

The Significance of Dōgen

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Introduction

The medieval monk Dōgen (1200-1253 CE) was the founder of Eiheiji Monastery, still in operation today. Because Eiheiji is the oldest remaining temple of the Sōtō School in Japan, he is also regarded as founder of that school of Zen Buddhism. Within the Zen tradition, Dōgen is famous for his emphasis on “just sitting” shikan taza and on the “unity of practice and enlightenment” or, as I will prefer to translate satori, “insight.”

His “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye” has been translated multiple times into modern Japanese and English, and has inspired Zen communities around the globe. There are also many other works connected to his name, of which his “Instructions for the Cook” and his “Manual of Zen Meditation” are perhaps best known.

Modern religious history counts Dōgen among the founders of new schools which appeared in the early Medieval Period in Japan (that is, 12th to 14th century), a reform movement directed against the established schools which were closely linked to the political elite.

Dōgen also in the 20th century acquired a second life as a philosopher, with special attention given to his thought on time. In this context, Dōgen is read as an existentialist thinker and phenomenologist—often compared with Martin Heidegger.

As we will see later, all these images and characterisations have their problems. Nevertheless, they show that Dōgen has continued to function as an important point of reference ever since he started out as a teacher in his own right in the early 1230s.

My approach today in this seminar is that of a scholar interested in the intellectual history of Japan; and someone who has spent many hours doing zazen and thinking about what Dōgen had to say.

Still, Dōgen would rightly regard me as a “character counting scholar” – not a good thing in his eyes, and so you are welcome to take whatever I will say today with a good grain of salt.

In any case, I will attempt to separate as best as I can historical facts from legend, and philology – what we can know about what Dōgen wrote – from both tradition and personal interpretation.

I assume that many of you have already heard quite a lot about Dōgen and his works, and probably some of the things I shall say today will disagree to some extent with what you have heard. My aim is to provide you with information on why that is, so that in the end, you can make your own evaluations. Those of you who came here without knowledge about Dōgen, rest assured that I have you in mind as well, and will start from basic information.



Minamoto no Yoshinaka (源 義仲), Fifth shōgun in the history of Japan

Dōgen's Life: Legend, History, Context

Dōgen was also known as Kigen, Butsubō, or, after the monasteries he founded, Daibutsu and Eihei. Legend has it that he was born in 1200 as son of chancellor Minamoto no Michichika and Ishi, erstwhile lover of Minamoto no Yoshinaka (the rogue cousin of Yoritomo and Yoshitsune) -> member of the court aristocracy in a time of conflict / uneasy power balance between the imperial court in Kyoto and the newly established military government in Kamakura.

His father dies when he is only two years old, the mother dies when he is seven. Dōgen watches the smoke from the incense at her funeral/memorial service and awakens to the impermanence of all secular life. He is taken in by his grandfather, Fujiwara no Motofusa and groomed for a career at court. He is a prodigious child and is able to understand the Chinese classics and Buddhist literature early on. He receives a classic literary education and becomes a good calligrapher and poet.

At age thirteen, before his coming-of-age-ceremony that would start his political career, Dōgen sneaks out of his grandfather's house. He enters the most important monastery in Japan, the Enryakuji on Mount Hiei in the Northeast of Kyoto, under the tutelage of his maternal uncle Ryōken. He is then ordained in 1213 by the abbot of Enryakuji, Kōen, and trained as a monk of the Tendai school. During this period, he reads through the whole Buddhist canon, plus doctrinal literature.

It does not take long until he forms a "great clot of doubt" that will, ultimately, drive him away from Enryakuji and lets him embark on a religious search that will only end when he achieves enlightenment under abbot Rujing at Tiandong monastery in China in 1227, when, in his own words "the great matter to be studied for a whole lifetime" was settled for him. The doubt arises from reading in the Tendai doctrinal literature that all sentient beings are originally endowed with full enlightenment. If this doctrine of "original enlightenment" were true, Dōgen is said to have asked, why then is it necessary to practice and study Buddhism?

Receiving no satisfactory answer from his mentors at Mount Hiei, Dōgen starts to seek out other teachers. Kōin, another relative who is leading the Miidera monastery at the foot of Mount Hiei, close to lake Biwa, points him to Eisai and the Kenninji monastery in the Rokuhara district of Kyoto. Eisai, who is known for his "Treatise on propagating Zen and Protecting the Country," was among the pioneers of Zen Buddhism in Japan, and Dōgen wa

s accepted into his community and received his initial training in Zen from Eisai and Eisai's trusted disciple Myōzen. In 1223, Dōgen joins Myōzen for a study tour to China. Both feel that knowledge about Zen is still insufficient in Japan and that they need to see authentic practice as conducted in Chinese monasteries and clarify matters with the great masters there.

Upon arrival in China, there is a dispute because the Chinese authorities do not accept his certificate of ordination; accordingly, he is regarded as a novice, to which he objects, writing a petition to the court in excellent calligraphy. Impressed with this show of skills, the petition is granted.

While the petition is processed, Dōgen meets an experienced Chinese monk who serves as cook in his monastery and comes to the ship on which he stays to buy Japanese mushrooms. Dōgen questions him about affairs in Chinese monasteries, and enjoins him to stay for the night, but the monk refuses, stating that his duties as a cook demand that he go back to his monastery. When Dōgen inquires why a monk of his seniority occupies himself with such a lowly task, instead of meditating or reading the scriptures, he replies that the young monk from a foreign country obviously has not yet understood the meaning of Buddhist teaching and practice.

During his first year in China, Dōgen travels extensively and meets with many masters; he also gets to see various documents of succession and learns to discern authentic testimonies of approval of enlightenment from forgeries. He is often not impressed with what he sees in the monasteries, as many monks have only a shallow understanding of the teaching and show no great zeal in practice.

In 1225, he hears that Rujing has become abbot of the Tiandong monastery and joins his congregation. He petitions and is allowed to see the master in private, which starts a series of exchanges recorded in his "Record of the Boajing Era." After two years, he has an enlightenment experience when Rujing during a nocturnal Zazen session scolds a sleeping monk, saying that meditation means to "let fall away body and mind." Rujing tests and accepts his insight, and gives him a certificate of succession. Dōgen then



Yoshitsune (源義経), samurai and general of the Minamoto clan



returns to Japan, where he at first resides again at Kenninji. Before returning, he copies the Kōan collection Blue Cliff Record (Bi yan lu) in one night to bring it with him to Japan. He writes a first version of his “Manual for the Promotion of Zazen,” but finds no congenial audience in Kenninji. Frustrated by the resistance, he withdraws to a dilapidated temple south of the capital. From there, he starts his career as a Zen master with his first doctrinal exposition, “Negotiating the Way” (Bendōwa, 1231).

From 1233 onwards, he is joined by more and more disciples and decides to build a proper Zen monastery. From 1235, a meditation hall is built and in 1237, the monastery is in full operation. He is joined by Ejō, who becomes his attendant and most trusted disciple. Ejō records his informal evening lectures in the coming years, known as “Things Heard about the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye” or Shōbō genzō zuimonki (short: Zuimonki) in Japanese. He also starts to give formal instructions (called jōdō, “ascending in the hall”) and informal talks (jishū, “instructing the assembly”), which will later form the bulk of his “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye.”

In the early 1240s, the Tendai monks on Mount Hiei become jealous of his success and start to threaten him. Dōgen submits a formal tract in defense of his teaching to the court, but his argument is dismissed. The recorded sayings of his master Rujing are brought to Japan and remind him of Rujing’s insistence on living remotely in the mountains.

In 1243, Dōgen relocates his community to the Hakusan mountain in the “Snow Country” of Northwestern Japan. A new monastery, later called Eihei-ji, is quickly built. Here, Dōgen realizes his vision of a pure Zen life. In 1247, he is called to the military regent as a spiritual guide and offered the abbacy of a new Zen temple in Kamakura. He goes to Kamakura for a couple of months, but refuses to stay and returns to Eihei-ji in spring 1248. He will not leave the monastery again until severe illness forces him to seek medical aid in the capital at the end of his life. He is succeeded at Eihei-ji by his trusted disciple Ejō, who upholds his legacy and continues to copy and edit his works.

History

There is much truth in this legendary / hagiographical account. But taking away some of the embellishments added on to history by the tradition provides us with a more complex picture of Dōgen's life and accomplishments. To mention the more important aspects in chronological order:

Dōgen's parents were slightly less prominent and less immediately connected to the conflicts leading up to the establishment of the military government in Kamakura than tradition has it. His father was not Michichika, but Michichika's less powerful son Michitomo. His mother was a lower ranking aristocrat and consort of Michitomo's, which greatly hampered his prospects for an illustrious career at court. Still, he may have risen to some degree of prominence with the protection of his foster father Fujiwara no Motofusa—or if he had made full use of his connections to more prominent clerics in various monasteries of the capital. His trusted disciple and successor Ejō had come to Dōgen via his elder brother Shōkū, who was head of the only branch of the Pure Land School of Buddhism accepted by the court. This shows that family connections continued to be important even after Dōgen had entered monastic life.

Dōgen stayed on Mount Hiei probably until 1217. He may have visited Kenninji earlier, but did not join its community until after Eisai's death. A direct connection between the two is very unlikely, as Dōgen never mentions such an encounter himself.

Similarly, the "great clot of doubt" is a later addition to his biography, and not a very probable one. Dōgen himself mentions in one of his evening talks that he didn't like the orientation of his early teachers towards a career in the monastic hierarchy, or in his words: fame and gain. He may have been drawn to Kenninji and its community more because of its more rigorous adherence to monastic life and religious practice. Although the Dōgen scholar Steven Heine 15 years ago published a book titled "Did Dōgen go to China?", there is little doubt that he did. Not only did one of his companions under Rujing later join him in Japan, his recorded sayings were later redacted in China, which testifies to the fact that he was accepted as a legitimate dharma heir of Rujing. The record of his encounters with his master, however, probably was written many years later and should not be understood as a direct transcript of their conversations.

The story about the “One Night Blue Cliff Record” is best understood as a literary metaphor for Dōgen’s single-handed efforts to transmit the kōan tradition to Japan. Note that Dōgen’s Zen is often characterized as “silent illumination” Zen in opposition to the “contemplation of kōan” Zen of the Rinzai tradition, but that kind of distinction is a product of later times. Not only did Dōgen compile his own collection of three hundred kōan cases, his famous “Treasury” is also to a large extent a commentary on kōan cases, and he produced other forms of kōan commentary as well. Note also that in his first doctrinal exposition, he emphasizes the Rinzai tradition more strongly and does not mention his masters’s Sōtō lineage.

The Manual of Zazen that Dōgen wrote upon his return to Japan is not identical with its extant versions, which have developed over time. The reasons behind the decision to relocate from the vicinity of Kyōto to the remote mountains of the “Snow Country” are not documented, and were probably complex. There was the matter of competition in the capital: the Rinzai monk Enni Ben’en had recently come back from China and now enjoyed support by the powerful Fujiwara family. His earlier dream of doing in Japan what the Indian master Bodhidharma had allegedly done in China seemed less and less likely under these circumstances. Furthermore, Dōgen’s community had been joined by followers from an early Japanese branch of the Zen school that was

considered heretical by the establishment, opening his monastery up to attacks. Some members of this group, on the other hand, were well connected in the area where the new monastery was located. Finally, Dōgen’s visit to Kamakura was arranged by his patron Hatano Yoshishige, and did not involve extensive interaction with the Shogunal regent, Hōjō Tokiyori. It is unlikely that he was offered the abbacy of a monastery in Kamakura. In general, the Rinzai tradition was held in much higher esteem in early medieval Japan, and there were other, more prominent clerics available for the position.

To sum up, historical scrutiny leaves us with a more human, more complex, and less sectarian image of Dōgen. That said, it is clear that he was a very bright intellectual mind and a dedicated teacher who was steadfast in his vision of monastic life modeled after the precedent of the buddhas and Zen ancestors. Fortunately, he also was an accomplished writer, so that we have extensive sources from which to engage with his ideas. But that is the subject of our next section.



Question

So, I see a question whether Dogen really believed in reincarnation or did he used it like a parable?

Steinbeck: "Well, we can't looking to his head, but to his writings that indicate He simply saw it as a parable. And why shouldn't he have believed in it? We have to keep in mind that he's writing in the 13th century. There's no science in his world in the way that we know it, So, the whole question of how to connect this traditional buddhist worldview with what today think we know about world is something that simply didn't present himself to him, and we have a lot of references in his writings where he, at least, speaks as if he takes things that we would today clearly regard as legendary, just as the letter on how the things are".

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