



BRIGHT WAY ZEN
STUDY SERIES



DOGEN'S
GENJOKOAN

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Zen master Dogen’s essay, “Genjokoan” | 3 |
| <u>Dogen’s Genjokoan Part 1: Non-Duality, Intimacy, and Enlightenment</u> | 6 |
| <u>Dogen’s Genjokoan Part 2: Our Experience of Absolute and Relative</u> | 15 |
| <u>Dogen’s Genjokoan Part 3: Seeking, Self-Nature, and the Matter of Life-and-Death</u> | 21 |
| <u>Dogen’s Genjokoan Part 4: Moon in a Dewdrop and Views of the Ocean</u> | 27 |
| <u>Dogen’s Genjokoan Part 5: Birds Fly, Fish Swim, a Zen Master Waves a Fan</u> | 32 |

GENJOKOAN

By Zen master Eihei Dogen, translated by Shohaku Okumura

*Chant leader alone: **Genjokoan is on page 49 of the chant book.***

Incense offering:

- *As doshi bows at mat*
- *As doshi bows at altar, after offering*
- *As doshi bows at mat again*

Chant leader alone, immediately after last incense offering gong above (don't wait for doshi to be seated) –

Genjokoan: Actualization of Reality

All together –

When all dharmas are the Buddha Dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, life and death, buddhas and living beings.

When the ten thousand dharmas are without fixed self, there is no delusion and no realization, no buddhas and no living beings, no birth and no death.

Since the Buddha Way by nature goes beyond the dichotomy of abundance and deficiency, there is arising and perishing, delusion and realization, living beings and buddhas.

Therefore flowers fall even though we love them; weeds grow even though we dislike them. Conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice-enlightenment is delusion. All things coming and carrying out practice-enlightenment through the self is realization. Those who greatly realize delusion are buddhas. Those who are greatly deluded in realization are living beings. Furthermore, there are those who attain realization beyond realization and those who are deluded within delusion.

When buddhas are truly buddhas they don't need to perceive they are buddhas; however, they are enlightened buddhas and they continue actualizing buddha. In seeing color and hearing sound with body and mind, although we perceive them intimately, the perception is not like reflections in a mirror or the moon in water. When one side is illuminated, the other is dark.

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things. To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of others drop off. There is a trace of realization that cannot be grasped. We endlessly express this ungraspable trace of realization.

When one first seeks the Dharma, one strays far from the boundary of the Dharma. When the Dharma is correctly transmitted to the self, one is immediately an original person. If one riding in a boat watches the coast, one mistakenly perceives the coast as moving. If one watches the boat in relation to the surface of the water, then one notices that the boat is moving. Similarly,

when we perceive the body and mind in a confused way and grasp all things with a discriminating mind, we mistakenly think that the self-nature of the mind is permanent. When we intimately practice and return right here, it is clear that all things have no fixed self.

Firewood becomes ash. Ash cannot become firewood again. However, we should not view ash as after and firewood as before. We should know that firewood dwells in the dharma position of firewood and has its own before and after. Although before and after exist, past and future are cut off. Ash stays in the position of ash, with its own before and after. As firewood never becomes firewood again after it has burned to ash, there is no return to living after a person dies. However, in Buddha Dharma it is an unchanged tradition not to say that life becomes death. Therefore we call it no-arising. It is the established way of buddhas' turning the Dharma wheel not to say that death becomes life. Therefore, we call it no-perishing. Life is a position in time; death is also a position in time. This is like winter and spring. We don't think that winter becomes spring, and we don't say that spring becomes summer.

When a person attains realization, it is like the moon's reflection in water. The moon never becomes wet; the water is never disturbed. Although the moon is a vast and great light, it is reflected in a drop of water. The whole moon and even the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew on a blade of grass. Realization does not destroy the person, as the moon does not make a hole in the water. The person does not obstruct realization, as a drop of dew does not obstruct the moon in the sky. The depth is the same as the height. To investigate the significance of the length and brevity of time, we should consider whether the water is great or small, and understand the size of the moon in the sky.

When the Dharma has not yet fully penetrated body and mind, one thinks one is already filled with it. When the Dharma fills body and mind, one thinks something is still lacking. For example, when we sail a boat into the ocean beyond sight of land and our eyes scan the horizon in the four directions, it simply looks like a circle. No other shape appears.

This great ocean, however, is neither round nor square. It has inexhaustible characteristics. To a fish it looks like a palace; to a heavenly being a jeweled necklace. To us, as far as our eyes can see, it looks like a circle. All the myriad things are like this. Within the dusty world and beyond, there are innumerable aspects and characteristics; we only see or grasp as far as the power of our eye of study and practice can see. When we listen to the reality of myriad things, we must know that there are inexhaustible characteristics in both ocean and mountains, and there are many other worlds in the four directions. This is true not only in the external world, but also right under our feet or within a single drop of water.

When a fish swims, no matter how far it swims, it doesn't reach the end of the water. When a bird flies, no matter how high it flies, it cannot reach the end of the sky. When the bird's need or the fish's need is great, the range is large. When the need is small, the range is small. In this way, each fish and each bird uses the whole of space and vigorously acts in every place. However, if a bird departs from the sky, or a fish leaves the water, it immediately dies. We should know that for a fish water is life, for a bird sky is life. A bird is life; a fish is life. Life is a bird; life is a fish. And we should go beyond this. There is practice-enlightenment—this is the way of living beings.

Therefore, if there are fish that would swim or birds that would fly only after investigating the entire ocean or sky, they would find neither path nor place. When we make this very place our own, our practice becomes the actualization of reality. When we make this path our own, our activity naturally becomes actualized reality. This path, this place, is neither big nor small, neither self nor others. It has not existed before this moment nor has it come into existence now. Therefore the reality of all things is thus. In the same way, when a person engages in practice-enlightenment in the Buddha Way, as the person realizes one dharma, the person permeates that dharma; as the person encounters one practice, the person fully practices that practice. For this there is a place and a path. The boundary of the known is not clear; this is because the known which appears limited is born and practiced simultaneously with the complete penetration of the Buddha Dharma. We should not think that what we have attained is conceived by ourselves and known by our discriminating mind. Although complete enlightenment is immediately actualized, its intimacy is such that it does not necessarily form as a view. In fact, viewing is not something fixed.

The Zen Master of Mt. Magu was waving a fan. A monk approached him and asked, “The nature of wind is ever present and permeates everywhere. Why are you waving a fan?” The master said, “You know only that the wind’s nature is ever present—you don’t know that it permeates everywhere.” The monk said, “How does wind permeate everywhere?” The master just continued waving the fan. The monk bowed deeply.

The genuine experience of Buddha Dharma and the vital path that has been correctly transmitted are like this. To say we should not wave a fan because the nature of wind is ever present, and that we should feel the wind even when we don’t wave a fan, is to know neither ever-presence nor the wind’s nature. Since the wind’s nature is ever present, the wind of the Buddha’s family enables us to realize the gold of the great Earth and to transform the water of the long river into cream.

Chant leader alone –

We offer the merit of this scripture recitation to all, so that they may be able to obtain the truth.

All together –

- All buddhas throughout space and time,
- All honored ones, bodhisattvas, mahasattvas,
- Wisdom beyond wisdom, maha prajna paramita

Final bows with doshi:

- ◆ *Doshi bows to altar*
- ◆ *Doshi bows to you (chant leader)*
- ◆ *Doshi bows at seat, or door of zendo if s/he is leaving*

Announce, “Zazen” immediately.

Dogen's Genjokoan Part 1: Non-Duality, Intimacy, and Enlightenment

Introduction

This episode is part of my **Buddhist Texts** series, and it focuses on a famous Zen text called “Genjokoan.” The author of this relatively short text – an essay, really – is Eihei Dogen, a Japanese Zen master born in the year 1200. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk at age 13, and eventually traveled all the way to China to get answers to his burning spiritual questions. When he got those answers, he went back to Japan and established his own monastery, where he taught a form of Zen that was called “Caodong” in China, and came to be called “Soto” in Japan. Dogen was a prolific writer, producing close to 100 dense and poetic essays like Genjokoan, along with other texts. Ironically, Dogen’s writings fell into obscurity not long after his death and have really only become popular again within the last hundred years or so, but today his teachings are revered throughout the Zen Buddhist world as deeply profound and eloquent.

Genjokoan is the first essay in a collection of Dogen’s writings called the *Shobogenzo*, or “The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye.” Genjokoan is also one of the most popular and widely studied of Dogen’s essays, because, as Dogen’s writings go, it’s pretty down-to-earth and accessible. That said, accessibility is relative, and the meaning of Genjokoan is still not immediately obvious to someone unfamiliar with Buddhism, Zen, and particularly with the poetic imagery used by Dogen and by Chan or Zen writers in general. And even once you know what a particular passage is trying to say, really understanding it for yourself is, of course, another matter entirely.

In the interest of unlocking the profound teaching of the Genjokoan for you, I’ll proceed through the essay verse by verse. First, I’ll talk about the widely accepted interpretations of the language and imagery Dogen uses, so you can get a sense of the teaching being conveyed in a more or less objective sense (although Dogen’s essays really do read more like poetry than prose much of the time, so there’s always a measure of speculation when interpreting or translating them). After I give you the basic interpretation of a verse, I’ll then spend a little time trying to explain it from the point of view of Zen practice – which of course means I’ll be adding another layer of interpretation. Because we’ll be considering the text so thoroughly, it will take us several episodes to get through it. Next week’s episode will continue with Genjokoan, and then I’ll take a break to visit a different topic before returning to it.

I invite you follow along and allow Dogen’s words – as well as the interpretations – to flow into your consciousness and out again, without trying too hard to figure it all out intellectually. The most powerful aspects of Dogen’s writings, for many of us, tend to be their evocative quality – again, like poetry. Even though you intellectually may not have any kind of grasp of what Dogen’s talking about, you might find something within you stirred by his language, as if, at some deep level, you’re familiar with the truth he’s pointing to. I advise you to honor and explore those stirrings, and even to practice translating some Dogen passages into your own words – you might be surprised how much of his teaching you actually do understand!

One last note before I begin working my way through Genjokoan: for the translation of the text, and for much of the interpretation of it, I am indebted to Shokaku Okumura's book, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen's Shobogenzo*. ([Click here for a pdf of Okumura's translation.](#)) Another good text is *Dogen's Genjokoan: Three Commentaries*. Note: no other piece of Dogen's writing has so much material available on it, so Genjokoan is a great place to begin your Dogen study.

The Meaning of the Title, "Genjokoan"

To begin our study of Genjokoan, then, we should first consider the title. Okumura sensei says the Japanese character *genjo* means "reality actually and presently taking place" and *koan* refers to the intersection of two aspects of reality: the individual, or relative, and the universal, or absolute. Therefore, Okumura translates Genjokoan to mean "to answer the question from true reality through the practice of our everyday activity."^[1] Other translations of the title are, "Actualization of Reality," "Actualizing the Fundamental Point,"^[2] and "The Realized Law of the Universe."^[3] ([Click here to read a bunch of different translations of Genjokoan.](#))

My version of the title of Genjokoan is this: Honoring and manifesting the relative and absolute dimensions in your life, simultaneously. Some background on the whole Zen teaching of absolute and relative will be useful, here: early on in the development of Chan Buddhism in 7th and 8th century China, it began to describe reality as having two aspects, or dimensions: the relative, and the absolute. In the relative sense, we're all separate individuals, and we need to discriminate one thing from another, and define things through comparison: tall and short, good and bad, profound and mundane. But all discriminations are relative, and in truth the boundaries between things are arbitrary and largely conceptual. In the absolute sense, we're all just parts of one, seamless reality, and we share the same fundamental nature – existent and empty at the same time. ([Click here for a handy chart comparing and contrasting the absolute and relative dimensions of reality.](#))

Don't worry if this discussion of absolute and relative doesn't make sense to you right away, because it's basically the subject of the whole Genjokoan and we'll be exploring it a lot more. Actually, the relationship between the absolute and relative is one of the primary concerns of Zen as a whole, so this topic shows up all the time, in all kinds of Zen teachings. The "two sides" are identified using many different paired words and images: unity and individuality, one and many, emptiness and form, dark and light, buddhas and ordinary suffering beings, enlightenment and delusion.

Why is this whole topic of absolute versus relative so central in Zen? It's not purely philosophical. We experience the relative as we navigate our daily lives, relying on our ability to compare and discriminate in order to make decisions. The relative is the world of self versus other, good versus bad, success versus failure, gain versus loss. It's our experience of individuality and separateness – a rich dimension of our life, but the relative world can also be exhausting, overwhelming, isolating, and depressing. The absolute dimension of our life is what we remember at certain moments when we have a sense of a larger, underlying meaning or connection – a sense of God, or the divine, or the "more," or whatever you want to call it. When we taste the absolute dimension of our life, things may make sense, or seem worth it, or appear profoundly beautiful and complete even though they're utterly ordinary.

In our daily lives, the absolute and relative dimensions of reality sometimes appear to be in contradiction – or at the very least we experience one side and then the other, bouncing between

the two. Where is our experience of the divine when we're upset with traffic? Where is our anger when we're experiencing the divine? Genjokoan is about our practice with this. How do we live in harmony with – not just understand – the two aspects of reality, which are simultaneously true and mutually interdependent? I invite you to ask yourself deeply, “What does this koan/question mean to me? How does it manifest in my life? Why should I care? Are there any moments in my life when I honor the absolute and the relative in the same moment?”

The Basic Buddhist Teachings

Genjokoan begins with three statements about life, or reality, each from a different dharmic perspective. The first is this:

[From the Genjokoan:] When all dharmas are the Buddha Dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, life and death, buddhas and living beings.[4]

Okumura explains that the first sentence here refers to the original teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha – foundational Buddhism, in other words. The first “dharma” is a lowercase-d dharma, which just means “things.” The second “dharma,” part of the term Buddha Dharma, is capital-d Dharma, meaning “truth” or “teaching.” So, when you view reality – all things – from the point of view of Buddhist practice and teaching (“all dharmas are the Buddha Dharma”), “there is delusion and realization, practice, life and death, buddhas and living beings.”

To explain this list of things which are aspects of Buddhism: According to the teachings of the Buddha, your experience of reality is profoundly impacted by the state of your mind, or your views. If you are “deluded” – if you don’t understand the true nature of reality, including the nature of self – you inevitably create stress and suffering for yourself and others. “Realization,” on the other hand, liberates us from the cycle of transmigration – or the endless process of “birth, or life, and death,” rebirth, and generation of karma that keeps the whole cycle going. We achieve realization through “practice,” and those who attain full realization and liberation are buddhas, or “awakened ones,” as compared to us ordinary “living beings.”

I talk about these foundational, original Buddhist teachings in Episodes 9 ([Shakyamuni Buddha's Enlightenment: What Did He Realize?](#)) and 27 ([Buddha's Teachings Part 2: The Four Noble Truths](#)), so I won't explain them further here. The important thing to realize about this passage in the Genjokoan is that it occurs at the very beginning – stating up front the foundational truths of original Buddhism, in condensed form – *and* that it is part of a three-sentence verse. The next line of Genjokoan states the emptiness aspect of Mahayana Buddhism, contrasting it with the description of reality from the point of view of original Buddhism. The third sentence then reconciles the two sides, reminding us that both are true simultaneously.

Mahayana Teachings of Emptiness

So, from the emptiness perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, we get the next line:

[From the Genjokoan:] When the ten thousand dharmas are without [fixed] self, there is no delusion and no realization, no buddhas and no living beings, no birth and no death.

In short, all things, including people, objects, and ideas, are “empty” of inherent, enduring, independent self-nature. Things don’t exist in-and-of-themselves in the way we think they do.

Ultimately, the boundaries between things can't be pinned down, and there is no permanent self-essence to be found within them. Everything is impermanent, and each thing is what it is *because* of its relationship to everything else. In order to function in the world – to make decisions, act, and communicate – we conceive of things like delusion, realization, and buddhas, but ultimately even these things are empty.

Why is it important to contrast the teaching of emptiness with the statement about the foundational truths of Buddhism? The teaching of emptiness is a medicine to treat the problem of attachment, and we can become attached to Buddhism just like anything else. It's easy to imagine, isn't it, that as Buddhists we could enshrine the concepts of delusion, practice, realization, and suffering, and imbue them with self-nature and permanence, or as Okumura says, make them into "irrefutable truths."

Imagine us correcting and editing one another: "Oh, don't do that, that's just being attached!" Or "Of course, I shouldn't really care because everything is impermanent." Or, "Do you think so-and-so is a Buddha yet?" We could start to vilify desire or delusion of any kind, or withdraw from life because it's just a source of dissatisfaction or suffering, or we could get self-righteous with the people we know who don't practice. We can, essentially, end up using the Buddhadharma as a tool of self – making the self feel *more* substantial, important, and secure – and superior to all those ordinary attached beings who suffer in delusion.

Not only that: According to the Mahayana, insight into emptiness is an essential part of the Buddhist path. If you stop with a limited understanding of original Buddhism, you may end up stuck in duality, or in the relative dimension of good and bad, deluded and enlightened. There's plenty of beneficial work to be done in the relative realm, but true liberation – according to the Mahayanists – requires us to awaken to absolute dimension of reality as well.

Dogen's Pointing toward Radical Non-Duality

This brings us to the third sentence of the first, three-part verse of the Genjokoan, where Dogen points us toward the radical non-duality of Zen:

[From the Genjokoan:] Since the Buddha Way by nature goes beyond [the dichotomy of] abundance and deficiency, there is arising and perishing, delusion and realization, living beings and buddhas.

Essentially, Dogen is reminding us not to get stuck even in the duality of relative *versus* the absolute. According to Okumura, "abundance," here, refers to "positive" things like realization, arising, and buddhas, while "deficiency" refers to their opposites. The "Buddha Way" – or the path of according with reality – goes beyond such a dichotomy. In other words, our life has both a relative and absolute dimension, but reality itself transcends such a distinction. Sure, everything is empty, but there's still life, isn't there? Despite the fact that even Buddhism and practice are empty, delusion *does* lead to suffering, suffering hurts, and practice helps.

Because emptiness does not actually negate relative reality, Dogen restates the reality of "arising and perishing, delusion and realization, living beings and buddhas" – and yet, because of the truth of the first two sentences, this third sentence is different. It's not just a restatement of the first statement from the point of view of original Buddhism. With full consideration of both

the relative dimension of delusion-versus-realization *and* the absolute dimension where no such distinctions exist, we arrive at an integrated sense of reality which doesn't deny anything. How do we enact Dogen's teaching, and avoid getting caught in either the relative or the absolute view? We realize our liberation is constantly enacted in the daily dance of life. We only know emptiness because there are things and people and experiences to *be* empty (emptiness is not something that exists separate from form, as I explain in Episode 19 on the **Heart Sutra**). We only know non-attachment because we have loved, gotten attached and let go. Even a moment of perfect liberation is experienced *through* your body and your senses, and along with the floor, the light, and your surroundings.

In our practice, we first give up resistance to impermanence and no-self, and this is liberating. Then we give up resistance to the ungraspable nature of liberation, letting go even of setting ourselves up in opposition to relative world of stress and suffering. Then we turn toward all of existence – including struggle, suffering, and delusion – as being inseparable from the Great Reality we want to know intimately. Complete Buddhist practice and liberation, then, at least from the Zen point of view, includes *three* steps: 1) relative practice to clear away delusion and relieve suffering, 2) awakening to emptiness in order to appreciate the absolute dimension of our lives, *and* 3) a transcendence of the duality of absolute versus relative.

This transcendence of duality *is* Genjokoan, or “honoring and manifesting the relative and absolute dimensions in your life, simultaneously.” The rest of Dogen's essay uses a series of images and metaphors to describe the experience and practice of Genjokoan.

Our Relationship with All Things in the Universe

[From the Genjokoan:] Therefore flowers fall even though we love them; weeds grow even though we dislike them. Conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice-enlightenment is delusion. All things coming and carrying out practice-enlightenment through the self is realization.

To paraphrase: Despite our preferences, our lives are inevitably filled with things that cause us discomfort and pain (that is, weeds) and the things we love change or pass away (those are the flowers). This causes us dukkha (stress, dissatisfaction, or suffering), so we engage in spiritual practice in order to free ourselves from dukkha. After all, that's what the original Buddhist teachings tell us to do! If we free ourselves from delusion, we can attain liberation.

However, this approach – seeking enlightenment for ourselves – is limited. It's “conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice-enlightenment.” (Note, instead of simply saying “enlightenment,” Dogen often used Japanese terms that are best translated as “practice-hyphen-enlightenment,” because he strongly emphasized practice and enlightenment are one and the same thing.) As long as we go about seeking enlightenment for our own benefit – in the same way that we go about the other activities of our lives, trying to change or achieve something for ourselves – we remain stuck in delusion. We still see ourselves as separate from all that is, and cling to relative world of good and bad. We may strive and strive – reading, meditating, trying to be good people – but somehow our spiritual aspirations elude us.

Dogen says, then, that realization is when “all things come and carry our practice-enlightenment through the self.” What does this mean? Clearly it is not something “we” *do* in the ordinary sense of the word. This is a very subtle teaching that may best be expressed by a story:

My Story about Oneness with a Flower

“Therefore flowers fall even though we love them; weeds grow even though we dislike them.”

Before any spiritual practice, we’re completely absorbed in the relative and don’t even question it. If I’m looking at a flower, there’s me, and there’s a flower. It’s obvious. I have my existence, and each thing or being I encounter has its own existence. We may be related in some way – I may notice and value a flower because it’s beautiful, or I may know the flower’s a weed and think of getting rid of it, or maybe I hardly notice the flower at all. There is *me* moving through life encountering different things that make my life pleasant or unpleasant, easy or difficult. No matter how I feel about things, inevitably flowers fall and weeds grow. Sometimes life is good, and sometimes it sucks.

Then I experience what Buddhists call the arising of “The Mind That Seeks the Way” – I encounter an inspiring spiritual practice and consider the possibility that there’s a different way of living. I hear about unity, or absolute reality. It sounds intriguing, and I’d like to understand more – and maybe even experience some of it for myself, because it seems like it would really change my outlook on life. So, I set out to find that flower again, and this time I’m *really* going to look at it. Buddhism says that ultimately my “self” is empty and there is no separation between me and all things – and I want to experience that.

“Conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice-enlightenment is delusion.”

So, I sit next to the flower and try to look at it without any sense of separation from it. I try to drop my sense of self, to let go, to allow my mind to settle to the point where there are no thoughts. I sit zazen for many hours at a time in retreat, stay up late at night sitting, try to reach an altered state where the sense of separation will fall away. But no matter how hard I try – no matter what I try – there’s still *me* staring at the flower, a brutal and undeniable reality of difference.

This is what I think Dogen means by “conveying oneself toward all things to carry out practice enlightenment.” Unfortunately, it’s a stage we can’t skip. We don’t understand how it’s delusion until we try it, exhaust it, and eventually give up on it.

To return to my story, then, I reach this point of exhaustion and give up. However, I *don’t* give up practice; that’s become a deeply ingrained habit. I still sit zazen, and try to pay attention to reality. I *do* give up any hope for the special experience of the absolute I wanted. I find myself worn down, transparent, bored with myself and ready to try something different. Essentially, I’ve given up any hope for my *self* – that I’m going to get something out of this practice.

“All things coming and carrying out practice-enlightenment through the self is realization.”

Because I’m still practicing, I end up looking at the flower again. As I do so, I am well trained so I don’t jump into the old narrative assumption of me on my self-interested journey through life, encountering a flower that may or may not seem beautiful to me. At the same time, I now look at

the flower with no *spiritual* agenda. Not trying to see it as empty, not trying to feel one with it, nothing. Just looking, like when we're just sitting in zazen.

At last: There is the flower and me and the dirt and the breeze and the warmth of the sun and the ant crawling by... and everything – including me but with no special emphasis on me – is one, luminous, precious reality. There isn't *me* realizing how it's all one, luminous, precious reality (at least, not until later) – in the moment of prajna, or enlightenment, we all participate in this reality together. This reality includes unity and difference at the same time, and (a little poetry of my own):

The teachings of the buddhas and ancestors are written in all the atoms and cells,
and each manifestation loudly proclaims the truth by its very existence.
But actually, no comment is necessary. It's just things as they are.

What is the Nature of Awakening?

Before we wrap up, let's explore one more verse:

[From the Genjokoan:] Those who greatly realize delusion are buddhas. Those who are greatly deluded in realization are living beings. Furthermore, there are those who attain realization beyond realization and those who are deluded within delusion. When buddhas are truly buddhas they don't need to perceive they are buddhas; however, they are enlightened buddhas and they continue actualizing buddha.

“Those who greatly realize delusion are buddhas.”

Buddhas are awakened beings. We wonder what buddhas are like, and what awakening is like. We imagine that if we're awakened we will “wake up to” some great reality that's different from the reality we already know. We imagine we'll see in what way everything is perfect just as it is, or how all is one and we're not separate from anything, and therefore we'll feel inspired to shed our egocentricity and self-concern.

But in a moment of awakening there is only awakening to the way we *obscure* reality from ourselves – therefore each person's path is their own, and unique. We are not awakening to a great abstract philosophical view, we are waking up *from* our own self-imposed dream and encountering reality itself. Therefore, buddhas are simply those who “greatly realize delusion.”

“Those who are greatly deluded in realization are living beings.”

Even when we are deluded we are in realization. What does this mean? If we don't realize we're in it, what does it mean to be in realization, and what good does it do us? Who is realizing what? If in the moment of awakening there is no one to realize – there is just life as it is, a complete whole – realization is not something that happens to people. It's simply reality. It doesn't really make sense to talk about “being in” realization this way, with no one to realize, but because of reality there always exists the potential of realization. We are constantly surrounded by the stuff of realization, which is reality itself. We can't not be in reality. Still, there *is* a big difference between our subjective experience of being awake, and being caught up in self-centered dream, so it is said we are “greatly deluded in realization.”

An old Buddhist story illustrates this point beautifully. A man stays overnight at his friend's house, and while he's sleeping, his host sews a valuable jewel into his cloak. The cloaked man then wanders for many years, slipping into deep poverty and despondency. Eventually he visits his friend again, only to have the friend show him how was carrying wealth with him all the time, sewn into his cloak. The man had lived as if he was poor even though he was wealthy. There was a big difference in his subjective experience before and after realizing his wealth, but the reality had not changed.

When we are living in poverty despite the jewel in our coats, or greatly deluded within realization, we are (ordinary) living beings. This is not pejorative, it's just an observation.

“Furthermore, there are those who attain realization beyond realization and those who are deluded within delusion.”

Dogen can't be satisfied with a tidy analogy. If he left us with buddhas realizing delusion and living beings being deluded about, or in, realization, that would be too easy. We'd fall into dualistic thinking, wondering if we're really awake or not, or whether we've found the jewel in our cloak or not. Am I a living being at this moment, or a buddha? Hmmm, I guess if I'm thinking about it, I'm a living being.

So, he goes further: the moment we become aware of awakening, we inhabit the world of living beings again. Just *being*, moment after moment, *is* realization beyond any discrimination of realization.

We may pity ourselves because we're just “living beings” at any given moment, but if we *know* there are moments of awakening, we're not completely deluded. At other times we are lost in delusion and believe that's all there is in life – and that, I think, may be what Dogen means by being deluded within delusion.

“When buddhas are truly buddhas they don't need to perceive they are buddhas;”

This is really about what we hope for: that we will reach oneness or awakening or whatever and be able to *know* it – to contrast our experience as a buddha with that of our experience as a living being and say, “Oh, this is much better.” When we are living beings, we imagine that when we manage to become buddhas we will be fundamentally better people, or in possession of something special. But this is not the nature of awakening.

Fortunately, we don't *need* to perceive we are buddhas, or awakened, in order for buddhahood or awakening to be wonderful, essential, and worthwhile. That's all we really care about, after all; the identification of self with enlightenment is just an extra agenda added by the ego. This is why Dogen says *need*, not just “they don't perceive they are buddhas” – which is also true, but not the point here, because:

“however, [even though they do not perceive they are buddhas] they are enlightened buddhas and they continue actualizing buddha.”

Somehow, being awakened does not involve a consciousness of *being* awakened, but there is still awakening. Think about this. How can this be? How can we be awake without having a sense

that “I” am awake? Sometimes we lose our sense of self-consciousness in activity, entertainment, or thinking, but then we cannot be said to be awake in this liberative sense.

How can we be awake – engaged, aware, alive, ready – without self-consciousness? This is our koan, or the big question in our Zen practice. We explore this question for ourselves in our zazen, in retreats, in our daily lives. It’s because this question is so central that we study the Genjokoan.

Sources

Dogen, Eihei. *Dogen’s Genjokoan: Three Commentaries*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2011.
Okumura, Shohaku. *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen’s Shobogenzo*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010.

Endnotes

[1] Okumura pg 21

[2] Tanahashi, Kazuaki, trans., ed. *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*. New York, NY: North Point Press, 1985

[3] Nishijima, Gudo and Chodo Cross. *Master Dogen’s Shobogenzo* (in four volumes). London: Windbell Publications, 1994

[4] All translations of the Genjokoan in this episode are from Okumura 2010

Dogen's Genjokoan Part 2: Our Experience of Absolute and Relative

This episode is part 2 of my series focusing on the famous Zen text called “Genjokoan.” As I explained in the **last episode**, the author of this essay is Eihei Dogen, a Japanese Zen master born in the year 1200. I’ll continue working our way through the text verse by verse, using the translation from Shohaku Okumura’s book, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen’s Shobogenzo*. I advise listening to the first Genjokoan episode if you haven’t already done so, because in the interest of minimizing repetition, I’m going to assume you’ve already heard my discussion of the meaning of the text’s title, “Genjokoan,” as well as my introduction to the following three weighty topics:

- The concepts of “absolute” and “relative” in Zen, and why the relationship between these two aspects of our experience is one of Zen’s central concerns;
- Dogen’s emphasis on radical non-duality – reminding us not to get stuck thinking only in relative terms, or only in absolute terms;
- Dogen’s vision of the nature of practice and enlightenment.

We will, of course, be continuing to develop our understanding of these topics in this episode. Note: in the interest of providing variety in your listening pleasure, I’ll take a break from our study of Genjokoan next week in order to cover a different kind of topic, and then I’ll return to it.

The Nature of Our Experience of Absolute and Relative

So, on to the next section of Genjokoan:

[From the Genjokoan:] “In seeing color and hearing sound with body and mind, although we perceive them intimately, [the perception] is not like reflections in a mirror or the moon in water. When one side is illuminated, the other is dark.”

Personally, I really like the translation of the first sentence by Robert Aitken and Kaz Tanahashi in the book *Dogen’s Genjokoan: Three Commentaries* (Counterpoint Press, 2012): **“When you see forms or hear sounds fully engaging body-and-mind, you intuit dharmas intimately.”** (Here, “dharmas” a lower-case-d “dharmas,” which simply means “things.”) The subject of this sentence points to one of the most essential aspects of Zen practice: learning to tune into our unmitigated, direct experience using our entire being: body-and-mind as one organism. This is seeing and hearing (as well as tasting, touching, smelling, and thinking) while “fully engaging body-and-mind.” When we do this, there is no sense of “self” as separate from the things the “self” is perceiving. At such a time, we “intuit dharmas intimately,” and experience our lives in a direct, fresh, and vital way – rather than through the filter of our concepts and views. Every diligent Zen student should ask themselves deeply, “What is this activity of intuiting dharmas intimately, or experiencing things directly? What is it like?”

Ironically, unmitigated, direct experience is simultaneously remarkable and utterly ordinary. It so defies discursive explanation that we often turn to poetic language and imagery to express it, like Japanese Soto Zen priest and Dogen scholar Bokusan Nishiyari (1821-1910) does in his commentary in the book *Dogen’s Genjokoan: Three Commentaries*:

“Lingyun [an ancestral Zen master] had realization when looking at peach blossoms; it’s seeing forms with bright mind. Xiangyan [*Shiang-yan*, another ancestor] had realization through the sound of a stone striking bamboo; it’s hearing the sound and being enlightened with the Way... “You intuit dharmas intimately.’ This is good. There is no dharma outside of the self, and there is no self outside of the dharma. Facing forms, the entire body becomes forms. Facing voice, the entire body becomes voice. The self and the object become not-two. At the time of ‘seeing peach blossoms,’ the entire world becomes peach blossoms. At the time of ‘hitting bamboo,’ the entire world is ‘crack!’ That’s the moment when the forms are truly seen and the voice is truly heard. At this moment you intimately intuit it.”^[1]

These Zen practitioners, Lingyun and Xiangyan, are said to have studied diligently for a long time, but unequivocally experienced the absolute dimension of their lives only when they finally *really saw* the peach blossoms, or *really heard* the sound of a stone striking a stalk of bamboo. In one sense, this complete, unmitigated experience is profound, but it’s also very simple. When there is no separation between self and the world, there is only this moment’s radiant occurrence. Significantly, it’s *not* radiant because it’s great as compared to our ordinary daily experience; it’s radiant because that’s the nature of reality.

Perceiving Versus Participating in Reality

But then Dogen warns us that this experience of reality is **“not like reflections in a mirror or the moon in water.”** In what sense? What does this warning mean, and why does he offer it?

Think of the nature of a reflection. It’s two dimensional. The mirror or the water is passive and separate, reflecting something outside.

If we act like a mirror, we may be very still, clear, empty of self-concern and perceiving things in a very objective way, but there is still a sense that there’s an “I” that’s observing, perceiving, or reflecting the universe “out there.” What we reflect may seem beautiful and grand, but it’s really just our image or idea of reality, not reality *itself*.

In contrast, as I described in the last episode ([Episode 34, under What Is the Nature of Awakening?](#)), “In the moment of prajna, or enlightenment, we all participate in reality together. Reality includes unity and difference at the same time.” In a moment of total absorption, when we truly “intuit dharmas intimately,” there is no sense of that “I” am reflecting or intuiting – no sense that “I” have now perceived reality directly. All beings and things awaken with you, through you, and you through them.

Absolute and Relative – Illuminating Only One Side at a Time?

Now we get to the line that has always been troublesome to me: **“When one side is illuminated, the other is dark.”**

I think many people see this sentence as saying that when we “see forms or hear sounds while fully engaging body-and-mind” and “intuit dharmas intimately,” we engage the absolute dimension of our lives – and therefore the “self,” and the relative dimension, is in the “dark,” or not perceptible. Presumably then, the opposite is true: when we experience a sense of self and operate in the relative world, the absolute dimension is in the dark, or not perceptible. After all, unlike the reflection in a mirror, life is three-dimensional, so there is always a side you’re not seeing. You’re either operating “in” the relative, or “in” the absolute.

This line of the Genjokoan has always bothered me because of this interpretation, which seems very dualistic to me. It seems to suggest we're doomed to be separate from a unified experience of reality as long as we have any sense of self, or as long as we want to operate in the relative world.

Even if this is not what various authors and teachers have meant in their commentaries on Genjokoan, this is an interpretation I believe is carried – consciously or unconsciously – by many Zen students: We figure that our lives will be mostly “spent” in the relative, nourished by vague memories of our past experiences of the absolute. Then, at certain times, we get the opportunity to “switch modes” and tap into the absolute – understanding, of course, that “we” aren't even really there to experience it. This description of having to switch between absolute and relative certainly manages to express our experience of practice, at least early on in our training, or at certain times.

But Dogen's Zen has got to be deeper than that, doesn't it? What happens if we depart from the dualistic interpretation I just described?

Nishiari, the Japanese Dogen scholar I quoted earlier, seems to interpret the meaning of “dark” in a non-dualistic way, taking it to refer to “all things merging in darkness.” As we've discussed, in Zen, dark often signifies the absolute, or non-differentiated reality; in this case Nishiari seems to be proposing that when you intimately intuit dharmas, there is no “other side:”

“When we intuit that the self and outer realm are not two, but one, there is not a second person throughout heaven and earth. When we illuminate one side, the *dharmadhatu* [the realm of the absolute] becomes one side, the ten directions [the cardinal directions plus up and down, meaning everywhere] become dark and all collapse.”[2]

Nishiari continues, suggesting that if our limited, one-sided illumination is complete, we touch the infinite:

“This one side merges with all dharmas in darkness and there is nothing left out. It's called *dark*. One dharma comprehends myriad dharmas in darkness.”

There is nothing left out. Any experience, any insight, any view is partial, but when we completely illuminate it, the whole universe is revealed within it. (Don't worry if you don't get this right away – other parts of the Genjokoan address this point, so we'll return to it later.)

All of Dogen's teaching, all of the Genjokoan, all of our practice is fundamentally about this paradoxical nature of our existence: How we realize, actualize, and live in harmony with the absolute as a limited being? Not *in spite of* our limited being. Not *once we transcend* our limited being. Not *only when we give up* our limited being. Not when we discover an *alternative, unlimited* being. We remain a limited being *and* we awaken to how, simultaneously, all things are Being-with-a-capital-B, and there are no real boundaries around or within that Being.

What does this mean for our actual, daily practice? It means we can rely on the fact that we are not cut off from the absolute just because we manifest as a person. In a moment of wholehearted

participation in reality, the self is there; it still has a limited view, but by its wholehearted participation it realizes the whole of reality through just what it can see and experience and know. This “self,” of course, is not the conventional self that is defined by our relationships and details (that self is actually fairly easy to forget). The “self” that participates wholeheartedly is the Self that lies underneath all of our details – a momentarily-separate parcel of life that wonders about existence and absolute reality.

We don’t have wait until we’ve managed to get rid of our sense of self in order to intuit dharmas intimately with our whole body-and-mind. So, we’d better get busy.

Learning the Self

Now we come to what is probably the most famous verse of the Genjokoan, which pretty much sums up all of Zen practice:

[From the Genjokoan:] “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things. To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of others drop off.”

As Shohaku Okumura says in *Realizing Genjokoan*, the word translated as “to study” is *narau*, which means “to get accustomed to,” or “to become familiar with.”^[iii] This isn’t intellectual study.

To put it another way, “to become familiar with the Buddha Way is to become familiar with the self.” I also like the translation “to learn,” which makes it, “to learn the Buddha Way is to learn the self.”

What is the nature of this self we are becoming familiar with, or “learning?”

We’re taught in Buddhism that we should see beyond, and let go of attachment to, our “small” self – the karmically conditioned self, the self of details and relative relationships: our body, thoughts, emotions, opinions, desires, possessions, abilities, etc.

Do we study this “small self” in Buddhism? Isn’t the point to forget that self? Aren’t we told from the beginning that this small self is empty of inherent, enduring self-nature and doesn’t even really exist the way we think it does?

Many people are surprised to find that we do, indeed, study the Buddha Way – at least at first – by *studying the small self*. It’s the only self we know! And we “study” it even though, as Okumura points out, this suggests a separation between “I,” “the self,” and the “Buddha Way” – and there really is no such separation. At first, however, we feel there is – and that’s where we have to start.

In zazen, and in whatever stillness we can summon in the rest of our life, we pay attention to ourselves. This doesn’t mean getting caught up in the details, but observing carefully. What do we think? What do we feel? What triggers us? When do we feel small and defensive, and when do we feel relaxed and intimate? Why do we feel what we feel? What do we fear? What do we hope for? Who do we think we are? What is it like when our self-consciousness falls away for a moment? What makes that happen?

We don't intellectually investigate these questions, and we don't have to go through them systematically like a course of required study. We just cultivate awareness of what's going on in our body-mind, every moment we can manage. We become familiar with our own living.

The online Oxford dictionary (www.oxforddictionaries.com) defines self in three ways:

1. A person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action.
2. A person's particular nature or personality; the qualities that make a person individual or unique.
3. One's own interests or pleasure.

These three are the *conventional* aspects of self we let go of when we sit zazen. Eventually we start to see how ephemeral all the aspects of small self are, and recognize how most of our sense of self is just an elaborate story. We gain insight when we manage, for a moment, to completely let go of that story.

The “True” Self Which Is One with the Universe

And yet, even when we relinquish our attachment to self – we're still there. We don't disappear or go brain-dead. Who's still there? In what sense, even at such a moment, is there a self? Why does Dogen say, “Sitting is itself the true form of the self?” Why does he say “All things coming and carrying our practice-enlightenment through the self is realization?” Why all this talk about self, even after we've let go of a sense of a separate, independent, inherent, enduring self?

Even though, in a moment of unmitigated, direct experience of reality, all things participate in reality together and it's not a matter of *self* realizing something *outside of self*... there remains an aspect of our experience that can be called “self.” This self, as Okumura says, is “one with the universe,” but it somehow still makes sense to refer to self. Why? When the self is one with the universe, doesn't that mean self is obliterated because there is no individuality anymore? Doesn't that mean there is essentially no self? Isn't self an illusion? What does “self” mean if it isn't about distinguishing us from others?

Personally, I like to think of our deeper self, our “true” self, our self which is one with the universe, as more or less synonymous with *life*. Or, more accurately, *living* – because it's about a moment to moment unfolding, not a concept that can be delineated and put on a shelf (such that you could place “life” in a box next to “death” or “non-life”).

Our actual experience of living in a moment of enlightenment is the interpenetration of absolute and relative. Our life is not our own, and our experience of living is without boundary. There is no territory that belongs exclusively to the self. And yet – there *is* living, and that living is manifesting, in part, through our body and mind.

We sometimes call this aliveness “self” (often self with a capital “S,” or “true self”) in order to point to the vivid reality of direct experience and awareness. You can only participate in reality with your body and mind. You can't leap into another realm of existence. Your aliveness remains, but you recognize all things are also aliveness. So, in some senses this is about an *expanded* sense of self – but with no central reference point.

Even though body and mind – as concepts we cling to – have to drop off, we work toward that “dropping off” by studying the self based on our current understanding of what that self is. We have to start where we are, not imagine what an enlightened perspective would be like. At first, studying the self in this way may feel mundane and rather grueling, like having to sit in the middle of your own mess and look at it without any distraction at all.

Gradually we become more familiar with self, and look beyond our limited sense of it. “What more is there?” We wonder. We finally get so fascinated by living this moment that we forget the details of our lives, and our delusive identification with the details of our small self drops away. Then all things participate with us in a moment of pure reality, and we finally identify with Something Greater. (Or, as Dogen says, we are verified by all things.)

What does this mean to our everyday practice? That our way, the Buddha Way, is to fully explore the matter of our living. Who are you? Do you know? Are you willing to let all things verify you? Don’t you want that kind of intimacy? It’s not far away, it’s right here.

Sources

Dogen, Eihei. *Dogen’s Genjokoan: Three Commentaries*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2011.
Okumura, Shohaku. *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen’s Shobogenzo*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010.

Endnotes

- [1] *Dogen’s Genjokoan: Three Commentaries*, pg. 51-2
- [2] *Dogen’s Genjokoan: Three Commentaries*, pg. 54
- [3] Okumura pg. 76

Dogen's Genjokoan Part 3: Seeking, Self-Nature, and the Matter of Life-and-Death

If you haven't listened my first two episodes on Genjokoan, I advise you to do so before listening to this; to minimize repetition, I'm going to assume you've already heard my introduction to the concepts of "absolute" and "relative" in Zen, why the relationship between these two aspects of our experience is one of Zen's central concerns, plus Dogen's emphasis on radical non-duality, and his vision of practice and enlightenment.

Before I get started, though, I want to refer you to a handy 1-page chart I made, listing 10 paired terms describing the relative and absolute dimensions of reality (click on the image to the right, or [here for a pdf](#)). The pairs in this chart include phenomena and principle, form and emptiness,

| The Two Aspects or Sides of Reality from a Chan/Zen Perspective <i>Compiled by Domyo Burk, 2017</i> | |
|---|--|
| Shih (or Ji) 事 | Li (or Ri) 理 |
| relative: dimension of reality in which each and every thing is identified and defined by relative positions and qualities | absolute: dimension of reality in which each and everything is part of a seamless whole |
| phenomena: all that manifests and happens | principle: truth or reality underlying, or manifesting through, phenomena |
| form: short for the five skandhas, or form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness; everything that can be touched, sensed, conceived, or experienced | emptiness: the quality of all things being empty of inherent, independent, enduring self-essence |
| individuality, uniqueness: the reality that no two things, moments, or beings are the same | sameness: the reality that all things share the same nature (empty, part of a seamless whole, independent) |
| many, myriad, separateness: the countless things and beings in the universe | one, unity: being empty, nothing can be differentiated from anything else in an ultimate, permanent sense |
| difference: the relative reality where there are effective and important differences between things (harmful vs helpful, deluded vs wise, etc.) | equality: the way in which all things are marked by emptiness, sameness, and unity, while all differentiations are relative and impermanent |
| interdependence: each thing is defined by its relationships to other things, and by what it is <i>not</i> , so insofar as it can be differentiated, each thing is dependent on all other things <i>by definition</i> | independence: each thing has absolute value given its unique place within the seamless whole, or "merit expressed according to function and place" (Sandokai) |
| attributes: the qualities and circumstances that define our individuality and affect our experience; the unique flavor of our lives and personal karma | true nature: the luminous, self-sufficient nature of each thing and being based on absolute qualities and completely independent of relative ones |
| conditional: the relative differentiations we make in order to live our lives, which are always based on conditions and subject to change | ultimate: the unchanging, absolute aspect of reality, which is not limited by conditions, space, or time; it was before we were born and will be after we die |
| mundane: the way we experience reality when we are only aware of the relative, and our fixed ideas label things as ordinary, or relatively unremarkable and unworthy of our attention | suchness, thusness: the luminous, precious, miraculous quality of phenomena when they are experienced with an awareness of the absolute |

and separateness and unity. Each term is defined. Personally, I've found it very helpful to refer to this chart when discussing teachings about the absolute and relative. Sometimes Zen discussions can get... well... a little intellectual and philosophical. They can lead us to all kinds of incorrect assumptions – such as thinking “the absolute” is transcendent place or plane that we experience only during enlightenment, or that it's separate from the relative, or that the relative is somehow an imperfect or defiled dimension that manifests despite the purity of the absolute.

In this chart, you get to think about all kinds of different ways the absolute and relative are related to each other, all at once. If you allow the chart to stretch your brain, you might find it easier to understand how the absolute is simply a quality of the relative, and relative is *everything* – including all that's beautiful and right with the world. I may focus an episode on this chart at some point in the future, but for now I'll go on with our discussion of Genjokoan.

The Paradox of Seeking What We Already Have

So, we've gotten to point in the text where it says:

[From the Genjokoan:] When one first seeks the Dharma, one strays far from the boundary of the Dharma. When the Dharma is correctly transmitted to the self, one is immediately an original person. (*Translation of all Genjokoan passages by Shohaku Okumura*)

Amazingly, these lines are relatively straightforward. When we start on a spiritual path, we start to seek for a deeper truth, or an alternative way to live. This is good, and necessary. However, we naturally assume what we're looking for is something *other* than what we've always had. After all, if it's something we already have, why are we dissatisfied? Unfortunately (or fortunately) the Dharma is not like other things we seek to understand or master; it's about completely and utterly inhabiting *this very place, and this very life* in a way we're totally unfamiliar with. Our seeking outwardly, however sincere and well-intended, ends up distracting us from what we actually need to do.

At the same time, we *have* to seek in order to what any of this really means. To not seek is to just resign ourselves to the status quo, which means we'll never taste the rewards of Dharma practice. Dogen makes this statement not to discourage us from seeking, but to remind us – right from the beginning – that, ultimately, we won't find the answers *out there*. When we've “strayed far from the boundary of the Dharma” and still haven't found satisfaction, Dogen's words will come back to us. And who knows, maybe with his warning we'll be able to avoid chasing the truth all over the planet.

As for the second part of this verse, “When the Dharma is correctly transmitted to the self, one is immediately an original person,” Shohaku Okumura helpfully points out the “original person” is a translation of the Japanese *honbun nin*.^[i] In *Realizing Genjokoan* he explains, “*Hon* can be literally translated as *original, true, root, or source*, *bun* means *part or portion*, and *nin* is *person*. So this word, which has the same meaning as ‘original face,’ refers to a person who is one with the original source that exists before karmic conditioning.”

In other words, when we really “get” the Dharma, or truth, we wake up to the reality of our absolute nature. We don't suddenly *become* connected with the absolute – we realize we've always been part of it, or it's always been an aspect of us. The Dharma being “correctly

transmitted” is not something that has happened in the past or will happen in the future. The correct transmission happens only *right now*. So much more could be said, but let’s move on...

The Illusion of Permanent Self-Nature

[From the Genjokoan:] If one riding in a boat watches the coast, one mistakenly perceives the coast as moving. If one watches the boat [in relation to the surface of the water], then one notices that the boat is moving. Similarly, when we perceive the body and mind in a confused way and grasp all things with a discriminating mind, we mistakenly think that the self-nature of the mind is permanent. When we intimately practice and return right here, it is clear that all things have no [fixed] self.

It’s easy to make all of this into philosophy, or some kind of abstract theory of phenomenology (or the experience of consciousness from the first-person point of view). What is Dogen talking about here? Obviously, this passage refers to giving up the delusion of having an inherent, enduring, independent self-nature. But what’s emphasized here is the process of perception – the mistaken ways of perceiving that we employ every day.

What are these mistaken ways of perceiving? It’s not just about thinking that some part of us persists in an unchanging way as it moves through space, because it’s also not correct to assume you move while the shore doesn’t! Okumura explains in his chapter on this passage how, in another of his essays (Tsuki), Dogen quotes from an old Zen text (“The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment”) where the Buddha says, “[when] a cloud flies the moon moves and [when] a boat sail the short drifts.” Dogen explains, saying, “The moving together of the boat and the shore, in the same step, at the same time, in the same way, is beyond starting and stopping and is not a cycle... Do not mistakenly think limited thoughts according to your small view.” So this isn’t about convincing ourselves the self is impermanent, while stuff “out there” is permanent.

The problem is trying locate *anything* that doesn’t move or change, *anything* that’s inherently and independently real, *anything* against which we can measure everything else.

What does all of these mean in terms of our daily lives? Much of the time we locate the sense of permanence within ourselves. We move around with respect to our homes, cars, spouses, places of work, Zen Center, and meditation cushions. We’re the subject, navigating the landscape of our life: Hurrying, or working, or relaxing. Sometimes the landscape changes and surprises us – delighting or upsetting us. Everything is relative to us. The world revolves around us. This is our instinctive mode of operation. There’s no blame involved here. Of course, this mode is ultimately unsatisfactory.

At other times we locate the sense of permanence outside of ourselves. Other things – our homes, cars, spouses, places of work, Zen Center, and meditation cushions – seem more real than we are. We grasp these apparently real, permanent, reliable things and try to orient ourselves. Who are we? This kind of question often arises when our sense of self has radically shifted for some reason.

This is also a troubling, dissatisfying way to operate, because the things outside us aren’t permanent or graspable, either.

Seeing Through the Illusion of Permanent Self-Nature

What is it like when we stop trying to identify anything as permanent, fixed, or inherently real?

We wake up to life. We don't have to figure out what's moving relative to what; everything is relative to everything else. We don't pin our hopes on finding something permanent, which is a great relief. We let go of the inner struggle to make sense of things, and instead live adventurously, on the edge of change, with full appreciation of impermanence. This is what Dogen means when he says, "intimately practice and return right here." Right here – the only place life actually is. We ride along in the boat, experiencing the unfolding of life, without having to create a self-referential narrative about what's happening.

What does this look and feel like in everyday life? When you find yourself stuck in your personal narrative (or, as Barry Magid beautifully puts it in his book *Ordinary Mind*, when you're caught in the delusion of the "isolated mind"), you look up and notice what's around you. When you find yourself pulled toward this and that, hoping it will make you happy or give you the relief you seek, you simply notice that's what you're doing. Then, hopefully, you will have spent long enough in spiritual practice to have the faith to let go of your fantasy about your permanent self-nature and how it needs this or that. Then you wake up to life as it is, which isn't fixed or easy, but it *is* real. You may find yourself breathing a sigh of relief, no matter what's going on, because *real* you can actually deal with.

The Great Matter of Life-and-Death

This next passage is a long one, and it's about the nature of life and death, time, and existence. It uses metaphors of firewood becoming ash, and winter becoming spring, for how one thing changes into another in a relative sense:

[From the Genjokoan:] Firewood becomes ash. Ash cannot become firewood again. However, we should not view ash as after and firewood as before. We should know that firewood dwells in the dharma position of firewood and has its own before and after. Although before and after exist, past and future are cut off. Ash stays in the position of ash, with its own before and after. As firewood never becomes firewood again after it has burned to ash, there is no return to living after a person dies. However, in Buddha Dharma it is an unchanged tradition not to say that life becomes death. Therefore we call it no-arising. It is the established way of buddhas' turning the Dharma wheel not to say that death becomes life. Therefore, we call it no-perishing. Life is a position in time; death is also a position in time. This is like winter and spring. We don't think that winter becomes spring, and we don't say that spring becomes summer.

In his book *Realizing Genjokoan*, Shohaku Okumura explains, "Life and death" is an English translation of the single Japanese word *shoji*.^[ii] *Sho* means "to live" or "to be born," and *ji* means "to die" or "to be dead." Okumura goes on to explain how the term *shoji* has many meanings and uses in Buddhism. It can refer to the period of time between birth and death. It can refer to the process of myriad beings taking birth, living, and dying over and over, according to the idea of rebirth. *Shoji* can also refer to the arising and passing away of life in the present moment.

Essentially, *shoji* sums up our primary spiritual concerns as Buddhists and human beings. Who are we if everything is constantly changing? What is the substance of our life? If only the present

moment is ultimately real, how do we relate to our past and future? What do we do about death? Is there life after death? If there is no life after death, how can we avoid despair?

I think most of us expect our religion to offer us some solace when it comes to dealing with Life-and-Death (that's life-and-death with hyphens, also called the "Great Matter" in Zen). If our religion doesn't help us with the Great Matter, what is it good for? Only a small fraction of people feel compelled to explore the nature of life and death purely for the sake of intellectual understanding. Most of us simply want to understand more about Life-and-Death so we'll know how to live happier and more skillful lives; frankly, if the reality of life and death is actually just depressing, we'd be better off ignoring it as best we can.

Is Dogen offering us anything useful for our lives in this part of the Genjokoan? I hope you'll find his teaching – and Zen teaching more generally – *can* provide the strength, clarity, guidance, and solace you might be looking for – but I have to admit these things are not easily attained in Zen. Well, honestly, they aren't easily attained period – at least not in lasting, stable way – no matter what spiritual path you're on. Simply accepting nice, comforting ideas doesn't tend to cut it when you're personally faced with the reality of Life-and-Death. You really attain strength, clarity, guidance, and solace when you've personally wrestled with the Great Matter and glimpsed the truth in an experiential way. So Dogen isn't offering us any easy, cheerful Buddhist explanations of Life-and-Death that will instantly make us feel better.

What is this Great Matter you're invited to wrestle with? Basically, when you experience something completely, there is no problem. Experiencing something completely – this moment of birth, this moment of life, this moment of dying, this moment of death – means living it directly, without relying on reference to past or future. It means being in harmony with the absolute aspect of our existence.

In the relative dimension of time and causation, firewood turns to ash when it burns, and human beings inevitably die. In the absolute dimension, there are no fixed, independent entities such as "firewood" and "human being" that can be said either to exist or to perish. There's only one, seamless reality, within which, in a given moment, things have a place regardless of whether they can be said to be *before* or *after* the events of burning or dying. The concepts of "life" and "death" only make sense in terms of time – when we follow the chain of causation and see a being, followed by dying, followed by death. Something is said to be dead because it used to be alive. In *this* moment, without reference to past or future, there is just what is. No birth and no death.

Practicing with Life-and-Death, Zen-Style

Okay, to take this out of the realm of philosophy and into practice, let's say you're dying. That's the full, luminous reality of the present. It may sound strange to describe death this way, so don't get me wrong. Dying may involve pain and confusion and messiness and grief, but ultimately all of that can be okay as long as you don't define the moment in terms of past and future. The moment you think of your past life and health, or the moment you think of the future you're not going to have, you're not directly experiencing the present anymore. You'll probably feel great suffering. Of course, you probably won't be able to *help* thinking about the past or the future at least a little, but that's not the point: in the moment of your dying, solace can be found in wholehearted experience of the present.

Whether we're talking about death in the literal physical sense or in the more metaphorical moment-by-moment sense, the practice is the same. We recognize that our concepts are not reality itself. We use our minds to make sense of our world and our life, creating concepts to explain and predict. We create narratives about our lives to create a sense of coherence and make plans. These are natural activities, but if we mistake our ideas for reality itself, we create problems for ourselves.

Creating problems for ourselves is what Dogen is talking about when he reminds us that spring doesn't *become* summer. This is a great analogy he has chosen, because a season is rare example of a concept we don't tend to reify. We think, "Of course spring doesn't *become* summer!" When we're enjoying the flowers that appear only in spring and that dry up and die in the summer heat, we naturally feel some sadness because we know things will change. However, we don't concretize the idea of springtime and think with bitter regret, "This spring is just going to die," as if the spring were a thing unto itself, naively producing flowers even though it's doomed. If we can take the same approach to life as we do to the seasons, we will taste some of the solace Zen can offer. Whatever has come before this moment has had its own reality; whatever will come after will have its own reality. We can wholeheartedly do the work of this moment – cultivating as much wisdom and compassion as we can – without worrying about past or future, except to use them as convenient concepts. When things change and we feel sad, it's a natural response to loss. Even grief has its own luminous reality – as long as it's allowed to change like the seasons. Something always comes next, and that something has its own reality, and its own before and after.

Maybe you don't find any solace in the thought of wholeheartedly dying, or of wholeheartedly letting someone or something die. That's because it's not the *thought* that's the source of solace, it's the experience. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense when you describe it. Many Zen teachers have tried, and sometimes their words help guide people toward their own experience of wholeheartedness. But ultimately you have to explore this teaching for yourself.

What does it actually *feel* like to let go of the narrative that ties past to present to future? What happens when you meet death eye-to-eye, without regret and without pleading? This isn't a matter of learning to like the ending of things, or of cutting off your taste for life. After all, Dogen says, "flowers fall even though we love them; weeds grow even though we dislike them." Despite our love and aversion, we face reality directly. It feels pure, clean, and ennobling. It feels unrestrained: being continues, time continues. In a moment of literal death, the season changes but nothing is subtracted from reality Itself

Sources

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[i] Okumura pg. 98

[ii] Okumura pg. 110

Dogen's Genjokoan Part 4: Moon in a Dewdrop and Views of the Ocean

Today's episode is part 4 of my series on the famous Zen text called "Genjokoan," written in 1233 by Japanese Zen master Eihei Dogen. I'm using the translation by Shohaku Okumura from his book, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dogen's Shobogenzo*. Listen to – or read – the previous Genjokoan episodes for an introduction to the Zen concepts of "absolute" and "relative," why the relationship between these two aspects of our experience is one of Zen's central concerns, plus Dogen's emphasis on radical non-duality, and his unique vision of practice and enlightenment.

Moon in a Dewdrop: Individual Versus the Universal

[From the Genjokoan:] When a person attains realization, it is like the moon's reflection in water. The moon never becomes wet; the water is never disturbed. Although the moon is a vast and great light, it is reflected in a drop of water. The whole moon and even the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew on a blade of grass. Realization does not destroy the person, as the moon does not make a hole in the water. The person does not obstruct realization, as a drop of dew does not obstruct the moon in the sky. The depth is the same as the height. [To investigate the significance of] the length and brevity of time, we should consider whether the water is great or small, and understand the size of the moon in the sky.[1]

In this passage of Genjokoan, the moon symbolizes the absolute, or unity, as described in earlier episodes. Everything in the universe is part of one, seamless reality; this reality when perceived directly is complete, luminous, and precious just as it is. Attaining realization means personally experiencing the absolute nature of reality, and thereby experiencing liberation from the delusion of the separateness of self (as well as liberation from other problematic delusions). The drop of water symbolizes a real person, like you or me – our particular manifestation in this life, which is as tiny, limited, and ephemeral compared to the rest of the universe as a dewdrop on a blade of grass.

It may help, here, to imagine what questions Dogen might be answering with this passage:

"I am so limited in my abilities, character, and understanding. Is it possible for someone like me to 'attain realization?'"

"How is it possible to perceive, actualize, or be part of absolute reality while I remain an embodied, conditioned being deeply dependent on concepts like self, time, and space?"

"Why are people who have 'attained realization' still idiosyncratic, flawed human beings?"

"What good is 'attaining realization' if it doesn't get rid of one's problematic individuality?"

Essentially, all of these questions are about the relationship between realization of the absolute, and our relative existence. We may imagine people who experience awakening manage to work themselves into some transcendent state where – at least momentarily – they’re able to stick their heads out of their drop of water in order to experience something greater. Or their drop of water evaporates, or they bust out of it and renounce individuality in favor of reunion with the absolute (at least for a moment).

How the Limited Reflects and Contains the Unlimited

But this is not how realization works. We never get to peek outside of our drop of water, let alone bust out of it or manage to make it dissipate. So-called “realized” spiritual practitioners don’t achieve perfected or disembodied states. They don’t transcend ordinary, mundane reality, or – as it’s said in some Zen literature – the need to piss and shit. Dogen says, “Realization does not destroy the person, as the moon does not make a hole in the water.”

In this lovely metaphor of the moon reflected in a drop of water, Dogen offers us a way to understand how realization is possible *even though* we are stuck in, or stuck being, our drop of water – that is, even though we never escape our karmically conditioned, mundane, embodied, short lives. Full realization is possible because, within your limited, relative experience, the absolute is reflected in its entirety. In this very place is reflected the entire universe – all of infinite space. In this very moment, this ungraspable instant, is reflected all of infinite time. So, it’s all here, within your actual experience. Within your life.

And yet – when you don’t perceive the absolute – that complete, luminous, precious reality – you may interpret the paragraph above as saying, “Your life, as you perceive it, is it. There’s nothing more.” I don’t know about you, but at certain times in my life I would have found such a statement profoundly discouraging. Fortunately, the moon is a “vast and great light.” The entire moon can be seen in your little drop of water, but it’s not constrained to it. The same moon is reflected in every last dew drop and in every ocean, lake, and puddle. There *is* something greater. As Dogen says, “We should understand the size of the moon in the sky.”

It may sound pretty far out to propose that this instant reflects all of time, this place reflects all of space, and your little drop of water reflects the entire moon. Anyone skeptical of spiritual practice is likely to think such ideas are delusional. However, this interpenetration of absolute and relative is really not so remarkable. All it means is that at any given moment, at any given place, whatever is – including your bag of skin – is part of one, seamless, lively, reality. You’re part of the universe, and without you, it would not be the same universe. You’re who you are because of everything that surrounds you. You’re defined by your relationships to everything else, and everything else is defined, in part, by relationships to you – no matter how small or isolated you might feel. This moment is what it is because of everything that has come before. Everything you do will have some effect on the future. In your bag of skin is reflected the sun and moon, the earth, the force of gravity, and the wonder of evolution. Everything that every was or will be is reflected, in some way, right here.

Words About a Wordless Experience

Of course, this is an intellectual explanation of a wordless, real, embodied experience. You only perceive the absolute when you drop differentiation and allow yourself to be part of the one, seamless reality. At such a time you aren’t thinking about relationships, trying to track the passage of time, or cataloging all the things you can see reflected in your experience! There is a

truth to these descriptions, but they make realization seem quite full of content when in actuality it's just pure, direct experience of the flow of life.

Every metaphor breaks down after a while, and this is the case even with our lovely moon reflected in a drop of water. Such an image invites you to think the absolute lives outside you, and that you can experience It because It's reflected within you. This thinking is still dualistic, dividing things up into absolute and relative, inside and outside. Actually, there is no moon and no drop of water – there is only that one, seamless, undifferentiated reality.

And yet. There is *also* the reality of differentiation and manifestation. In fact, there is no life, no Being, except *through* differentiation and manifestation – so of course, without the relative, there are no sentient beings to attain realization, and therefore no realization! So, when we're talking about "realization" we go ahead and talk about the moon's reflection in a drop of water. This limited metaphor describes one aspect of our experience as human beings.

Don't Let Being a Dewdrop Stop You!

Given what Dogen has shared with us, we can try to answer those initial questions in modern-day English:

"I am so limited in my abilities, character, and understanding. Is it possible for someone like me to 'attain realization?'" *Yes. Stop using your limitations as an excuse not to seek a direct experience of awakening.*

"How is it possible to perceive, actualize, or be part of absolute reality while I remain an embodied, conditioned being deeply dependent on concepts like self, time, and space?" *You're already part of absolute reality, and it's reflected fully within your own, embodied experience. Your conditioning, attachments, and concepts obstruct only your vision, not absolute reality. Part those obscuring clouds for just a moment and the moon will shine through.*

"Why are people who have 'attained realization' still idiosyncratic, flawed human beings?" *As long as we are alive, we remain "drops of water." "Realization does not destroy the person." Why do we want it to? Because imperfect people create suffering and ugliness in the world? That's certainly the case, but those imperfect people also manifest kindness, generosity, brilliance, and wisdom. There are no perfect people.*

"What good is 'attaining realization' if it doesn't get rid of one's problematic individuality?" *Before realization it's your problematic individuality. After realization it's your opportunity to manifest in the world. Your karmically conditioned, mundane, embodied, short life is your vehicle for action, and your field for cultivation. What are you going to do with it?*

Relative and Absolute Truth

[From the Genjokoan:] When the Dharma has not yet fully penetrated body and mind, one thinks one is already filled with it. When the Dharma fills body and mind, one thinks something is [still] lacking. For example, when we sail a boat into the ocean beyond sight of land and our eyes scan [the horizon in] the four directions, it simply looks like a circle. No other shape appears. This great ocean, however, is neither round nor square. It has

inexhaustible characteristics. [To a fish] it looks like a palace; [to a heavenly being] a jeweled necklace. [To us] as far as our eyes can see, it looks like a circle. All the myriad things are like this. Within the dusty world and beyond, there are innumerable aspects and characteristics; we only see or grasp as far as the power of our eye of study and practice can see. When we listen to the reality of myriad things, we must know that there are inexhaustible characteristics in both ocean and mountains, and there are many other worlds in the four directions. This is true not only in the external world, but also right under our feet or within a single drop of water.[2]

We want the ultimate Truth to penetrate our body and mind because we want to live fully, authentically, and compassionately. We know Truth leads to such results because the ancestors have said so, but also because we have experienced this cause-and-effect connection ourselves, even if only in small ways. Still, what is the nature of Truth, or the Dharma? Dogen encourages us to investigate this question thoroughly.

Over our lifetimes we have accumulated many useful truths. We come to understand our own personalities, strengths, and shortcomings. We have learned facts and principles that help us successfully navigate the practical world. Through our personal – often painful – experience, we have learned about things like love, loss, growth, stagnation, responsibility, acceptance, anger, and forgiveness. We develop philosophies and views that help us make sense of the often-crazy world.

These are truths that apply in the relative world. We all hold the best truths we've been able to come up with, based on our particular experiences and perspectives. These relative truths allow us to function, but they are like the fish's sense of water as a palace, and the heavenly being's sense of water as a jeweled necklace. Over time, this is another truth we learn: everyone has their own perspective. We may believe our truth is more true or valid than someone else's, and maybe we have a point, but there's no denying the other person has their version of truth and they're holding on to it.

The Truth of Reality, or the Dharma

The Dharma – the deepest spiritual Truth, whatever your spiritual path – is not like these relative truths. However, this is *not* because it's a Truth that trumps all relative truths. If the Dharma were just a Truth that trumps all relative truths, Dogen would have said something like, "The ocean actually *is* a jeweled necklace; human beings and fish are just deluded." Or he might have said, "The ocean is actually a circle." In his book *Realizing Genjokoan*, Okumura suggests that seeing the ocean as a circle while riding in a boat in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight, symbolizes the experience of emptiness, the absolute, or non-differentiation. At such a time, we may realize in what sense everything is one, and assume *that* is reality. But Dogen *doesn't* say, "The ocean is actually a circle." Instead, Dogen lumps it in with all other views. Why?

Because it's not that the absolute is true, while the relative is somehow less true. In other words, while in a sense everything is part of one, seamless reality, that's not a Truth that trumps the fact that each thing has its place, and reality has innumerable characteristics. We are part of the seamless reality and therefore can directly taste its nature, but we can never know more than a few of its inexhaustible characteristics.

What does this teaching mean to us in daily life? It means we should maintain profound humility. We can never know anything completely in a relative sense – not even a drop of water! Within a single drop of water may be many tiny forms of life; dissolved elements other than water; physical forces like surface tension, and at the atomic level and beyond, realities that defy complete comprehension. Although the great spiritual masters may have had profound insight, their philosophies and teachings were constrained by their karma – at the very least by whether they were born as a human, fish, or heavenly being. As Dogen says, “We only see or grasp as far as the power of our eye of study and practice can see.” Our most precious convictions are still just views.

Before we awaken to the Dharma – when it “has not yet fully penetrated body and mind” – we don’t fully appreciate the limitations of our relative views, or are attached to our view of the absolute, and we think we have some kind of handle on the Truth. Ironically, then, when the Dharma *does* fill our body and mind, we recognize “something is still lacking.” This lack isn’t about being inadequate or inferior or anything negative like that, it’s about awakening to the nature of reality, when any conclusion we draw is limited by our perspective. There’s no problem with that as long as we recognize it, which is why, earlier in Genjokoan, Dogen said “Those who greatly realize delusion are buddhas.”

Living Without Any Fixed View

Although Dogen encourages us to awaken to, and accept, the relativity of all of our views and opinions, this teaching also means we should fully inhabit, claim, express, and live our various truths without shame or apology. For a fish, water *is* a palace. For us, water is a liquid we use to quench our thirst, wash our bodies, or place our boats on. In his book, Okumura says our relative relationship to water – and to everything – *creates* our reality. There is no real, absolute, fixed view, compared to which other views are false or incomplete. There is no inherent reality to anything that can be defined as “Truth” and then viewed different ways. In a sense, in the realm of the relative, there is *only* relationship and view.

What is the real, full Dharma – which, when it penetrates our body and mind, robs us of any sense that we *have* It? Is this world just relativistic and ungraspable, which I personally find a depressing thought? Is there anything that’s *not* just a view? Yes! There is! But I can only show you by walking over and thumping you on the head. Or insisting you drink your tea. I can’t adequately express it in words, but LIFE itself is not a view.

Sources

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Endnotes

[1] Translation by Okumura in *Realizing Genjokoan*

[2] Translation by Okumura in *Realizing Genjokoan*

Dogen's Genjokoan Part 5: Birds Fly, Fish Swim, a Zen Master Waves a Fan

Limited Perception Doesn't Obstruct Awakening

[From the Genjokoan:] When a fish swims, no matter how far it swims, it doesn't reach the end of the water. When a bird flies, no matter how high it flies, it cannot reach the end of the sky. When the bird's need or the fish's need is great, the range is large. When the need is small, the range is small. In this way, each fish and each bird uses the whole of space and vigorously acts in every place. However, if a bird departs from the sky, or a fish leaves the water, it immediately dies. We should know that [for a fish] water is life, [for a bird] sky is life. A bird is life; a fish is life. Life is a bird; life is a fish. And we should go beyond this. There is practice-enlightenment—this is the way of living beings.

Therefore, if there are fish that would swim or birds that would fly only after investigating the entire ocean or sky, they would find neither path nor place. When we make this very place our own, our practice becomes the actualization of reality. When we make this path our own, our activity naturally becomes actualized reality. This path, this place, is neither big nor small, neither self nor others. It has not existed before this moment nor has it come into existence now. Therefore [the reality of all things] is thus. In the same way, when a person engages in practice-enlightenment in the Buddha Way, as the person realizes one dharma, the person permeates that dharma; as the person encounters one practice, the person [fully] practices that practice. [For this] there is a place and a path. The boundary of the known is not clear; this is because the known [which appears limited] is born and practiced simultaneously with the complete penetration of the Buddha Dharma. We should not think that what we have attained is conceived by ourselves and known by our discriminating mind. Although complete enlightenment is immediately actualized, its intimacy is such that it does not necessarily form as a view. [In fact] viewing is not something fixed. (Okumura 2010)

This passage is about how we can transcend our limited self by *becoming* our limited self completely. This is very important, and many earlier parts of the Genjokoan were leading up to this. We the birds and the fish – living, practicing, and seeking. We want to know the truth of reality, and sense that it is infinitely greater than what meets our eyes – and yet we can never leave the domain of our experience, or comprehend the infinite. Our individuality, humanity, and limitations seem to prevent us from personally knowing the absolute. However, the water and the sky are the seamless reality within which we function, and from which we are not separate. As part of the absolute, we can know it.

Dogen points at this truth earlier in Genjokoan, when he writes, “All things coming and carrying out practice-enlightenment through the self is realization.” (I discussed this passage in [Genjokoan Part 1](#).) This means that when we awaken to seamless reality (or the “absolute,” or unity), we *participate* in this seamless reality with everything. Awakening is not about realizing something *about* the universe. It's *joining* the universe – or realizing we were never separate from It to begin with.

This teaching that our incomplete perception isn't an obstacle is addressed in yet another part of Genjokoan, when Dogen says that when we are "seeing color and hearing sound" with our whole body-and-mind, we perceive things intimately, or directly. When this happens, "one side is illuminated, [and] the other is dark." As I discussed in [Genjokoan Part 2](#), I agree with Bokusan Nishiari's interpretation of this passage: in perceiving wholeheartedly and intimately, everything we don't see is "dark," or part of the great, undifferentiated seamless reality. Whatever we don't perceive is still very much present, and no real boundary can be drawn between what we perceive and what we don't. Therefore, there is completeness in the act of perception, however limited it is. This is what prompted me to write:

"All of Dogen's teaching, all of the Genjokoan, all of our practice is fundamentally about this paradoxical nature of our existence: How we realize, actualize, and live in harmony with the absolute as a limited being? Not *in spite of* our limited being. Not *once we transcend* our limited being. Not *only when we give up* our limited being. Not when we discover an *alternative, unlimited* being. We remain a limited being *and* we awaken to how, simultaneously, all things are Being-with-a-capital-B, and there are no real boundaries around or within that Being."

We Don't Have to Be Other Than Who We Are

Now, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to write that last paragraph based solely on the Genjokoan passage about one side being illuminated while the other is dark. Fortunately, I knew the Genjokoan also included this lovely section on birds and fish, which is where Dogen further develops the idea that we are fully capable of realizing, actualizing, and living in harmony with the absolute *as* a limited being, even though that may seem impossible. And then, not only does he tell us it's possible, he tells us how.

There we are, little birds and fish, striving to live good lives and, in order to do so, to understand our relationship to the rest of the universe. We struggle, search, travel, explore, study, strive, etc. We can't help but feel restricted by our bodies, circumstances, and karma. Not one of us can step outside of who and where and when we are. We may gain a measure of peace and happiness by accepting our situation – by getting used to being a fish, and learning to be content with our little part of the ocean – but it can seem that by doing so, we give up the possibility of experiencing something greater.

Dogen assures us the we can do both at the same time: we can realize, actualize, and live in harmony with the absolute and wholeheartedly be exactly who, where, and when we are. We can experience the great ocean and great sky right here, in our own little part of the ocean or sky. We can live the life of the universe as we go about our daily affairs. We can feel part of a whole, complete, luminous, seamless reality in the midst of our imperfect world.

Transcending Versus Accepting Our Limitations

How?! "When we make this very place our own, our practice becomes the actualization of reality. When we make this path our own, our activity naturally becomes actualized reality." What does it mean to make something our own? This isn't about identifying something with our small sense of self, or exerting control over it. To me, "making something my own" implies loving, appreciating, caring for, taking responsibility for, and realizing my interdependence with something or someone.

When we find our own, true place, we stop searching all over for it. We settle into our home. When we find our own, true path, we stop worrying and wondering about other paths and devote ourselves entirely to what is in front of us. When we fully inhabit our lives without trying to be anyone, anywhere, or anywhen else, our practice and activity naturally become “actualized reality.” It’s important to note that the term translated in this passage as “actualized reality” is “Genjokoan.” When we inhabit our lives completely, we resolve the koan of “actualizing the simultaneous truths of unity and difference in your life.” (See [Genjokoan 1](#) for a discussion of the term “Genjokoan.”)

That’s all well and good, but how do we know whether we’re “just living our lives” in a limited, complacent, self-absorbed sense, versus “just living our lives” in a wholehearted way that allows us to realize, actualize, and live in harmony with the absolute? Although Dogen warns us that, “We should not think that what we have attained is conceived by ourselves and known by our discriminating mind,” he also says that when complete enlightenment is immediately actualized, it is intimate. In a moment of wholehearted inhabiting your life in an enlightened way, you show up for your life instead of letting it slip by while you dream of other things. Even if things aren’t exactly how you’d like them to be, life feels real and vibrant. You feel authentic and present, and there is no question in your mind about whether you’re doing your best. At the same time, you are fully aware that you don’t know what comes next, and that life is fragile and fleeting.

Watch for the moments in your life that are like this, they can be easy to miss.

If Everything’s Okay, Why Do Anything?

[From the Genjokoan:] [The] Zen Master of Mt. Magu was waving a fan. A monk approached him and asked, “The nature of wind is ever present and permeates everywhere. Why are you waving a fan?” The master said, “You know only that the wind’s nature is ever present—you don’t know that it permeates everywhere.” The monk said, “How does wind permeate everywhere?” The master just continued waving the fan. The monk bowed deeply.

The genuine experience of Buddha Dharma and the vital path that has been correctly transmitted are like this. To say we should not wave a fan because the nature of wind is ever present, and that we should feel the wind even when we don’t wave a fan, is to know neither ever-presence nor the wind’s nature. Since the wind’s nature is ever present, the wind of the Buddha’s family enables us to realize the gold of the great Earth and to transform the [water of] the long river into cream. (Okumura 2010)

The “nature of wind” is buddha-nature, and “waving a fan” is spiritual practice. The essence of the question being discussed here is this: “Zen teaches that everything in the universe is part of one, seamless reality, and this reality when perceived directly is complete, luminous, and precious. Not only that: The universe is complete, luminous, and precious and you’re intimately part of its perfection whether you realize it or not. Realizing it for yourself is nice, but ultimate reality isn’t dependent on your realizing. So we don’t have to do anything, right?”

This is not a philosophical question, at least not as it’s presented by Dogen. This is about what really matters in life. It’s about how you should live out your aspirations and embody your natural compassion.

Should you “wave a fan,” or practice to improve yourself and the world? From the beginning, Buddhism has been about refusing to simply accept dukkha, or suffering, and instead to do something about it. We meditate, study, practice mindfulness, behave morally, and seek to let go of self-attachment and develop liberative insight.

And yet, part of the liberative insight is that we don’t exist as independent, inherent selves the way we think we do, and letting go of “I, me, and mine” relieves suffering. We discover that nothing has been lacking from the beginning, and everything and everyone is empty. Therefore, shouldn’t we let go of our very desire for things to be better in the world and in our own lives? After all, desire causes suffering, so if you can just accept things as they are, suffering ceases. This would be *not* waving a fan, but transcending our discomfort in the heat by connecting with the reality that there ultimately is no *one* sitting there sweating, and suffering is optional.

The Third Position, Not Stuck in Relative or Absolute

As Dogen presents this dilemma, he harkens back to the beginning of Genjokoan, where he presents three views of the Dharma (see [Genjokoan 1](#) for a discussion). The first is the relative view of traditional Buddhism, which includes delusion and realization, practice, and buddhas versus ordinary living beings. The second is the absolute view of Mahayana Buddhism, which says everything is empty, so asks, “What delusion or realization? What practice? What buddhas? What living beings?” But the third view Dogen presents is the radical non-duality of Zen, which says relative and absolute are simply aspects of one reality, and don’t contradict one another.

In other words, there *is* a difference between a buddha and a living being, or there would be no Buddhism. Waving a fan can make you feel much cooler, and practice can relieve suffering. At the same time, it’s important to awaken to the reality of emptiness so we don’t get too caught up in a desperate effort to perfect our fan-waving and escape any discomfort – or so attached to our practice and our own liberation that we actually just get stuck in delusion and desire again. It really is possible to directly experience the heat without resistance, without conceiving of discomfort. Heat just is. Suffering just is. It’s all part of one, seamless reality and there’s actually no problem.

Still, reality “goes beyond the dichotomy” of absolute and relative, so fan-waving (that is, practice) can be undertaken with a full appreciation of emptiness. Ideally, we can energetically practice to improve ourselves and the world, even as we realize that, in a certain sense, there is nothing to improve, and no such thing as improvement. If we get stuck either in the relative or absolute perspectives, our practice and enlightenment will be incomplete. It’s only when we genuinely and delicately dance with our shifting reality that truly skillful practice emerges.

Why We Wave a Fan (Practice)

To put this in concrete terms, let’s return to the monk, the master, and the fan. Now, the monk has a point. Imagine the so-called master is sitting there in the heat, miserable and irritable, busily fanning himself and wishing he was able to escape to a cooler climate. We’ve all experienced this kind of dukkha, or dissatisfaction. Something is causing us pain or discomfort, but we add to our experience of dukkha with resistance – wishing things were different, or vigorously striving to feel better. The monk says, “The nature of wind is ever present and permeates everywhere.

Why are you waving a fan?" Or, "In an absolute sense there is no such thing as heat or cold, and you are empty of any inherent self-nature. As a Zen master you should know this. Why do you have to rely on a fan to relieve your discomfort?"

The monk has a valid question that can be extended to us. Through our own experience – or at least through our study of Zen teachings – we know suffering is something we create. But sometimes, despite what we know, we struggle. We ignore the Dharma and strive after conditional happiness by trying to rearrange the world around us.

However, that's not what the Zen master of Mt. Magu was doing. He doesn't get offended by the monk's question, but says, "You know only that the wind's nature is ever present—you don't know that it permeates everywhere." In other words, you have a sense of the absolute nature of things – or the sense in which differences between hot and cold, comfort and discomfort, self and environment are illusions. But you still don't understand how relative and absolute are two sides of the same reality, or how the complete, luminous nature of that reality permeates everywhere – even when we're engaged in a relative activity.

In response the monk asks, "How does wind permeate everywhere?" Or, "How does the complete, luminous nature of reality permeate everywhere?" The master answers by demonstrating: he keeps waving the fan. Vast, seamless reality includes everything – our struggle, our delusion, our aspiration, our practice, our efforts to improve, our discomfort, everything. A limited view sees practice as something we do in order to attain what we don't yet have (liberation, peace, happiness...). A similarly limited view sees how we can attain what we long for by giving up longing for anything other than this – and therefore can see practice in the relative sense as a sort of delusion or waste of time. An integrated view recognizes the perfection of the whole crazy scene: the truth exists no matter what, and yet we don't experience it without practice. Practice is the deeper truth manifesting – the divine, if you will, spurring us on from within.

The complete, luminous universe is complete and luminous because it includes our effort. How does the nature of wind, or buddha nature, permeate everywhere? Through our waving the fan. Not *because* we wave a fan, as if there is no wind until we do so (or, no buddha nature until we awaken it through practice). Rather, the moment of our fan-waving is a perfect example of the nature of wind permeating everywhere.

The moment when we place our shoes straight, or say a kind word to someone, or vow to release our anger and anxiety, we are enacting universal completeness and luminosity. When we see how this is so, we realize how precious this universe is (the gold of the great earth) and transform our lives (the long river) into something nourishing and delightful.

Sources

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