

# The Zen Master's Dance

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING  
DŌGEN AND WHO YOU ARE  
IN THE UNIVERSE

Jundo Cohen



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# Introduction

Eihei Dōgen, a Japanese Zen Master of long ago, heard the music of the universe that sounds as all events and places, people, things, and spaces. He experienced reality as a great dance moving through time, coming to life in the thoughts and acts of all beings. It is a most special dance, for it is the dance that the whole of reality is dancing, with nothing left out, that you and I are dancing, that is dancing as you and me. It is a vibrant, swirling, flowing, merging and emerging unity that Buddhists sometimes call “emptiness,” as the motion and sweep of the dance “empties” us of the sense of only being separate beings, and fills and reaffirms us as the whole. We, as human beings, can’t be sure when or where this dance began, or whether it even has a beginning or end. But we can come to see that it is being danced now in each step and breath we take, much as a dance unfolds and constantly renews with every turn or leap of its dancers.

You and I are dancers in this dance, as is every creature great or small, the mountains and seas, every grain of sand or massive galaxy, the atoms that make up the universe and the whole universe itself. Everything in reality, no matter how old or vast, no matter how unnoticed or small, is dancing this dance together. And although we may feel as if we are separate dancers — finite individuals on a grand stage spanning all of time and space — we are also the dance itself dancing through us. A universe of dancers that are being danced up in this dance that the whole universe is dancing.

Picture in your mind a spectator witnessing a dance so vigorous and vibrant that its countless actors seem to vanish in the swirl of motion: single dancers becoming pairs, then groups, coming together and separating moment by moment, yet so merged as the overall movement that, from a distance, individual dancers can no longer be seen. It is like single raindrops vanishing in a distant storm. The dance

is the ground below, the air that's stirred, the light of moon and stars in the open sky above. We are such fragile drops in motion, but also the whole ground, the whole motion, every breath of air, the moon and all the stars, the entirety of sky that is dancing too — for the dance is the whole of everything. It's a dance that leaves nothing out.

Indeed, the swirling dance constantly spins out new shapes and creations, gives temporary form to each and all of the individual dancers. From this vantage point, each of us is no more solid or separate than eddies in swirling water, dust devils in the breeze, flashes of lightning casting momentary light and shadow, each there for a while before fading back into the dance. The dance of nature in motion seems to spin us out onto the stage, then spin us back in, giving the appearance of birth and death. But beyond those temporary appearances, we are also the whole dance itself — a dance which happens before, during, and after our limited sense of time. There are scenes during life of youth, health, love, joy, and beauty, as well as sickness and sorrow, violence and war. Yet all are outward appearances rippling across the surface of it all.

So united did Dōgen see that whole that, in his mind, each point holds all other points, near or far, each point miraculously fully contains the whole, and each moment of time ticks with all other moments of time, before or after. It is much like saying that every step of each dancer somehow embodies, depends upon, and also fully expresses every step by all the other dancers on the stage, past, present, or future, and fully contains the entire dance too. Dōgen experienced the time of the dance as the overall movement that is fully held and expressed in each individual move itself, with past not only flowing into present and future, but future flowing into the present and past, as the present fully holds the past and future of the dance.

Can we truly say that there are separate dancers in this all-encompassing dance? Endless dances are going on within each dancer, each cell and each atom, each bond and reaction, just dancing within and with each other . . . dancing within dancing. We can experience all dancers and all reality absolutely absorbed in the constant motion of the dance. As the borders that separate our sense of self from the rest of the world soften or drop away, we see that

there is no dance outside, no “me” and “you” inside the dance. There is only that which flows from inside to outside, outside to in — all borders, all barriers dropped away and the whole having no surface or edge.

Please don't understand the concept of this dance merely intellectually. Instead, join in, truly feel what it is to be swept up in this dance as this dance. Master Dōgen spoke of practice, putting it all in motion. Where this dance has come from, where it is going, is not as important as the dance that is truly realized — made real — right here, in your next leap and gesture. The dance is always right underfoot, so just dance, without thought of any other place.

## How to Dance

What would a dance be without some dance lessons? Each dancer can find herself — find her identity in the dance knowing her life as a dance too (a personal dance within the great dance), and that her grace, balance, direction, the choices she makes in each step by step, help create the dance as she goes. In his many writings, Master Dōgen, our master instructor, shows us how to dance with skill and grace. His dance secrets come down to a few fundamentals:

The first step is no step, sitting upright and very still. This is zazen, seated Zen, in which we assume a balanced and stable posture, breathe deeply and naturally, and just sit. In this sitting, we let go of tangled thoughts and judgments as best we can. We try not to wallow in our emotions or get caught up in long trains of thought, but instead let things be. We sit in equanimity, beyond judging good or bad, with a sense that this sitting is the one and only act that needs to be done in this moment, the one place to be in the whole universe. We sit in the present instant without engaging thoughts of past or future, and in doing so, we encounter the timeless wholeness of just this moment. As we sit unmoving, the whole moving world flows past and through us. When we sit with the trust that nothing is lacking in zazen, our sitting is complete because we stop all other measuring.

We human beings are always chasing goals, feeling our lack, judging good and bad, and feeling friction between our wants and reality. But when we sit in *shikantaza* — in “just sitting that hits the

mark” — we stop chasing goals for a time. Sitting is its own goal and completion. When we sit this way, the division between us and the world drops away and we feel the profound wholeness of the dance. That is the first lesson.

Master Dōgen’s next lesson is the sacredness of all things and activities. Getting up from the sitting cushion, we return to a life of goals and tasks, work that needs tending, clothes that need mending. In his teachings, Master Dōgen said we should not separate life and practice, but instead see everything and all moments *as* sacred practice. Rising in the morning, using the toilet and washing, cleaning and cooking, are all steps in the dance. Every single thought, word, and gesture, no matter how seemingly ordinary and mundane, is sacred.

This does not mean that all our actions are equally good. We need to live and act in skillful ways in order to taste the overarching goodness and sacredness of life. Thus, Master Dōgen’s next lesson tells us to always seek to do good and to avoid doing harm. By that he means that we should avoid greed, anger, jealousy, and other damaging mental states. We should live with balance, poise, and moderation. In our own thoughts, words, and acts, we should choose that which is free from such harmful behaviors. In turn, the lessons of zazen and Zen practice will help us to do this. Thus, dancing well leads us to practice as better dancers, while being better dancers allows us to dance well.

Of course, realizing this truth, getting it into our bones and living accordingly, is what our practice is about.

Except where noted, all translations in this book are by the author.

# How to Read Dōgen

Master Dōgen’s legacy is contained in various writings and records, such as his *Shōbōgenzō*, the *Right Dharma Eye Treasury*. In them, he expresses the path of zazen and of diligent practice in all of life. Unfortunately, some say that Dōgen’s way with words is hard to pierce, that his strings of wandering phrases can leave the reader lost. Whole books and hundreds of articles have been written seeking to explain what the old master was trying to say. Some people think his writing is just meaningless gobbledygook, or something so profound that only a Buddha can understand it.

I do not believe, however, that Dōgen is so hard to understand at all. I don’t mean to say that his message is simple. It is multilayered, multifaceted, and subtle when not downright nebulous. So, in order to understand it, we must first study a considerable amount of Buddhist history and important Mahayana and Zen doctrines — as well as Dōgen’s own unique perspectives on those doctrines — before we fathom where he is coming from. But beyond that, his original and imaginative writing style is really not such a mystery once we get used to his quirks and stylistic habits.

I think that the reason we sometimes get tangled up in Dōgen’s writing is because we don’t hear him as a musician playing a jam, a kind of wild and innovative “Zen jazz.”

I have described Dōgen’s sense of the world as evincing a great dance, and perhaps the best way to see that dance is as the fluid forms, open expression, and creativity of jazz or modern dance moving to creative sounds.

All beings and events move and merge in lively interactions that, while often chaotic on the surface, reveal a hidden unity below. Dōgen wished to teach his students how to move with grace and

balance through that dance, and his words and writings sought to express that vision. His free dance emerged, however, from his training in classical dance forms, including traditional Mahayana Buddhism. It was not “do whatever you want” dancing, as some folks incorrectly imagine Zen to be. At heart, Dōgen was a classically trained artist and dancer honoring the refined choreography and rituals of monastic life. At the same time, he was willing to be wide-ranging, free, and experimental in his expression of those classical teachings. That is why it may be helpful to hear Dōgen’s writings as the musical voicing of his dance, and thus to think of him as a classically trained jazz musician who, for all his wild sound, never left behind the basics of musical theory and conservatory training.

A modern jazz musician like saxophonist John Coltrane, by taking the basic melodies and themes of the standard score, by bending and turning them inside out, changing the beat and going to uncharted places, squeezes amazing sounds and fresh discoveries out of the well-worn original. The thing about appreciating Coltrane and many of the other jazz greats is to know that by their doing so, each player makes his own musical expression the same as, but different from, the standard tune it is based upon. Dōgen does the same in imaginatively re-expressing ancient teachings. Sometimes with Dōgen and Coltrane it is the sound, man, and the hinted implications, more than the straight meaning. People often get tangled in Dōgen’s style because they constantly look for Dōgen’s intellectual and philosophical meaning in every phrase. They shut the book in frustration or think that Dōgen was pulling the wool over people’s eyes. However, although I believe that Dōgen *was* often trying to impress his listeners with a “hot” set of startling phrases, I don’t think that he was ever just putting on a show. He said what he meant, and meant what he *felt*. Dōgen was being true to the Buddha’s sound. With Dōgen, we have to learn to *feel* the music more than to intellectually understand the score.

It’s not just Coltrane or jazz: Picasso and the other modern visual artists took the concrete image of a table, a human face, or a guitar and, by pulling apart the pieces and reassembling them in unexpected ways, led us to discover new insights into ordinary table-ness, face-icity, and guitar-ism. Hendrix explored guitar-ism in his own ways, by



bending a Fender™ and having it do things that had never quite been done before. It is just the same for slamming poets or rappers, and modern DJs find it with a turntable and sampling old hits, spoken phrases, and random noises at a rave. T. S. Eliot and James Joyce did much the same with words, linking them together in unexpected ways and with powerful effect. (I have heard it said that Joyce did not, himself, always know what he “meant” in his own writing, but he knew that something alive was emerging.) Some 700 or so years before these modern folks, Dōgen had the equivalent approach, taking “standard” Mahayana Buddhist teachings, fanciful but traditional Buddhist images, and “samples” of quotes from well-known stories related to his intended topics, tearing them apart, and tossing all back together again, remixing them, in order to discover and uncover new feelings, sounds, implications, visions, and wisdom, all in what was often pretty wild imagery to start with!

To me, Master Dōgen was “blowing his *Shōbōgenzō*-sax” — riffing, rockin’, rollin’, ranting, and roof-raising by expressing-folding-bending-fractalizing-unfolding-straightening-teasing-releasing the “standard tunes” of the *sutras* and old *kōans*. The untrained ear can’t always make heads nor tails of the complex rhythms, flying notes, wild tempos — maybe sometimes even Dōgen himself could not grab hold of the animal he was creating — but I know that he felt what he meant, and that he knew that the creature he was fashioning had life.

Still, it would be a mistake to only listen to Dōgen’s playful sound while forgetting the basic Buddhist doctrines he was exploring. For example, in one of the earliest pieces in the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen commented on passages of the classic *Heart Sutra* that include the term *prajñā* (“wisdom” in Buddhist lingo — a profound insight into emptiness) and the realization of form as emptiness. Of these he wrote the following (additions in brackets are mine, to highlight the Buddhist teachings tossed in the mix):

When Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara [Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion] practices most profound *prajñā-pāramitā* [perfection of wisdom], the entire body manifests [a phrase apparently added by Dōgen

not found in the original] that the five aggregates [in traditional Buddhism, these are the five factors or *skandhas* whose workings are said to account for our experience of reality] are empty.

[Dōgen comments:] The five aggregates are form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. These are five instances of *prajñā*. Seeing clearly is *prajñā* itself. To expound the principle of this teaching, it is that “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” [Dōgen then adds a line not found in the original *Heart Sutra*] Form is form, emptiness is emptiness. One hundred grasses [all phenomena] are such, the multiplicity of forms is such.

Next, Dōgen references emptiness as space:

The [Indian] god Indra asks the venerable monk Subhūti, “Reverend One! When bodhisattvas, great beings, wish to study this profound *prajñā-pāramitā*, how should they study this?” Subhūti says, “[ . . . ] they should study such as space.”

Dōgen intended the addition of the phrase “the entire body” and the example of emptiness as space to interlace with the climax of the essay, a poem on form and emptiness by Dōgen’s own teacher, Master Rujing (whom Dōgen often refers to as “the Old Buddha” in a gesture of tremendous respect):

*My late master, the Old Buddha, says:  
Entire body like a mouth [of a windbell], hanging in space;  
Unconcerned that the wind is east, west, south, or north . . .*

In these short passages we find many ideas and characters of Mahayana Buddhism indispensable to understanding what Dōgen is expressing: Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, *prajñā-pāramitā*, the five aggregates, the phrase “form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” and other *Heart Sutra* references. We also find some standard Buddhist images, such as the description of phenomena as the “one hundred

grasses.” That is why a good grounding in traditional Buddhist, Mahayana, and Zen philosophy is vital to understanding Dōgen. In addition, we also benefit by knowing some Buddhist history in order to answer questions like, why does a Hindu god like Indra appear in a Buddhist text, who is Subhūti, and who was Dōgen’s master, Rujing? Once we understand these references, we can then see how Dōgen is making creative contributions to the text.

In the end, however, the truths expressed in the *Heart Sutra* and Dōgen’s commentary on it are not intended to be so much intellectually understood as “grokked” (science fiction author Robert A. Heinlein’s term for such thorough understanding — whether by intuition or empathy — that the observer merges with and is reaffirmed by that which is understood).

Dōgen does not deviate from the classic Mahayana teaching that wisdom is the clear and free experience of the total identity and interpenetration of unbounded emptiness. This emptiness, which is actually a wholeness, manifests in all of the countless things of the world, as well as in the mental faculties that create our subjective experience of that world. But once Dōgen establishes this standard Buddhist melody, he picks up his horn and lets loose. Tossing all intellectual knowledge away, we get Dōgen’s message by “digging the rhythms” — that is, the power, the feel of his words.

In another example, Dōgen wilds and re-wilds the already fantastically wild *Lotus Sutra*. In a famous scene in the text, a *stupa* (a traditional pavilion or tower containing the ashes or relics of a Buddha or other great Ancestor) thousands of miles tall emerges from the ground and comes to rest in midair. Buddha Śākyamuni sees that another Buddha, named Abundant Treasures, is sitting inside, and the two Buddhas share a seat within the tower and preach together. In an astonishing kind of metaphysical loop, all this is depicted as occurring in the sky over Vulture Peak, the Indian sacred site where the *Lotus Sutra* is being preached: a scene of the preaching of the very book that contains within it the preaching scene. It is already a pretty wild vision before Dōgen even sets to work on it. Here is the original:

At this time, before the Buddha, a stupa of seven treasures [gold, silver, pearl, etc.], five hundred

*yojanas* in height and two hundred and fifty *yojanas* in length and breadth, sprang up from the earth and abided in the sky . . . When that Buddha [Abundant Treasures] was practicing as a bodhisattva in the past, he deeply vowed: “After I have realized Buddhahood and died, if anywhere in the ten directions there is any place where the *Lotus Sutra* is being preached, my stupa shall spring out and appear in that place so that I may hear the sutra’s preaching.”

In a *Shōbōgenzō* essay called “Hokke-Ten-Hokke” (The Flower of Dharma Turns the Flower of Dharma), Dōgen takes this scene, flips it around, stirs it up, and brings it home. The expression “turning the flower of *Dharma*” can mean a Buddha’s preaching of the Dharma, or Buddhist truth, which turning by the Buddha’s flowery tongue expresses the whole beautiful turning universe that is itself like a flower turning:

[Dōgen says:] There is the turning of the flower of Dharma in the appearance “before the Buddha” of the “treasure stupa,” which is a “height of five hundred *yojanas*.” There is the turning of the flower of Dharma that is the “Buddha sitting inside the stupa,” whose breadth is “two hundred and fifty *yojanas*.” There is a turning of the flower of Dharma by springing forth from the earth and abiding in the earth, whereby mind is without obstructions and matter is without limits. There is the turning of the flower of Dharma in springing out of the sky and abiding in the earth, which is limited by the eyes and limited by the body.

Vulture Peak is within the stupa, and the treasure stupa is on Vulture Peak. The treasure stupa is a stupa of treasure abiding in space, and space opens space for the treasure stupa. The timeless Buddha within the stupa shares a seat with the Buddha of Vulture Peak, and the Buddha of Vulture Peak shares the realization of the Buddha within the stupa. When the Buddha of

Vulture Peak experiences this state within the stupa together with body, mind, and all things, he also enters into the state of the turning of the flower of Dharma. [. . .] This “within the stupa,” “before the Buddha,” “the treasure stupa,” and “space” are not limited to Vulture Peak; they are not limited to the realm of phenomena; they are not limited to some halfway stage; neither are they the whole world. Nor are they matters of some fixed “place in the Dharma.” They are simply “non-thinking.”

The sacred all and everything of this scene and all reality, so thoroughly interconnected and interflowing, every bit pouring in and out of every bit, is the turning of the flower of the Buddha’s teaching, the whole universe turning, sometimes experienced in the world of restrictions and sometimes unrestricted. And all of it is the “non-thinking” (*hi-shiryō*) of *zazen*. (This reference is the same one that Dōgen often employs to describe the state of mind in which “thinking-not-thinking” is “non-thinking” — a state of wholeness and clarity in which we are untangled from thoughts in *zazen*.)

Sometimes we can clearly make out the original melody Dōgen was working with — a sutra passage, a poem, an old *kōan*. At other times, we can barely do so, for it is not always the case that Dōgen was trying to make a point through reasoned words, but that he wanted to communicate the sound and emotion of the music.

I think there are many passages — like Dōgen’s above commentary on the *Lotus Sutra* — where even he did not know the terrain to which the sound had carried him or what it meant in intellectual terms. I will go so far as to say that perhaps from time to time he backed himself into a musical corner, so that he was not always sure where he had ended up or how to get out of that spot — except by jumping in deeper. For some reason we assume that every word Dōgen wrote has an intellectually concrete meaning, as opposed to it merely expressing a *feeling* of truth. Nonetheless, I believe that Dōgen profoundly recognized the message that these true feelings evoked.

## And Thus This Book

In the pages that follow I will introduce that standard “songbook” of Mahayana Buddhism where it is appropriate to understand the source of Dōgen’s teachings, and also point out where I think he was just jammin’ on his horn. In many places I have tried to experiment, offering my interpretation of Dōgen’s words, seeking to walk the fine line between explaining Dōgen’s doctrinal ideas and conveying the simple feeling I think he was shooting for.

As I have mentioned, some writers and Dōgen scholars take a highly philosophical approach to understanding his teachings, and such explanations sometimes run the risk of becoming too analytical, turning the subtleties of Dōgen’s writing and speaking style into intellectual ideas that are excessively complex and tangled. On the other hand, some writers, coming from a worshipful and religious attitude, have tried to turn Dōgen into a mysterious oracle whose strange proclamations can only be understood by those who have attained some otherworldly, transcendent enlightenment. Dōgen’s harder passages are portrayed as cryptic, even magical words that cannot be grasped by the ordinary or unenlightened mind. I don’t agree. There is a logic to Dōgen. His teachings derive from traditional Mahayana sources such as the Perfection of Wisdom literature and Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka philosophy, which explores the implications of the fact that all phenomena are empty of independent self-existence; the *Huayan* or *Flower Garland Sutra* teachings, which state that all phenomena flow and interpenetrate each other and the totality of reality; sutras like the *Lotus Sutra* and other texts that offer a variety of teachings and parables that became seeds for Dōgen’s inspiration; perspectives on Buddha Nature and original enlightenment, which state that all of us sentient beings are already Buddha, already enlightened — although our ignorance and unskillful behavior keeps this fact hidden from us; and much more. For that reason, “Dōgen logic” is rather different from our ordinary, common-sense way of experiencing the world. Yet it is a logic nonetheless, and it can be explained in generally understandable terms even to people new to Buddhist teachings.

For example, in our ordinary experience of life, a mountain is not a cup of tea, and neither a mountain nor a cup of tea are you or me. A

is not B, and neither one is C nor D. However, for Mahayana teachers like Dōgen, mountains are mountains and also cups of tea. Tiny teacups hold great mountains within, as well as the whole world and all of time. Mountains quench our thirst, mountains walk and preach the Dharma, and mountains are also other faces of you and me. It is not merely that our ordinary eyes might see a nearby mountain reflected on the liquid inside a cup, or painted on its side, or reflected like a kaleidoscope in each poured drop, but that the mountain and the whole universe is truly poured and held in every drop of tea to be tasted, and is contained in the cup itself. The teacup, though held in our hands, is also huge, boundless, as big as a mountain and the whole universe. The whole universe is just a great vessel which is also the vessel in our hands — a vessel that cradles our hands as we cradle it. (If this is hard to get your mind around, it is fine to approach it in a poetic sense until, on the zazen cushion, one can actually realize such truths.)

When we drink tea, as it enters our mouth and we taste it on our tongue and it merges with our body, we too enter the tea, are tasted by and merge with it. Likewise, in drinking tea we enter the mountains and the whole universe. The tea swallows us as we swallow the tea, and the mountain/universe drinks us as we drink the mountain/universe — all in the simple action of tasting a cup of tea. The tea steps all time and space as you steep tea; the mountain pours the universe as the universe moves with your hands when pouring a cup. Each drop of tea, each inch of the mountain or atom of the universe glitters as a unique and precious jewel, each unique and whole unto itself, yet each is also the all. That is the kind of world vision that Dōgen is usually expressing.

This is why many translators rightly declare that it is hard to render Dōgen into English or other languages. One can trace his grammar fairly closely but then end up losing or stepping over much of his wit with homonyms and synonyms, intentionally misread Chinese characters, newly created words, and scrambled sentences, imaginatively reinterpreted classic quotes, puns, and double-triple-quadruple entendres, fancy rhythms, and wild poetic riffs. One also struggles to identify the many quips, story citations, and quotes of well-known or obscure texts — some now forgotten — that were

*image  
not  
available*



*image  
not  
available*

his body in order to find freedom. But then, one day, after all those many years of effort, the Buddha-to-be sat cross-legged under a tree. He saw the simplicity and completeness of the morning star rising naturally on the distant horizon and gave up all fighting, striving, and resistance. He realized that the star, the world, and himself were just what they were, whole and complete. In that moment, he was freed of the need to fight or to run toward his desires and away from his aversions. He put aside all judgments and accepted the world on its own terms. In doing so, the hard borders and feelings of separation and alienation between him and all of life softened and dropped away. Thus he experienced an abiding wholeness and peace. He remained in this world with all its divisions, complications and troubles, yet also saw through them into wholeness.

We human beings have forgotten how to simply sit still, how to be whole and content while doing such a plain thing. Trees just stand, mountains sit still, even my little cat knows how to rest when she rests. Instead, we always run around trying to fill the holes in our hearts. We buy things, or we look for sex and love, success or fame, and other temporary distractions from our pain. Shikantaza, as “just sitting,” teaches us to experience life in that unadulterated way.

Shikantaza is so radically “goalless,” that it is often said to not be a method of meditation. So what is the “non-method” of shikantaza? There are several vital points:

## The Basics and the Missing Ingredient

Most experienced modern teachers of shikantaza agree on the basic points: you should sit in the lotus posture (or in some other stable posture such as Burmese, kneeling in *seiza*, or in a chair, as many modern students do), focus on the breath or the body as a place to rest the attention, or just be “openly aware” by letting your thoughts flow without grabbing onto them. While sitting in shikantaza, do not judge the experience of sitting or the circumstances you find yourself in. If you are caught in trains of thought, return to the breath, or the posture, or a feeling of spaciousness.

Sit daily for ten, twenty, thirty minutes or longer, but without any objective or need for reward. Do not seek special states of deep

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