

DŌGEN

His Life, Religion, and Poetry

By Steven Heine



Dōgen, founder of the Sōtō Zen sect in Japan, viewing the full moon. This painting is held at Hōkyōji Temple. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/pe4zjgh>.

Sect Founder and Universal Philosopher

Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253) was the founder of the Sōtō sect, one of the five major denominations of Japanese Buddhism that spread rapidly in medieval Japan and remains an important religious movement in modern society. Dōgen transmitted the teachings he learned during a four-year visit from 1223 to 1227 to China, where he attained enlightenment while training in Zen meditation under the tutelage of mentor Rujing and was also immersed in studying Chinese styles of writing, including poetry. In response to Rujing's exhortation to stay free of distraction, even if it might limit the number of disciples, Dōgen eventually decided to leave behind the secular society of Kyoto for a remote mountain setting north of the capital following his return from the mainland. In the 1240s, he established a major monastery at Eihei-ji Temple in Echizen (currently Fukui Prefecture), which is today one of the most frequently visited sacred sites in Japan.

In one of his Japanese *waka*-style poems consisting of five lines and thirty-one syllables, Dōgen writes lyrically of the environment at Eihei-ji:

*The white mountains of Echizen
Are my winter retreat. A blanket of clouds
Covers the frosted peaks
And snowy slopes.¹*

In this verse, successive shades and textures of wintry paleness are accentuated by the wordplay on “white mountain” (*shirayama*, which is another pronunciation for Mount Hakusan, a perpetually snow-covered peak located near Eihei-ji). This literary technique helps evoke the Buddhist doctrine of nonduality, whereby an underlying unity allows for infinite varieties of distinction, a theme similarly conveyed by a famous Zen saying often cited by Nō playwright Zeami, “a white heron reflected by the moonlight sits on a silver vase.”

This *waka* is one of many examples showing why Dōgen is greatly appreciated for his profound philosophy of religion that has universal spiritual and literary implications. A tremendously creative author of prose and poetic works who integrates an eloquent use of Japanese rhetorical forms featuring inventive wordplay and allusion with a remarkable knowledge of Chinese Buddhist textual sources, Dōgen is often referred to as the premier philosopher in Japanese history and one of the foremost exponents in the overall development of Buddhist thought. Leading thinkers in Japan, such as Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji, have interpreted Dōgen's complex Chinese-Japanese texts. Dōgen's works are also often compared to those of classic and modern Western intellectuals, ranging from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas to Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. His principal treatises are now available in multiple translations; for some sections, there are a dozen or more versions in English, in addition to European languages and Chinese.²

The establishment of Sōtō Zen took place during a turbulent time that was, from the standpoint of spawning many new religious factions, very much a creative period of Japanese history. The beginning of the Kamakura Era marked the radical transition of Japanese society from the peaceful leadership of the Fujiwara regency centered in Kyoto to the military rule of the Hōjō shogunate, which moved the capital to the town of Kamakura, now located about an hour south of Tokyo. Rapidly shifting social conditions led to the emergence of the rising class of samurai warriors, many of whom turned to Zen Buddhist practice as a form of discipline that helped steady their minds during battle and also inspired, in addition to expertise in martial skills, their participation in the literary and fine arts.

The support of the Hōjō shoguns was crucial to the expansion of the Zen sect yet ironically played a key role in shaping our image of Dōgen as a tough-minded idealist. Toward the end of his life he was invited to Kamakura, where he apparently spurned an offer from Hōjō Tokiyori to lead a major temple in the new capital so that he could return to and stay

secluded in his mountain monastery. During his travels back to Eihei-ji, Dōgen wrote the following waka that captures dual feelings of vulnerability and determination:

*In the heart of the night,
The moonlight framing
A small boat drifting,
Tossed not by the waves
Nor swayed by the breeze.*

The Kamakura Era (1185–1333) was marked by the decline of the traditional Tendai Buddhist sect, which was based at Enryakuji Temple situated on Mount Hiei just to the northeast of Kyoto and affiliated with the Fujiwara clan. Tendai was challenged and changed by the onset of a number of innovative, charismatic Buddhist teachers. One of these monks was Eisai, who traveled to China a couple of decades before Dōgen and founded Rinzai, the other main Zen sect that also practices a form of meditation. Three additional leaders who favored a devotional style of Buddhist practice were Hōnen (Pure Land), Shinran (True Pure Land), and Nichiren (Nichiren).

All these denominations, referred to as examples of “New Kamakura Buddhism,” are currently flourishing as mainstays of Japanese religion that is characterized by the saying, “Born Shintō, Die Buddhist,” in that Shintō shrines perform ceremonies for birth and marriage whereas Buddhist temples conduct funerals and memorials. Sōtō Zen remains the largest Buddhist sect in terms of both the number of temples it supports (about 14,000) and the number of adherents who claim membership (over ten million).

Visitors to Eihei-ji gain a sense of Dōgen’s role as founder of a living tradition based on the practice of Buddhist meditation conducted as silent contemplation while sitting in the upright posture known as *zazen*. Dōgen learned the *zazen* method during his stay in China. It was a practice he felt had been diminished by an emphasis on various kinds of rituals in Japanese styles of training. In a famous passage from his primary text, the *Shōbōgenzō* (*Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye*), a collection of ninety-five sermons and essays, Dōgen maintains that during a single instant of sitting meditation there arises unity of the mental and physical attributes of the practitioner, as well as a sense of oneness joining the individual with reality:

We become whole when sitting in zazen and entering a state in which we are no longer conscious of a separation of body and mind. If someone, even for a short moment, sits up straight in the balanced posture of the Buddha, it immediately becomes apparent that everything in the universe also exhibits the same equanimity and that this realization spreads through all of existence.

Only a small fraction of Sōtō temples, however, are considered monastic training temples that focus on *zazen* practice for monks. The vast majority function as sites for burials or rites dedicated to local deities such as Inari or Tengu that were assimilated over the centuries into Sōtō religiosity. Nevertheless, in the postwar period, there has been a significant movement at many temples toward promoting *zazen-kai*, or weekly meditation sessions for laypeople, in addition to *Genzō-e*, or monthly lectures and discussions about the *Shōbōgenzō*.

Dōgen’s Unique View of Impermanence

The single main feature of Dōgen’s distinctive approach to Buddhist theory and practice, which was reflected in his own background and upbringing during the unstable and unsettling historical period of the dawn of the Kamakura Era, is an approach to religious experience based on insightful reflection on *mujō-kan* (the meaning of impermanence). An understanding of the transiency of human and natural existence is realized by Dōgen

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Eihei-ji Temple in snow. Photo courtesy of Yoshihide Yoshizu.

both in terms of personal experiences of sorrow and sadness—for example, when his parents died in childhood, he resolved to become a monk—and as the basis for a view of reality as fundamentally shifting and uncertain phenomena manifested in the fleeting beauty of natural surroundings, as disclosed at Eihei-ji.

Dōgen’s view represents a productive combination of Indian Buddhist philosophy in regard to the insubstantial, selfless nature of reality with the sensibility of the Japanese recognition through eloquent poetry of the effects of ephemerality. Schooled in the doctrines of Sakyamuni Buddha, Dōgen was greatly influenced by Japanese culture that emphasized coming to terms with the vicissitudes of life, which were reflected in medieval writings. Works such as *The Tale of Heike* (*Heike monogatari*), Chōmei’s *An Account of My Hut* (*Hojoki*), and Kenkō’s *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*), which respond to the impact of famines and natural disasters, as well as human conflict and war in a whirlwind of complex social and political entanglements, evoke the ideals of *mono no aware* (poignant sadness based on the passing of things) and *sabi* (solitude). In that light, Dōgen emphasizes that we should not view the experience of enlightenment, known as *nirvana* (extinction of desire) in India or as *bushō* (all-encompassing Buddha-nature) in Japan, as an eternal realm separable from impermanent reality. Instead, a thorough appreciation of the transitory nature of all phenomena must serve as the touchstone of Buddhist meditative training and mystical realization.

Much of Dōgen’s emphasis on impermanence derives from his own experiences as recorded in his traditional biographies. Although many of the details of these records have been called into question by recent historiographical studies, the symbolism of the main events is still important for understanding the meaning of his philosophy of Zen. According



A panoramic view of the northern part of Fukui Prefecture, from the top of Mt. Murakuni in Echizen, Fukui. Photo by Osarusan. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/nmgwvmf>.

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to the established accounts, Dōgen was born into an aristocratic family at a time when Japan was beginning to be plagued by ongoing civil warfare. He experienced profound sorrow and tragedy at an early age as his father, a prominent general, died when he was two and his beautiful mother, a mistress of the father, passed when he was seven. It is said that when he saw the smoke of the incense rising and vanishing during his mother's funeral, Dōgen was deeply moved by an awareness of the inevitability of death and the pervasiveness of impermanence.

The orphaned Dōgen had the opportunity through members of his noble family to be trained for a courtly career but decided to renounce ordinary life to seek Buddhist enlightenment at the age of thirteen. At first, he studied on Mount Hiei in the dominant Japanese Tendai sect, which held to the central doctrine of *hongaku* (original enlightenment), or the innate potentiality of all beings to attain the primordial Buddha-nature. However, Dōgen quickly felt a fundamental sense of “doubt” about the efficacy of this doctrine: if everyone is already enlightened in that they possess the truth of Buddha-nature, he wondered, then what is the need for sustained meditative practice as required by the Buddha's teaching?

Unable to resolve the doubt in Japan, Dōgen traveled to China, where the contemplative path of Zen (*Chan*, Chn) had become the dominant school during the Song Dynasty (960–1279). At first, Dōgen was disappointed in the laxity of Chinese monks, who failed to inspire him to resolve his uncertainty. Then, on the verge of returning to his native country unfulfilled, he met Rujing, who insisted on an unrelenting approach to meditation. Under the guidance of his new teacher, Dōgen attained an awakening experience of *shinjin datsuraku* (“casting off of body-mind”), or a spontaneous yet continuing process of liberation from all intellectual and volitional attachments, which signified the resolution of his doubt about the necessity of sustained practice. This occurred in a flash of insight when Rujing scolded the monk sitting next to Dōgen, who was slumbering during a prolonged session of meditation.

Back in Japan, Dōgen practiced in solitude for several years before he became leader of a thriving new group of followers. In addition to his

collection of sixty-three waka, Dōgen wrote several hundred verses in the style of *kanshi* (Chinese poetry) that are contained in the last two sections of his ten-volume *Eihei kōroku* (*Recording Sayings*). One of these from 1230 captures the feeling of serene reclusion, coupled with a restless longing to teach disciples:

*How pitiful is life and death's ceasing and arising,
I lose my way yet find my path as if walking in a dream.
Even though there is still one thing left to do I must not forget,
The deep grass of Fukakusa settles in the sound of the evening rain.*

According to recent interpreters, Dōgen's philosophy played a key role in the formation of the Japanese “religio-aesthetic tradition,” for which spiritual ideals are expressed not so much in terms of doctrine or ritual but through the arts. Literature and painting are prized not as exemplary as art for art's sake but for instructing the audience in regard to the essence of religious experience. A modern commentator on this cultural development, Karaki Junzō, suggests that there are three levels of impermanence articulated in the religio-aesthetics of Japan. The superficial stage is marked by a sensation of change felt during everyday ups and downs that can cause frustration, futility, disappointment, or despair. A more profound level is an emotional response when, by confronting loss and regret at times of illness or dying faced by oneself or a beloved companion, a deep understanding of contingency, mortality, and limits comes into play. Karaki argues that Dōgen attained the supreme level through cultivating contemplative awareness of the impermanent nature of each and every person or thing by learning to transcend any fear of death while also overcoming a clinging or attachment to staying alive.

The standpoint of impermanence is expressed in Dōgen's essays on numerous Buddhist topics contained in the *Shōbōgenzō*, including chapters on the “Unity of All Beings and Time” (“Uji”), “Sounds of the Valleys, Colors of the Mountains” (“Keisei sanshoku”), and “Mountains and Waters Form the Sutras” (“Sansuikyō”). A central feature of aesthetic realization is Dōgen's use of poetic language, especially elaborate metaphor, and philosophical punning to convey a sense of contemplation that enhances the enlightenment experience of detachment from worldly concerns.

One of the main examples of Dōgen's creativity is the philosophical wordplay he makes on the term *uji* (also pronounced *arutoki*), which in everyday conversation means “sometimes.” This word is composed of two *kanji* (Chinese characters) for “being” (*u*) and “time” (*ji*). In the “Uji” chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen uses *uji* to imply the principle of the paradoxical unity of “all being as all moments of time.” Beings, each existing in space and time, and times of every instance of past, present, and future, form wholeness so that the ordinary word “uji” means much more than the sum of its two parts.

Dōgen stresses that the unity of being-time does not function in the

human dimension alone, but is fully cosmic in encompassing all forms of existence, which is evident through awareness of the beauty of nature and the cyclicity of seasonal rotation. Like many Zen masters in China and Japan, as well as Far Eastern mystics of the Daoist and Shintō traditions, Dōgen seemed most content after he moved from the political strife occurring in Kyoto to the splendor of the Echizen Mountains, where he experienced a constant state of communion with the natural environment. In the following waka, he equates Buddha-nature with natural phenomena and expresses an aesthetic rapture in which the rushing stream is experienced as the voice of the living Buddha, while the mountain peak appears as his form:

*Colors of the mountains,
Streams in the valleys,
All in one, one in all
The voice and body
Of our Sakyamuni Buddha.*

Dōgen's view of the fleeting quality of time is also conveyed in the waka titled "Impermanence" ("Mujō"):

*To what
Shall I liken this world of ours?
Moonlight, reflected
In dewdrops
Shaken from a crane's bill.*

Dōgen, a Literary Figure?

In 1968, Kawabata Yasunari, the first Japanese author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, opened his acceptance speech in Stockholm by citing a waka composed by Dōgen. In the speech, "Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself (Utsukushii Nihon no watakushi),"³ Kawabata commented on the profound influence of Zen aesthetics on his writing, beginning with Dōgen's verse on "Original Face" ("Honrai no memmoku"). This term suggests the fundamental essence of human nature that stands fully in harmony with the ultimate principle of Buddha-nature. First used in a famous story about one of the early leaders of Zen in China, Huineng, "Original Face," which is also referred to as "the look on your face before you were born," implies a quality that is uncorrupted by ignorance or attachment. As highlighted by a recent film biography of Dōgen titled *Zen*, in which a famous Kabuki actor movingly plays the religious leader, this verse was one of the pedagogical tools Dōgen used during his visit to Kamakura to preach to Hōjō Tokiyori, who was trying to reconcile his violent life as a warrior with Buddhist vows of nonviolence.

For Dōgen, the "Original Face" of humanity is found amid the beauty of nature and the cyclicity of the four seasons. In Edward Seidensticker's translation, the waka reads:

*In the spring, cherry blossoms,
In the summer, the cuckoo,
In autumn, the moon,
And in winter, the snow, clear, cold.*

This poem is notable, according to Kawabata, because "by a spontaneous though deliberate stringing together of conventional images and words, it transmits the very essence of Japan." Kawabata refers to "conventional images and words" in Dōgen's verse in that a simple connecting of seasonal imagery typical of medieval poetry evokes the ephemeral yet renewable quality of nature. Thus, the true essence of the person, or "original face," is one with the surroundings.

Based on an analysis of the rhetoric of the verse, it is possible to rethink Seidensticker's translation of "Original Face." An alternative translation is:

<i>Haru wa hana</i>	In spring, the cherry blossoms,
<i>Natsu hototogisu</i>	In summer, the cuckoo's song,
<i>Aki wa tsuki</i>	In autumn, the moon, shining,
<i>Fuyu yuki kiede</i>	In winter, the frozen snow.
<i>Suzushi kari keri</i>	How pure and clear are the seasons!

In Japanese court poetry, *suzushi* often implies the serene and cool outlook—encompassing both objective appearance and subjective response—generated by phenomena that are not literally cold.

The aesthetic configuration of the waka, which reinforces its religious message, is primarily based on the multiple nuances of the adjective *suzushi* appearing in the final line. *Suzushi* can be taken to mean, as Seidensticker's version indicates, the physical characteristic or bodily sensation of the brightness and coldness of the snow. Yet that rendering, which suggests that *suzushi* merely amplifies *kiede* (frozen) in modifying snow, represents but one level of meaning. In Japanese court poetry, *suzushi* often implies the serene and cool outlook—encompassing both objective appearance and subjective response—generated by phenomena that are not literally cold. The term is used by the poet Tamekane, for instance, to describe the purity and coolness of the voice of the *hototogisu* (cuckoo), in which one kind of stimulation evokes the impression of another sensation. This phenomenon, called synesthesia, illustrates the underlying and complex interrelatedness of personal reaction and external stimulus, body and mind, and sensation and awareness.

In the revised rendition, *suzushi* refers neither to just the snow nor the observer, neither to the physical nor the mental. Rather, it suggests a lyricism that is rooted and yet unlimited by the forms previously portrayed in the poem. In this context, Dōgen uses the word *suzushi* in a religio-aesthetic way to comment on human involvement in the rotation of the seasons, or the immediate and renewable response to the perpetual cyclicity of four distinct yet overlapping phenomena. Thus, *suzushi* reflects the lyricism of the entire poem by expressing the primordial unity encompassing infinite diversity and the possibility for momentary change by modifying each of the seasonal images: the vivid colors and graceful scattering of spring flowers, the sharp cry of the cuckoo at dawn or dusk, the clarity and tranquility of autumn moonlight, and the purity of freshly fallen snow.

Like many other classic Zen masters, Dōgen was a reluctant writer of verse. In fact, he is probably better known for saying in a collection of sermons called *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*: "Zen monks are fond of literature these days, finding it an aid to writing verses and tracts. This is a mistake . . . Yet no matter how elegant their prose or how exquisite their poetry might be, they are merely toying with words and cannot gain the truth." Dōgen uses a waka to convey mixed feelings about composing poetry and about the way his expressions are received by the audience:

*Will their gaze fall upon
The petals of words I utter,
Shaken loose and blown free by the spring breeze
As if only the notes
Of a flower's song?⁴*

An intriguing example of Dōgen's Chinese poetry further highlights the intricate feelings of exaltation about religio-aesthetic inspiration combined with regret for allowing himself to be distracted by literary pursuits:

<i>Jiū shè rénjiān wú aixī</i>	Living in the world for so long without attachments,
<i>Wénzhāng bīyàn jì pāo lái</i>	Since giving up using paper and pen.

Dōgen Timeline

1200	Born in Kyoto to aristocracy
1202	Father, a prominent general, dies
1204	Educated in Confucian classics and Japanese poetry
1207	Mother, a mistress of father, dies, so Dōgen is orphaned
1213	Becomes a monk after turning down a secular position
1217	Joins Kenninji, the first Zen temple in Japan, founded by Eisai
1223	Travels to China to seek authentic teaching and overcome doubt
1225	Attains enlightenment and learns Chinese poetry under master Rujing
1227	Begins to transmit the Sōtō school to Japan
1231	Starts writing the <i>Shōbōgenzō</i>
1233	Establishes his first temple in Kyoto
1236	Temple expands with Chinese-style buildings
1241	Prolific period of writing essays and poetry, and giving sermons
1243	Leaves Kyoto for mountains in remote Echizen Mountains
1244	Settles in newly constructed Eiheji Temple
1247	Travels to Kamakura at request of Hōjō Tokiyori
1248	Returns to Eiheiji after spending six months away
1252	Completes editing of <i>Shōbōgenzō</i> while falling ill
1253	Goes to Kyoto for medical care and dies

Jiàn huā wén niao fēnqíng shǎo I see flowers and hear birds
without feeling much,
Zhà zài shān yóu kuì bù cái Living on mountains, I am
embarrassed by this meager
effort.

The *pinyin* transliteration of this poem illustrates that Dōgen mastered the complex rules for writing Chinese poetry with four lines and seven syllables. These regulations include the use of end rhyme in the second and fourth lines, plus a pause or caesura that occurs after the fourth syllable in each line. In addition, the thematic progression in which the first line represents the opening statement, the second further develops the topic, the third creates a sense of turnabout or reversal, and the final line expresses an ironic sense of closure regarding the contradiction.

One of Dōgen's most eloquent poems was written near the end of life as he returned from Echizen to the capital for medical care. Making the trek to Kyoto for the first time in ten years in what would prove to be his final journey, Dōgen spoke of his difficult yet thrilling travels:

Kusa no ha ni Like a blade of grass,
Kadodeseru mi no My frail body
Kinobe yama Treading the path to Kyoto,
Kumo ni oka aru Seeming to wander
Kokochi koso sure Amid the cloudy mist on the
narrow mountain pass.

With the alliteration of “k” sounds in the first word of each line, the waka conveys exhilaration, anxiety, expectation, and frailty during the trip. ■

NOTES

1. Some of the poems are cited from Steven Heine, *The Zen Poetry of Dōgen* (Mount Tremper, NY: Dharma Communications, 2004). Some of the translations have been modified. Dōgen's collected works are in *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, ed. Kawamura Kōdō et. al. (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1988–1993).
2. Two translations of Dōgen that are highly recommended for being complete versions of their respective texts are Kazuaki Tanahashi, trans., *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2010), and Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, trans., *Dōgen's Extensive Record: A Translation of Eihei Kōroku* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010). Another useful translation is *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002). For examinations of key components of Dōgen's life and thought, see Carl Bielefeldt, *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); William M. Bodiford, *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993); Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000); and Takeshi James Kodera, *Dōgen's Formative Years in China: An Historical Study and Annotated Translation of Hōkyō-ki* (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1980).
3. Kawabata Yasunari, *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself*, trans. E.G. Seidensticker (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969); this is a bilingual edition.
4. This sentiment recalls the *Rhymes of a Rolling Stone* (1912) by modern American poet Robert W. Service, who notes, “I have no doubt at all the Devil grins, / At seas of ink I spatter. / Ye gods, forgive my ‘literary’ sins— / The other kind don't matter.”

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