

# Japanese Environmental Philosophy

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## CHAPTER 4 | Kūkai and Dōgen as Exemplars of Ecological Engagement

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AT A TIME when the world is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis in the form of human-caused global warming, most politicians in the developed nations (especially, and crucially, in the United States) seem to be unable or unwilling to take action to prevent disastrous consequences for millions of people (for the most part in the developing world). One factor behind this passivity is that the general public is disinclined to believe the findings and predictions of the climate sciences, and is happier to continue with “business as usual” in the hope that, if anything is in fact going wrong, some new technology will be able to set it right.

There are many reasons (psychological, social, and political) for this pathological behavior, but it ultimately stems from a particular basic conception of the human relationship to nature that is central to anthropocentric traditions of thought in the West, and which understands the human being as separate from, and superior to, all other beings in the natural world. Traditional East Asian understandings of this relationship are quite different and relatively unanthropocentric, especially as exemplified in the ideas of Chinese Daoism and Japanese Buddhism—even though these have now been to a large extent replaced by Western conceptions in present-day China and Japan. Nevertheless, these ideas and understandings are experientially accessible to any contemporary person who has full contact with the natural world, regardless of which tradition that person stands in.

The focus of this chapter is on the human-nature relation that we find in the philosophies of Kūkai (空海, Kōbō Daishi, 774–835) and Dōgen (道元, 1200–1253), from whom we can learn a great deal that is beneficial in the context of our current environmental predicament.<sup>1</sup> The ideas of

both thinkers are firmly rooted in practice (*shugyō* 修行), and especially bodily or somatic practice, designed to bring about a transformation of experience. The argument is not that we should appropriate their conceptions of nature in order to solve our environmental problems; rather, since they both practice “philosophy as a way of life,” I am suggesting that we can learn from the practices they advocate in the light of what they say about natural phenomena—and would benefit from emulating their ways of engaging the world ecologically.

Two ideas central to Japanese Buddhism (in part thanks to Kūkai and Dōgen) merit a brief discussion at the outset, since they are the source of some revealing misunderstandings, which will be dealt with in the last section. These are *hongaku* (本覺), usually translated as “original enlightenment,” and *bussō* (仏性) or “Buddha-nature.” The idea of original enlightenment, or “radical awakenedness,” is implied by the basic idea in Mahayana Buddhism that “form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form” (the *Heart Sutra*), or that “nirvana is not different from samsara” (Nāgārjuna). Śākyamuni Buddha realized that the unsatisfactory condition of existence derives from ignorance, that things don’t go well because our experience is distorted by our desires and cravings, and that it’s possible to become aware of this distortion and thereby clarify our experience. This insight becomes radicalized in the Mahayana tradition into the realization that there’s no need to transcend the world of samsara to the other shore, since we’ve been standing on it right here all along, but without realizing it. This shift focuses our attention on this present existence as the only one, and on affirming and working to improve it. *Hongaku* thus means that we can awaken to the condition that we’ve always been in, but unawares, and also that *any* human being—not just the saint or the bodhisattva—may attain enlightenment.

However, further consideration of the central Buddhist doctrines of *anatman* (no-self) and *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent arising) led Mahayana thinkers to question the assumption that only humans have the capacity for enlightenment, or “Buddha-nature.” What one realizes, after all, is that the idea of the self is illusory and that one is what one is, or becomes what one becomes, only in—and as—an infinitely complex network of interconnections. This is the context for the bodhisattva’s vow to realize enlightenment “for the sake of all sentient beings.” The term *hongaku* (or its Chinese precursor, *benjue* 本覺) makes its first significant appearance in a Chinese text from the sixth century, the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*.<sup>2</sup> When Buddhism was transplanted from India to China, some thinkers there began to ask—no doubt under the influence of Daoist

ideas—whether the extension of *hongaku* to include “all sentient beings” was sufficient. Jizang, who founded the Chinese Madhyamaka (Sanlun, or “Three Treatise”) school at the end of the sixth century CE, was the first to speak of the “attainment of buddhahood by plants and trees.”<sup>3</sup> Some two hundred years later the Tiantai patriarch Zhanran used the term *Buddha-nature* in arguing that not only plants, trees, and earth but even particles of dust are originally enlightened.<sup>4</sup>

When Buddhist ideas from China began to arrive in Japan, they found fertile ground prepared by the indigenous religion of Shinto, according to which the natural world and human beings are equally offspring of the divine. In Shinto the whole world is understood to be inhabited by *kami* (神), which include not only divine spirits and spirits of the ancestors but also any phenomena that occasion awe or reverence: the sun, wind, thunder, lightning, rain, mountains, rivers, trees, and rocks. Such an atmosphere was naturally receptive to the idea that the earth and plants participate in Buddha-nature. As William LaFleur has pointed out, whereas the Chinese proponents of the extension of *hongaku* to all beings, sentient and nonsentient, were concerned primarily with “the logic of Mahayana universalism,” the Japanese philosophers who adopted the idea were more interested in the special role played by the natural world in the Buddhist concern with enlightenment. Although the first Japanese thinker to use the phrase *mokuseki busshō* (“Buddha-nature of trees and rocks”) was apparently Saichō, founder of the Tendai school, the first to make the ideas of *hongaku* and the buddhahood of all phenomena central to his thought was Kūkai.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4.1. Kūkai on Nature as Sermon and Scripture

Kūkai’s best-known idea is probably *sokushin jōbutsu* (即身成佛), the idea (predicated on *hongaku*) that it’s possible to attain enlightenment in this present body—by contrast with earlier Buddhist views that it can be achieved only after many lifetimes. What one realizes through the somatic practices that Kūkai recommends for this endeavor has to do with a larger body belonging to Dainichi Nyorai (大日如来, the Great Sun Buddha: Mahāvairocana in Sanskrit), the Dharmakāya or cosmic embodiment of the Buddha. In his “Introduction to the Mahāvairocana Sutra,” Kūkai writes that “Mahāvairocana is the One whose own nature is the Dharmakāya . . . which is intrinsic and original enlightenment.”<sup>6</sup> Kūkai’s second great idea, *hosshin seppō* (法身說法), means that Dainichi as the

Dharmakāya is constantly engaged in expounding the Buddhist teachings, or dharma. This contrasts with the traditional understanding of the cosmic embodiment of the Buddha as “formless and imageless, and totally beyond verbalization and conceptualization.”<sup>7</sup> It also exemplifies one of Kūkai’s major innovations in the development of Buddhist doctrine, which was to bring the idea of the Dharmakāya “down to earth” by identifying what had been customarily regarded as the formless and imageless Absolute with the actual world we presently inhabit.

If we think about what it means for Kūkai to say in the Heian period Japan that all phenomena (dharmas) are expounding the dharma, we realize that by far the greater part of this elucidation is being done by natural phenomena. After all, the extent of the human imprint on the natural environment was far smaller then than it is now, and Kūkai pursued the earlier phases of his thinking, during the third decade of his life, while living a nomadic existence in the mountains of his native Shikoku. And in a poem written much later, explaining his decision to remain in the retreat he established up in the Kōga mountains (in what is now Wakayama Prefecture), he writes:

I have never tired of watching the pine trees and the rocks at Mt. Kōya;  
The limpid stream of the mountain is the source of my inexhaustible  
joy.<sup>8</sup>

The world, for Kūkai, is constantly creating itself through the Five Great Processes (*godai* 五大) of earth, water, fire, wind, and space interacting with each other and with a sixth process, awareness—so that he also speaks of the Six Great Processes constituting the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> At one point he discusses the Buddha-nature of vegetation in this cosmological context:

The explanation of the buddhahood of insentient trees and plants is as follows: the Dharmakāya consists of the Five Great Processes within which space and plants and trees [*sōmoku*] are included. Both this space and these plants and trees are the Dharmakāya. Even though with the physical eye one might see the coarse form of plants and trees, it is with the buddha-eye that the subtle color can be seen. Therefore, without any alteration in what they are in themselves trees and plants may unobjectionably be referred to as buddha[-nature].<sup>10</sup>

The awakened nature of vegetation isn’t going to be clear to the ordinary eye, but requires practice in a different kind of seeing, through the

“buddha-eye.” In a poetic excursus in his essay “On the Meanings of the Word *Hūm*” (*Unji gi*), Kūkai twice alludes to the awakened nature of vegetation (*sōmoku*):

If trees and plants are to attain enlightenment,  
Why not those who are endowed with feelings? . . .  
If plants and trees were devoid of buddhahood,  
Waves would then be without wetness.<sup>11</sup>

When the cosmic embodiment of the Buddha preaches the dharma, this takes place through both sound (as in a sermon) and signs (as in a scripture). Indeed, for Kūkai reality consists of nothing but sounds and signs, as he explains in his treatise “The Meaning of Sound, Sign, Reality” (*Shōji jissō gi*), where he describes the process whereby sounds become signs and signs become things.

Taking the elucidation of the teachings by sound first: this means on the one hand sounds we can ordinarily hear, such as the wind blowing through the grass, the crashing of waves on the shore, the roaring of a forest fire, the song of birds, and the cries of mammals. Even for the uninitiated among us, such sounds can seem, if we attend to them with an open mind, in some way meaningful (though we may have no idea what it is that they mean). On the other hand, Kūkai is talking about sounds that are ordinarily inaudible: vibrations emanating from the sun, the resonances of clouds, and the voices of rocks. The key to understanding this enigmatic idea is his notion of *sanmitsu* (三密), the “Three Mysteries” or (in the more illuminating translation suggested by Thomas Kasulis) the “Three Intimacies.”<sup>12</sup> This triad is based on the traditional Buddhist conception of the individual as consisting of “body, speech, and mind,” and working karmically as “acting, speaking, and thinking.” Corresponding to these three aspects of the individual are three aspects of Dainichi as the cosmic Buddha: the sounds of the world as his speech, the signs of the world as images of his thought, and the things of the world as his body. Although Kūkai emphasizes that Dainichi’s elucidation of the Buddhist teachings is “for his own enjoyment” and thereby a communication “between the Buddha and the Buddha,” it is also true that “he deigns to let it be known to us.”<sup>13</sup> Insofar as Dainichi preaches the Buddha-dharma with his voice, through the sounds of the cosmos, the student of Shingon will be able, by chanting mantras, to attune his or her hearing to the cosmic resonances and thereby understand the sermon.

Just as every phenomenon is basically a vibration that we can learn to hear “with the third ear,” as it were, so everything is also a sign inscribed in the great scripture that is the world. As Kūkai writes in one of his longer poems:

Being painted by brushes of mountains, by ink of oceans,  
Heaven and earth are the bindings of a sutra revealing  
the Truth.  
Reflected in a dot are all things in the universe;  
Contained in the data of senses and mind is the sacred book.  
It is open or closed depending on how we look at it;  
Both [Dainichi’s] silence and His eloquence make incisive tongues  
numb.<sup>14</sup>

This sutra bound by heaven and earth won’t be readable by the uninitiated—even though striations on rocks or patterns in water or vegetation may appear, to an open mind, to mean something. A full reading of the world’s signs will require the Shingon practices of visualizing mandalas and settling the mind in meditation (*samādhi*)—an opening of the third eye, as it were—to be comprehensible.

Finally, to experience all things as constituting Dainichi’s body, the somatic practice of mudras is necessary. As Kūkai puts it, in “Attaining Enlightenment in this Present Body”:

If there is a Shingon student who reflects well upon the meaning of the Three Mysteries, makes mudras, recites mantras, and allows his mind to abide in the state of *samādhi*, then, through grace, his three mysteries will be united with the Three Mysteries [of the Dharmakāya Buddha].<sup>15</sup>

These three kinds of practice allow one to realize one’s participation as body, speech, and mind in the body, speech, and mind of the cosmos—and thereby experience the Dharmakāya elucidating the dharma.

If we ask, in the case of natural phenomena, what is to be learned from them, which aspects of the Buddha-dharma they teach, we find that Kūkai gives no explicit answer. But presumably they would include the impermanence of all things, the interdependence of their arising and perishing, the necessity for limits, the infinity of perspectives in the world, and the beauty of natural and spontaneous unfolding. In any case, insofar as the world is what Kūkai calls the “wondrous” and “fulfilled” body of the cosmic Buddha, it is worthy of our reverence and respect.<sup>16</sup> And insofar as

natural phenomena are delivering sermons and scriptures in the primordial natural language, they are worthy of our careful attention as valuable sources of understanding. Naturally, as beings that have to eat and find shelter and protection from the world's dangers, we are going to have to consume vegetation at the very least, even though this goes against the Buddhist precept against killing. But it would seem that, for Kūkai (and in line with the Buddhist precepts), to kill capriciously, or exploit what we call “natural resources” unnecessarily, would be to desecrate the body of the Buddha and destroy opportunities for learning and understanding.

Some difficult ecological questions arise, however, when it comes to animal life that threatens humans (whether saber-toothed tigers or deadly microbes): Is it good to wipe out dangerous predators in order to enhance the safety of human beings? Or to exterminate lethal viruses and bacilli to the extent that we can? What is more, as mentioned earlier, Kūkai understands the Dharmakāya as all phenomena, which would include not just things of nature but also things made by humans. Thus, not only temples and ritual instruments but also secular constructions and artifacts would be part of the cosmic body of the Buddha and engage in preaching the dharma. If we can look to Kūkai as a guide for ecological behavior, we might wonder what his attitude would be toward such things as chemical pollution and plutonium waste. Are these human-made products also worthy of our reverence and respect? Or on what grounds, by contrast, might we want to eliminate them? But let us postpone answering these questions until after the discussion of Dōgen's ideas, since a consideration of those will prompt similar questions.

## 4.2. Preparing Food and Sailing Boats

Moving from the ninth century to the thirteenth, and from Shingon Buddhism to the beginnings of the Sōtō school of Zen, we find that Dōgen maintains Kūkai's emphasis on the centrality of somatic practices, and has similar ideas about the world as the body of the Buddha. Just as for Kūkai there is a distinction without a difference between body and mind (since the five processes comprising the physical world are always interfused with mind, or awareness), so in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* (*Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye*) the distinctions between body and mind, and between self and world, are consistently minimized. Whereas philosophical texts that talk of, and speak only to, the mind tend to draw us away from the body into a realm of abstraction, his emphasis on the body connects us to the

natural world in which it participates. If so many people in today's world appear unfazed by the prospect of our destroying the natural environment on which we depend, the reason may be that they subscribe to some kind of mind-body dichotomy, and identify themselves with an immortal soul rather than a body destined for death. By contrast, Dōgen advocates the nonduality of body and mind, which encourages the concomitant realization of the intimacy between self and world, and by emphasizing our embodiment he recalls our utter dependence on the well-being of the natural world for our own well-being.

Another factor behind our environmental predicament is our poor relationship with *things*, insofar as rampant consumerism encourages using things up—thereby promoting a certain disregard for them. Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* is unique among the masterpieces of world philosophy in devoting chapters to the preparing and eating of food, as well as to the making, washing, and wearing of clothes, and the proper care of eating bowls (which he calls “the body and mind of buddha ancestors”).<sup>17</sup> Careful attention to the things we handle on a daily basis leads, for Dōgen, to care for the wider environment in which we live. When, in “Recommending Zazen to All People,” Dōgen says, “Do not try to become a buddha,” he is affirming the oneness of “practice and realization”—and thereby highlighting the limitations of the “means-ends” schema that structures ordinary experience.<sup>18</sup> When we stop discriminating between the fulfilling ends we aim at and the burdensome “chores” we are required to perform in order to attain those ends, preparing meals (for example) becomes just as important as eating them: both activities can be consummate expressions of full awakening. Dōgen therefore advises monks who work in temple kitchens to use the polite forms of language when referring to meals and their ingredients: “Use honorific forms of verbs for describing how to handle rice, vegetables; salt, and soy sauce; do not use plain language for this.”<sup>19</sup> He also stresses the importance of treating the kitchen utensils as well as the ingredients with the utmost care and respect:

Put what is suited to a high place in a high place, and what belongs in a low place in a low place. Those things that are in a high place will be settled there; those that are suited to be in a low place will be settled there. Select chopsticks, spoons, and other utensils with equal care, examine them with sincerity, and handle them skillfully.<sup>20</sup>

Gratitude and reverence for what is given us to eat, and for what we use to prepare and ingest our food, dictate that we take care to keep the

kitchen clean and well ordered. But the order doesn't derive from an idea in the head of the cook, but rather from careful attention to suitabilities suggested by the things themselves. This allows us to situate the utensils so they may be settled and thus less likely to fall down or get damaged. And once we get down to cooking, we find that the creative interplay between activity, utensils and ingredients is a paradigm case of what Dōgen calls "turning things while being turned by things."<sup>21</sup> For his ideal of fully engaged activity, or total dynamic functioning (*zenki* 全機), full attention is crucial—for a sense of both how things are turning so that we can align ourselves aright, and how our turning is in turn affecting what is going on.

When it comes to eating, the activity that sustains all human life, the practice becomes all the more important. Dōgen begins an exposition of regulations for the serving and eating of meals in monasteries (*Fushuku hampō*) by citing a line from the *Vimalakirti Sutra*: "When we are one with the food we eat, we are one with the whole universe."<sup>22</sup> From this it follows, Dōgen says, that food is also the dharma and the Buddha. After a thousand or so words on how monks are to enter the hall, where the various monastery officials are to sit, and on how and where the monks are to sit down and arrange their robes, Dōgen finally gets to the regulations concerning the bowls and utensils.

In order to set out the bowls one must first make *gasshō*, untie the knot on the bowl cover and fold the dishcloth to an unobtrusive size, twice crosswise and thrice lengthwise, placing it, together with the chopstick bag, just in front of the knees. Spread the pure napkin over the knees and put the dishcloth, with the chopstick bag on top of it, under the napkin.

The cover is then unfolded and the farther end is allowed to fall over the edge of the tan, the other three corners being turned under to make a pad for the bowls to be placed upon. The lacquered-paper table-top is taken in both hands, the under-fold being held in the right hand and the top one in the left, and is unfolded as if to cover the bowls.

While holding it in the right hand, take the bowls with the left and place them in the centre of the left end of this table-top, thereafter taking them out from the large one separately, in order, beginning with the smallest. Only the ball of the thumb of each hand is used for removing them so as to prevent any clattering.<sup>23</sup>

The practice of this ritual at every mealtime inculcates care and reverence for the things that accompany this central necessity of human existence.

While we are learning, it obliges us to become acutely aware of how we are handling these things, and of the joy, when the food is served, of harmonious interaction with others. Once the ritual has been incorporated and made “second nature,” the actions flow spontaneously—so that it’s not that a subject of consciousness uses the body to unfold the lacquered paper, but rather that my hands guide the papers unfolding and help it on its way to where it needs to be. In the course of these activities there is ample opportunity to appreciate that the food we eat is “the dharma and the Buddha.”

Another discussion of the use of artifacts, in the chapter on “Total Functioning,” broadens the context of our activity to cosmic dimensions. Dōgen invokes as his prime example a product of basic technology:

Life is just like sailing in a boat. You raise the sails and you steer. Although you maneuver the sail and the pole, the boat carries you, and without the boat you couldn’t sail. But you sail the boat, and your sailing makes the boat what it is. Investigate a moment such as this. At just such a moment, there is nothing but the world of the boat.<sup>24</sup>

The sailboat is the consummate nature-friendly product of technology, one that—by inserting a human artifact (in the form of sails) into the interplay of the powers of heaven and earth—makes use of natural forces without abusing them or using them up. Since winds are by nature variable, a sailboat functions properly only if it can also be propelled by human action mediated through a pole or oars. And yet these implements only work in conjunction with a boat. The activity of sailing is thus another prime example of “turning things while being turned by things.”

When you sail in a boat, your body, mind, and environs together are the dynamic functioning of the boat. The entire earth and the entire sky are both the dynamic functioning of the boat. Thus, life is nothing but you; you are nothing but life.

Regarded from our customary anthropocentric perspective, a boat, as something made by human beings, is in our world, in my world, but lacks a world of its own; whereas for Dōgen the context of total functioning allows the world to be construed by any particular focus of energy, or pivot of force, or dynamic function within it.<sup>25</sup>

### 4.3. Dōgen on Landscape as Scripture and Sermon

Dōgen quotes Śākyamuni Buddha's saying, "When the morning star appeared, I attained the way simultaneously with all sentient beings and the great earth," and takes this as a ground for holding that the earth and all that it produces engages in enlightened activity (Buddha-nature) and thereby preaches the dharma.<sup>26</sup> In one of his earliest works, "On the Endeavour of the Way," he writes:

Earth, grass, trees, walls, tiles, and pebbles in the world of phenomena in the ten directions all engage in Buddha activity. . . . Grasses, trees, and lands that are embraced by this way of transformation [the *samādhi* of zazen] together radiate a great light and endlessly expound the inconceivable, profound dharma. Grass, trees, and walls bring forth the teaching to all beings, including common people and sages; all beings in response extend this dharma to grass, trees, and walls.<sup>27</sup>

Again we can see Dōgen move from the interconnection of practice and realization on the part of all phenomena to the ideal of total dynamism as exemplified in zazen.

Two fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō* in particular, "Voices of the Valleys, Shapes of the Mountains" and "Mountains and Waters as Sutras," echo Kūkai's idea of *hosshin seppō* in showing that the natural world can be experienced and understood as a spoken and written elucidation of the Buddhist teachings.

"Mountains and Waters as Sutras" is one of the most profound and poetic chapters in the *Shōbōgenzō*.<sup>28</sup> Its main thrust is summed up in these admonitions: "Do not view mountains from the standard of human thought," and "Do not foolishly suppose that what we see as water is used as water by all other beings. . . . You should not be limited to human views when you see water."<sup>29</sup> While there is a brief allusion to words of wisdom being inscribed "on trees and rocks, on fields and villages," the main aim of this talk is to prepare the listener for reading landscape (*sansui*, "mountains waters") as a scripture rather than to argue that it is expounding the dharma. Such a reading is possible only if we abandon our customary anthropocentric way of regarding mountains and waters as insentient beings. Only then can we appreciate that, as the opening sentence puts it, "mountains and waters right now actualize the ancient buddha expression."<sup>30</sup>

Dōgen goes on to quote a Zen master's saying, "The green mountains are always walking." He urges his listeners not to doubt that mountains can

walk, “even though it does not look the same as human walking.” If we think about our actual experience of walking in the mountains, we realize that when we walk, the mountains appear to move, and when we stop they appear to stop moving—unless of course we turn our head, in which case they move again. What is immediately given in the experience of walking are mountains in motion; but because we (think we) know that mountains don’t really move, we construe them mentally as standing still. But that is a prejudice of thought and not our actual experience. Moreover, contemporary geologists tell us that mountains do indeed move, only too slowly for the human eye to perceive.

But Dōgen wants to make another, more significant point, when he writes:

“In the mountains” means the blossoming of the entire world. People outside the mountains do not notice or understand the mountain’s walking. Those without eyes to see mountains cannot notice, understand, see, or hear this reality.<sup>31</sup>

When he says that the blossoming of the entire world is *sanchū* (山中), “in the mountains,” Dōgen is talking not only about the experience of being up among mountains but also about experiencing from *within* the heart of the mountains themselves. Everyday experience of mountains is based on how they appear to human beings, and as long as we maintain our anthropocentric standpoint that’s all we get: how they appear to us, rather than how they are “in themselves.” We need to go beyond “merely looking through a bamboo pipe at a corner of the sky” and open up to a broader view of the world.<sup>32</sup> Dōgen helps us do this by going on to talk about waters.

Indian Buddhist thinkers had used the image of water, as the source and sustainer of life, to elaborate a perspectivism based on karmic conditioning. A philosopher from the sixth century, Asvabhāva, formulated the “four views on water,” alluding to four of the Six Realms of *samsara*: celestial beings, humans, hungry ghosts, and fish all regard water differently because of their different karma and the different realms they inhabit. Dōgen elaborates a radical perspectivism based on this traditional idea, in which he invites the reader to entertain the perspectives of a variety of different beings.<sup>33</sup> This leads to the realization that each particular phenomenon, occupying a unique locus in the complex web of interrelations that is the world, construes the world while abiding in its own dharma-position (*jū hō i* 住法位). If, then, we can get ourselves into the

“dharma-position” of a mountain, or a body of water, this will allow us to read them as letters in a sutra.

Just as for Kūkai the inscription of the teachings “by brushes of mountains and ink of oceans” makes the world a sutra, so Dōgen insists that sutras are more than ancient texts and scrolls containing written characters. In the chapter “Buddha Sutras” (*Bukkyō*) he writes:

The sutras are the entire world of the ten directions itself. There is no moment or place that is not sutras. . . . The sutras are written in letters of heavenly beings, human beings, animals; fighting spirits, one hundred grasses, or ten thousand trees.<sup>34</sup>

Since the words and letters of plants and animals differ from those employed by humans, they constitute “natural language” in the deeply literal sense.

Like “Mountains and Waters,” “Voices of the Valleys” begins with an encouragement to go beyond anthropocentrism, recommending “slipping out of your old skin and not being constrained by past views” so as to attain “experience beyond the realm of human thinking.”<sup>35</sup> Dōgen then discusses some lines from a poem by the eleventh-century Chinese poet Su Dongpo (SU Shi), who became enlightened after hearing the sounds of a valley stream one night:

Valley sounds are the long, broad tongue [of the  
Buddha],  
Mountain shapes are the unconditioned body.  
Eighty-four thousand verses are heard through the night,  
What can I say about this in the future?

On seeing this verse, [Zen master] Changzong approved his understanding. . . . Dongpo had this awakening soon after he heard Changzong talk about insentient beings preaching the Dharma.<sup>36</sup>

Instead of *hosshin seppō*, Dōgen uses the expression *mujō seppō*, which means that even insentient beings (*mujō* 無情) expound the Buddhist teachings. He goes on to discuss two other cases of sudden enlightenment in natural settings. A monk named Xiangyan, after practicing for many years, built himself a hut in the mountains and planted bamboo beside it “for company.” One day, he was sweeping the path when a pebble flew up and struck a bamboo, triggering instant awakening. Another monk,

Lingyun, who had practiced for thirty years, went into the mountains, and “on seeing peach blossoms in full bloom by a distant village he was suddenly awakened.”<sup>37</sup> As Dōgen remarks, there are many such stories in the Zen tradition; and while some of them involve artifacts such as the broom Xiangyan was using, these are all made of natural materials. Working with today’s tools is less likely to conduce to satori: the roar of a motorized leaf-blower would render the sound of a pebble striking bamboo inaudible.

#### 4.4. Shallow Readings, Deeper Ecology

Dōgen has not been well treated in recent discussions of ecology. In the course of borrowing some Zen Buddhist ideas from him, the deep ecology movement, unfortunately, missed the point—in a way that exposed his ideas to subsequent and misguided criticism, which in turn mistook what is at stake. The mistakes are, however, instructive.

Deep ecology promotes an “ultimate norm” of “biocentric equality,” which evidences its narrower focus as compared with Zen, where the so-called inorganic world of mountains and waters is as worthy of reverence as the vegetal and animal realms.<sup>38</sup> The principle, or “intuition,” of biocentric equality is based on the idea that “all nature has intrinsic worth” and states that “all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and to reach their own individual forms of unfolding and self-realization.”<sup>39</sup> Peter Harvey’s paraphrase of Dōgen’s idea of Buddha-nature comes perilously close to this formulation: “Each aspect of nature has an intrinsic value as part of ultimate reality, and to let go of oneself in full awareness of the sound of the rain or the cry of a monkey is to fathom this in a moment of non-dual awareness.”<sup>40</sup> But to adopt the deep ecology principle as an ultimate norm would mean abandoning the work of human culture altogether: if, on discovering the tubercle bacillus, we had upheld its equal right to live and flourish, tuberculosis would have decimated our best artists long ago. And there are numerous viruses that, if given encouragement to “reach their own individual form of unfolding and self-realization,” would bring the human race to a gruesome finish in very short order.

Whether or not influenced by the deep ecology reading, other scholars have argued more recently that Zen Buddhist ideas aren’t of much help when dealing with environmental problems because they entail not only acceptance, but even celebration, of the all-devouring power of radical

impermanence.<sup>41</sup> In a brief but incisive essay, Yuriko Saitō calls into question “the alleged Japanese love of nature” by examining its three “conceptual bases,” and finds these lacking in their ability to “engender an ecologically desirable attitude” toward the natural world.<sup>42</sup> She argues that the attitude of *mono no aware* (“the pathos of things”) that has informed so much of Japanese culture is too fatalistic to promote salutary ecological awareness, pointing out that deforestation or pollution can on this view be accepted as yet another instance of transience.<sup>43</sup> This is true, but let us focus on the role of impermanence, as understood in Zen, which provides Saitō’s third basis for the love of nature.

“As respectful of and sensitive to nature’s aesthetic aspect as [Zen Buddhism] might be,” she writes, “it still does not contain within it a force necessary to condemn and fight the human abuse of nature.” The reason for this has to do with Dōgen’s insistence that “impermanence is itself Buddha-nature.”<sup>44</sup> Saitō continues: “If everything is Buddha-nature because of impermanence, strip-mined mountains and polluted rivers must be considered as manifesting Buddha-nature as much as uncultivated mountains and unspoiled rivers.” She concludes by observing that the notion of “responsive rapport” among all things, which is likewise found in Dōgen, “makes it impossible for any intervention in nature to be disharmonious with it.”<sup>45</sup> This is a powerful objection, which we might as well intensify by invoking the phenomenon of radioactive contamination (sadly topical in Japan since the meltdown of the reactors at Fukushima): if everything human beings do is natural-manifesting, and in tune with, Buddha-nature—then plutonium waste, which remains lethal for at least ten thousand years and is so deadly that a tiny amount can vastly devastate life around it, would be a natural product that positively hums with Buddha-nature.

In a similar context, another commentator, Ian Harris, invokes John Stuart Mill’s argument against the idea of “natural law” in order to show that the “extreme holism” advocated by Mahayana Buddhism is incoherent when it comes to questions of value. Mill argues that if natural law implies a conception of nature as “the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them, there is no mode of acting that is not conformable to nature in this sense of the term.”<sup>46</sup> Harris argues that since Mahayana Buddhism holds just such a view of nature, there is no essential difference between the proposition that “all things are equally valuable” and the view that “everything is devoid of value.” This would be an argument against the deep ecology principle of “biocentric equality,” but it doesn’t apply to the philosophy of Kūkai or Dōgen, as we shall see shortly.

Harris levels a similar criticism against “the Hua-Yen doctrine of the mutual interpenetration of all things” when used to promote reverence toward the natural world:

The intention here is to show that since all things are inter-related we should act in a spirit of reverence towards them all. However, the things category of “all things” includes insecticides, totalitarian regimes and nuclear weapons and the argument therefore possesses some rather obvious problems.

Since ethics, for Harris, is in the business of generating “judgments about those states of affairs that are valuable and those that are not,” this kind of Buddhism “suffers from a certain vacuity from the moral perspective.” It’s not at all clear that Huayan Buddhism would be making any ethical arguments in this context, and it’s certain that neither Kūkai nor Dōgen would. But since Harris invokes in support of his argument the work of HAKAMAYA Noriaki, one of the primary exponents of “critical Buddhism” in Japan, it will be instructive to consider the critical Buddhists’ criticisms before showing how they all miss the mark.

Hakamaya and his colleague MATSUMOTO Shirō argue that several apparently central ideas in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism—*hongaku* and *bushshō* prominently among them—are “not really Buddhist.”<sup>47</sup> This seems rather narrow-minded, but our present concern is not with Buddhology and the history of Buddhist thought but rather with an interpretation of Kūkai and Dōgen that makes philosophical and practical sense without violating the historical context. Hakamaya claims that if “grasses, trees, mountains, and rivers have all attained Buddhahood, and sentient and non-sentient beings are all . . . included in the substance of Buddha,” this leaves no room for the moral imperative (implied by *anatman*) to act selflessly to benefit others. But Kūkai and Dōgen certainly hold this view of grasses and trees, mountains and rivers, *and* are fully committed to promoting selfless activity that benefits others—though not just other humans, as the critical Buddhists would have it. That commitment is obvious throughout the writings of both thinkers. Apparently, the critical Buddhists fail to see this because their perspective is so anthropocentric, as evidenced in the distinction Matsumoto insists on “between two types of *tathāgata-garbha* thought”:

The first type could be considered the original type, that is, the idea of Buddha-nature as “immanent” [仏性内在論] or as “Buddha-nature in one’s body.” The second type is the more extreme type, and could be called

the “theory of the manifestation of Buddha-nature” [仏性顕在論] and is expressed in sayings like “Buddha-nature manifested as phenomenal existence such as trees and stones.”<sup>48</sup>

The gloss “Buddha-nature in one’s body” says it all: Matsumoto’s extreme anthropocentrism prevents him from seeing that for Kūkai “one’s body” participates in the Dharmakāya, and that for Dōgen “the true human body” is similarly “the entire world of the ten directions.” What Matsumoto calls “the more extreme type” is simply the more expansively selfless and more comprehensively compassionate understanding.

In the context of a diatribe against the appropriation of the “enlightenment of grasses and trees” by *Nihonjinron* enthusiasts such as UMEHARA Takeshi, Matsumoto overstates his case:

It is simply not logically possible to derive environmental ethics from an Eastern naturalism expressed in such phrases as “mountains, rivers, plants, and trees are all enlightened.” Such “naturalism” leads nowhere but to the “natural state of doing nothing. . . .” In order to acknowledge the “wrongs” brought about by destruction of the natural world and to right these wrongs by changing our way of living, we need to think and to act.<sup>49</sup>

While Matsumoto’s criticisms of the *Nihonjinron* proponents are well taken, they completely misunderstand the role of “mountains, rivers, plants, and trees” in the philosophies of Kūkai and Dōgen. There’s no need to try to “derive an environmental ethics” from their thought: one simply has to appreciate their perspectives and ask what kinds of activity these would lead to in the contemporary context. Both figures were energetic and vigorous actors as well as thinkers, and they encouraged their audiences to behave in a similar way. They certainly relegated conceptual and logical thinking (of the kind praised by the critical Buddhists as the only thinking worth the name) to a secondary role, acknowledging its usefulness in certain contexts and pointing out its limitations in others. In its place, they advocated subtler, more responsive (because more deeply embodied) modes of seeing and hearing and engaging the particular emerging situation.

If we go back to the question left open at the end of our consideration of Kūkai, we need to ask how something like plutonium waste can be part of the cosmic embodiment of Dainichi Nyorai. It’s admittedly hard to see how it would fit: as the Great Sun One who has “Thus Come” (the literal meaning of his name), Dainichi is certainly radiant—but also lethally

radioactive? Since the Dharmakāya comprises awareness as well as the Five Great Processes, it must include artifacts—and even synthetic products such as plastics, chlorofluorocarbons, and radioactive waste. But the human introduction of nonbiodegradable elements that disrupt the dynamics of natural ecosystems is something unprecedented in the history of the biosphere, and the injection of such pathogens into the body of the earth is surely making it sick. We know now that the biosphere is only a minuscule part of the universe, and so this process can hardly be doing harm to the body of the cosmos, but from Kūkai’s perspective it would surely constitute a desecration of, if not bodily injury to, the Dharmakāya. We can in any case ask, assuming the Dharmakāya is expounding the dharma, just what these newly introduced components are teaching us.

If natural phenomena demonstrate the ideas of impermanence and interdependence—in broad terms, the lessons of contemporary ecological science—what is the nonbiodegradable plastic with which we have littered the world’s oceans telling us? It tells us that our carelessness is killing many kinds of marine life and thereby disrupting the fabric of interdependence on which our own existence depends. And since plastic takes longer to decompose than the life cycles of seabirds and fish, it shows us the dangers of making such relatively permanent things. Plutonium waste teaches a more extreme version of the same lesson: being the result of highly complex technological manipulations, it is infinitely more disruptive to ecological relationships than any naturally occurring radiation, and is again relatively nonimpermanent, remaining far more deadly for far longer than any natural toxins.

The deep ecology appropriation of Dōgen and the criticisms of Zen as quietist because it affirms the equal worth of all phenomena (and therefore the status quo) misunderstand his philosophy in two respects. Dōgen’s perspectivism, which is similar to—and no doubt influenced by—the Daoist thought of Zhuangzi, undermines anthropocentrism by relativizing the human perspective with respect to those of other beings, both animate and inanimate.<sup>50</sup> But to show up the arrogant pretensions of our ego-based discriminations between pleasant and painful, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, and so forth, is not to deny that there is a certain patterning (which Zhuangzi calls *dao* and Dōgen “Buddha-nature”) to the ways the world unfolds, such that all phenomena abide in their particular “dharma-positions.”

In his discourse “Buddha-Nature,” Dōgen says not just that human beings (or all sentient beings, or all phenomena) *have* Buddha-nature, but they all *are* Buddha-nature—or better, since, Dōgen views everything

as activity: they all *do* it, or enact it.<sup>51</sup> Buddha-nature turns out to be not only “mountains, rivers, and the great earth . . . the fins of a donkey and the beak of a horse” as well as “grass, trees, land and earth . . . the sun, moon, and stars,” but it’s also “walls, tiles, and pebbles.”<sup>52</sup> But when Dōgen equates impermanence with Buddha-nature, the focus is not on any particular phenomenon per se but rather on its interactions with other phenomena. Nor is it a matter of the simple sum of all impermanent phenomena: it’s rather the organized totality of their dynamic interactions (which he calls *shitsu-u* 悉有, or “whole-being”) that’s important. As with Kūkai, human activities and artifacts participate too; but since what’s crucial is *zenki*, the dynamic functioning of all phenomena together, there would be every reason to eliminate, rather than celebrate, something as toxic as plutonium waste. Indeed, Dōgen would want to ask the deeper question concerning the desires that drive us to consume so much energy that we think such contrivances as nuclear power plants, with all the dangers and problems that they involve, are a worthwhile component in the whole.

So, although for Mahayana Buddhists such as Dōgen the whole world is to be affirmed in its suchness—*nyo* (如)—at every moment, this means neither that every phenomenon is perfect nor that we shouldn’t exert ourselves to improve things in the next moment. The world, as impermanent, is different every next moment—and this is what can give us some reason for optimism no matter how bad things become. They could get worse, but they can also improve; and if they are constantly changing anyway, it only takes a small nudge from us to affect the direction of that change for the better.<sup>53</sup> But does Dōgen offer any guidelines for our actions?

One thing is clear: our motivations, and our choice of what to do, had better come not from our egotistical desires—and especially for gain and fame—but rather from the energies and activities of the whole, to which the practice of entertaining multiple perspectives will have opened us. Kūkai powerfully evokes the salutary effects of confronting impermanence, and similarly for Dōgen what most effectively eliminates selfishness, profit, and fame as motives is the confrontation with, and embrace of, the world’s impermanence—and our own.<sup>54</sup> When talking to the “Students of the Way” in his monastery, he says:

When you truly see impermanence, egocentric mind does not arise, nor does desire for fame and profit. Out of fear that the days and nights are passing quickly, practice the Way as if you were trying to extinguish a fire enveloping your head. . . .

It goes without saying that you must consider the inevitability of death. . . . You should be resolved not to waste time and refrain from doing meaningless things. You should spend your time carrying out what is worth doing. Among the things you should do, what is the most important?<sup>55</sup>

The activity that responds to that question will be different for every one of us, but for those who have incorporated Dōgen's teachings, the style of the engagement will surely be ecological.<sup>56</sup>

The way of life, then, that Kūkai and Dōgen advocate involves energetic participation in the dynamic functioning of the whole world. Their discourses on natural phenomena encourage a respectful and reciprocal engagement with artifacts and things of nature and an attitude open to the wisdom expressed in their words and letters. And their ideas give every warrant for promoting (though it was unnecessary in their times) an overcoming of the hubris of our anthropocentrism in order to preserve and enhance the workings of Buddha-nature all over this green and blue planet.

## Notes

1. I have treated some of these themes before, in two essays that I would not now recommend, since the attempt to reconcile the notions of *hosshin seppō* and *bushhō* with environmental toxins was, in retrospect, misguided. More worth reading is "Body-Mind and Buddha-Nature: Dōgen's Deeper Ecology," in *Classical Japanese Philosophy*, ed. James W. Heisig and Rein Raud, *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 7* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2010), 122–147, even though the discussion of Buddha-nature is still flawed.

2. Jacqueline Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 5.

3. William R. LaFleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature," in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 184.

4. LaFleur, "Saigyō," 184–185; Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 9.

5. LaFleur, "Saigyō," 185–186; see also Stone, *Original Enlightenment*, 11.

6. Kūkai, "Introduction to the Mahāvairocana Sūtra," cited in *Kūkai: Major Works*, trans. Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 86. Subsequent references will be abbreviated as *KMW*.

7. "The Difference between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism" (*Benkenmitsu nikyōron*), *KMW*, 154.

8. "Difference," *KMW*, 52.

9. "Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Body" (*Sokushin jōbutsu gi*), *KMW*, 228–229. I translate *godai* as the Five Great Processes, rather than the customary "Five Great Elements," since for Kūkai they are in constant dynamic transformation, and on the

assumption that they are modeled on the Chinese idea of *wuxing* (五行), the “five goings” or “processes” or “phases of transformation.”

10. “Record of the Secret Treasury” (*Hizō ki*), cited in LaFleur, “Saigyō,” 186–187; trans. slightly modified.

11. *KMW*, 254–255.

12. See Thomas P. Kasulis, “Reality as Embodiment: An Analysis of Kūkai’s *Sokushinjōbutsu* and *Hosshin Seppō*,” in *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*, ed. Jane Mane Law (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 166–185. This essay is an exceptionally lucid exposition of these two key texts of Kūkai’s.

13. Kūkai, “Exoteric and Esoteric,” *KMW*, 152; “Introduction to All the Sutras,” trans. Kasulis, in “Reality as Embodiment,” 174.

14. *KMW*, 91.

15. *KMW*, 230–231.

16. “Introduction to All the Sutras,” cited in Kasulis, “Reality as Embodiment,” 174.

17. Dōgen, “Eating Bowls” (*Hou*), in *Treasury of the Trite Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. TANAHASHI Kazuaki (Boston: Shambhala, 2010), 2:720. Subsequent references to the *Shōbōgenzō* will be to this edition, by the volume and page number.

18. “Recommending Zazen to All People” (*Fukanzazengi*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 2:908.

19. “Instructions on Kitchen Work” (*Ji kuin mon*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 2:764.

20. “Instructions for the Tenzo” (*Tenso kyōkun*), in *Moon in a Dewdrop*, ed. and trans. TANAHASHI Kazuaki (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987), 55.

21. “Instructions for the Tenzo,” 56.

22. “Regulations for Eating Meals,” in Roshi Jiyu Kennett, *Zen Is Eternal Life* (Emeryville, CA: Dharma Publications, 1976), 97.

23. “Regulations for Eating Meals,” 100–101.

24. “Undivided Activity” (*Zenki*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 1:451 (trans. modified).

25. On the centrality of practice as activity (*gyōji*) to Dōgen’s thinking, see Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), chap. 3, esp. 67–76.

26. Dōgen, “Arousing Aspiration for the Unsurpassable” (*Hotsu mujō shin*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 2:650; see also “Continuous Practice” (*Gyōji*), part 1, *Shōbōgenzō*, 1:334.

27. “On the Endeavour of the Way” (*Bendōwa*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 1:6.

28. Although the title is usually translated as “The Mountains and Waters Sutra,” Dōgen surely wasn’t presuming to write a sacred text. It makes more sense to see it in the context of his idea of *mujo seppō* as introduced above.

29. “Mountains and Waters as Sutras” (*Sansuikyō*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 1:163, 161.

30. “Mountains and Waters as Sutras,” 1:154.

31. “Mountains and Waters as Sutras,” 1:155.

32. “Mountains and Waters as Sutras,” 1:156.

33. “Mountains and Waters as Sutras,” 1:158–159.

34. “Buddha Sutras” (*Bukkyō*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 2:538.

35. Dōgen, “Voices of the Valleys, Shapes of the Mountains” (*Keisei sanshoku*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 1:85.

36. “Voices of the Valleys,” 1:86–87.

37. “Voices of the Valleys,” 1:87–88.

38. Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as If Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985), 66, where the norm is attributed to the “founder” of deep ecology, Arne Naess. The authors refer to and quote from Dōgen several times: 11 (where he is invoked as a representative of Daoism), 100–101, 112–113, and 232–234.

39. Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 69, 67.

40. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 177.

41. See, for example, Yuriko Saitō, “The Japanese Love of Nature: A Paradox,” *Landscape* 31, no. 2 (1992), 1–8, who uncharacteristically misses the deeper point of Zen thought here. Also Ian Harris, “Getting to Grips with Buddhist Environmentalism,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 2 (1995), 173–190.

42. Saitō, “Japanese Love of Nature,” 3.

43. Saitō, “Japanese Love of Nature,” 5.

44. Dōgen, “Buddha-Nature” (*Busshō*), *Shōbōgenzō*, 1:243 (citing Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism).

45. Saitō, “Japanese Love of Nature,” 8.

46. John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, cited by Ian Harris in “Getting to Grips,” 177–178.

47. See the essays in Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997).

48. MATSUMOTO Shiro, “Comments on Critical Buddhism,” in Hubbard and Swanson, *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 162.

49. Matsumoto, “The Lotus Sūtra and Japanese Culture,” in Hubbard and Swanson, *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, 402–403.

50. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see the section “Waters and Waters,” in my essay “Body-Mind and Buddha-Nature: Dōgen’s Deeper Ecology,” 134–138.

51. Dōgen, “Buddha-Nature,” 1:234–236.

52. Dōgen, “Buddha-Nature, 1:238, 250, 259.

53. See, in this context, Peter Hershock, *Chan Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004), 18; *Buddhism in the Public Sphere: Reorienting Global Interdependence* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 57.

54. See, for example, Kūkai’s magnificent prose poem “Impermanence,” *KMW*, 131–133.

55. “Points to Watch in Practicing the Way” (*Gakudō-yōjinshū*), in *Dōgen Zen*, trans. Shōhaku Okumura (Kyoto: Soto Zen Center, 1988), 1; *Shōbōgenzō-zuimonki*, trans. Shōhaku Okumura (Kyoto: Soto Zen Center, 1987), 2–17, 97.

56. See the eloquent account of acting through “no-self” in the chapter “Self and No-Self,” in James W. Heisig, *Nothingness and Desire* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).