

Introduction to "Beyond Thinking"

Meditation Guide by Zen Master Dogen

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Summary: In this introduction to "Beyond Thinking: A Guide to Zen Meditation," a collection of Dogen's writing compiled and translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi, Zoketsu assesses the work and central message of Dogen-zengi.

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The year 2000 marked the 800th anniversary of Dogen's birth, a good time to appreciate the crucial contribution this great teacher has made not only to Japanese Soto Zen Buddhism, or even to Zen Buddhism in general, but to religious practice the world over. The last half of the twentieth century has been perhaps the strongest time for Dogen's work: in Japan and in the West he has been studied as never before, and his thought has been influential not only for a Soto Zen school that is now thoroughly international, but also in a wider philosophical discussion, in which he is often compared with Heidegger, Whitehead, Wittgenstein and others. Dogen's thought has proven useful and germane to many post modern discussions in fields like metaphysics, epistemology, language theory, and the like. When I began practicing Zen in 1970, and encountered Dogen's writing for the first time, he was very little known and understood in the West. While much of his writing has yet to be brought into European languages, several English translations of his master work "Shobogenzo" (from which several of the pieces in this volume come), as well as other materials, are now available, and Western Zen practice centers based on his work have been established. With all this, I think we can say that serious study of Dogen in the West is well underway.

It seems natural then that we at this moment take stock of where we stand with Dogen, both in Japan, and in the West. Who is Dogen, what does he stand for, why he is important? For those of us who have been practicing Zen for many years and studying and trying to put into practice the ideas of Dogen, a new spirit is emerging. There is a greater willingness to see Dogen in a wider context, to see the problems along with the tremendous and sublime depths, and to recognize that the religion that he founded has had its ups and downs. In Japan the Soto establishment has in

recent years made a strong effort to reach out to the wider world. It has forthrightly apologized for past mistakes (supporting Japanese militarism before and during World War II, and going along with the Japanese anti Chinese racist policies of that period), and, more than this, has engaged in its own internal debates about how and why these mistakes were made. In many ways the Japanese Soto church has made sincere efforts to accept non Japanese practitioners not simply as colonial subjects of their religion, but as robust and authentic practitioners in their own right, who may have something to contribute to a wider-ranging study of the Master. All of this was unimaginable twenty-five years ago.

Western Zen practitioners are beginning to grow also, retaining a good deal of the the initial wonder and adoration of Dogen, but tempering them with a critical eye. It is true that Dogen's writings are lofty, difficult, and profound, and represent one of the great treasures of world religious thought. And yet, we are now beginning to admit that Dogen's thought is at times cranky, narrow-minded, elitist, fundamentalist, even violent at times in its expression. We are beginning to admit that no human being, Dogen included, is perfect, unchanging, or always right, and that no person or institution remains unaffected by the social and political conditions that form the context for what happens.

While Dogen was a religious reformer and innovator, he was also, deeply, a traditionalist. A traditionalist religious view is more often than not narrow minded, authoritarian, and rule bound, more likely to cut off real and vibrant life than to foster it. We need only study the record of any religious establishment to confirm this - from jihad to the Crusades, religion's effect on the human world has often been disastrous. And even when religion has fostered relatively peaceful times, it has often left scars of guilt and inner anguish on its most loyal adherents. Because of this, the last few hundred years have been understandably hard on traditionalist religion. The modern secular psychological and scientific viewpoint, which has taken religion as something old fashioned and counterproductive to real human values, has been a source of liberation for many people. But now

that we are to a large extent free of the old religion, and at the same time clearer about our own limitations as a species, the secular perspective is wearing thin. We are finding a new way to practice religion - not superficially nor rigidly but flexibly and widely, lovingly not crabbily, with a gentle idealism that it not, as idealism all too often is, toxic.

It seems to me that one of the necessities of this new kind of religion is actual practice - daily practice. It is admirable and important to have the right ideas about our lives; to believe that goodness is possible and can be cultivated; to view compassion as the most important of human achievements; to want to be mindful not mindless, and so on. But these sorts of attitudes, wonderful as they are, aren't enough to carry us forward in the midst of the world we live in. We also need some form of spiritual practice that we are committed to - an everyday practice, that will strengthen those beliefs and intentions, and help us to see and actually work with our daily conduct. By spiritual practice I mean activities that we actually do - that we take time out to do; activities that are, in a sense, useless, that are done just for the doing of them, with devotion and dedication to something larger than ourselves, and as much as possible without self interest. Here is where Dogen's writings, particularly those included in this volume, which bear specifically on his understanding of meditation practice, can be immensely useful.

Soto Zen practice, Dogen's practice, centers on zazen, sitting meditation. But zazen is not, as one might imagine, a concentration technique to still the mind and produce religious insight - a particular way of practice that is wholesome and effective. No, zazen is, at once much simpler, and far more profound than this. Even, as the reader will soon see, close to ineffable. I have always marveled at Dogen's sense of zazen practice. It is, on the one hand, extremely lofty and difficult, maybe even impossible to do, the most advanced and demanding of all possible spiritual practices; and, at the same time, it is a practice so easy and so accessible that anyone, no matter what his or her beliefs or level of commitment may be, can do - almost can't avoid doing. As Dogen says, zazen is a form of meditation so basic it can't even be called meditation. It is simply the practice of being what we are, of allowing, permitting, and opening ourselves fully, to what we are. In doing that we enter directly the depth of our living - a depth that goes beyond our individual life and touches all life.

Dogen's zazen defies description or explanation. Soto Zen teachers seldom offer specific meditation instructions. When they are asked about zazen they tend to answer in paradoxes or in such slippery ways that you have to wonder whether or not they are serious or know what they are talking about. But I do not think this is because they are confused. It's because the meditation practice that Dogen is advocating is neither devotional nor experiential, it's not a technique, a means to an end, not a form of concentration or relaxation. It is simply sitting in the midst of what utterly is, with full participation.

Dogen speaks to this in the very first sentence of the very first text he wrote explaining zazen, "Recommending Zazen to All People." If it is true that complete enlightenment is everywhere complete already, within us and outside us, (as I suppose a theist would assert about God) then why would we need to do anything to bring it about? In fact we do not. We practice zazen not to make what we want happen, but as a necessary expression of and manifestation of universal enlightenment. As he says in "Rules for Zazen," zazen "is not conscious endeavor; it is not introspection." Lest these expressions leave us in the dark or mystify us, Dogen goes on to explain, in a simple and very concrete way, exactly how to practice meditation - down to what temperature to maintain in the room, what to sit on, what to wear, and exactly how to arrange all the parts of your body in the correct posture. The text is just about a page long; it is quite simple, so simple it is impossible to make any mistakes. It's quite true - zazen practice is not difficult. Anyone can do it, and instruction only takes a few moments. After that you know all you need to know.

Yet there is one crucial requirement: you must actually do it, nurture the intention and the diligence to actually do zazen. It is interesting how physical a practice zazen is. You may not think of spiritual practice as physical, and yet, your life, your soul, your spirit, is something that only exists in association with your body. Without the body there is no consciousness and without consciousness there is nothing. In Dogen's way of practice body and mind are one thing, so to sit, to actually sit down, paying close attention to the body not as an endless timeless ineffable process, to unify your consciousness and breathing with that process until you can enter into it wholeheartedly without holding anything back - to do this is to return to what you most fundamentally are. You are this anyway, but when you do zazen you return to it, you embrace it.

I suppose that the most widely quoted and misunderstood aspect of Dogen's zazen is the line that comes toward the end of this text: "think not thinking. How do you think not thinking? Non thinking. This is the art of zazen." (Note that this term hishiryo, coined by Dogen, can be rendered as "not thinking" or "nonthinking" or "beyond thinking." In this book the latter two renderings have been used, sometimes together. As is often the case in translating Dogen, whose use of terminology is often purposely multifaceted, one English word for one term is not sufficient to give the full flavor of the meaning). I spent many years pondering this line, thinking about it but also working with it concretely in meditation practice. It has turned out to be something not so difficult to understand and to practice, and I am sure that now people who come to sit for the first time already understand it. To think not thinking doesn't mean to stop thinking, or to try to stop thinking. Dogen says "think not thinking" so he is talking about a style of thinking, an alternative way to relate to thinking that is not stuck in thinking but is beyond or free from thinking. Usually we are either asleep with our thinking, our minds producing many thoughts that we are only dimly aware of, or we are propelled within our thinking. To be propelled within our thinking is to be pushing our thinking toward something and to be pushed by our thinking toward something. When we do zazen we remove the energy from propulsion and just let thinking fall, let every thought fall, let it come and let it fall. Propelled thinking is rooted in self centeredness, which always eventually leads to unhappiness. In zazen we gently set propelled thinking aside and return to a mere consideration of breathing and posture. There may still be thinking going on but that's what it is: thinking going on, not "I am thinking." So thinking in this way, as non thinking, or beyond thinking, is no problem. We just return over and over again to our posture and breathing and let the thinking fall moment after moment. Sometimes there may not be any thinking or very little of it. This is fine also.

In the final line of this short text, in a deceptively simple single sentence, Dogen expresses the secret essence of his notion of zazen, and of all spiritual practice: "Zazen is the dharma gate of enjoyment and ease; it is undivided practice-enlightenment."

A great deal is said in these few words.

I think the real fruits of spiritual practice do not become apparent right away. If you do almost any kind of authentic practice even for a day or a weekend you will see some powerful effects for your life. It is not at all unrealistic to

think that someone can have a life transforming experience in a short retreat or even in a morning at church. I have seen this happen many times. But the real fruits of spiritual practice grow over longer periods of time. As you go back day after day to your cushion, through times when you like it and times when you don't like it, times when it is very difficult to keep it up, times when your soul aches so badly you can't imagine sitting there for even a single moment but you do it, and times when your mind is raging or your mind is so peaceful you can't believe there could ever be a troubled moment ever again - when you experience all of this year after year on your cushion you begin to find a deep appreciation and satisfaction in your practice. And in your life. You really feel as if your cushion is your home, your true spot, and that when you sit there you are always all right. If you are a Buddhist maybe you will say, "when I sit on my cushion I am sitting in the palm of Buddha's hand, and I feel this no matter what shape my mind is in;" and if you are a Christian you might say, "when I sit on my cushion I can feel Jesus' love flooding my heart." But whatever you say I think there will be that deep sense of satisfaction in your time of doing zazen, and not only then. You will feel that satisfaction in your life because you will know that you have come into contact with what is most basic and fundamental in the human heart: with love, letting go, and silence, and the taste of these will pervade your life. Even when the day comes when you lose everything to death, all your possessions, your friends, your body, your mind, even then you will have some serenity knowing that the big mind, the larger reality, will always be present, and will carry whatever you are to become exactly to where it needs to go.

By "undivided practice-enlightenment" Dogen means that our life is always undefiled, always whole. We always have been enlightened beings- this has always been the nature of our minds, the brightness of our cognizing consciousness. But this doesn't get us off the hook; to appreciate it is to know that we have a responsibility, a joyful responsibility, for our living. For Dogen "practice-enlightenment" is one continuous event. It's not that we practice in order to become enlightened. Rather because we are enlightenment already we must practice, and our practice is the full expression of our enlightenment.

Enlightenment sounds very lofty but really it is something quite concrete. The enlightened person is simply the person who isn't selfish- who sees things as they are, loves them, and acts out of that love. With our zazen practice we see a world that is lovely, and that calls out to us to participate in it. We are glad to do it. We can't not do it.

As you study the texts that comprise this book and continue with your meditation practice, I think you will find difficulty in explaining or understanding what you are reading or experiencing. Dogen's expression of zazen practice, of human life, takes us to the very edge of what we can say or know. For Dogen there is no linear path connecting ordinary life to enlightened life, no scale of depth in living or understanding from superficial to profound. Each moment of practice is already the last as well as the first, and even a beginner is already finished. As he says in "On the Endeavor of the Way," "the zazen of even one person at one moment imperceptibly accords with all things and fully resonates through all time... each moment of zazen is equally wholeness of practice, equally wholeness of realization." In other words, in our daily zazen practice we entrust ourselves to the wholeness of our experience, and to all of experience, moment by moment. We are not so much trying to calm down or improve as to give ourselves to the holiness that has always been at the center of our lives.

Although this is something we literally touch with our own bodies, as Dogen insists throughout his writing, it is also not something we can know, in the usual sense. We sense it, feel it, are it, as is everything else we come into contact with throughout the course of our lives; and yet as soon as we think we know it as an object or an experience, and begin to define or take credit for it, we lose track of it. In the same text Dogen says, "earth, grass, trees, walls, tiles, and pebbles... all engage in buddha activity" and inspired by them and in concert with them we express the depths of what's true, "unfolding widely inside the endless, unremitting, unthinkable, unnamable buddhadharma throughout the phenomenal world."

This is lofty indeed, and lest we get too excited about it, think we possess it, that others do not, and so want to rush out with our good news to the world, Dogen reminds us that, none of it "appears within perception, because it is unconstructedness in stillness; it is immediate realization." Unconstructed. Immediate. This is how we begin to make efforts in our lives, then, inspired by our practice of zazen. To let go of our assumptions and preconceptions and come forth in our lives from a stronger place. Not that we can ever eliminate our assumptions and preconceptions, but rather that, seeing them come and go in daily practice, we know them for what they are, and can once and for all break their spell over our minds and hearts.

Passages such as these bring us face to face with one of the most often mentioned aspects of Dogen's writing: its difficulty. We are speaking here not only of problems having to do with translation or cultural distance, but with the sheer and inescapable fact that Dogen's writing, in places, is almost perversely opaque, to the point where one wonders whether he actually intended communication at all. For Dogen the central fact of our existence, and the source of its profundity as well as its inherent problematicity, is that we are at once severely limited, and, at the same time, limitless, and that these conditions depend on each other. In other words, as existent creatures we are bound by time and space, and yet also we have a foot in eternity- which is not a limitless span of time and space, but the true, imperceptible shape of each moment of our lives. Since this is Dogen's point over and over again, how can he not find himself immersed in linguistic spirals and verbal somersaults?

Underlying almost all Dogen has to say about meditation practice is this sensibility in regard to the paradoxical nature of time and space. As he says quite directly in "Deep Ocean Samadhi," "Past moments and future moments are not sequential. Past elements and future elements are not aligned. This is the meaning of deep ocean samadhi." ("Samadhi" is meditative concentration). We experience ourselves conventionally, in the world of our own perception and emotion, as sequential, as within the realm of time and space. But the actual reality of time and space also must include non time and non space, which is always present with us. To do zazen is to open ourselves to this reality. For us, dying is the limit of time and space. Dying is present with us always, in the midst of every passing moment, although we usually do not think of it. Dogen thinks of it, and in doing so, how can he not come up against the limits of language, which is time and space bound. So, in a text like "King of Samadhis," he cannot avoid expressions like, "Know that the world of sitting practice is far different from other worlds... Study the world at the very moment of sitting. Is it vertical or horizontal? At the very moment of sitting, what is sitting? Is it an acrobat's graceful somersault or the rapid darting of a fish? Is it thinking or non-thinking? Is it doing or non-doing? Is it sitting within sitting? Is it sitting within body-mind? Is it sitting letting go of sitting within sitting, or letting go of sitting within body-mind? Investigate this in every possible way. Sit in the body's meditation posture. Sit in the mind's meditation posture. Sit in the meditation posture of letting go of body-mind."

These are not rhetorical questions; they are open questions, crucial questions. It is passages like this that have made me

appreciate my practice and my life, hold myself always as open as I can to new possibilities of meaning and experience, and, incidentally, never tire of going back again and again to reading Dogen.

It is a very curious thing that this wonderful wide open practice that Dogen so eloquently advocates became in his life and in the centuries afterward identified with a rigid and formalistic style of severe monasticism (the third section of this volume, "Zazen in Community" contains important texts that reflect this). Many readers of Dogen, baffled by this, choose to ignore or dismiss this as historical baggage, but to do so is to miss an important point.

The monastic life is a strong way of life that involves dedication and total participation. In the monastic life there are no breaks, no hiding places, no profane moments. The monastic life honors a rule and the essence of the rule is simple: always think of others and always act with others in mind, for we have no life without others. And even beyond this, Dogen sees monastic life literally as the actual concrete life of an awakened person, and of the historical Buddha himself. Through living the monastic life we enter a ritual reenactment of Buddha's own life; our lives become that. The elaborately detailed rules and guidelines, the formalized bows and words, the minutely described marking out of sacred space through ceremony, the solemn rules and gestures of seniority- all these serve to make this ritual life concrete through all our daily acts. Although most of us will not live in this way even for short periods of time, we can recognize the point that such a life illuminates - that we are all Buddha in essence, and that, seen in that light, every moment of our lives is a timeless crucial moment. And so we are challenged to live with that spirit, making all our acts, large and small, buddha acts, because each and every one of them carries the moral, metaphysical, and symbolical weight of absolute truth.

In other words, Dogen sees that through monastic ritual profound meditation practice can pervade our whole lives. This explains the elaborate rituals detailed so painstakingly in texts like "Practice Period" and "Guidelines for the Practice of the Way," which can so easily sound to the modern reader rather over the top. To translate them one virtually has to reconstruct maps of medieval Japanese monastic compounds, so detailed are they and so dependent on the physical layout of buildings and the texture of particular customs. How can such stuff be useful to us in our daily practice as twenty-first century people?

It seems as if one of the greatest casualties of modern life is a sense of coherent community. It is important for all of us to feel we belong to each other and when we do not our lives can feel broken, lonely, isolated, lacking in support, friendship, and love. The traditional structure for community (extended families living in close proximity to one another, an economic and social system that supports people to stay close to home on a daily basis, an agrarian or crafts-based village life) are almost gone in much of the world and are probably not going to come back. But I think it is possible for us to construct new forms of community that can replace or augment whatever remnants of this old community remain. Such new forms of community will require that we establish and maintain specific and sacred ways of doing things and of being together, ways that bind us closer and more profoundly than any casual or personal contact ever could. Although it is probably not possible or even desirable that we raise funds to construct detailed Japanese monastic establishments as Dogen describes them (as far as I know, none of the Western Zen monastic enclosures, even the major ones, have attempted this) we certainly can, through a lived understanding of the essentials of the monastic lifestyle, find ways to participate fully with each other in a sacred way. Once we train in such ways of conduct, we can apply the insights we have gained from them to our whole lives. In my own case, having spent a number of years living monastically, I can bring the deep structure and feel of that life to my daily life in the ordinary world. This training has helped me a great deal to learn how to include others in what I do, and to feel that I am joined by others, even in my solitary acts.

For monastic life is fundamentally a life of participation with everything, and of loving kindness. Monastic renunciation is simply the letting go of a self centered view of life. As Dogen says in "Regulations for the Auxiliary Cloud Hall," we should all be together "like milk and water," as grateful to each other for our mutually supportive practice as we are to our parents for our very life. It is this sense of communal sharing in gratitude that characterizes the monk's life, and that stands behind all that is baroque in Dogen's monastic writing. This inspired life of sharing and gratitude is also, in the final analysis, the essence of Dogen's understanding of meditation practice.

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