

# Body-Mind and Buddha-Nature:

## Dōgen's Deeper Ecology

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One can engage a figure like Dōgen by studying and interpreting his texts as an exercise in the history of philosophy, or as a source of ideas about how we might best flourish in the uncertain world of the twenty-first century. The theme of the present workshop favors the latter way, which can always be followed with respect for the historical context of the ideas that are being adapted to contemporary circumstances. The aim would be to avoid any such adaptation that would contradict or fail to catch the spirit of Dōgen's philosophy in its historical context. Among our current circumstances none is more urgent than the environmental crisis, where some of us in the richer nations seem to be hell-bent on destroying the natural basis on which our species depends for its existence. Although the world in which Dōgen lived and wrote had its problems, environmental devastation was not among the most pressing issues facing Japan in the thirteenth-century. Dōgen doesn't talk of "nature" in our sense of the term as the natural world, and yet his engagement with natural (as distinct from human) phenomena can help us think more clearly and creatively about our current environmental predicament. From Dōgen's perspective to call it "environmental" is already too anthropocentric: perhaps "ecological" would be better. Dōgen is the least anthropological of thinkers; and yet his anti-anthropocentrism

can contribute—now that “Save the Whales” has become “Save Life on Earth”—to humanity’s efforts to avoid self-destruction.

Dōgen’s ideas are embodied in a way of life, the Buddha-Way, where philosophy and practice work together: the ideas helping to amplify the realization, and the zazen serving to actualize the philosophy. Some of his advice on how to make one’s way—the foolishness, for example, of “wasting time worrying about how to earn a living in order to postpone one’s death” (*Zuimonki*, DŌGEN 1987, 94; 2–14) —is more appropriate for monks living in a monastery than for householders in the dusty world of today. Other aspects of his advice, especially those relating to the bodily necessities of life, are more broadly applicable and eminently pertinent to lives in the twenty-first century. Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* is unique among the masterpieces of world philosophy in devoting long passages to the preparing and eating of food, the making, washing and wearing of clothes, going to the toilet and performing ablutions, washing the face and cleaning the teeth.

Dōgen is acutely sensitive to the drawbacks of dividing our activities into means and ends: many features of our current eco-predicament derive from our treating natural phenomena as mere means for realizing human purposes. The problem with the means-ends schema is that it diverts us from the moment: insofar as I treat this present activity as a means for another, my attention is exported to the future, which isn’t yet real, and I lose touch with reality. If I regard cleaning the room in which I’m writing as a mere means to the end of finishing this paper, the cleaning then becomes a “chore” by contrast with the fulfilling activity of thinking about Dōgen. But the cleaning, the preparing, the process is consummate activity in itself: the other shore is right here, already, with ends at every moment.

When Ed Brown’s Dōgen-Zen-inspired cookbook *Tassajara Cooking* first appeared, some admirers of his *Tassajara Bread Book* were so eager to get cooking that the opening pages caused great dismay—being devoted to the “The Knife,” a discussion of how to care for, feed, and befriend the knives to be used for preparing the food (BROWN 1973, 1–7). They were missing the point: it impoverishes our experience to separate the preparation from the product, and to disparage the so-called inanimate by comparison with the animate. When the author ends the chapter with

the words “Makes it feel good, too,” the “it” refers not to the activity but—quite in the spirit of Dōgen—to the knife.

Although the Tassajara food books were popular in their day, the Americanization of the world since the 1970s has resulted in a widespread derogation of activities such as preparing food, washing clothes, and so forth as mere chores, necessary evils to be tolerated or passed on to someone else—rather than, as Zen sees them, “the supreme activities of the buddhas and patriarchs.” By subverting the means-ends construal of our experience, Dōgen is promoting the realization that our every action can be (is already) its own end—especially because at the deepest level we are ending at every moment in any case. Ignoring this inconvenient truth, members of Americanized societies tend to resent menial tasks for the way they detract from the important things in life: the pursuit of riches and fame. Yet throughout his philosophical and religious writings Dōgen is relentless in emphasizing the foolishness of ordering one’s life around the pursuit of either. He is in the company here of many illustrious predecessors: Confucius, Socrates, the Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed, for example. Indeed there is no great thinker who holds that the way to a fulfilled life is through becoming famous or making lots of money. Since much of the damage we are currently inflicting upon the natural world derives from vast amounts of money being spent on unnecessary consumer goods, such a questioning of society’s goals is pertinent and timely.

Nowadays we have to contend with climate change skeptics and global warming deniers; in Kamakura period Japan, Dōgen had the problem of people who denied the impermanence of the self, holding on to the view that the mind somehow survives death.<sup>1</sup> Against them, he argues for impermanence, understood in the sense of the finitude of all phenomena—nothing lasts forever—and in the more radical sense of the momentariness of all phenomena: everything arises and perishes momentarily, at every instant. Although Dōgen is one of the profoundest thinkers in the history of world philosophy, the basic idea is straightforward: Confront impermanence, and everything else follows.

1. The so-called Senika school in India, whose ideas Dōgen frequently criticizes.

When we truly “see” impermanence, egocentric mind does not arise, nor do thoughts of fame and personal benefit. Being anxious that the days and nights are passing quickly, practice the Way as though your head were enveloped in flames.<sup>2</sup>

But nowadays the resistance to confronting the impermanence of both the individual and the species is greater than ever before, as evidenced by the success with which modern societies keep most of the realities of death concealed. In the short run, the history of the race shows that the mortality rate for human beings since they first trod the earth is one-hundred percent: each and every one of us, as human, is (like Socrates) mortal. And in the long run, *all* life on earth comes to an end: as the sun expands on its way to becoming a “red giant” it will incinerate the earth. And even if the earth’s orbit happens to widen fast enough to avert this fate, the sun’s increasing heat will evaporate the oceans and return the planet to its molten condition. Against this grim background, human existence can easily seem a paltry thing—except that if we humans persist with business as usual in our burning of fossil fuels and heating up the planet, the consequent “runaway global warming” could pre-empt the expanding sun by setting in train events that will boil the oceans away and fry the planet. The climate scientists call it, disconcertingly, “the Venus syndrome.”<sup>3</sup> It’s possible that we shall succeed in extinguishing life on earth.

So why bother? Because in the meantime, for Dōgen, if one practices the Way successfully, the impermanence turns out to be buddha-nature and the earth a paradise whose finitude is irrelevant.

## CARE FOR THE BODY

When Buddhism arose in ancient India, it was in a world replete with rituals and ceremonies designed to connect the performer through an askesis of body and soul with the realms of the gods and the ances-

2. “Guidelines for Studying the Way,” first paragraph, cited in DŌGEN 1987, 10 (translation modified).

3. See, for instance, HANSEN 2009, especially chapter 10, “The Venus Syndrome.”

tors. On being transplanted to China it naturally became imbued with an equally rich culture of ceremony and ritual deriving from Confucianism, for which the disciplined training of the body was again paramount. When Dōgen returned to Japan from practicing Buddhism in China, he brought back an appreciation of the crucial significance of ritual practice. For example, in teaching the proper way to prepare and serve food in the Zen monastery, he emphasizes the importance of doing nine bows toward the monks’ hall before sending out the meal.

Although we have been studying Buddha’s teaching in Japan for a long time, no one has yet recorded or taught about the regulations for preparing food for the monks’ community, not to mention the nine bows facing the monks’ hall, which people in this country have not even dreamed of. People in our country regard the cooking in monasteries as no more developed than the manners of animals and birds. (*Tenzo kyōkun*, DŌGEN 1985, 58)

Since proper bowing is a physical action that has to be learned and practised—this is a idea central to Confucian thought—the nine bows set the natural activity of eating in a frame of culture that distinguishes humans from other animals. The bowing also serves to reinforce the social and communal aspects of eating (the monks usually eat in silence), and connect the activities of preparing and consuming food back to the ancestors. “If you act in harmony with the minds and actions of our ancient predecessors, how can you fail to bring forth their virtue and practice?” (64). Our everyday activities are imbued with meaning by connecting with the past in this way, even though the ground of that meaning is contingent, immanent, and radically impermanent. Previous Buddhist thinkers had understood such a ground as “Dharma-nature” (*hosshō*), as some kind of metaphysical principle or essence that transcends this world. But for Dōgen, this is a fatal error:

Such people deludedly imagine that after the triple world and the ten directions which we are experiencing have suddenly dropped away, then the Dharma-nature will appear, and this Dharma-nature will be other than the myriad things and phenomena of the present. (*Hosshō*, Dōgen 1997, 126)

Dōgen by contrast holds that there is no entering Dharma-nature “apart from wearing clothes and eating meals, and apart from exchanging conversations, employing the six sense organs and engaging in all kind of everyday activities” (*Hossbō*, KIM 2007, 13)

In the absence of a means-ends structure, preparing meals becomes just as important as eating them. A fascicle in the *Shōbōgenzō* titled “Words for the Kitchen [of a Zen temple]” begins with the advice: “In preparing meals for the Sangha, to do so with reverence is fundamental” (*Jikūinmon*, DŌGEN 1999, 107). Dōgen instructs the monks who work in the kitchen to use honorifics when referring to courses in meals and their ingredients. “In general use the polite form when talking about rice, vegetables, salt, soy-sauce, and the various other items.” He also stresses the importance of treating the utensils as well as the ingredients with the utmost care, calling them “the lifeblood of the Buddhist patriarchs” (108–9).

Dōgen develops these ideas at length in his essay “Instructions for the Head Cook,” where he emphasizes that an accomplished cook who doesn’t deprecate simple ingredients and materials can work wonders with them: “Do not arouse disdainful mind when you prepare a broth of wild grasses; do not arouse joyful mind when you prepare a fine cream soup” (*Tenzo kyōkun*, Dōgen 1985, 56). This sort of discrimination based on personal inclinations and value judgments is unhelpful, whereas appropriate attention to the tasks of the kitchen requires keen discrimination of a different kind: “Look out for sand when you examine the rice; look out for rice when you throw away the sand” (54). So it’s not a matter of rejecting discriminative thinking, but of exercising appropriate forms of discrimination when the circumstances call for it, while refraining from superfluous value judgments.

To avoid wastefulness Dōgen encourages the cook to calculate with care the amount of food to be prepared, based on the number to be fed and an estimation of their appetites (57). He goes on:

Before preparing the rice and soup for the noon meal, assemble the rice buckets and other utensils, and make sure they are thoroughly clean. 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. (*Tenzo kyōkun*, Dōgen 1985, 55)

Gratitude, respect, and even reverence for what is given us to eat, and for what we use to prepare and consume our food, dictate that we take care to keep the kitchen free of grime and well ordered. Yet 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. An openness to the nature of the various utensils allows us to situate them in the appropriate place in the kitchen, whether high or low, so that they may be "settled" there—and so be less likely to fall down or get damaged. To achieve a creative interplay with the things we deal with, Dōgen advises: "You should practice in such a way that things come and abide in your mind, and your mind returns and abides in things, all through the day and night." This intimate reciprocity between the cook's bodymind and the utensils and ingredients is what enables the magical transformations that good cooking always involves.

This is the way to turn things while being turned by things. Keep yourself harmonious and wholehearted in this way.... Taking up a green vegetable, turn it into a sixteen-foot golden body; take a sixteen-foot golden body and turn it into a green vegetable leaf. This is a miraculous transformation—a work of buddha that benefits sentient beings. (56)

The usual Zen expression talks about convertibility between a blade of grass and a sixteen-foot golden body (symbolizing the cosmic Buddha), which Dōgen here adapts to the context of the kitchen. "When you prepare food," he advises, "do not see with ordinary eyes and do not think with ordinary mind." Any good cook will agree that success in the kitchen comes from adopting the appropriate frame of mind, getting in the right mood for paying close attention to what is going on. Unwrapping a prewashed green vegetable from its cocoon of supermarket plastic and dropping into a food processor probably isn't the best way to begin the process of transformation. Dōgen would recommend starting with a vegetable fresher from the earth, then washing and chopping it by hand. (Most traditions acknowledge the remarkable energetic properties of the

human fingers and palms.) This promotes responsiveness to the transformations to take place in the bubbling pots and simmering saucepans.

Moving now to the other end of the alimentary canal, we find that Dōgen’s precise instructions for attending to the body’s natural functions in this moment are again backed up by reverence for tradition, or emulation of the ancients. In the fascicle titled “Washing and Cleansing” the topic isn’t merely cleaning, but rather “receiving the authentic transmission of a bodymind of the Buddhist patriarchs” and “realizing countless and limitless virtues”: “At the moment when we dignify bodymind with training, eternal original practice is completely and roundly realized” (*Senjō*, DŌGEN 1994, 58). Then comes a series of meticulous instructions concerning defecating and wiping oneself in the context of “practicing meditation beneath a tree or on open ground,” as well as going to the communal toilet in the monastery, washing afterward, and then rubbing one’s dried hands on a stick of fragrant wood. “Actions like these all purify the Buddha’s land, and adorn the Buddha’s kingdom, so do them carefully and do not be hasty” (64). (All of this naturally without phosphates, and everything biodegradable.) His conclusion is incontrovertible: “People of scant knowledge do not think that buddhas have dignified behavior in the toilet” (65).

Such is the importance of cleaning the body that Dōgen devotes an entire other fascicle to washing the face (洗面) and cleaning the teeth and tongue. In one of his less austere moments, he advises:

To bathe the bodymind, to apply fragrant oil, and to get rid of dust and dirt are Buddha-Dharma of the highest priority. To put on a fresh and clean robe is a method of purification. (*Senmen*, DŌGEN, 1997, 139–40)

He cites some traditional Buddhist views of the body as impure on account of its disconcerting interior (the “five viscera” and the “six entrails”), on the basis of which some people argue that there’s no point in washing its exterior. Apparently “some people have never known or heard the Buddha-Dharma”: actually, Dōgen writes, the way bodhisattvas bathe and wash is “supremely venerable and supremely high.” The instructions that follow, on how to use a twig of willow to sanitize the mouth, stimulate the gums, clean the teeth, and scrape the tongue, are

worthy of today's best practices in preventive dentistry—though the willow twig is more easily obtainable and recyclable than most of the paraphernalia we use nowadays (146).

Turning now to the Buddhist practice of simply “wearing clothes”: since the traditional Buddhist robe, or *kaṣāya*, is called “the clothing of liberation” (from karmic and other hindrances), Dōgen devotes more than one fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō* to the topic.<sup>4</sup> He claims that “the usual method of the buddhas, in every case, is to see rags as the best material” for making clothing for monks, since “we consider so-called “filthy rags” to be the purest material of all” (*Den'ne*, Dōgen 1994, 127, 140). He cites the Buddha's listing of the “ten excellent virtues” of the robe, which include: “keeping away cold and heat, as well as mosquitoes, harmful creatures, and poisonous insects; ...eradicating defilements forever and making them into a fertile field; extinguishing the karma of sins... and nurturing the bodhisattva-way” (142–3). The *kaṣāya* achieves these wonderful effects thanks to the spirit in which it is assembled and the materials from which it is made.

The origin and nature of the optimum materials for the monk's robe are quite remarkable, as evidenced in this passage where Dōgen appears to be quoting from a Chinese text: “People in India discarded soiled rags in streets and fields as if they were filth.... Practitioners picked them up, washed them, and sewed them, and used them to cover the body” (128). He then quotes a passage from the *Middle Āgama Sūtra* which advises how to dispel anger aroused by impurities in the bodily or verbal behavior of others, using the metaphor of a monk's gathering materials for his robe:

After inspecting a rag, the monk picks it up with the left hand and stretches it out with the right hand. If there are any parts that are not soiled by feces, urine, tears, spit, or other impurities, and which are not in holes, the monk tears them off and takes them. (145)

In the same way, we should simply ignore the impurities in the conduct of others and focus instead on its praiseworthy aspects. But Dōgen

4. “The Virtue of the Buddhist Robe,” *Kesa kudoku*, DŌGEN 1994, 121; see also “The Transmission of the Robe,” *Den'e*.

is just as concerned with the metaphor's vehicle, recommending that after gathering rags for the robe "we should reject the parts that cannot be washed clean, being too deeply soiled with long-accumulated stains of feces and urine... and select those parts that can be washed clean." He then lists the traditional "ten kinds of rags":

(1) Rags chewed by an ox, (2) rags gnawed by rats, (3) rags scorched by fire, (4) rags soiled by menstruation, (5) rags soiled by childbirth, (6) rags offered at a shrine, (7) rags left at a graveyard, (8) rags offered in petitionary prayer, (9) rags discarded by a king's officer, (10) rags brought back from a funeral. These ten kinds people throw away; they are not used in human society. We pick them up and make them into the pure material of the *kaṣāya*. (145–6)

Dōgen laments that no such decent rags can be found in the Japan of his day—"It is regrettable that this is a minor nation in a remote land"—and suggests some acceptable alternatives, such as "using pure material offered by a donor." His discussion highlights the virtue of frugality and exemplifies the principle of "reuse and recycle" at its best—in striking contrast to the ready-to-discard ethos of the fashion industry today. It also encourages a healthy skepticism about our tendency to reject things as unworthy of attention because they are somehow impure. The monk's patchwork robe is proof of the power of cleansing (both physical and psychical), and at the same time a brilliant piece of bricolage that materially exemplifies the interrelations among things.

## BODYMIND AND SELFORLD

If so many people are apparently unfazed by the prospect of our destroying the natural environment on which we depend, it must be because at some level they don't understand the situation and imagine themselves independent of the world. It's hard to imagine how people can imagine such a thing, but it's probably easier if one subscribes to some kind of dualism between mind and body. Western thinking has often envisaged the dichotomy between body and soul (or mind) as corresponding to that between earth and heaven, animal, and god, matter

and spirit, immanence and transcendence, and so forth. By contrast, since heaven and earth in the East-Asian traditions are understood as a unity, without any notion of a transcendent realm beyond, mind and body were never, until recently, split in any kind of Cartesian way. Indeed the Chinese word for “mind,” *xin* 心, (like the Japanese *shin*, or *jin*) has so many affective connotations that it’s aptly translated as “heart-mind.” At any rate, to realize the nonduality of body and mind, as Dōgen describes it, can contribute to the concomitant realization of the nonduality of self and world—which it turn confirms our utter dependence on the well-being of the natural world for our own well-being.

Dōgen quotes the Buddha as saying of his first experience of enlightenment: “When the bright star appeared, I became enlightened together with the Earth and all sentient beings” (cited in DŌGEN 1997, 259). What the Buddha awakens to is the realization that, as a being embodied in the world, he is not separate from “the Earth and all sentient beings”—which means all beings. Buddhism is generally distinguished by its insights into psychology, and its emphasis on the way certain changes of mind can lead to a less frustrating and more fulfilling life. Dōgen is concerned to balance this emphasis with an appreciation of the equal importance of the body, and so he reminds his monks: “The Way is surely attained with the body” (DŌGEN 1987, 110; 2–26). But also with the mind, as evidenced in his frequent use of the term *shinjin*, “bodymind”—as in the title of the short piece “Bodymind Study of the Way” the first half of which discusses studying the Way with the mind, and the second half with the body.

Dōgen begins by speaking of the mind in terms of traditional Buddhist psychology and soteriology, but then goes on to associate it closely with the human body on the one hand and with natural phenomena on the other. For example: “The mind studies the Way running bare-foot—who can catch a glimpse of it? The mind studies the Way turning somersaults—all things tumble over with it” (*Shinjin gakudō*, DŌGEN 1985, 89). The Way here is not only the Middle Way of traditional Buddhism but also the *Dao* of Chinese philosophy. This latter way refers to the way the world unfolds, the way nature works, the way the sages used to live, and the way that each one of us makes as we live our lives. The term tends to be used metaphorically, but Dōgen takes it literally and

talks of the mind's studying it by introducing somatic metaphors such as running and turning somersaults. He subverts any idea of the mind as separate by saying:

Now mountains, rivers, earth, the sun, the moon, and stars are mind....<sup>5</sup> To study the way with mind is this mountains-rivers-and-earth mind itself thoroughly engaged in studying the way.... Because the study of the way is like this, walls, tiles, and pebbles are mind. (*Shinjin gakudō*, Dōgen 1985, 88–9)

This is a consummate expression of Dōgen's radically unanthropocentric view of the world: if there's any kind of centrism at work in his thought it would be, in an apt oxymoron, a “cosmocentrism.”

Whereas the idea of mountains as mind is shocking to the modern Cartesian consciousness, for which the external world (including animals and human bodies) is soulless and inanimate, it would not surprise the classical Chinese thinkers, who regard all phenomena as different manifestations of the energies known as *qi*. More provocative to Dōgen's contemporaries might be the idea that natural phenomena, as mountains-rivers-and-earth mind, are thoroughly engaged in studying the Way—especially since they would have been doing this far longer, and might therefore be much better at it, than human beings. Since vegetation is also mind (“The mind is trees”<sup>6</sup>), and animals (though he doesn't say so explicitly), as well as human artifacts like walls and tiles, it becomes clear that for Dōgen everything is mind—what contemporary philosophers of mind would call a robust panpsychism. Explicitly, he cites with approval the words of one of the founders of the Tendai School of Buddhism: “A single mind is all things. All things are a single mind” (*Tsuki*, DŌGEN 1985, 130).

When he turns to studying the Way with the body, Dōgen comes straight to the point:

5. This expression comes from the ninth-century Chan Master Isan Reiyu: “What is fine, pure, and bright mind? It is mountains, rivers, and the Earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars.” Cited in DŌGEN 1994, 53.

6. Dōgen is discussing a pronouncement by the First Patriarch in China (Bodhidharma): “Mind in every instance is like trees and stones” (*Hotsu mujōshin* DŌGEN 1997, 253–4). He also adopts the traditional Buddhist idea of the “vegetal mind.”

It is the study of the Way using this lump of red flesh. The body comes forth from the study of the Way. Everything which comes forth from the study of the Way is the true human body. The entire world of the ten directions is the true human body. (*Shinjin gakudō*, DŌGEN 1985, 91)

Insofar as the study of the Way is undertaken not merely as a mental operation but as a somatic activity—sitting zazen, eating food, making one’s way through life—it is enacted by “using this lump of red flesh” (as Linji calls it). But through studying the Way one comes to realize that there is more to this lump of red flesh than at first meets the eye: it turns out, through practice, that the true human body is actually the body of the Buddha, which in one of its three aspects is the entire world.

Since the entire world is also mind, it’s best to think in terms of bodymind rather than either aspect separately: “The bodymind of the Buddha’s Way is grass, trees, tiles, and pebbles, and is wind, rain, water, and fire” (*Hotsu mujōshin*, DŌGEN 1997, 259). The activity of this lump of red flesh is totally dependent on the forces of heaven and earth, and on the uses we make of those forces in order to survive—such as baking tiles in order to have a roof over our heads as shelter from the storm. Breaking through the cramped understanding of oneself as a separate entity, physical activities become one with the activity of the true human body as the entire world. At this point of the realization of nonduality, “bodymind is dropped off,” or “sloughed off,” as one of Dōgen’s best-known formulations expresses it:

To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things in the universe is to cast off the bodymind of the self, as well as those of others. (*Genjōkōan*, DŌGEN 1985, 285)

## WATER AND WATERS

Since the ancient Chinese thinkers envisaged the world as a field of constant transformations, water—as the most mutable of the “five phases” of earthly transformation—plays a major role in their thought.

Soft and fluid at normal temperatures, it becomes invisible as water vapor when heated, and extremely hard as ice when cooled. For the Daoists in particular it's the natural phenomenon that most powerfully intimates *dao*, and so provides a helpful model for human behavior. (Be flexible and yielding, avoid contention, adapt to the situation, flow with the flow.) Although Dōgen in his testier moods disparages the ancient Chinese philosophers—Confucius and Laozi more often than Zhuangzi—in fact some of his best ideas are anticipated by the Daoists, and by the *Zhuangzi* in particular.

In the first chapter, water provides a pivot on which human perspectives turn. Zhuangzi's friend Huizi has been given some gourds, which he tries to use in the usual way, as water containers or ladles. However, they don't work because they're too big, even when he splits them in two, and so he ends up smashing them to pieces in frustration. Zhuangzi asks why he didn't think to use them intact, by tying them to his waist so that he could "go floating away over the Yangtse and the Lakes." Huizi was stuck in a particular perspective of utility, fixated on the gourds as something to put water in, and so overlooked the possibility of putting himself in the water and using them to keep on top of it.

The *Zhuangzi*'s second chapter contains an episode that puts the anthropocentric perspective thoroughly in perspective in a way that's unmatched in the history of philosophy before or since. The question is Who knows the right place to live, among a fish, a monkey, and a human? Who has the proper sense of taste, among humans, deer, centipedes, and owls?

Gibbons are sought by baboons as mates, elaphures [a kind of deer native to China], like the company of deer, loaches play with fish. Mao-chiang and Lady Li were beautiful in the eyes of men; but when the fish saw them they plunged deep, when the birds saw them they flew high, and when the deer saw them they broke into a run. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world? (ZHUANGZI 1981, 58; ch. 2)

It makes no sense to claim that the human being knows better than other kinds of beings the best place to live, the best things to eat, or the most beautiful mates. At best, the human perspective can distinguish

itself from others by its ability to realise itself *as* a perspective. What is more, by entertaining a wide range of perspectives and practicing adopting opposite points of view, the wise human being can find “the axis of the Way” between all the various “it”s and “other”s that our perspectives generate. By “opening things up to the light of heaven and earth,” the Daoist sage is able to “stay at the point of rest on the potter’s wheel of heaven and earth” and thereby appreciate all possible perspectives (53, 52, 54; ch. 2).

Before Dōgen entertained some similar ideas, Buddhist thinkers had used water, as the source and sustainer of life, to elaborate a perspectivism based on karmic conditioning. The formulation of “four views on water” is ascribed to the sixth-century philosopher Asvabhāva, who alludes here to four of the Six Realms of samsara: celestial beings, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell.

But as celestial beings, human beings, hungry ghosts, and fish do not carry the same effect from past causations, they each see water differently. Celestial beings see it as jewels, people in the world see it as water, hungry ghosts see it as pus and blood, and fish see it as a palace. (cited in DŌGEN 1985, 285)

One of Dōgen’s profoundest pieces of writing, “Mountains and Waters as Sutras,” invokes the four views on water in the context of arguing for an understanding of natural landscape as sacred scripture, a direct manifestation of the Buddhist teachings. But first he introduces water as something that eludes all dualistic categories:

Water is neither strong nor weak, neither wet nor dry, neither moving nor still, neither cold nor hot, neither existent nor non-existent, neither deluded nor enlightened. When water solidifies, it is harder than a diamond. Who can crack it? When water melts, it is gentler than milk. Who can destroy it? (*Sansuikyō*, DŌGEN 1985, 101)

Being susceptible to different transformations, water is less a thing than an event, always in the process of becoming, and thus hard to pin down or grasp hold of. (The *Laozi* often cautions: “Whoever grasps, loses it.”) What is more, any quality we ascribe to water—strong or wet or moving or whatever—is there only from a certain perspective, from a viewpoint

that is conditioned by particular factors. Yet within this multiplicity of perspectives there is one that is privileged: “This is not just studying the moment when human and heavenly beings see water; this is studying the moment when water sees water.” Beyond adopting the perspective on water of another kind of being, or the water’s perspective on what is other than it, it’s a matter of appreciating water’s perspective on itself.

All beings do not see mountains and waters in the same way. Some beings see water as a jeweled ornament, but they do not regard jeweled ornaments as water. What in the human realm corresponds to their water? We only see their jeweled ornaments as water. (101–2)

Celestial beings may experience water as jewels, their quicker existence perhaps making water appear more still, but we can’t extrapolate any further understanding of how their experience of other things might be.

There is a lot more to water, then, than just water. Dōgen goes on to ask: “Are there many ways to see one thing, or is it a mistake to see many forms as one thing?” The answer is: Yes, there are many ways to see, for example, water, and no reason to regard any one way as privileged because fully adequate (except perhaps water’s way of seeing itself as reflected in its environment). But also: Yes, it’s a mistake to see many forms as one thing, if it leads to an idea of some essential being of water apart from its myriad manifestations: “It seems that there is water for various beings but there is no original water.” This does not mean that water phenomena aren’t interconnected, but they’re dependent on each other rather than on some underlying idea or over-arching abstraction. Nor does this prevent particular bodies of water from being quite different from, say, formations of earth, since for Dōgen each particular phenomenon, occupying a unique locus in the complex web of interrelations that is the world, “abides in its own dharma-position.”

Such interrelations become more fully realized when they are apprehended by a mind informed by a self-reflection of the kind where “water sees water” as a major mental event: “Water exists inside fire and inside mind, thoughts, and ideas” (103). The world is a play of perspectives, a field of interpreting forces, where every focus of becoming construes and co-constructs every other. Since everything is intimately related to water, and pervaded by water, water in turn contains everything within: “Even

in a drop of water innumerable Buddha-lands appear.” This is an allusion to the image of the Diamond Net of Indra, in which each particular jeweled node of the net holographically reflects all other particulars in the universe.

These Buddha-lands are landscapes, mountains formed by earth and waters, not beyond but within the beautiful landscapes to be found in the natural world. Dragons and fish, Dōgen tells us, see water as a palace because they live in its ebb and flow and thus don’t experience it as flowing. If we tell them the water is flowing, they’ll be as surprised as human beings are when told that “mountains flow” and “mountains walk” (104). When a dewdrop can hold the image of the moon and sky and earth, worlds proliferate as reflections abound:

It is not only that there is water in the world, but there is a world in water. It is not just in water. There is also a world of sentient beings in clouds. There is a world of sentient beings in the air..., in fire..., in earth..., in the phenomenal world..., in a blade of grass. (106)

It’s all there, but our perceptions need to be stretched, our perspectives widened and insights deepened for us to appreciate it.

## NATURAL TECHNOLOGIES

Here’s one way of framing our current ecological predicament: Having lost touch with what is natural, we have allowed the artificial and technological to overwhelm us and drive our activity to a point where we’re in danger of wiping out the natural altogether. Some enthusiasts of the “post-human” seem to be encouraged by this development, and already celebrate the collapse of the category of the “natural.” Those of us old-fashioned enough to want to retain some element of nature in our humanity may find in East-Asian thought some good grounds for rehabilitating the category, which in turn can contribute to human flourishing. It’s evident that Daoist thought can help us think fruitfully about the nature of the natural, but not so clear that Dōgen’s thinking can be as helpful—especially since Sōtō Zen has been much misunderstood on this point.

Dōgen has often been mistaken for a quietist of some kind. If it's all buddha-nature, so the argument goes, then everything is fine just the way it is, and there's no need, let alone justification, for intervention for the purpose of environmental protection (cf. SAITŌ 1995 and HARRIS 1995, 177). If human employment of technology now introduces massive and damaging pollution into this world of impermanence, so much the better if things arise and perish in shorter order. And if everything human beings do is natural—manifesting buddha-nature—then plutonium waste, a long-lasting substance so lethal that a tiny amount can vastly devastate life around it, would be a natural product that positively hums with buddha-nature. (One is reminded of the fifty million Christian fundamentalists in the United States who believe in some kind of “End-Time theology”: they tend to welcome, and even actively promote, the destruction of the earth and its climate, since it will help to bring on “the Rapture,” whereby the righteous will enter Heaven and the sinners will be consigned to the Other Place.) But this way of understanding Dōgen misses how helpful Zen can be when we try to fathom our technology-mediated dealings with the natural world.

To judge from Dōgen's only discussion (as far as I know) of human engagement with a product of technology, he seems relatively unconcerned with technology's impact on human existence. In one of the shortest and densest sections of the *Shōbōgenzō*, “Total Dynamism” (*Zenki*), Dōgen begins by invoking the traditional Buddhist notion of “momentariness” (刹那消滅, S. *kṣaṇika*), which states that everything perishes immediately upon arising. “There is birth and death in each moment of this life of birth and death” (*Shinjin gakudō*, Dōgen, 1985, 91). Unsurprisingly, most people are unaware of this feature of reality:

You should take note that the human body in this life is formed temporarily as a result of the combination of the four elements and the five skandhas [bundles of psychophysical strands].... [Moreover] life arises and perishes instantaneously from moment to moment and does not abide at all.... Pity those who are altogether unaware of their own births and deaths! (*Shukke kudoku*, KIM 2004, 154)

Dōgen invokes this idea at the beginning of his discussion of total dynamism, using the term *shōji* 生死: birth-death. Since *shō* means “life”

as well as “birth,” it’s a matter of life and death and a life of birth-deaths—with all existents arising and perishing momentarily, in every instant (*Zenki*, DŌGEN 1985, 84).

In accordance with the principle of dependent co-arising, everything arises and perishes in interconnection with everything else—giving rise to a dynamic of “total functioning” or “total dynamism.” To illustrate, Dōgen invokes a boat.

Life is, for example, like sailing in a boat. Although we set sail, steer our course, and pole the boat along, the boat carries us, and we do not exist apart from the boat. By sailing in the boat we make the boat what it is. Study assiduously this very moment.

The sailboat is the consummate nature-friendly product of technology: by inserting a human artifact (sails) into the interplay of the powers of heaven and earth, it makes use of natural forces without abusing them or using them up. If we have two sailboats side by side, or one downwind from the other, the fact that I catch the wind in my sails doesn’t preclude you from doing the same with yours. Since winds are by nature variable, a sailboat only functions properly if it can also be propelled by human action, mediated by a pole or oars. And yet oars only function in conjunction with a boat. The activity of sailing is thus a prime example of “turning things while being turned by things.”

At such time there is nothing but the world of the boat. The heavens, the water, and the shore—all become the boat’s time.... In riding the boat, one’s body and mind, the self and the world are together the dynamic function of the boat. The entire earth and the whole empty sky are in company with the boat’s vigorous exertion. Such is the I that is life, the life that is I.

Regarded from our customary anthropocentric perspective, a boat, as something made by human beings, is *in* our 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>23</sup>

23. One of the great merits of Hec-Jin Kim’s reading of Dōgen is that he empha-

For Zhuangzi what distinguishes humans from other beings is a certain kind of analytical thinking, by contrast with a natural spontaneity deriving from the powers of heaven and earth (*tian* 天, nature). Another way the Daoists acknowledge the difference between what comes from *tian* and what comes from *ren* 仁 (the human) is through distinguishing two kinds of activity: *wuwei* 無為, which avoids disrupting the powers of heaven and earth, and so harmonizes with and even enhances them; and *yuwei* 有為, which is intentional or artificial activity that interferes with and even overcomes the forces of nature. Dōgen’s sailboat is a paradigm of *wuwei* technology, which makes use of natural forces without using them up, as with the waterwheel and the windmill. *Yuwei* would be technologies like nuclear fission and genetic engineering, which work by monkeying around with the most basic elements of nature and life. As a rule of thumb, Daoists would approve of *wuwei*-style technologies, while warning against the potential drawbacks of *yuwei*-style contrivances—especially in the long term.

Dōgen doesn’t seem to be especially concerned to distinguish the natural from the artificial, and he only occasionally discusses the Daoist distinction between *wuwei* (*mu-i*) and *yuwei* (*u-i*). He does this in response to “stupid people of the small vehicle [Hināyāna]” who claim that the making of images and building of stupas is to be avoided on the grounds that it involves too much thinking and planning (way too *u-i*). This false view elicits a blast of vituperation from Dōgen, who insists that this sort of activity is “the natural establishment of bodhi-mind... merit achieved through *mu-i*, without superfluity” (*Hotsu mujōshin*, DŌGEN 1997, 256–8). As long as we’re working in the right frame of mind, we’re doing the right thing when we “make a Buddha or build a stupa by gathering wood and stone, by heaping up mud and earth, and by collecting gold, silver, and the seven treasures.” This is natural activity, vital activity, and a valuable work of culture.

In view of his denial that the building of stupas is *u-i* behavior, it looks as if we’d have to say that all human building is natural enough. If it’s natural for beavers to build dams and birds to make nests, it’s surely natural for humans to build structures to shelter them from the ele-

sizes Dōgen’s basic conception of human existence as dynamic *activity*.

ments, and then—when they get religion—stupas, temples, churches, and cathedrals to affirm their relations with the divine. But what about hermetically-sealed, heated and air-conditioned buildings that prevent their inhabitants from ever coming into contact with a single molecule of untreated air? When even the buildings get diagnosed as “sick,” isn’t there something unnatural going on?

When talking about the ubiquity of mind, Dōgen often invokes a locution from the Chan Buddhist tradition: “fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles.”<sup>25</sup> The first three items, as products of human ingenuity applied to raw materials to provide basic protection, are readily understood as concrete manifestations of the human mind in the physical world. The pebbles, as naturally occurring, present a challenge to the anthropocentrists—and prepare the mind for its association with the sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, earth, and all the other natural phenomena Dōgen invokes as being mental and mindful. But when he goes on to say at the conclusion of the fascicle on buddha-nature (*Bussbō*), that it is “fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles,” this is a provocation to traditional thinking about buddha-nature.

### TOTAL BUDDHA-NATURE

Just as in the West the pool of candidates for ethical consideration has widened from the neighbors to animals to the more majestic forms of vegetation, trees too big to hug, like sequoias; so in the East the promise of enlightenment had been extended—as Buddhism moved from India to China and Japan—from extraordinary human beings to ordinary ones, then from all sentient beings to “insentient” ones such as trees, rocks, and even particles of dust.<sup>26</sup> Dōgen took this trend to its ultimate conclusion by arguing for the nonduality of buddha-nature and the world of impermanence generally—famously rereading the well-known line from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra*, “All sentient beings have

25. 牆壁瓦礫 See, for example, *Shinjin gakudō*. DōGEN 1985, 89; “This Mind itself is Buddha,” DōGEN 1994, 54; *Sangai yuishinn*, DōGEN 1997, 47; *Hotsu mujōshin*, DōGEN 1997, 254.

26. For an illuminating account of this debate, see LAFLEUR 1989.

buddha-nature without exception,” as “The whole of existence as all sentient beings is buddha-nature” (*Bussbō*, DŌGEN 1996, 1).

Several writers in the Deep Ecology movement have tried to embrace Dōgen as one of their own, taking his thought as an inspiration for their “ultimate norm” of “biocentric equality.”<sup>28</sup> As this odd term suggests, these deep ecologists are cheerfully biocentric by comparison with Dōgen, who acknowledges a full range of “insentient” beings as being mind(s) capable of awakening. And if the principle of biocentric equality 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” (DEVALL and SESSIONS 1985, 67), one has to wonder what the authors want to do about the tubercle bacillus, for example, or the Ebola virus. Lethal viruses and deadly bacteria are natural beings and, as such, would have to be, for Dōgen, buddha-nature—even though aspects of buddha-nature that it serves humans to avoid. But would he support their right to live and blossom, to attain full unfolding and self-realization? Praise them, perhaps, as purveyors and hasteners of impermanence? If so, then not much point in enlisting his ideas in efforts to save the planet.

Dōgen naturally subscribes to the Buddhist view of the sacredness of life and the precept of not killing, but he would observe these precepts in the context of the belonging-together of life and death (生死) and the functional interdependence (緣起) of all things.<sup>30</sup> Just as it made good sense, and was natural, for our ancestors to take steps to avoid being eaten by saber-toothed tigers and other predators, so it’s a natural reaction to want to eliminate deadly viruses. Given the difference in the “dharma-positions” occupied by humans and viruses, Dōgen would not, under most circumstances, condemn attempts to eradicate the tubercle bacillus as pernicious anthropocentrism. However the eradication of all

28. See DEVALL and SESSIONS 1985, 66, where they credit Arne Naess with developing the norm. For a criticism of this view, and a more detailed treatment of some of the themes in the present section, see PARKES 2003.

30. Dōgen’s idea of buddha-nature—which comprises “total-being buddha-nature” (悉有仏性), “non-being buddha-nature” (無仏性), and “emptiness buddha-nature” (空仏性)—is extremely complex. An illuminating commentary is the chapter “The Religion and Metaphysics of Buddha-Nature” in KIM 2004, 10–75.

top predators poses a problem for the flourishing of the whole, insofar as the populations of predators tend to keep themselves dynamically stable within ecosystems. (If predators predate too efficiently, or their population grows beyond the sustainable limit of the ecosystem, they die.) The only top predator of which this isn't true—so far at least—is the human being, since our current population growth and consumption of resources are clearly jeopardizing the flourishing of the whole.

Dōgen is the least anthropocentric of thinkers, but this doesn't mean he thinks the human race is dispensable. On the contrary, his notion of “total dynamism” enjoins his audience to full and vital participation in the functioning of the whole. This whole, here and now, is buddha-nature; but Dōgen thinks buddha-nature has been widely misunderstood through being wildly overestimated:

Since time immemorial foolish people have seen consciousness of the divine as buddha-nature, and as the original human state. One could die laughing! To express buddha-nature further... it is fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles.<sup>31</sup>

To ascribe buddha-nature to pebbles is natural because they come into being naturally—the *shō* 性 of *bussbō* 仏性, when read as *saga*, connotes “birth,” “life,” and “growth.” Since the radical of this character is *shin* 心, “mind,” which for Dōgen informs natural phenomena as well as humans, it could extend to artifacts made by human beings for their livelihood. To fences, walls, and tiles, for example, since it is doubtful whether the technology used in his day to produce such artifacts was environmentally destructive. But are fences or tiles made of non-biodegradable plastic to be revered as buddha-nature? In natural ecosystems there's no such thing as waste, since something will be consuming the decaying remains of everything that dies; but once we introduce such non-natural entities as plastics and other synthetics into the biosphere, we get the phenomenon of waste in a way that gravely burdens the earth.

The important feature of buddha-nature for Dōgen, exemplified in his calling it “whole-being” (*shitsu-u*), is that it constitutes a self-organizing

31. *Bussbō*, DŌGEN 1996, 32. The term *garyaku* 瓦礫 (fences and walls) also has the connotation of useless, insignificant things.

totality. He would thus *not* be committed to celebrating the chemicals polluting a river (which render the resident fish more impermanent than they would otherwise be), or revering the radioactive waste stored all over the planet (which is capable of radicalizing the impermanence of all life to the point of total extinction), as venerable manifestations of buddha-nature. Just as the Daoist sage practices an enlightened “sorting” (論) of things on the basis of the broadest possible perspective on their various powers and potentials (得), so Dōgen exhorts his readers to “total exertion” (究尽) in attending to the different ways things “express the Way” (道德) and occupy their special “dharma-positions” (法位) in the vast context of the cosmos.<sup>32</sup> By contrast with the radical-egalitarian deep-ecological picture of Daoism and Zen, whereby all living beings are to be encouraged to blossom and flourish, Dōgen would consider the effects of propagating tubercle bacilli or plutonium waste on the flourishing of humans—in the context of the flourishing of the whole—before deciding to let them bloom. One of the main things we learn from East-Asian thinkers in this respect is that universal rules or principles are of little help in such circumstances: difficult issues always demand careful attention across the widest relevant context.

It is simplistic to suppose that Dōgen would accept plutonium waste as buddha-nature, insofar as it’s part of the totality of what there is. Here today, he would rather see, and say, that at some point human beings, through overproducing the artificial and the synthetic, have actually managed to violate the totality to such an extent that buddha-nature is no longer what it used to be? buddha-nature would be the total functioning of the earth-system including the human, but not when the activities of humans throw the whole thing out of joint.

Plutonium waste wouldn’t qualify as buddha-nature since it conflicts with two of Buddhism’s most fundamental ideas: impermanence and interrelatedness. Of course plutonium waste isn’t permanent, but it’s far

32. Hee-Jin Kim lays appropriate emphasis on the anti-quietistic aspect of Dōgen’s philosophy: “In his view things, events, relations were not the given (entities) but were possibilities, projects, and tasks that can be acted out, expressed, and understood as self-expressions and self-activities of the buddha-nature. This did not imply a complacent acceptance of the given situation but required man’s strenuous efforts to transform and transfigure it” (KIM 2004, 142).

less impermanent than natural processes, remaining lethal as it does for around 250,000 years. Partly from its deadliness, and also from its highly technosynthetic genesis, plutonium waste doesn't lend itself to dynamic or creative interrelations with any of the natural phenomena in the larger subsystems beyond it. It is subject, as all phenomena are, to conditions of dependent arising—but these conditions are so far from the natural, and so self-insulating from the overall operations of buddha-nature, that their product disrupts and detracts from the dynamism of the whole system. This is true to a lesser extent for plastic, another emblematic synthetic that disrupts natural ecosystems through its relative permanence, which comes in turn from its being derived from oil—which is never a component of healthy ecosystems on the earth's surface.

What we learn from Dōgen, then, is not a set of principles about how to treat the environment, but rather a way of living that learns from the natural world, appreciates its beauty, emulates it where appropriate, respects and draws inspiration from it. A way of living whereby bodymind realizes itself as a configuration flourishing into buddha-nature as a whole.

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