

# A Brief Overview of Dōgen's Works

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Dōgen started out as a teacher with a doctrinal exposition titled “Discourse on Negotiating the Way” (Jap. Bendōwa), which he wrote in 1231. The “Discourse” contains two positions for which he is famous: first, the idea that practice and insight or attainment of enlightenment are one and the same, and second, that the supreme gate of enlightenment is the practice of seated meditation (Jap. zazen). The “Discourse” is now often presented together with his most famous work, the “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye.”

The “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye” (Japanese: Shōbō genzō) is a collection of recorded informal instructions and written doctrinal expositions in complex literary Japanese with interspersed Sinitic expressions. (Or the other way round, as a later commentator put it: Dōgen “softened” the Sinitic text with Japanese words to make it more accessible.) Most of the texts were copied out by Ejō. The various chapters or fascicles were composed over the course of twenty years, from 1233 to 1253; however, the bulk of the texts dates from the years 1241-1243. In other words, while Dōgen produced some of these instructions in earlier years, the idea of producing a collection of such texts originated some time around or after 1240. He also wrote a number of undated instructions in his final years that are collectively referred to as the “new draft.”

Actually, this “Treasury” was preceded by another work of the same name, which is a collection of 300 kōan cases in literary Sinitic. (And here I have to explain something on literary styles.) Also, Ejō had previously recorded Dōgen’s evening talks in a work that is known as “Things Heard about the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye” (Japanese: Shōbō genzō zuimonki or short: Zuimonki). This record is of a much more straightforward style than the “Treasury.” As mentioned earlier, the texts of the “Treasury” in Japanese are mostly

composed as a string of elucidating remarks on canonical sources centered around a certain subject, such as “Buddha nature” or “Washing and Purifying” or “Reading Sutras”, to name some which indicate the range of themes. The sources are sutra passages, excerpts from the recorded sayings of Chinese Zen masters, or kōan cases.

A problem with the “Treasury” is that Dōgen did not finish the work or leave instructions on its edition. There is an indication that he wanted it to comprise 100 fascicles. But he also distinguished between an “old” and a “new” draft. Today, the dominant collection of the “old” draft comprises 75 chapters, and that of the “new” draft 12 chapters. But during the medieval period, the dominant collection was one of 60 chapters, which left out 25 chapters included in the 75 fascicle version that contained sectarian polemic, but included 7 chapters from the “new draft.” Later editors came up with various other compositions. The most important one is the chronologically ordered 95 fascicle edition that was published by Eihei-ji in the early 19th century.

Besides the various “Treasury” collections, there are the “Recorded Sayings” collected in seven volumes of the “Extensive Record of Eihei.” (The remaining three volumes contain informal written instructions and poetry.) These are records in literary Sinitic of formal presentations Dōgen gave when he ascended the abbot’s seat in the monks hall. Their style is generally much more terse, and they rarely contain the kind of doctrinal explanation that Dōgen does at times present in the “Treasury.”

Chinese monastic rules say that these formal presentations should be delivered on dates ending with a five or zero of the lunisolar calendar, which ensured that there was such a presentation every new moon and full moon. Dōgen often alludes to the specifics of a date or occasion in these presentations, something which is largely absent from the “Treasury”. Judging from the number and frequency of entries in the “Extensive Record,” Dōgen pretty much adhered to this schedule in the final years in Kyōto and after Eihei-ji was completely operative. The “Treasury” contains several texts in complex literary Japanese that explain monastic procedures. But Dōgen also compo-





sed texts on such topics in literary Sinitic. These were later assembled into a collection called “Pure Rules of Eihei” (Eihei shingi) although they were partly written in Kyōto, before the founding of Eihei-ji. Texts of this kind, whether in the “Treasury” or in the “Pure Rules” collections, regularly combined detailed instructions on procedure with elaborations on the deeper spiritual significance of such actions. The procedures generally follow rules from the canon, and Dōgen both takes the Chinese Zen tradition and older texts such as the Brahmajāla or Avatamsaka Sutras into account.

Besides, there are also less voluminous works such as an instruction on “Essentials for the Study of the Way” (Jap. Gakudō yōjin shū) for new disciples written in the mid-1230, or the already mentioned “Manual for the Promotion of Seated Meditation” (Jap. Fukan zazen gi) and the memoir of his encounters with Rujing, the “Record of the Baojin Era” (Jap. Hōkyō ki). Last but not least, Dōgen also composed poetry both in literary Sinitic and in literary Japanese. His most famous poem was written while in Kamakura, apparently upon the request of regent Hōjō Tokiyori’s wife. It is titled “The Original Face” (Jap. Honrai no menmoku), and can be roughly translated as: “About spring: blossoms / summer: mountain cuckoo, about fall: the moon / winter: snow glistens—how cold it is!” As we will discuss later on, this poem can be seen to express Dōgen’s view of practice and attainment as well as his thoughts on time.

To sum up, it seems that after setting out as an independent teacher, Dōgen experimented with different formats in his attempt to transpose the Zen literary tradition to Japan, and to convey his own ideas. Presenting kōan cases and commenting on them was a central part of his literary activity, and remained so until the end of his life. Besides this field, which roughly belongs to the realm of religious education and guidance, he also composed works that addressed practical matters in building a monastic community, and especially monastic regulations. Even here, his emphasis was on clarifying the spiritual meaning of conduct according to these rules. To him, they were not simply formalities, but provided guidance for a life which emulated the example of the buddhas and ancestors in the Zen tradition. And such a life was, in his mind, the day-to-day realization of consummate insight.

# Question

**If Dogen states, talking about time, that, with that you create the seed for future enlightenment, how could this be connected to his concept whereby practice itself is enlightenment?**

Steinbeck: *“Very good question! I think Dogen, in a famous text called Genjokoan, says that: “Enlightenment is like the moon in the water, and the moon is reflected in a single drop of water as it would be in the large sea”. But he goes on to say: “There is a difference in the depth of the water and the depth of the sky. So, I think what he tries to convey by that is: “Once you practice, or when you practice, you are one with all the Buddhas” and then says, you realize full enlightenment. But since you don’t immediately change into the Golden Body of the Buddha, there’s still the idea of a sequence that deepens your insight. So you continue in the circle of life, but that’s also, from that point onwards, whether you enter buddhist practice, that is already the life of the Buddha because there is no other life than go to this process”.*

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