

The World According to Dōgen: Things as Time

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What kind of world-view supported this view of practice as realization of insight? Perhaps it is best to first look at the positions that Dōgen vigorously denied. One position he comes back to for all is life is a view that he calls the Senika Heresy. He used this name for a view that was apparently held by many in the Zen School of the day, and probably also within his own community.

The view he opposes is that the intellectual and sensitive faculty in human beings is a kind of spirit nature that is indestructible and upon death returns to the “spirit sea”—and expression for something like an eternal cosmic spirit. Salvation consists in simply understanding that one’s spirit nature already belongs to that eternal cosmic spirit, so there is nothing to worry about. Also, no specific religious practice is required, once one has understood these things.

Against this opinion, Dōgen holds that body and mind are not two separate entities. It is possible to look at the whole world and everything in it as mind, like it is possible to look at the whole world as body. But when looking at everything as mind, the human body is also mind, and when it perishes, mind perishes.

A less extreme way to look at things is to simply say that an individual’s body and mind are one in the sense that they are not two separate things, and that they arise together and die together. Also, they are occasioned by the karma accumulated in previous lives, and the karma accumulated in the present life will cause another body-mind unit to arise, live, and die according to the principle of recompensation. Another view that Dōgen opposed is a variant

of the Senika Heresy connected to the concept of Buddha Nature. This concept developed in India and China to explain why, despite the heavy load of karma, it was possible for sentient beings to achieve insight and liberation. It was often understood according to the image of a seed of enlightenment that sentient beings were born with, and which, when nurtured, would mature and eventually result in enlightenment. Some took the natural metaphor further and believed that like a seed growing into a tree, bearing blossoms and finally fruit, Buddha Nature would grow into enlightenment in and of itself, when the time came. Dōgen called this view the “Naturalist Heresy.” Like the Senika Heresy, it denied the need for religious practice. The “Naturalist Heresy” might also discourage people, who believed their efforts were useless because enlightenment would simply arrive when its time was come. In this view, the yet unenlightened being was something completely different and separate from enlightened beings such as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Against such views, which might inspire either quietism or hopelessness, Dōgen posited two principles. One is the general Buddhist principle of non-duality. Non-duality is often equated with non-differentiation, the view that all distinctions are only provisional and that, ultimately, all is one. This was not Dōgen’s view. Non-duality in his view meant that difference does not mean separation. The body is not the mind, but it is also not separate from the mind. Ordinary, deluded beings are not buddhas, but they are not separate from buddhas. Emptiness is different from form, but what has form is also empty. Emptiness exists as the way forms are, and not as something above or separate from form.





The second principle is that everything that is is also time. This idea is specific to Dōgen, and is presented in an early text from the “Treasury” titled Uji or “What is=time.” The term uji is a neologism coined by Dōgen, but the concept it stands for is a concretization of older Buddhist ideas, most importantly that of impermanence. The principle of impermanence states that things exist because of certain conditions, and when the conditions cease, the things in question also go out of existence. There is nothing that is self-sustained, and therefore everything can only last for a limited while. What Dōgen says with his term uji is that this is not because things are affected by an external force, like the passing of time. It is not that there are things, and these things somehow enter the temporal world, like a boat that is placed on the surface of a river.

The boat itself is already time. It is a constellation or configuration of elements that maintains certain characteristics under certain circumstances. It would not be what it is without these circumstances— in terms of modern physics: the chemical composition and pressure of the air, the gravitation of the earth, the absence of fire or other destructive forces in its immediate vicinity, and so on. Dōgen in one text goes further and states the relation between the boat and those who ride it as one of the conditions of its existence: the people who take the rudder and set the sail turn the boat from an aggregation of materials into a functioning vessel; while the boat that carries them over the waters lets them live. Each side exists through the configuration of the whole world, with the movement of the water, the tides (involving the moon), the wind (involving the sun) and so on, and is such a configuration; and each configuration is also intertwined or interfused with the other. Because of this, nothing can ever stand still, everything, even mountains or stars, is an aggregate of interacting movements: time.

Seeing things as time also helps to understand how they are connected to the past and future; the present state is the result of previous events and actions, and, as a condition for the future, in a certain sense also contains the future. Dōgen is primarily interested in the consequences this has for those who practice Buddhism. Those who have the feeling that no matter how hard they strive, they still are far removed from the realm of enlightenment, he encourages by reminding them that their present action is the seed of future attainment: the Buddhas, he says at one point, were once ordinary beings just like us, and we will one day be like them.

Seeing things as time therefore also means to see a current state as part of a sequence. Most importantly, current religious practice is part of the sequence of bringing forth the wish for enlightenment, practice, realization, and nirvana. By choosing to practice—and thereby testifying to the wish for enlightenment—one inserts one’s life into this sequence; and this means that from that moment onwards, one lives the life of a Buddha.

Dōgen illustrates this in Uji by saying that the golden, grand body of the fully enlightened Buddha embodies itself by living through this sequence. And this also means that being a Buddha means living as and like a Buddha—in other words, enlightenment means enlightened practice; there is no enlightenment and no Buddha beyond this performing of the functions of Buddha. But, Dōgen believes, in performing these functions by modeling one’s life after the precedent of Buddhas and ancestors of the tradition, one is at every moment living the same time as they do, and constantly receiving their support. Through that notion, Dōgen’s teaching, which often comes across as very rigorous and stern, is connected to a strong sense of hope and joy.



Question

For Dogen, there is no absolute time where things happen, but things themselves are each on a different relative time, in all the time events related to each other.

Steinbeck: *“Yes, I think that is a good expression of the idea He exposes in “Uji. So, perhaps one thing to add is: each event, as I said, is described as a constellation of the whole world, so it includes everything else, but in a non-exclusive manner. So, it coexists with other constellations like the boat and the people that ride the boat. The boat is one constellation, and the people is a constellation per se which interfere with the one of the boat”.*

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