



For the Time-Being: *Buddhism, Dōgen, and Temporality*

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Few philosophical and religious traditions around the world can claim such a long history and malleable tradition as Buddhism. It has come to mean many things for many people and has spread to nearly every corner of the earth. As Buddhism was transplanted here and there, it appropriated itself to the surrounding social environment. As such, Buddhist tradition takes many forms, almost paradoxically at times. Through the many configurations, however, there are general themes and concepts that keep Buddhist traditions “Buddhist.”

From the beginning, from Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment, the Buddha Way was a practical, viable means for human beings to attain supreme liberation from the fetters of life. By the time Buddhism reached the shores of medieval Japan, the many Dharmas had been written and commented on, schools of thought had arisen and fallen, and the real work of Buddhist thinkers lied in the details. One such detail was that of time. The problem of time in the history of Buddhist thought has often been regarded as a peripheral result of larger issues, such as emptiness and causality, Buddha-Nature, and so forth (Kim, 142).

One such Buddhist thinker of medieval Japan, Zen Master Dōgen, wrestled with the problem of time systematically in true Zen fashion, and came to view the understanding of time as central to understanding key concepts such as enlightenment, practice, duality and non-duality impermanence, activity and existence. Attempted here is a probing into Dōgen’s conception of time as a means to better and more completely understand these other key concepts of Buddhism.

Probing the nature of time is certainly not only found in Buddhism. The earliest philosophers of the world struggled with a definition of time. However, it doesn’t take a philosopher to experience time; everyone has a common-sense notion of time. Most commonly (in Western thought), time is seen as a container, the stage in which all actions and events transpire through some duration.

To people such as Isaac Newton, and most scientists, time is fundamental to the nature and structure of the universe; it is a

linear dimension, a measurable quantity with a certain direction moving from past to future. Another commonly held view of time is that time is a mental construct used as a measurement system to quantify the motion of objects and the intervals between sequential events. Thus, time is seen not as a substance of the universe, but as a “substance” of the human intellect.

Ancient Indian philosophy saw time as cyclic in nature. While the teachings of the Buddha deviated from the Vedantic philosophies prevalent in India at the time, the concept of time as cyclic remained. Indeed, the whole of Indian philosophy (culminating in enlightenment) sought release from the cyclic nature of the Samsaric world, or the wheel of becoming. As stated by Stambaugh,

“Dōgen follows Nāgārjuna in his rejection of nirvana or liberation as something *beyond* the cycles of birth and death. But, instead of primarily conceiving of an “identity” of the cycles of birth and death with liberation from them, which was Nāgārjuna’s innovative insight, Dōgen’s focus appears to be primarily on the nature of “being-time” (the Japanese word is *uji* and the possible experience of liberation inherent in it. Thus, ... that [orientation] of Dōgen is experiential and phenomenological.”

Here we see a concise description of Dōgen’s philosophic interest: that time is to be understood and experienced as being, as existence itself. Time is nothing other than being itself. To quote Dōgen’s own writings in his seminal work the *Shōbōgenzō* (specifically the fascicle *Uji* “The central meaning of being-time is: every being in the entire world is related to each other and can never be separated from time,” (Nishiyama, Stevens 69). For Dōgen, this is the correct way to view time and existence. He expresses his disdain for the common view of time in the following way: “Do not think of time as merely flying by; do not only study the fleeting aspect of time. If time is really flying away, there would be a separation between time and ourselves. If you think that time is just a passing phenomenon, you will never understand being-time”(Kim).

Furthermore, he says: “Indeed, being-time covers everything. It is pure Being; in it resolve, practice, enlightenment and detachment are acting, i.e., not different from being-time. The eternal present includes limitless space; there is nothing beside this” (Kim). With these two quotes, one can grasp that without the understanding of being-time one is lost in the fleeting fatalism of durational temporality (time flying by) where we cling to particulars and imagine time as ever flowing past the present moment. With an understanding

of being-time, however the clinging subsides when one sees the particulars *as* time and the flowing from this to that is illusory.

Dōgen founded the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism, a school he brought to Japan from his travels to China in the 13th century. Zen (or Ch’an Buddhism in China) arose in popularity among other schools such as Hua-Yen and T’ien t’ai. Concerning the Hua-Yen school, Ch’an borrowed and expanded on certain aspects. While the Flower Garland Sutra played the prominent role in Hua-Yen, it played a minor yet still important role in Ch’an Buddhism. Two principles of Hua-Yen permeate Dōgen’s ideas, those of mutual identity and mutual interpenetration. A fine description of these is given by Kim, “Mutual identity refers to the nondifferentiated state in which antitheses such as one and many, absolute and relative, being and nonbeing, and so forth, co-exist in oneness and interfusion. Mutual penetration refers to the simultaneous origination of all things and events interpenetrating one another in their myriad realms and dimensions” (140).

The “simultaneous origination of all things” occurs nowhere but the present moment. Seeking this in the past or future one will not find it. Thus, “various formations of discrete events take place in the matrix of the present moment.” Past, present, and future are seen as being, “realized in each moment -- one-in-many or many-in-one in the present,” (141). Dōgen uses these principles as ground for leaping into his own activity of expounding the nature of time. He writes succinctly “Everything exists in the present within yourself” (Uji, 70).

The present moment is the playing field in which all of Dōgen’s expositions are executed. The present moment we discuss varies drastically from the typical notion of an infinitesimal quanta of durational temporality found in a sequence of quanta set against the backdrop of an arrow of time moving from past to future. Dōgen finds all things dwelling in a “Dharma-position” best described as being, “comprised of a particular here and a particular now (a spatio-temporal existence in the world), hence, it is inevitably comprised of the existential particularities ... which are observed, compared, judged, and chosen in the dualistic scheme of things,” (Kim 149). So a given Dharma-position is the composition of existential particularities in a certain arrangement, which is equivalent to a particular here and now.

These ideas have profound implications. Each present moment is the total compilation of all composite things and arrangements, and each arrangement of composite things is the total compilation of all present moments. Therefore, each present moment is total and complete in itself. This is the solution to the problem of the flow of time. Time neither flows nor remains static; it is activity, it is being. No doubt logical paradoxes arise out of such statements and concepts. Each moment is discontinuous from all previous and all following

moments, and yet contains all things and all events making it totally and absolutely free.

In classic Zen paradox, Dōgen expresses this absolute freedom as obstruction or self-impedance. In the context of birth and death, Stambaugh summarizes Dōgen’s view of obstruction eloquently (75):

That life and death are without before and after, are cut off from them, means that before and after do not constitute a transition out of the present dwelling in a dharma-situation. The present moment does not become the past; it does not become it nor does it impede it. For Dōgen, nothing impedes anything else, only itself. This self-impeding, then, is not any kind of hindrance, but rather penetration, realization. The present does not become the past, or impede it, or “touch” it.

This understanding of the dwelling of a Dharma-position allows us to come back to a previous observation. Earlier we quoted Dōgen as saying, “resolve, practice, enlightenment and detachment [are] not different from being-time” (Kim). It was always Dōgen’s conviction that enlightenment is no different from the resolve and practice of the Buddha Way. That is the Zen Way as a whole; enlightenment is not some end result of the path of right practice, the practice is itself the enlightenment. For Dōgen, both practice and enlightenment are time. Only when the practice is fully exerted, when one’s practice (meditation for instance) is one’s total activity the small self the ego-self is forgotten and enlightenment is realized as nothing but being-time. When this path is taken and understood, all of the sudden the grand body of Buddhist thought falls out from it. For instance, the concept of Tathatā (the nature of things as they are, “suchness”) is just this idea of full exertion, things acting as they are naturally and spontaneously. This is also no different than self-impedance and we can begin to understand Dōgen’s statement, “a mountain mountain-s a mountain, thereby a mountain realizes itself” (Kim 151). Here, a mountain expresses itself as nothing but the full activity of being a mountain, thereby realizing itself as a mountain.

Until now we have left two large developments of Buddhist thought and expression out of the discussion. We will discuss in turn the nature of impermanence and Buddha-Nature with respect to being-time. If there is anything that pervades nearly every aspect of Buddhist development it is that of impermanence. It is so central as to be directly proportional to the Buddha’s first and second of the Four Noble Truths (that is, all things are Dukkha (“suffering,” “upsetting”) because clinging to that which is impermanent is the root cause of dukkha). Impermanence is even so important as to be labeled one of the three marks or facts of existence, the other two being nonsubstantiality (śūnyatā or emptiness) and dukkha. The

middle path of Zen avoids the extremes of permanence and impermanence. Thus, it is easy to be confused when reading Zen teachings on the importance of both permanence and impermanence. The extreme of permanence can be likened to a view of eternalism while the extreme of impermanence can be likened to a view of nihilism. For Dōgen though, permanence is understood as, “nonturning or nondualism,” (Kim 135). Kim goes on to quote Dōgen, saying, “Nonturning means that whether we overcome delusions or are conditioned by them, we are never attached to the traces of their coming and going. Hence, this is called permanence.” Much of Buddhist practice boils down to thoroughly investigating the impermanence that is the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths with a grounded body-mind of the permanent and non-attached nature described by Dōgen. This practice, when done whole-heartedly is the enlightenment that is sought, and is thus being-time. Permanence (nondualism) and impermanence (dynamism) are then both contained in the ever-present moment, being-time, which is altogether momentary.

Finally, we come to the magnum opus of Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha-Nature, in the context of being-time. Indeed, the question of Buddha-Nature was the driving force of young Dōgen’s spiritual adventure. “If we already possess the Buddha-Nature, what need is there to practice?” (Strambaugh 21). To answer the question, the question must first be analyzed. As stated, it is implied the Buddha-Nature is something to be possessed, something with substance and therefore temporal duration. However, all things lack an abiding substance, and no thing exists in the sense of a continuation from one moment to the next. Some schools interpret the Buddha-Nature as a potentiality, a seed of sorts, which will bear fruit at some time when the right conditions are met. However this lends itself to the conceptualization of the Buddha-Nature actualizing itself at some time in the future. How can this be if all things are expressed as they are only in the present? Yet, Dōgen presses that Buddha-Nature does not, “appear for the first time upon enlightenment,” (21). How can Buddha-Nature spontaneously arise in the present moment without previously existing in some sense beforehand? Perhaps Dōgen himself can shed some light (22),

By way of illustration, *if you wish to know the Buddha-nature’s meaning* might be read, you are directly knowing the Buddha-nature’s meaning. *You should watch for temporal conditions* means you are directly knowing temporal conditions. If you wish to know the Buddha-nature, you should know that it is precisely temporal conditions themselves.

Here Dōgen asserts Buddha-Nature is not separate from temporal conditions, and this assertion falls in line with so many other of Dōgen’s claims. Buddha-Nature does not abide in previous conditions, waiting to be realized spontaneously

in some future condition. It is not some substance that transmigrates moments as a potential seed of awakening. Buddha-Nature is not separate from the temporal conditions of the present moment. It does not come to fruition after right practice, does not actualize at the moment of enlightenment. The Buddha-Nature is tathatā; it is self-impeding and impermanent. The Buddha-Nature is the resolve, practice, enlightenment and detachment of the Buddha Way. Buddha-Nature is being-time. As Dōgen might say one does not see one’s original-face without practice, one does not recognize himself as time without “forgetting oneself” and “casting off the body-mind” (Nishiyama trans., *Genj k an*, 1).

Dōgen is a unique character in the development of the Buddha Dharma, unique even with respect to the progression of human intellect. His religion and philosophy are quite linear in the scheme of eastern traditions, though he advanced them both by leaps and bounds in his home country of Japan. It wasn’t for hundreds of years until Western thinkers, particularly Spinoza and Heidegger, among others (Strambaugh, 23), began to come to terms with many aspects of metaphysics that Dōgen had already encountered and seemingly come to terms with. Therefore, Dōgen Zenji’s Shōbōgenzō (The Eye and Treasury of the True Law) is an acme piece of human wisdom, only a fraction of which is expressed here in regards being-time.

Bibliography

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