a period as a soldier before 'leaving the world'. Now Dōgen was establishing himself in the same area that they had done. By 1233 he was able to found a centre that was to become his own monastery, Kōshō-ji. In the autumn of that year he wrote *Genjō Kōan*. We can, therefore, see *Genjō Kōan* as something of a manifesto. It was Dōgen hoisting his colours and making a clear statement of what he stood for.

Three independent monks			
Saigyō	1118–90	Quintessential poet monk	Exemplar
Hōnen	1133–1212	Famous religious innovator	Exemplar
Dōgen	1200–53	Leading writer on Zen	Author of *Genjō Kōan*

In investigating the background to *Genjō Kōan* we shall encounter a number of the key figures of the age. From among these, I would particularly

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like to single out Saigyō and Hōnen as reference points and make occasional reference to their lives and works to help put Dōgen into perspective. Since Saigyō, Hōnen and Dōgen are thought of as belonging to three different schools of Buddhism, they are not generally discussed together. However, at the time that Dōgen lived, these sectarian boundaries were not as deeply distinguished. Zen was not yet a distinct school in Japan. Saigyō's affiliations were very loose, and the Jōdo Shū (Pure Land School) that Hōnen established was as yet more an amorphous movement than a distinct organization. Dōgen was a religious innovator who had a highly poetic style. Hōnen was the greatest religious innovator and Saigyō the greatest poet of the time. They belonged to a generation before Dōgen and could be considered his spiritual grandfathers. Saigyō had been dead ten years when Dōgen was born and Hōnen died when Dōgen was eleven or twelve years old. Saigyō and Hōnen both became well known in their own time and even more so in the years immediately following their deaths, so they and their works would have been significant influences in the cultural world in which Dōgen lived his formative years.

In this fourth phase, from age twenty-nine to forty-three, therefore, Dōgen was trying to establish himself at the centre of Japanese life and culture. *Genjō Kōan* was written in this context. Dōgen was reaching out to laypeople as well as to actual and potential monastics. He wrote many of his most famous essays during this period.

LIFE IN THE NORTH

Dōgen now had his own temple and a small but keen following. His euphoria, however, did not last. He did not have Saigyō's solitary nature, but he did not have the common touch that Hōnen had been gifted with either. Hōnen was popular with the people and a friend of the prime minister. Dōgen did not attract such big crowds, nor did he gain favour with those in power. In fact, he soon found that being so close to the capital was not always an advantage. The Buddhist establishment did not view new developments favourably. Furthermore, he was developing a way of training his disciples that required concentrated attention. The distractions of the nearby city, not to mention political machinations and the attractions of rival Buddhist groups, were not conducive to focus and meditation. In 1243, ten years after writing *Genjō Kōan*, Dōgen moved his community to a more remote location in Echizen province to the north.

Moving to Echizen in the north was something of an admission of defeat.[3] Dōgen may well have gone through a period of depression at this time, which must have reawakened the grief of his early years. However, as at that earlier time, Dōgen's way out of the pain was, after a period of retreat, once again to throw himself into a demanding project. He may not have achieved great public acclaim, but he had around him some truly dedicated followers. Now, therefore, Dōgen's effort went into training this core group in the most rigorous way he could, calling upon everything he had learnt in China. The

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monastery they established was to become Eihei-ji, which remains the national centre for the Sōtō School of Zen in Japan. At Eihei-ji Dōgen was able to continue his writing and give many lectures, resulting in a considerable corpus of literature including the essays later arranged as the book *Shōbōgenzō*,[4] now regarded as his *magnum opus*, as well as the lectures that together make up the Eihei Kōroku, another important work.

In Echizen, Dōgen wrote fewer position statements and gave more talks. It must have caused him some chagrin to let go of his earlier hopes, but his own philosophy enabled him to cope with the setback. Inexorably the ironic dialectic of fate continued. Dōgen had failed as an evangelist to the public so now concentrated on what he was actually best at, which was training a group of talented people who would be his successors. These people then started to attract the public and some years after setting up in Echizen, Dōgen found himself conducting many fine precept ceremonies for the local lay population. It was on the strength of this public support and the work of these successors that the continuance of the Sōtō School was to rest. So, in the end, a certain kind of public support did come his way at last.

FINAL YEARS

It is also possible to divide these last ten years of Dōgen's life into two periods, in the sense that as he got older he placed more and more emphasis upon the fundamentals of the Buddhist religion: having faith, taking refuge, keeping the precepts, the thirty-seven fundamental doctrines, and making offerings to the Buddhas. This may mark a phase in his literary output, but I doubt that it really marks a change in Dōgen himself. I am inclined to the view that it was simply a matter of Dōgen 'coming out' more as he got older and had less to prove. In the years at Kōshō-ji he had taught what was distinctive in his own interpretation. In later years, still in his own style, he taught the bedrock upon which his religious life rested.

In 1253, Dōgen became ill and went back to the capital in search of a cure, but died there at the age of fifty-three, his great literary work still unfinished.

One can remember the landmarks of Dōgen's life in decades. At thirteen he was ordained, at twenty-three he went to China, at thirty-three he wrote *Genjō Kōan*, at forty-three he moved to Echizen and at fifty-three he died.

The above history is based mostly on Dōgen's own account. There are some issues about whether this account is trustworthy, especially the events in China, since there is virtually no external validation and the main witness, Myōzen, never came back to give his version. In the circumstances and pressure of sectarian competition Dōgen would have had plenty of motivation to exaggerate the aspects that portrayed him in a favourable light, and some points – such as Dōgen telling his disciples that people came from all over China to the funeral of Myōzen – do stretch credulity.[5] However, these controversies need not detain us. All agree that Dōgen wrote *Genjō Kōan* and, while understanding the context will certainly help us, our

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main purpose is to take it on its own merits.

It is also worth reflecting upon the parallelism between the lives of spiritual leaders. If we compare Dōgen with Śākyamuni and with Hōnen, for instance, we see that all three suffered bereavement in childhood, all three in due course embarked upon a spiritual quest that cost them a lot personally, all three arrived at a personal understanding that was sufficiently compelling to lead them to risk everything in their lives to convey it to others. All three then lived saintly lives, practised an evangelical mission, and faced many vicissitudes of fortune along the way that required considerable leadership skills. All three did their utmost to bring on members of their respective communities to carry forward the work after they were gone and each has left a distinctive legacy.

I.4 SUBLIMATION

Before continuing to fill in the historical background, let us turn to the emotional reality. Since oriental studies generally take place within academies, the focus of interest tends to be on ideas and intellectual formulations. However, ideas alone would not be sufficient to have generated a work like *Genjō Kōan* and, certainly, given the hazards involved at the time, would not have sufficed to send Dōgen across the treacherous sea to China.

In the foundations of this work are present the pain and anguish of a little boy watching the incense smoke rise over his mother's coffin. Buddhism seemed to promise relief, but what kind of relief and how? Dōgen was certainly willing to exert himself to the uttermost, however punishing the effort might become, but the chemistry of emotions is not a simple matter. There is no magic pill to overcome pain, nor is it simply a matter of trying harder and harder.

Consider Saigyō. He had also suffered. He and Hōnen lived through a period when the social situation was degenerating into a most terrible civil war.[6] He too had had bereavements and, it seems probable, had been broken-hearted from an ill-fated love affair. As with Dōgen, such factors contributed to his decision to become a monk. At first, as mentioned above, he lived in a hermitage close to the capital, but perhaps this was still too close to his old life. He went travelling and spent much time in the mountains. Like Śākyamuni, who was exemplar to all these masters, he threw himself into asceticism. Dōgen was also given to being very strict with himself and has left a legacy of a rather ascetic style of monastic practice. Grief resides in the body and in the mind. Sometimes it seems that they deserve the severest punishment for tormenting us so. For Dōgen, perhaps, the words of Rujing – to cast off body and mind – may have given permission that enabled him to moderate extremes to which he might otherwise have gone. Rujing was like a kind parent or grandparent to him, and the idea of cultivating a 'grandmotherly mind' of tender concern was to become significant in Dōgen's teaching later on.

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Saigyō was never given such release, yet had another channel. He was able to express his inner turmoil through his poetry, which is part of what makes it so appealing, the other part being his remarkable skill with words. The latter enabled him to express several layers of meaning even in a short verse. In fact, much of his poetry is, at first sight, simply descriptive of nature – mountains, grasses, streams, mist, waves on the sea, ice in winter, blossoms in spring. Many of Dōgen's later sermons also take this form.

Saigyō describes scenes of the 'forgotten' people, including astute observation of workmen and poor folk. In all this there is evident great sensitivity and pathos. The quality that Japanese call *yugen* haunts much of his verse – a bitter-sweetness, celebratory of loneliness or wistful longing. It is easy to see how, for Saigyō, the pain of loss has been converted into a profound sensitivity to beauty, just as for Dōgen it became an appreciation of tenderness. Saigyō writes of how, were he not frightened of being laughed at, he could gaze upon cherry blossom all day long.

We are here, surely, talking about the process that we call sublimation, whereby emotional energy that is tormenting the body and mind becomes re-channelled toward some constructive, loving or sublime end. Love, truth and beauty are media through which such transformation occurs and release from or solace of torment is effected.

Above all subjects, Saigyō celebrates the moon and we are going to see how the moon plays a central role in *Genjō Kōan*. The moon epitomizes cool beauty. Nor was it, to medieval people, simply an astronomical body. The heavens were the home of the ancestors and the gods. The day is ruled by the sun. Its heat gives passion to life. The moon, by contrast, seems the most perfect symbol of nirvāṇa, beautiful and cool. Among other practices, Saigyō learnt a meditation in which one internalizes an image of the moon so that even when the silver disc is not visible in the sky, still it resides close to one's heart.

Lovers gaze upon the moon. Lonely souls draw solace from it. Religious hermits sing its praises. Its light entering into us works a precious alchemy. Hence, in oriental culture, the moon has long been a symbol for the Dharma.

Hōnen's life was also shaped by grief. When he was a child his father was assassinated. As he was dying the father told the son not to seek revenge, but to seek the Dharma. In due course, in early adolescence, Hōnen, like Saigyō before and Dōgen after, went to the monastery. While he was away his mother died. For many years he sought a method of practice that would ease his pain and bring similar ease to all the ordinary people of the world who were caught up in similar grief. Eventually he adopted the practice of invocation of Amitābha Buddha. He wrote a poem summarizing his message which said,

> The light of the moon shines
> into every hamlet in the land
> but only those who turn toward it

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can carry its light in their heart.

It seems that for Saigyō and for Hōnen and perhaps for many others the contemplation of the moon was more than simply a symbol, certainly more than an idea. It was a powerful element in a process of sublimation in which grief was not abolished but rather transformed into a bittersweet appreciation of beauty, stillness and peace, where everything discordant could fall away.

This experience was not a matter of abolishing feeling, but of refining it. In Buddhism there are those who interpret the teaching as a matter of leaving all passion behind. Saigyō and Hōnen, however, provide examples of saintly figures who encompassed the whole gamut of sentiments from the most joyful to the most dire, yet, most especially, those in which the sweet and sour elements are inseparably mixed. This made them highly creative people in whom the tragedies of early years later fed into works of beauty and compassion. Another established symbol for nirvāṇa is ash – the sign of the fire having faded – but is this ash dead or is it fertile? In these examples we see its fertility and Dōgen was to find a similar salvation.

When Dōgen went to China he probably thought that he did not have much to lose. However, on arrival, he met with humiliation. We can only guess at his emotional state when he entered Rujing's monastery. It cannot have been easy. That the master took pity on him must have meant a lot. Then came the unexpected death of Myōzen. How much can one take? Then he heard Rujing's words "Let body and mind fall away." Suddenly something seemed possible after all. The ice began to melt.

When Dōgen returned to Japan he wrote *Genjō Kōan* in which the principal image is that of the moon lodging within whatever surface is in a condition to receive and reflect it. The experience of satori and its accompanying transformation is described through an analysis and extension of this image. The moon lodges within when body and mind fall away. Sublimation happens when we are no longer attached to our pain. It is not that the pain vanishes, nor that we become immune. Tender sentiments continue to flow and, in fact, appreciation of beauty intensifies. When we are no longer consciously and deliberately fighting it, the pain itself is reconfigured into the very substance of compassion and sensitivity.

Thus, in the work of these three great masters, we see a pathway out of tragedy that transforms its energy into the signs of enlightenment, signs that do not designate a sterile and frigid person, but one full of feeling and tender. It is this transformation and this process that Dōgen seeks to explicate in *Genjō Kōan*.

I.5 DŌGEN, SHINRAN AND EISAI

Dōgen is nowadays seen as one of the great religious writers and, of those from medieval Japan, he is one of the foremost, second only to his older contemporary Shinran, who, nonetheless, outlived him by ten years.[7] Dōgen

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and Shinran were contemporary with Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) and are of similar stature. Dōgen is regarded as the founder of the larger of the two main schools of Zen in Japan, the other being Rinzai, founded by Eisai.

In Japan, Shinran is better known than Dōgen, since he was the founding figure of Shin Shū, the foremost school of Buddhism, which is considerably larger and more significant than Zen. Dōgen is, however, better known in the West, because Zen has caught on here, whereas Shin has not.

Commonly, Zen and Shin are seen somewhat as opposites. Zen is 'self-power Buddhism' and Shin is 'other-power Buddhism'. Self-power (*jiriki*) means that you become enlightened by your own effort and by the realization of your own potential. Other-power (*tariki*) is the belief that we do not have such power in ourselves, but need, and do receive, help – in the West we might say 'grace' – from the Buddhas.

The West, especially America, with its culture of self-reliance, has preferred the former, whereas East Asia has, for the most part, preferred the latter. As we shall see, however, this simple dichotomization may not be entirely justified, at least as far as the categorization of Dōgen is concerned. Dōgen was more 'other-power' than it at first appears. It makes more sense to see Dōgen as reconciling self-power and other-power than as setting up one against the other.

There are still plenty of popular accounts of Zen in the West that assume it is non-ritualistic, non-devotional, has no priesthood or dogmas, does not use scriptures, abhors intellectual learning and lacks the other normal accoutrements of religion, all of which is completely untrue. We do not need to go into the anthropology of Zen here, but we should be open to other possibilities when we read Dōgen and not assume that he will fit into our own religious or irreligious preferences. Dōgen was an erudite monk who established a monastery and a priestly hierarchy, emphasizing ritual purity and monastic rules. While being a sensitive poet, he was also highly intellectual and scorned those who did not know their texts. He went to China to seek salvation, found what he was looking for, came back and propagated the teaching.

We find, in *Genjō Kōan*, an approach to spiritual practice that is fundamentally religious. Western people have often taken to meditation as a methodology intended to achieve various things that might be gathered together under the heading of 'personal growth'. Such people may feel drawn to Dōgen because he was a foremost advocate of zazen – sitting meditation. However, for Dōgen, zazen was certainly not a procedure with such a self-enhancement goal. As Dan Leighton writes, "Dōgen's meditative praxis is a faith expression of the beneficial gift of grace from the buddhas and ancestors, analogous to how nembutsu and shinjin are provided to the Shinshū devotee thanks to the vow of Amida.... Dōgen certainly speaks of relying on the cosmic buddhas and bodhisattvas for assistance, and even in totally entrusting [*sic*] them."[8]

However, in their own time, neither Dōgen nor Shinran was a particularly

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significant figure. Each had a small devoted following, each had distinctly unconventional views and each had a considerable output of writing in a very distinctive style that then failed to attract public attention in the centuries immediately following his death. In their writings and interpretations, both were willing to take quite substantial liberties with the source materials that they drew on, recasting them into poetic and impassioned prose as expressions of their distinctive modes of operation.

Shinran was a disciple of Hōnen and Dōgen of Myōzen, the disciple of Eisai. Being, respectively, the founders of the Jōdo and Rinzai schools of Buddhism in Japan, Hōnen and Eisai were much more significant figures in their own and Dōgen's time. They were the two figures of the previous generation who had challenged the Buddhist establishment most successfully. Their ideas, writings and practices were still strongly provocative, widely followed, and discussed in the time when Dōgen and Shinran lived. They had struck out in new directions as a result of becoming disenchanted with the hypocrisy of politics and religion in their time.

Contemporaries			
Eisai	1141–1215	Brought Rinzai Zen to Japan	Founded Kennin-ji
Myōzen	1184–1225	Successor to Eisai	Took Dōgen to China
Shinran	1173–1263	Founding figure of Shin Buddhism	Comparable author
Dōgen	1200–53	Founding figure of Sōtō Zen	Author of *Genjō Kōan*

Eisai was a slightly younger contemporary of Hōnen. He too began as a Tendai monk and he travelled twice to China. On his second trip, he was on his way back to Japan when the boat was driven off course and he ended up back in China for several more years, during which he received Zen training and became a fully qualified Rinzai teacher. This method he then brought back to Japan. After various political tribulations, the Rinzai training monastery, Kennin-ji, was established in 1202 as a branch temple of Enryaku-ji.

Relations between Enryaku-ji and Kennin-ji were generally rather strained. We now think of Rinzai Zen as a distinct school of Buddhism, but at that time it was just one of the approaches incorporated within the Tendai school. However, there were different kinds of Zen and there were debates within Tendai about which kind was best.

Eisai had come back from China with what he regarded as the right and

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more up-to-date approach, but leading figures at Enryaku-ji resented his attempts at reform. Eisai advocated the strict application of monastic discipline, which was also not popular at Enryaku-ji, which was, according to your perspective, more easy-going, or more corrupt. It was against considerable opposition that Eisai had been able to establish Kennin-ji as a specialist centre practising the 'new' approach to Zen. However, it was by no means a purely Zen temple. Other practices also took place there.

Eisai had no intention of establishing a separate Rinzai denomination of Buddhism; he simply wanted to reform the Zen element within Tendai, but subsequent history took things in a different direction and Rinzai became a separate school. Eisai's successor was Myōzen and, as we saw earlier, when Dōgen left Mount Hiei he went to Kennin-ji to study with Myōzen.

I.6 THE SETTING OF THE TEXT

WITHIN DŌGEN'S OPUS

Genjō Kōan is one of the earliest texts written by Dōgen. If we try to follow the fluctuations of Dōgen's mood and fortunes, we can see that it was written at a high point between two periods of struggle – the troubles and humiliations he had experienced in China and the troubles and disappointments he later had trying to get his views accepted in Japan. At the time of writing, however, he was full of enthusiasm to propagate his understanding, replete with the religious consciousness that had entered and inspired him. Having been liberated by something that had turned him around, changing his whole sense of what religion was, he wanted to share it with others. This text therefore is a gospel – a text of 'religious good news'. It was originally written for a lay supporter, but Dōgen intended to use it as the first chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*, his masterwork. At the time it was written, it was a first setting out of his essential idea.

The *Shōbōgenzō* was going to be a book of one hundred chapters comprehensively expounding Dōgen's vision, written in his inimitable style. Unfortunately the book did not get finished. Nonetheless, by the time of his death, more than three quarters of the work had been produced, if not revised. Like *Genjō Kōan*, each chapter of *Shōbōgenzō* can be read as a stand-alone essay. The topics are wide-ranging, covering everything from commentaries and explanations of Buddhist doctrines, texts and stories, through mystical and philosophical writings about the nature of enlightenment, to the minutiae of how to organize a monastery – right down to how to wash the rice.

Since his death various compilations of *Shōbōgenzō* have been made, not all of which include all of the chapters that he did complete. That *Genjō Kōan* was one of the first sections to be written, and was intended to be the first chapter, suggests that it is a particularly clear and central exposition of Dōgen's principal ideas, and most commentators have taken this to be the case. One can even take many of the other chapters as each having the

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function of expanding upon a theme that first appeared in *Genjō Kōan*, so there is a sense in which *Genjō Kōan* is a distillation of, or index to, the whole. All this makes it a particularly important text to study.

WITHIN HIS HISTORICAL PERIOD

Genjō Kōan was written in 1233, one hundred years after the birth of Hōnen. Hōnen, remember, more than anybody, had changed the face of Buddhism in Japan and, in so doing, had opened the way and provided a role model for teachers like Eisai and Dōgen to bring in other innovations also. Hōnen's Pure Land School taught the practice of *nembutsu* ('mindfulness of Amitābha Buddha' by reciting the Buddha's name). *Nembutsu* became very popular and is, to this day, the most widespread form of Buddhism in Japan.

The revolution that Hōnen ushered in made Buddhism accessible to many people who had previously been excluded. Anybody could practise and Amitābha welcomes everybody into his Pure Land paradise. I think that many Western commentators have under-estimated the importance of Hōnen for the generations that immediately followed him. This is probably in part because Pure Land has not become popular with Western Buddhists and in part because modern scholarship tends to be held within sectarian boundaries. Zen specialists and Pure Land specialists do not recognize the importance of each other's material. Hōnen's challenge to orthodox thinking was, at the time, however, something that made a considerable impact. It struck a strong chord with ordinary Japanese people. Hōnen never went to China. His approach was thoroughly Japanese. He was approachable, saintly, erudite and enthusiastic. He knew the doctrines of all the schools, but preached a message so simple a child could understand it. At the end of his life he and his disciples briefly fell out of favour with the imperial government and were exiled, but this only served to spread his message all over Japan.

My sense is that Hōnen had an influence at that time comparable with that of Freud in the twentieth-century West – many people disagreed with him, but nobody could ignore him, and the resulting disagreements provided the impetus for many innovations and developments in Buddhist practice. For instance, today only scholars have heard of a figure such as Myōe, but at the time he was more influential than Dōgen, Shinran or Myōzen. He was a Shingon-Kegon monk who wrote polemics against Hōnen. Nonetheless, he spent much of the last ten years of his life producing his own ideas about how to gain access to the Pure Land of Amitābha.

Hōnen had opened a door to innovation in Buddhist practice and Eisai, Dōgen and later Nichiren, founder of his own school, would all pass through that door. Some degree of revolution was, therefore, going on in Buddhism in Dōgen's time, a revolution that was still being strongly resisted by the more traditional establishment.[9] Dōgen, like Eisai before him and Nichiren after, would feel the sting of this disapproval. At the time of writing *Genjō Kōan*, however, he was still full of enthusiasm and hope.

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Three critics of Hōnen			
Myōe	1173–1232	Shingon Kegon monk	Traditionalist
Dōgen	1200–53	Founder of Sōtō Zen	Advocated zazen
Nichiren	1222–82	Founder of Nichiren School	Advocate of the Lotus Sūtra

Dōgen was ambivalent about *nembutsu* Buddhism. It did make a form of the Dharma available to the ordinary person, but Dōgen felt that in the form in which it was presented by many Hōnen enthusiasts of his day, it was simplistic and insufficient. He resisted the idea that complete enlightenment was impossible in the contemporary age. Dōgen believed that he had met a living Buddha in China in the person of Rujing. Hōnen had argued that although the traditional teachings of Buddhism were wonderful and marvellous, it was quite impossible to practise them fully in the current degenerate age and, therefore, rather than trying to be a Buddha oneself – a thoroughly arrogant notion – one should rely upon the compassion of the Buddhas, especially Amitābha, who would transfer merit and thus enable one to be reborn in his Pure Land of Sukhāvatī where conditions for practice were much better and one could have the benevolent attention of the Buddha all the time. If becoming a Buddha required an infinite amount of merit, how was this to be achieved? Transference of merit from existing Buddhas provided one solution to this otherwise seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

This meant that in Hōnen's scheme, much of the crucial process of Buddhism went on in a manner of which the practitioner was substantially unconscious. One simply entrusted oneself to Amitābha and the rest would follow. We shall see that the matter of unconscious practice has a place in Dōgen's thought too.

However, Dōgen wanted to demonstrate that it was possible in the present age to live the consummate Buddhist life and he set about creating a community in which it could be done. He brought to this task what he had learnt in China. To match the appeal of Hōnen he had to produce a vision of enlightenment as not unobtainable by real people and an explanation of how we can benefit from the compassion of the Buddhas here in this life as well as in the next one. Like Myōe and other religious innovators of his generation, Dōgen had to at least hint at how his approach could give people access to the Pure Land, though he frames it in his distinctively Chinese style.

Nonetheless, despite these differences, Dōgen also shared a good deal with Hōnen. Both implicitly rejected the notion of 'inherent enlightenment' that was popular at the time and both asserted that the essence of Buddhism was

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to be found in a unity of faith and practice.

Different teachers have different strengths. Dōgen was never going to be one to reach the masses in the way that Hōnen did so easily. However, he was able to write prose of great beauty and style and expose depths of meaning in traditional texts and ideas that nobody had dreamt of.

WITHIN JAPANESE BUDDHISM

So, Dōgen was a Buddhist monk who began his religious career in the Tendai School. We can think of Japanese Buddhism up to that time as evolving in three stages brought about by, firstly, the introduction of Buddhism into the country in the sixth century by Prince Shōtoku; secondly, the establishment of the Tendai and Shingon schools at the beginning of the ninth century; and from 1175 onward, in the Kamakura period, the establishment of new schools by Hōnen, Eisai, Shinran, Dōgen, Ippen and Nichiren.

Japanese Buddhism to the time of Dōgen		
552 onward	Buddhism introduced from Korea	Establishment of main temples at Nara
788 onward	Tendai and Shingon schools founded	Tendai at Mt Hiei in 805; Shingon at Mt Kōya in 806
1175 onward	Kamakura schools form	Jōdo, Shin, Ji, Sōtō, Rinzai, Nichiren

The First Phase: Buddhism came to Japan from Korea. In 552 AD the king of Paekche sent a Buddha statue to the emperor of Japan. In 584 AD a second mission from Korea resulted in the first ordinations – three nuns – in Japan. Subsequently, visiting Korean monks found an enthusiastic student in Prince Shōtoku, who in due course became regent for Empress Suiko and so gained supreme power. Shōtoku introduced Chinese models of culture, religion and government as part of a process of unification and pacification of Japan. He regarded the Lotus Sūtra as the preeminent Buddhist text and this has been sufficient to establish its great prestige within Japanese Buddhism ever since. I will say more about this sūtra below, as it had a major impact upon Dōgen. In this first stage the main centre of Buddhist activity was the old capital of Nara, north of Kyoto.

The Second Phase: This, we could say, began in 788 AD when the monk Saichō, the son of an immigrant Chinese family, built a hut on Mount Hiei near Kyoto. From this modest base, there gradually developed the greatest monastic complex in Japan. Mount Hiei became, and remains, one of the great holy mountains of Japan, with hundreds of Buddhist temples. The Tendai School that grew up there evolved an integrated vision of Mahāyāna

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Buddhism in which the Lotus Sūtra reigned supreme and many different forms of practice, including zazen, *nembutsu* and esoteric rituals, were united. In the same period, the Shingon School was founded by Kūkai. Shingon practised esoteric, which is to say, tantric, Buddhism. Kūkai's head temple was established on Mount Kōya where, to this day, it remains an important centre of Buddhist study and practice.

The Tendai and Shingon schools supposedly embodied the Mahāyāna principles of inclusiveness and egalitarianism according to which salvation was open to all alike, but in practice, since they depended substantially upon aristocratic patronage and increasingly became armed, land-owning feudal powers themselves, they were rather exclusive and authoritarian. This divergence between theory and practice sowed the seeds for the next phase.

The Third Phase: This arrives with Hōnen. Hōnen began as a Tendai monk, but in 1175 he 'descended from the mountain' and subsequently popularized the *nembutsu* as a sole practice. The main character of this third phase was, therefore, simplicity and devotion. All the subsequent innovators were simplifiers, including Dōgen, who advocated zazen as a sole practice.

At this time the Tendai School was searching for a unifying doctrine and found it in the adoption of a principle called 'original enlightenment' (*hongaku*). Attempts were made to link this teaching to Saichō and his teachers, but this is probably fabrication.[10] The real pedigree of the idea lies in earlier Buddhist doctrines of universal 'Buddha nature', of which it is an extreme form. Dōgen, like Hōnen, found this principle incoherent and it caused him considerable misgivings because it seemed to undermine the necessity of serious practice, which he found essential in his own life. It is possible to see some of Dōgen's work as an attempt to restore Saichō's original vision. Some people, however, lapped up the idea of *hongaku* and carried it to an even greater extreme that made Buddhist practice completely unnecessary. Most notable among these was a teacher called Nōnin.

Genjō Kōan is part of this third phase, a period in which new schools emerged, mostly having roots in Tendai. Dōgen's first experience of Zen was on Mount Hiei. Hōnen's first experience of *nembutsu* had been on Mount Hiei. Although Tendai has long since ceased to be the biggest school of Buddhism in Japan, it is, in a sense, the ancestor of most of those that now are: Jōdo (Hōnen), Rinzai (Eisai), Sōtō (Dōgen), Shin (Shinran), Ji (Ippen) and Nichiren (Nichiren).

Genjō Kōan, written in the midst of this period of new developments and competing schools, sums up Dōgen's claim to a special degree of understanding of what Buddhism is about.

I should say a little about Shingon and also mention the Daruma School. Shingon developed at Mount Kōya in the second phase, underwent considerable expansion during the third phase and continues to be important up to the present day. Myōe, already mentioned, was a Shingon monk, as well as being a follower of Kegon, one of the Nara schools. Saigyō was an independent practitioner, but he spent much time at Mount Kōya and had a great respect for Kūkai, the Shingon founder. Dōgen cannot have been

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unaware of Shingon principles and the prestige of Mount Kōya, and would have had some passing exposure to esoteric practices while at Enryaku-ji and Kennin-ji.

The Daruma School was founded at the end of the twelfth century by the monk Nōnin, mentioned above, who was rather anarchistic and antinomian. This is not unlike many modern advocates of Zen, who take it to be completely iconoclastic. The Daruma School was criticized by the Tendai establishment and also by Eisai and was banned by the government. However, it continued as an underground movement, attracting a number of freethinkers and strong personalities, many of whom subsequently came over to Dōgen's school, including Ejo, who became Dōgen's leading disciple, and Keizan, who eventually became his successor. When Dōgen had to leave the Kyoto area, he chose to go north to an area where the Daruma School had a following. In understanding why Dōgen wrote what he did at this time, one influence we must consider is the on-going implicit dialogue between his group and the Daruma people.

The Echizen area was, however, also home to many followers of *yamabushi. Yamabushi* is not really a school of Buddhism, more a style. The word means 'mountain asceticism'. Practitioners spend much time in the mountains exposing themselves to a variety of hardships and getting close to nature. There has always been a strong current of nature worship in Japanese religion. After moving to the area, Dōgen would often refer to himself as 'this mountain monk', an epithet that aligned him both with the mountain tradition of Zen in China and also with the local *yamabushi*.

The Kamakura period was, therefore, a time of competing schools and Dōgen's group were very small fish in this pond. Nonetheless, he did give his people a deep and thorough training and this was to bear fruit much later. Within the many broad trends in the debates going on at the time, one of the most important was the contention between those who believed in strict practice (Eisei, Dōgen), those who believed in simpler, easier, but nonetheless vigorous practice (Hōnen, and his critic Myōe) and those who did not really believe in practice at all (Nōnin and some of Hōnen's disciples). There was also struggle over the issue of simplification and pluralism, and in this respect Dōgen was a master at having it both ways, deeply respecting the whole range of traditional Buddhist practice, yet philosophically advancing the idea that these were all encompassed within the single practice of zazen.

Japanese Buddhist schools			
6th century	9th century	12th century	
Nara schools			
	Shingon		founder, Kūkai

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	Tendai		founder, Saichō
		Jōdo	founder, Hōnen, originally Tendai
		Rinzai Zen	founder, Eisai, originally Tendai
		Sōtō Zen	founder, Dōgen, originally Tendai
		Nichiren	founder, Nichiren, originally Tendai
		Ji	derived from Jōdo, founder, Ippen
		Shin	derived from Jōdo, founder, Shinran

So, it was to Mount Hiei that Dōgen went first to become a monk. There he found a religion with many dimensions, but in which the central unifying pivot was a focus upon the Lotus Sūtra. There he also encountered an emphasis upon the principle of 'original enlightenment'. This latter teaching brought Dōgen's kōan to the fore and set him looking for solutions. From Hiei he went to Kennin-ji. From Kennin-ji he went to China. When he came back he wrote *Genjō Kōan*. Later he was to retreat to the mountains in the north. We, therefore, have to try to understand *Genjō Kōan* in the context of the cross-currents in Dōgen's life, which include both Japanese and Chinese Buddhism. In both of these, the Lotus Sūtra assumes great importance.

Founding figures			
Shōtoku	574–622	Prince Regent	Established Buddhism in Japan
Saichō	767–822	Founded Tendai Shū on Mt Hiei	Dōgen first ordained in Tendai
Nōnin	d. 1196	Founded Daruma Shū	Daruma disciples joined Dōgen
Hōnen	1133–1212	Founded Jōdo Shū	Created the precedent for new schools
Eisai	1141–1215	Brought Rinzai Zen to Japan	Dōgen studied Rinzai at Kennin-ji
Dōgen	1200–53	Founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan	Author of *Genjō Kōan*

I.7 THE LOTUS SŪTRA

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As we have seen, most of the Kamakura period reformers, different as they were, started off as monks in the Tendai School. Dōgen, as a Tendai monk, would have known the Lotus Sūtra by heart and he continued to regard it as the most important of all the sūtras. The Lotus Sūtra had originally been translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in 286 AD in Chang'an, the capital of North China. This translation made a big impact at the time and it was further improved upon in a translation by Kumārajīva in the year 406 AD. Kumārajīva was a great translator. In order to render Buddhist texts into Chinese he had to invent a good deal of new terminology. We see the same thing happening as Buddhism comes to the West and words like Buddha, Dharma, karma, and so on enter Western languages.

Up until the time of Kumārajīva much of the vocabulary used to translate Buddhist texts was drawn directly from Daoism. Again, there is a modern parallel, as early Western translations tended to use Christian language and more recent ones have tended to use psychological language. Of course, neither of these can fully do justice to the original.

The Lotus Sūtra has not only added a richness of language to Far Eastern cultures, it has also added many images since the sūtra is full of parables and symbolic happenings that reveal aspects of the hidden meaning of the nature of Buddhas and their activity throughout the cosmos for the benefit of all sentient beings.

In 432 AD the monk Zhu Daosheng wrote a commentary on the Lotus Sūtra[11] which became highly influential. It is quite likely that Dōgen read this work while he was in China. Even if he did not read it, he will have encountered the ideas that it embodies. There has been debate among scholars about whether Daosheng was Buddhist, Daoist or Neo-Daoist. Neo-Daoism is basically a syncretism between Daoism and Confucianism. This kind of debate about classification, however, probably misses the point that Daosheng was simply a cultured Chinese person and freethinker who appreciated all three religions, drew from them all and had a preference for Neo-Daoist terminology even when writing about Buddhism. In this respect, Dōgen substantially followed in his footsteps, and presenting Dōgen in narrowly sectarian terms probably leads to a similar error.

What Dōgen will have learnt in China was not a narrow sectarian view, but a characteristically Chinese integration. Daosheng was certainly one of the key figures in establishing such an integration and has been claimed as the actual founder of Chan (or Zen) in China[12] before the arrival of Bodhidharma.

Daosheng spent time with Kumārajīva, the translator, in North China and with Huiyuan at Mount Lu in South China. At that time China was divided into two countries with rather different cultures and different styles of Buddhism. Daosheng speaks of nirvāṇa as 'mirror like voidness'[13] and he was certainly influenced by the so-called 'dark wisdom' of Daoism. We shall see the relevance of 'darkness', 'mirrors' and 'voidness' later in the commentary.

The Lotus Sūtra is full of imagery. *Genjō Kōan* also. Daosheng, writing about the Lotus and other sūtras, uses a mix of Buddhist, Daoist and

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Confucian terminology and Dōgen does the same. Daosheng makes particularly strong use of the Chinese concept Li (禮, in modern Chinese simplified to 礼). I shall explain this further in due course since, as we shall see, Dōgen does likewise. Without an appreciation of this Chinese way of using the conceptual structures of all three religions indiscriminately, one is likely to miss much of the significance of Dōgen's writing in general and of the present text in particular.

Lotus Sūtra translators and commentators			
Dharmarakṣa	*c*.240–*c*.300	Monk, traveller, linguist	Translated the sūtra into Chinese
Kumārajīva	344–413	Scholar, monk, translator	Translated the sūtra into Chinese
Huiyuan	334–417	Pure Land Teacher at Mount Lu	Influences Daosheng
Daosheng	*c*.360–434	Buddhist/Neo-Daoist monk, scholar	Wrote influential commentary on the sūtra, formative for Zen in China
Dōgen	1200–53	Author of *Genjō Kōan*	Scholar of the Sūtra and of Chinese Zen

The Lotus Sūtra offers a transcendental view of the Buddha. While we must take it that Dōgen was in revolt against some aspects of Tendai teaching, we must also appreciate that he was saturated with the imagery and content of this sūtra. His writing is full of references and allusions to other Buddhist texts, but in the *Shōbōgenzō*, references to the Lotus Sūtra outnumber those to any other single work. In the Lotus Sūtra, Buddhas are eternal and there are many of them. The vision of the universe that it imparts is one in which sacred influence is everywhere, though often unseen and unrecognized. The Buddhas are everywhere trying to help us to attain salvation, using all manner of skilful means, but we ignorant beings are like children playing in a burning house, inattentive to the calls of those who are trying to rescue us. Such is the general tenor of the work and of the religious consciousness that it imparts. This background is taken for granted in Dōgen's writing.

This religious vision in which there are Buddhas everywhere then struck a chord in the Japanese culture, which was already based on a nature religion

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called Shinto. At the time when Dōgen lived, the idea of *honji suijaku* was widespread, and certainly believed in by Saigyō the poet. This was the idea that the Shinto gods are manifestations of the celestial Buddhas, the supreme goddess, Amaterasu, being a manifestation of Vairocana Buddha, the supreme Buddha in Shingon. Dōgen will also have been aware of these ideas and although he does not adopt them, his lavish use of imagery drawn from nature is similar to the practice of Saigyō and other Japanese writers of his time.

I.8 POETRY AND DREAM

Poetry has played a big part in Japanese culture. The imperial government sponsored anthologies of the best poetry. There were competitions, and both Saigyō and Dōgen participated in them. Poetry provided a fluid medium that could bridge several otherwise separate domains. These included court life, religion, romance and nature. The tradition was sufficiently venerable to have a well-established vocabulary of tropes and images with many layers of meaning. We have already touched on the importance of the moon, which figures as a feature of the night sky, the light of the Dharma, a healing balm, a symbol of love, and, with its phases, a token of impermanence all at the same time. We shall see a number of these images in *Genjō Kōan*. To some extent they provide us with a code with which to unravel the meaning.

The fluidity of the poetic mode of expression also enables Dōgen to say several things at once with the images he uses, relying as he does upon the literal meaning, the established poetic association and the reference back to the source of the idea. Many elements of Japanese and Chinese poetry owe their origins to the stories in the Lotus Sūtra. Again, the idea of *honji suijaku* – equivalence between Shinto and Buddhist figures – also enables a writer to multiply meanings in a short phrase. Saigyō was the supreme master of this art. The currency of his work in the time of Dōgen must have aided Dōgen in exploiting the potential of language to give more than one religious and worldly meaning simultaneously as he does in *Genjō Kōan* and many of his other writings.

The idea of creating a bridge between domains can also be looked at in another way. Poetry is closely associated with dreaming and dream consciousness. When people are composing poetry they are not generally in a tightly conceptual-rational mode. Poetry spans the left and right brain. It partakes at once of both word and music. Thus it is a connection also between the unconscious and conscious mind; or, in a more archaic manner of expression, it is the mode in which the gods speak to us. Ancient Chinese religion was concerned with communication with the ancestors. The ancestors speak through dreams and the imagery of dreams emerges in poetry. Poetry thus becomes both a manner of praising and worshipping the spirits and also a means by which they speak to and through us. Even today we speak of the poetic Muse.

Sometimes the imagery is personal and sometimes it is broader; we might

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say, archetypal. If the allusions and associations pertain specifically to one person, or a small group of people, then we are dealing with personal matters. The unconscious, or the gods, might well want to give one a message helping one to change course in life. Saigyō writes of his longings, of the things that catch his attention, of his sense sometimes of being lost, and so on, but he does so by means of images of natural scenes and objects. Sometimes, the objects are so generalized that finding the personal association is more difficult. In these cases we are talking about the general spiritual issues that affect all of humankind – impermanence and intractability in all their forms. Dōgen's work has more of this latter character. One can sometimes see the personal reference, or, at least, the source of the imagery in his life, as when he speaks of the sea and the sky, clearly echoing his sea journey, but substantially he addresses the universal existential problems of life and death, together with the possibility of the kind of spiritual awakening that connects these universals with the concrete situations of our fate.

In Dōgen's writing there are recurrent dream images, like motifs with which he then plays in different ways, exploiting different perspectives, and he often imbues them with a subtle irony. It is easy to make the mistake of finding a passage in which Dōgen writes negatively about something or somebody and to conclude that the contrary stance represents 'Dōgen's position' on the particular issue. This is by no means always a warranted step. That Dōgen makes fun of something in one place does not preclude the possibility that he might praise it somewhere else. Dōgen is not so much a position-taker, more an explorer of possibilities.

Here again, we can note how dreams, being the expression of the unconscious, often provide a counterweight to something that has become overly developed in consciousness. They do this not because the over-developed feature is fundamentally bad or wrong, but simply to provide balance. Dōgen's work is full of balancing features. Is it better to be a fish or a bird? It is best to be what you are. However, whatever you are will only be part of the whole.

Poetry, because it does not have to adhere to a binary logic, can hint at the whole even while delineating a part. It can also contain contradictions that are not necessarily disagreements. The realm of the gods, which we might call the unconscious, can happily encompass opposites, and Dōgen's writing does so as a matter of course.

If one were to dream of a fan it would be profitable to ask what the fan symbolizes: what is the image behind the image? If one were to write a poem or tell a tale about a fan, likewise. At the end of *Genjō Kōan*, Dōgen relates a story about a fan. We can wonder what this means. Elsewhere,[14] Dōgen reports that an ancient master once raised a fan in the air and said: "Even though this has a thousand kinds of usages, after all there are not two types of wind". Dōgen goes on to say that he disagrees, that he can see ten thousand types of wind. Here 'wind' represents Dharma. We shall see this motif of fan and wind occur at the end of *Genjō Kōan*; however, my point

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here is that we cannot, from an utterance of this kind, conclude that Dōgen really rejects the interpretation of the earlier master, we can only conclude that on this particular day he raises further possibilities. In general, Dōgen opens up rather than closes down. There are not two kinds of 'wind' because Dharma is always Dharma, but there are innumerable kinds of wind because all real things are instances of Dharma; all teach and aid us on our path.

I.9 THE THREE RELIGIONS

China already had two religions before Buddhism arrived in the country, Daoism and Confucianism. To become accepted, Buddhism had to come to terms with the established creeds. This was a long and complicated story, but the upshot was a considerable degree of mutual borrowing and integration. When I was travelling in Vietnam, I visited a number of Chinese temples there. All were of rather similar design. There were always three altars. On one altar was a figure of Confucius, on another Laozi, and on the third a Buddha. One could tell to which religion the temple belonged by which of the three figures was on the central altar. This is a degree of accommodation between religions that we are not used to in the West. However, when Dōgen went to China he may well have encountered something similar. Not only did he encounter it, he embraced it. When back in Japan, he was in a different world where Confucianism and Daoism had less influence and the only other religion was Shintoism, but Dōgen retained the language and conceptual structure of the three religions and drew many of his most important ideas from that integration.

As a Westerner studying Dōgen it is easy to overlook this fact. Dōgen tends to be studied by people who have a fairly exclusive interest in Japanese Zen and if they look any further than the Zen School it is into Mahāyāna Buddhism. Furthermore, when Dōgen came back, he does seem to have had a sense that he was the only person in the country who really understood the true nature of Buddhism and how it should be practised, and this can easily lead one to think of him as the purveyor of an exclusivist style and so miss the meanings of terms that have their roots and associations in other parts of the Chinese integration.

So how does this integration work? Laozi wrote a book called the *Daode Jing* – the book of Dao and De. Loosely speaking, Dao is the mysterious underlying spirit of the universe, and De is its application in the practical world – its virtue. Confucius taught respect for heaven and a balance between heaven and humanity. This was to manifest as a perfect society. He also used the concepts Dao and De with slightly different implications. Confucianism is strong on social theory, ritual, etiquette and social relations. The key concept here is Li. Li is not easy to translate, being a rather broad concept. The original meaning had to do with the correct ordering of the sacrificial rites. In traditional Chinese society the rites were all-important. For life to be meaningful and successful there had to be a correct relationship between heaven, earth and mankind, and to maintain this there

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were rites. These involved sacrifice to the ancestors in heaven. By extension, a correctly lived life was itself regarded as being a rite and also a sacrifice, in the sense of being filial rather than self-assertive. One's whole life could be one's way of revering heaven, earth and the ancestors. Li thus came to mean the rite of life, the perfect way to live. Life of such a kind brought naturalness and duty into perfect harmony.

Since modern people have substantially lost touch with the notion of rites, it may help to think of dance. In ancient times, dance and ritual were closely related. Rites included dance. Dance is a ritual. To say that life is a rite is also to say that it is a dance. In this analogy, we could say that Dao is the music of that dance. The music calls us to dance. It gets us going. With each type of music there is an appropriate form of dance, an appropriate rite.

So Li and Te are both words for the practical application of Dao. Te inclines more toward the implication that the Dao manifests spontaneously in naturally virtuous action, and Li more toward the implication that performing one's duty is the best way of according with what is ultimately natural, but for the ancient Chinese these two principles were much closer than they are for many modern people. We tend to think of duty and naturalness as somewhat contradictory, but for them, duty was natural and the best way to be natural was to do your duty.

The Chinese thus found it fairly easy to think of ' Dao Li' rather than ' Dao Te'. Lao Tzu had had most to say about the nature of the Dao and Confucius most to say about Li, so ' Dao Li' brought them together nicely. In due course, there arose what is called Neo-Daoism, which was an amalgam of Daoism and Confucianism. It promoted Dao Li. Daosheng, who wrote the famous Buddhist commentary on the Lotus Sūtra, used Neo-Daoist language to do so, and Dōgen, many centuries later, also does so to some extent.

The Chinese recognized that Buddha taught a philosophy that had elements of both Dao and Li – transcendence and ethics, if you like. He was the supreme sage. He also advocated 'enlightenment', so there was a need to understand what this was in terms that made sense to the Chinese. The obvious answer was that enlightenment meant perceiving the Dao – the 'Buddha Dao' – so clearly that its Li became second nature. The integration of the three religions, therefore, can be neatly expressed as 'Buddha Dao Li' and Buddhism, seen through Chinese eyes, becomes simply Buddha's Dao Li.

For clarity, let me go over this again. Dao is the flow, grain or music of the universe, which is to say of heaven and earth. For mankind to live in harmony with it we have to 'perform the rites' correctly. This performance is called Li. We can also think of it as joining the dance, in which case Li means performing the right dance steps. If life is a dance to the music of Dao, then one has to know how to dance. Buddha comes along as the dance teacher, or expert in the rites. 'Buddha Dao Li' thus signifies the integration of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, with Buddha telling us how to live or perform (Li) in accordance with the fundamental nature (Dao) of heaven and earth. The Chinese for Buddha is '*Fo*', so this can be Fo Dao Li.

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The three religions of China				
Buddhism	Buddha	Fo	Enlightenment	The teacher
Daoism	Laozi	Dao	The mysterious 'Way'	The music
Confucianism	Confucius	Li	Humanity, duty, ritual	The ritual or dance

It will help us to comprehend *Genjō Kōan* if we recognize that Buddha Dao Li is a significant dimension, or even summary, of Dōgen's thinking. One important aspect of *Genjō Kōan* is that it explains the Buddha Dao and its Li and explains enlightenment – satori – in terms of the Buddha Dao and Dao Li. We shall see that *Genjō Kōan* begins with an assertion of the Buddha Dao, and ends with explanation of Dao Li, so Buddha Dao Li is the alpha and omega of this work.

In most translations of *Genjō Kōan*, the importance of Dao Li is not apparent and, I suggest, something essential is lost thereby. *Genjō Kōan* delineates a Buddhist Way, but it does so using a conceptual framework that owes a great deal to the other two religions. It tells us about the nature of spiritual awakening seen especially through the prism of the Chinese integration.

We should also grasp that in this way of understanding, rightness is to be found in the nature of things all around us. In modern life there has grown up a sense that spirituality is almost entirely an inward affair. However, in the Confucian and Daoist view, the ways of nature embody the truth, and the spiritual task is just as much, if not more, that of letting those truths in, than of finding them hidden deep within oneself. This attitude is further accentuated in Japan by its Shinto background. Much of *Genjō Kōan* is concerned with imagery drawn from nature.

Ritual rightly performed, Li, was intended to maintain proper order and regulate the relations between humans and heaven, Nature and the ancestors. This view of the universe is different from the one to which we are accustomed. The modern person can be perplexed to learn that Dōgen believes that a life of complete liberation is one that is almost completely ritualized. Much modern thought has been concerned with achieving a kind of liberation that involves the deconstruction of traditional rituals, but here, liberation, which is also equated with salvation, means liberation from the kind of self-centredness that modern consumerism takes to be the ideal.

I.10 SELF-POWER AND OTHER-POWER

While Dōgen was being shaped by and immersed in the cross-currents of the three religions of China, back in Japan other issues altogether were at play. The question that was probably most discussed in Japanese Buddhist circles at that time was not the integration of the three religions, but the debate about self-power (*jiriki*) and other-power (*tariki*) and the associated matter of

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mappō, the 'dark age'. Hōnen had been in search of a form of Buddhism that could provide salvation for the masses in a time of terrible events. He observed that it seemed to be impossible for people of his age – or ours, though for different reasons, perhaps – to fulfil the stringent demands for human perfection found in Buddhist scriptures. How many people do you know who are perfectly ethical, have mastered all the meditation samadhis and are now tenth-stage bodhisattvas?

Many people in Japan were convinced by this argument and they believed that this was because they lived in *mappō*, as we do now. There were various theories to the effect that the more distant in time one was from the epoch when a Buddha had appeared in the world, the more difficult it was to practise, and that as a result the human race was in decline. Looking around one in Japan at the time, beset as it was with civil war, earthquakes, famines, fires and plagues, it was not difficult to believe that those were degenerate times. In this circumstance, Hōnen preached a message of other-power that spoke to people's condition. It seemed quite evident in those times that the 'self-power' practices of strict morality, pure-minded meditation and wisdom were beyond human capacity, especially for people who were obliged to work in professions such as soldiering or fishing that inevitably carried the bad karma of killing. People needed help and the Buddhas had made vows to be compassionate. Thus even if one inevitably fell short personally, was it not obviously the case that the Buddhas would help if one turned to them and asked? The practice that Hōnen advocated – calling the name of Amitābha Buddha (*nembutsu*) – was something that everybody could actually do, even while sailing a boat or ploughing a field. However, the new teaching was controversial, as much for its very popularity as anything, which threatened the hegemony of the established Buddhist organizations on Mount Hiei, Mount Kōya and elsewhere, that relied upon a much more complicated integration of Buddhist doctrine that most people respected, but did not understand.

Dōgen recognized the idea of *mappō*, but he thought that it was still possible for practitioners to reach the complete fulfilment of the salvation offered by Śākyamuni Buddha. His view was that even in the time of Śākyamuni there were people who did not attain enlightenment and even in this remote time and place (medieval Japan) a few still could. The adversity of the times should be a spur to action. He wanted to preserve the possibility of enlightenment in this life and sometimes criticized *nembutsu* as being lightweight. However, the idea of a polarity between Dōgen and Hōnen can be taken too far.[15] I believe, as I shall explain below, that Dōgen was not teaching self-power to the exclusion of other-power, but was teaching an integration of the two and was using what he had learnt in China as the key to doing so. In fact, Dōgen leans quite strongly in the other-power direction, as does the Lotus Sūtra. In his very clear and concrete later text *Dōshin* ('Heart of Dao'), Dōgen, just like Hōnen, advocated incessant chanting of the Buddhist refuge formula, especially at the time of death and in the *bardo* state between lives. Such devotion, he said, is profound realization of

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Dharma.

I suspect that one of the reasons that Dōgen is popular nowadays is because he emphasizes practice in the present life and most interpretations of his work stress this. However, this is a one-sided view. Certainly, in relation to Hōnen, he stressed that enlightenment in this life is a real possibility. However, it would be completely wrong to think of Dōgen as a wholly this-worldly philosopher. He was a religious practitioner and he produced his own conception of other-power and of the Way that the myriad Buddhas shine their grace upon us and rescue us from the fate of endless rebirth. His primary point is that for them to do so, we have to play our part, but then, Hōnen thought so too in his own way.

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1 For a translation and extensive commentary, see Okumura, Shohaku 2010. *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen's Shobogenzo*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Books. Some notable other examples of translations are, alphabetically by author, "Genjokoan – The Problem of Everyday Life" in Kennett, Jiyu 1972. *Selling Water by the River: A Manual of Zen Training*, New York: Pantheon Books: 142–5; "The Spiritual Question as it Manifests Before Your Very Eyes (Genjo Koan)" in Nearman, Hubert and Daizui MacPhillamy 1996. *The Shōbōgenzō or The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching by Great Master Dōgen*, Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey: 52–60; "Genjokoan" in Nishijima, Gudo and Choto Cross 1994. *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*, 4 vols, Woking: Windbell: 33–8; "Actualizing the Fundamental Point" in Tanahashi, Kazuaki 2000. *Enlightenment Unfolds: The Essential Teachings of Zen Master Dōgen*, Boston, MA: Shambhala: 35–9. Several more can be found on-line.

2 De Bary, William Theodore, Donald Keene, George Tanabe, and Varley, Paul 2001. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, New York: Columbia University Press, vol. 1: 309.

3 Dōgen had been advised by Rujing not to get involved in worldly life and to establish himself in a remote place, in accordance with the Chinese 'mountain monastery' tradition. Now he had to admit that Rujing had been right.

4 正 法 眼 蔵 (*Shōbōgenzō*) is variously translated. The first three characters signify 'the right (correct) Dharma eye'. The final character, 蔵, can mean a 'treasury' or 'storehouse', but it can also signify a hidden place. The character represents guarded valuables. The title thus suggests that the text will reveal

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the hidden secret of how to see the Dharma correctly.

5 For a full discussion of these questions, see Heine, Steven 2006. *Did Dōgen Go To China?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

6 See LaFleur, William R. 2003. *Awesome Nightfall: The Life, Times and Poetry of Saigyō*, Boston, MA: Wisdom Books.

7 For a comparison of Dōgen and Shinran see Abe, Masao 1992. *A Study of Dōgen*, New York: State University of New York Press.

8 Leighton, Taigen D., "Dōgen's Zazen as Other-Power Practice" at http://www.ancientdragon.org/dharma/articles/dogens_zazen_as_other_power_practice (accessed 8 December 2017).

9 For a critical assessment of what was happening in Japanese Buddhism at the time, see Payne, Richard Karl (ed.) 1998. *Re-Visioning "Kamakura" Buddhism*, Honolulu: Kuroda.

10 See Groner, Paul 2000. *Saichō: The Establishment of the Japanese Tendai School*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, especially 45–6.

11 See: Kim, Young-ho 1990. *Tao-sheng's Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

12 By Hu Shih. See, e.g. "Development of Zen Buddhism in China", *Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, 15/4: January 1932.

13 In *Bianzong Lun*, by Xie Lingyun.

14 Leighton, Taigen D. and Shohaku Okumura 2004. *Dōgen's Extensive Record*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Books: 119.

15 For a similar view, see Cleary, Thomas 1992. *Rational Zen: The Mind of Dōgen Zenji*, Boston, MA: Shambhala, especially 27–32.

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II

TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

II.1 A DIFFICULT TEXT

Genjō Kōan is not an easy text for us. Few of Dōgen's writings are. There have been many translations of *Genjō Kōan* into English and other European languages. They differ considerably. Different translators have taken the meaning in different ways. I have spoken to many Western people who have read one or another of these translations and by far the commonest report is that it is confusing. The matter was well summed up by a very experienced Zen practitioner and teacher who said to me, "I love Dōgen, but I don't understand it."

Nonetheless, we know that *Genjō Kōan* was originally written for a lay disciple named Yō Kōshū. This strongly suggests that it cannot have been anything like as obscure to an ordinary Japanese person of Dōgen's time as it seems to be even to great scholars today. There is a key missing. The difficulty is partly that of getting into the mind-set of a person from the thirteenth century living in the feudal culture of Japan. Just about all the things that we take for granted as modern, educated people of the twenty-first century probably did not form part of his world. What mattered to him is not necessarily what matters to us and vice versa.

Also, Dōgen's poetic style of writing is full of references and allusions to other Buddhist texts and stories, many of which are themselves difficult for us to penetrate. He takes it for granted that we already know what he is alluding to and texts in those days did not have footnotes and references. It is a bit as though one were to make allusions to Bible stories with just a throwaway line. If a modern writer mentions the term 'Samaritan' we immediately have a whole story in our head. So, in some ways, Dōgen's text uses a code with which we are not always familiar. I think that I have picked up some references that others have missed, but I have no doubt that there are more that have escaped me, just as they have escaped other modern readers. Most would, however, have been perfectly clear to an educated person in Dōgen's own time.

I think that clarity has then, probably, been further obscured by the attitude of most of the translators and commentators, since they evidence a desire to make Dōgen fit into, or to use him as a support for, the currently popular rendering of Zen in the West, which tends to be technical, secular and reductionist, attitudes that had probably not even been invented in

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Dōgen's time and would have been strongly disapproved of if they had been.

Dōgen would probably have as much difficulty in reading us as we have reading him. The reasons that Zen in particular and Buddhism in general have evolved in this direction in modern times have to do with our history, our Judeo-Christian background, the secularization of industrial society, and the academicization of education, including oriental studies, topics that are worth several books in their own right, but which mean that we tend to look at the text through a different set of spectacles from those of the author and his original readers. Some of these points will become clear as we go along.

However, people are people and even though cultures change, some human fundamentals do not. These include the kinds of central spiritual problems that people face. Birth and death are still birth and death. Self-centredness may change its modes of expression, but it is perennial.

Then there is the question of spiritual development itself. I think that some of the translations that I have read suffer from the same kind of misunderstanding of the Dharma as Dōgen himself suffered from before he went to China. This misunderstanding is simply the idea that the whole purpose of practice must be to obtain something for oneself – something to satisfy body and mind. In modern times, self-development, personal growth and spiritual liberation have become confused. I suspect that much of what we consider to be the real value of meditation and similar practices Dōgen would have regarded as narcissistic distraction.

Although there is a good deal of rhetoric in Western Buddhist circles about practice for its own sake, often enough even those who make such remarks are still, in essence, practising with a view to their own enhancement. This is quite understandable and natural, but if, as is likely, Dōgen was actually, in some respects, trying to dispel that as an objective, then many of the things that we, in common discourse, take for granted are not going to apply. Whether I have completely managed to overcome this pitfall myself, I doubt. The problem is that such attitudes are deeply ingrained and, by definition, one is not generally conscious of what it is that one is taking for granted. It may seem so self-evident that one has difficulty understanding how an intelligent person could think differently.

II.2 WHAT WAS DŌGEN TRYING TO DO IN THIS TEXT?

In *Genjō Kōan*, Dōgen is telling us how satori happens, and, as this was intended to be a foundational chapter in *Shōbōgenzō*, he is here attempting a reassertion of the core of Buddhism according to his understanding. In particular, Buddhism is a transmission. It is, therefore, about interaction. Zen asserts that something happened between Śākyamuni and his disciple Kāśyapa and that, subsequently, something similar happened between Kāśyapa and Ānanda and that in this way the Dharma has come down to us. We say that what happened was an 'awakening'. It was sudden. It was

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surprising. As an interaction, it involved two (usually two) people, but sometimes one person and a natural phenomenon. This is what Dōgen helps us to understand.

Along the way, *Genjō Kōan* throws light upon a variety of other matters that are or have been controversial in Buddhism. For instance, *Genjō Kōan* can be seen as a commentary on the Buddha's assertion that Buddhism is neither eternalism nor nihilism. In the post-war period there has been a movement in Japan called Critical Buddhism,[1] which asserts that Buddhism has drifted away from Śākyamuni's original message in the direction of eternalism because of '*hongaku'* teachings such as those of Buddha nature and original enlightenment that seem to assert an underlying reality 'behind' phenomena. In theoretical terms, the Critical Buddhists are, therefore, the polar opposite of the Tendai people in Dōgen's time who were advancing the *hongaku* principle strongly. Where did Dōgen stand on this issue? Did he reject *hongaku* outright? Did he accept it in his earlier works and then change his mind later? Or was his real opinion to be found somewhere between these two poles, and if so, how is it to be understood? On this question, I am of the last opinion. I think that Dōgen holds a middle position, but it is a middle that, in a sense, incorporates both poles rather than rejecting them. He does not take on the notion of original enlightenment, but he does not swing to the opposite extreme either. He does not reject it, but he does not rely upon it either. He does have a sense of an unborn, uncreated, undying truth, but that truth is not static, nor is it something that will allow one to sink into any kind of complacency and it is certainly not to be identified with any kind of original nature of the person. This means that he also holds a middle position between self-power and other-power. How does he do this? Principally by deploying the notion of Buddha Dao. *Genjō Kōan* explains how this works.

In Dōgen, the ultimate is immanent in things insofar as they demonstrate or reflect ultimate truth, but such truth is the truth of impermanence. Thus nothing can be pinned down into static categories. As soon as one tries to do so the game is lost. Thus there is eternal truth and any ephemeral circumstance can demonstrate it to us, but we cannot grasp it as a concept. It can grasp us, but we can never grasp it in any final way. As soon as we try to do so it slips through our fingers. Dōgen not only asserts this, he demonstrates it in his mode of discourse, and this demonstration often seems more important than the conceptual content of what he says.

Actual lived life is a series of encounters, endlessly giving way to one another. There is eternal truth in each, but it never manifests itself in a familiar way. It is like the churning of the ocean. Waves continually arrive at the shore, yet every wave is unique. It is always the same, yet always different. This is the Dao. It encompasses yin and yang and manifests as them. So Dōgen's 'middle' is ceaselessly active. Time and change are fundamental. To reverse a traditional French saying, 'plus c'est la même chose, plus ça change'. So it is not that the eternal, unborn, uncreated

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somehow defies time; it *is* time.

In this vision of things, the eternal truth, often represented poetically as the moon, sheds its light, but if that light enters into one it 'sends one forth', it provokes action, because it is the essence of change. We search for a static final truth in order to justify our smugness and to enable us to defy impermanence. When ultimate truth touches us it destroys our game and stirs us into action. As a consequence, we become actively passive or passively active: passive in the sense that we must allow the truth to enter us, yet active as a result of it doing so. Dōgen calls this 'playing our part'.

The Dharma life is a cooperation, which can be imagined as a ritual or a dance, between oneself and the Dharma, but it is the Dharma that leads. As soon as we try to take control we lose contact. Thus satori is a cooperation between ourselves and the Buddhas, or, we could say, with the Dharma manifest in a myriad ways all around us. We have to play our part, but the essential element comes from outside and enters into us, though not in a way that makes it into part of ourselves. Yet our 'playing our part' makes the Dharma evident to others which actually turns out to be even more important then it appearing to us. Dōgen tells us that enlightenment does not necessarily become personal knowledge for ourselves and we might not even know that it is happening. The aim of the exercise is not to gain something, but to serve the greater purpose, even unwittingly – the 'greater purpose' being the enlightenment of all sentient beings, the work of all the Buddhas.

With all this goes his fervent belief in the importance of practice. Dōgen needs to explain how, even though the light of the Dharma is already shining upon us, our duty is to practise diligently.

So, we can see that while Dōgen has a single central message to impart about satori, he has to do so by integrating a number of cross-currents.

1. *The Lotus Sūtra*: We can take Dōgen's writing, including *Genjō Kōan*, as expressing an inner conversation that Dōgen is having with the Lotus Sūtra. Dōgen will certainly have felt that his interpretation of Buddhadharma had to elucidate without being in contradiction to it. However, he will also have felt free to reinterpret it in his own way.

2. *A religious text*: This means that *Genjō Kōan* is a religious text. I think that it is important to stress that this text is about the real religious life. We live in an age in which the dominant trend in Western Buddhism seems to be toward presenting it as a non-religious philosophy or psychology, in which writers like Dōgen are taken as support for a secular, self-development approach. The text, however, makes a lot more sense if one understands it in an unabashedly religious way. Here, I mean religious both in the sense of the Mahāyāna Buddhist religion, and also, to an extent, in the sense of addressing the fundamentals of all and any conceivable true religion. If Dōgen had not had some sense of an eternal, universally present Buddha or Dharma nature – a highly metaphysical concept – his kōan would not have existed in the first place. It would certainly not have had the

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power to drive him to make the dangerous journey to China, risking his life for a solution. If he had, as so many modern practitioners, simply seen Buddhism as a technique of stress reduction, or even as an ethical philosophy, he would have stayed in Japan. Therefore, *Genjō Kōan* is about religious things, holy things, sacred things. Often the words that Dōgen chooses have several layers of meaning. The ordinary person can read this text and think that it contains many pretty word pictures of oceans and birds, firewood and dewdrops and completely miss the point.

3. *Not ontology*: This also means that this is not a philosophical work in the Western sense of the term. This is not about ontology, epistemology or logic; it is not an abstract theory of time or being. Philosophers might find that some parts of it stimulate ideas for them, but this is not Dōgen's purpose. His purpose is spiritual awakening and the explication of enlightenment: what it is and how it happens.

4. *Personal realization*: The work is Dōgen's attempt to express his own religious experience. That experience is his own personal solution to his own spiritual problem. However, the result is here universalized. If Dōgen is right – and in this commentary I will assume that he is – whatever form one's spiritual problem takes, the principles that Dōgen is enunciating here will have relevance.

5. *Daoism and yin-yang*: Dōgen found the solution to his problem at Tiantong monastery with Master Rujing. Rujing was Chinese. I think that the form in which Dōgen expresses his message owes a great deal to Chinese religiosity. In particular it smacks of a strong Daoist influence and is shot through with formulations that would have worked easily for somebody familiar with yin-yang thinking. This does not mean that Dōgen was a Daoist as such, but it is a strong influence. Dōgen would have rejected the idea that he was Daoist and this work, *Genjō Kōan*, is probably not a deliberate attempt to integrate Daoism and Buddhism, but, in many ways, it does so. Presumably, this influence came partly from Dōgen's general experience of being in China, and it probably owes a lot to the direct influence of Rujing. I suspect also a strong influence from the Neo-Daoist style of Daosheng. This has to remain speculative, of course. My hunch is that Dōgen was deeply steeped in Chinese ways of thinking. I imagine this as having been rather in the manner that many contemporary Western Buddhists, despite having consciously rejected Christianity or Judaism, are still steeped in a Judeo-Christian way of thinking and tend to present Buddhism in categories (such as justice and forgiveness, human rights, moral imperatives, and so on) that were not particularly relevant to Buddha and his contemporaries, nor to Dōgen's times either, but have powerful resonances in Western thought. Thus, in *Genjō Kōan*, we have Dōgen's presentation of Buddhism and Buddhist enlightenment in a text that is clothed as much in Daoist as in Buddhist robes.

6. *Confucianism*: Confucianism has a strong social philosophy. It is about the rightly ordered life in the rightly ordered society. Dōgen strikes one as

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being something of a Confucian in his general style. A great deal of his work and writing is actually about organization and the correct relations between people according to their roles. He does not follow Confucianism in a narrow sense, but his temperament has a distinctly Confucian leaning. If Confucianism is about creating a perfect society, then Dōgen was interested in creating such a society in miniature in the monastic community that he established. One of the fundamental principles of his community was that nothing should be wasted. What one is provided with by life is one's lot and it is by deeply appreciating and conforming to one's lot that that one lives out a rightly ordered life. In *Genjō Kōan*, Dōgen is advancing the Li of Buddhism – the rite of enlightenment – as being such a correctly ordered life that will contribute to a rightly ordered community. For Dōgen, the epitome of rightly conducted ritual is zazen, but he carries this principle far beyond the meditation hall. All of life becomes a correctly ordered ritual. Confucius would have approved of the principle even if they disagreed about the detail.

7. *Self-power and other-power*: Ordinary people were concerned about salvation. Buddhism seemed to offer it, but it was impenetrably difficult for many ordinary people to understand. All the innovators of the third phase of Buddhism in Japan (see above p.25) had to explain the empowering force that effected the necessary change. Each did it in a distinctive way. Dōgen believed in personal effort, but he also believed that the change does not come from 'self'; it comes when self gets out of the way.

8. *Monastic and lay*: Much of Dōgen's effort went into creating and running a monastery dedicated to helping individuals attain satori. Yet, the work that he wanted to form the first chapter of his *magnum opus* was a letter to a layperson that contains no mention of monastic discipline. This has to be significant. It tells us at least that Dōgen was alert and sensitive to what lay Buddhists were concerned about even if his forte was going to be training monks.

Although Dōgen is commonly presented as the founder of a sect, he seems to have had no intention of doing so, any more than Eisai. In fact, as has already been pointed out, Dōgen comes across in *Genjō Kōan* as an integrator, not a separator. On the one hand, Dōgen did seem to believe that when he came back to Japan he was perhaps the only person in the country who really understood what Buddhism was all about. On the other hand, he thought that it was about a seamless integration of Chinese wisdom within a Buddhist frame in which self-power and other-power were completely integrated as the yang and yin of the Buddha Dao and its Li.

We should not, however, take it that Dōgen's integration is an assertion that Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism are just different ways of saying the same thing, nor that there is a kind of underlying common essence to the three. Rather, Dōgen, like Daosheng, has strong views about what is and is not true and genuine, and sees most of what passes for orthodoxy in all three religions as dubious. However, this does not lead him to reject their

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concepts, but rather to reappropriate, redefine and thereby redeem them. Dōgen is difficult, but not fuzzy. He believes in the Buddhist teaching of causation, in the importance of clear thinking, in faith, courage, altruism and self-effacement.[2]

In Dōgen, the Buddha Dao is not a hazy reality, dimly visible behind natural things. Rather, he elevates natural things to being instances of, rather than merely indicators of the Dao. This is, therefore, an immanentist view: a robust, action-oriented philosophy that nonetheless centres upon the self-effacement necessary for the Dharma to do its work.

The above are some of the conclusions and assumptions that have informed my translation. If they are wrong then I am probably off the mark. However, they do yield what I believe to be a translation in which the different parts of the text all conspire together to offer a single vision. Many of the existing translations and Western commentaries use *Genjō Kōan* as a series of hooks upon which to hang supposedly correct Buddhist doctrines of considerable variety. Often the doctrines chosen by such commentators are ones that stress the uniqueness of Zen as a distinct school. These were also my own assumptions when I started this work. However, I gradually realized that Dōgen's essay becomes much more coherent when we see that all the figures used in it are different perspectives on a single idea. *Genjō Kōan* does not advance a string of loosely related doctrines so much as present a single argument in which the different parts of the text each support the single central thread. I have just said "conclusions *and* assumptions" and this is because most of the assumptions that I am conscious of having made are the result of working through the text reiteratively. It sometimes seems that every time I read it something new jumps out. I hope that you have the same experience.

II.3 YŌ KŌSHŪ'S KŌAN

When Dōgen had finished the first version of *Genjō Kōan*, he gave it to a layman named Yō Kōshū. This may have been simply for safekeeping, but it seems probable that the original version was a reply to a communication from Yō Kōshū and we are handicapped by not having that communication. What did Yō Kōshū ask? Did he ask Dōgen what his position was in relation to the big issue of the day, which was the self-power/other-power controversy? Did he ask about 'original enlightenment' and the ideas of Nōnin? Did he ask why Dōgen focuses so specifically upon zazen? We cannot know. None of these topics is overtly referred to in *Genjō Kōan,* but implicit answers to all three are to be found here.

The image of a mirror that we shall encounter later tells us the manner in which other-power enters a person without becoming part of that person. However, Dōgen's conceptualization of that power is rather different from that of Hōnen, being more immanent in a way that had less appeal to his contemporaries, though more to people of the twenty-first century.

Genjō Kōan implicitly refutes many of the ideas of Nōnin, but is, equally

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clearly, in dialogue with them and shares with them a sense of what could be called natural or spontaneous enlightenment.

Genjō Kōan does not mention zazen, yet it can tell us a good deal about Dōgen's sense of its inner meaning.

Yō Kōshū seems to have worked in the same government office as a man called Yakou who is mentioned in Dōgen's *Eihei Koroku*.[3] It seems likely that Yakou visited Dōgen in the year after *Genjō Kōan* was written. He was a Confucian who practised Buddhism. If Yō Kōshū was similar in this respect, then this might help to explain Dōgen's free use of Chinese terminology in *Genjō Kōan*. However, we cannot take it that this was purely an adaptation to the needs of the reader in this one text because of Dōgen's wish to use *Genjō Kōan* as the first chapter of *Shōbōgenzō*. It was clearly more significant than simply a letter to one person.

The central thread in *Genjō Kōan* is a description of what satori – enlightenment – actually is and how it works. This fundamental point solves Dōgen's own problem and, in principle, offers liberation to all people. So perhaps Yō Kōshū asked: what is practice and enlightenment? We shall never know, but Dōgen's reply remains a seminal essay that, like a good kōan, endlessly continues to reveal more and more shades of meaning.

II.4 DŌGEN'S KŌAN

Here I am using the word 'kōan' in the sense of 'a spiritual problem' that Dōgen would have been familiar with from his time at Kennin-ji. We shall soon see that Dōgen himself recasts and redefines this word. In the Tendai monastery, Dōgen learnt that we are all already inherently enlightened, and he asked himself: if this is so, what is the point of practising? Surely, practice is important, but if we are already inherently enlightened, why does it matter?

Practice could seem like hard work, and if all you got in return was something that you had had all along, it was difficult to see the point. When one thinks that practice is about getting something for oneself, this kind of objection is insurmountable. Why work hard to get what you already have? This was the question that Dōgen asked everywhere he went and nobody had a satisfactory answer. However, I think that behind this question, Dōgen already believed that practice was vital and what he wanted was an explanation of how that could be squared with the teachings that he had received that so easily led to antinomian conclusions. Nōnin had said that practice is unnecessary since enlightenment is already inherent and knowledge of it arises spontaneously. The young Dōgen could not accept this, but could not refute it either.

Furthermore, the idea of having an inherently perfect nature is – as Hōnen had also thought some decades before – a rather perilous idea for a spiritual practitioner to hold. It can readily lead to complacency, to over-self-evaluation and to arrogance, and also to carelessness of others since, if they already have what they need, there is no need to give them anything

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else. The whole idea of an inherent radiant nature also seems dangerously close to the idea of the ā*tman* that was the central concept of the religion that Śākyamuni had rejected back in India. In fact, virtually by definition, Buddhism rejects the notion of an immortal, unchanging soul or god-element in the individual. How were all these points to be squared with one another?

By the time Dōgen came back to Japan, he had found a different way of viewing things. In this new vision, he could accept the unborn Dharma of all Dharmas, without reifying it, by realizing that while it is, was and always shall *be*, it is not something that one can *find originally located* in one's own body and mind, nor can one *appropriate it* to one's body or mind, but, yet, its functioning can, if one plays one's part, send one forth in the service of all sentient beings. This new way then informed all his work.

Genjō Kōan is autobiographical in that it is an account of what the author emerged with as the solution of his own deep spiritual problem, something precious that he then felt impelled to share.

II.5 RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

The pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim pointed out that the hallmark of religion is a distinction between, on the one side, the mundane or profane, and, on the other side, the sacred or holy. He was looking for a distinguishing feature that would enable him to say, in any culture, whether any given institution, practice, way, thought, custom, etc., was religious or not. Religions vary hugely in form from one society to another. Durkheim established this criterion and it has stood the test of time. When there is, in the consciousness of the people engaged in some activity, a distinction of this kind, then we can say that it is a religious activity. We can therefore distinguish religious consciousness as the consciousness that some things (objects, concepts, abstractions, people, actions, etc.) are holy and some are not.

If you have grasped the idea of what religious consciousness is you will realize that there is a connection between this and ideas about duality and non-duality. If there is religious consciousness then there is a duality between the holy and the non-holy. Dōgen was a religious Buddhist. He was not secular. He lived all his life as a monk. He believed in correct practice. He set up a monastery that had a strongly ritualistic basis. He wrote in a religious context and his writing is full of attempts to penetrate the relationship between the holy and the mundane.

Many people think that *Genjō Kōan*, and Dōgen's writings in general, are essentially about propounding a philosophy of non-duality. Translators and commentators, therefore, try to make the text fit with this assumption. However, as it stands, the actual text has a great deal of dualistic imagery. Furthermore, it tends to emphasize the sharpness of the distinctions in the dichotomies presented. We shall see this as we go through. The actual terms 'duality' and 'non-duality' do not occur. Dōgen deals with the subject

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