

# Dogen Zenji

## **Introduction**

Dogen (1200-1253), founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, is a renowned writer, philosopher, poet, and Buddhist priest.<sup>1</sup> Known also as Dogen Kigen, Eihei Dogen, and just plain Dogen, among other titles, he is recognized as one of Japan's most innovative and profound thinkers, and its greatest Zen teacher. Although relatively unknown during his lifetime and for hundreds of years afterward, his works are now a focus of intense international study and debate following their rediscovery in the early twentieth century. Contemporary practitioners of Soto Zen in particular should strive to gain a basic understanding of his thought and how it underlies their school of Buddhism.

This primer reviews Dogen's life, teachings, and legacy. An appendix introduces nine of his teachings available in English translation.

## **Dogen's Life**

According to legend, Dogen was the illegitimate son of a noble father and mother, both of whom died before his eighth birthday.<sup>2</sup> At thirteen he joined the Tendai school of Buddhism on Mt. Hiei near Kyoto, the capital, as an initiate. During his early training, he is said to have become focused on the question (paraphrased here), "If human beings are already enlightened by nature, why is it necessary to engage in spiritual practice and seek enlightenment?"<sup>3</sup>

Becoming dissatisfied with the teachings he was receiving, he left Mt. Hiei in 1217 and studied with Myosen for six years at the Rinza Kennin-ji monastery in Kyoto. He sailed to China in 1223 with Myozen to seek a more authentic Buddhism, a visit that lasted four years. After visiting several temples, he finally found answers to his questions,

according to received tradition, from Ju-ching (1163-1268), abbot of the Ching-te temple on Mt. T'ien-t'ung. Ju-ching, a master of Caodong, a major school of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism founded in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Ju-ching gave Dogen Dharma transmission and inka (confirmation of the authenticity of a student's experience of enlightenment) in 1227, after Dogen experienced a "casting off of body and mind."

Following his return to Japan in 1227, Dogen set about establishing his own school of teaching, naming it Soto, the Japanese pronunciation of Caodong. For the first six years following his return, he lived once again at Kennin-ji monastery. Although he eventually established his own monastery, Kosho-ji, south of Kyoto, he relocated to mountainous Echizen province far north of Kyoto in 1243. The move may have been the result of his own desire to establish a monastery in a distant mountainous setting or growing tensions between his "zazen only" practice and the Tendai community and Rinzai competitors. By 1246, he had begun construction in the same province of Eihei-ji (Temple of Eternal Peace) monastery, today one of two head temples of Soto Zen in Japan. He spent the remainder of his life, except for trips, there until the last months of his life, dying of illness in 1253 in Kyoto.

Although Dogen is famous now, at the time he was not well known and was outside the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism. Nonetheless, his cloister at Eihei-ji conformed closely during his time there to the Song-style training he had learned in China, and architecturally his monastery followed the seven-hall layout of the Chinese Five Mountain system. At the time of his death, Rinzai Zen (samurai Zen in Japan) was more closely associated with the aristocracy and the capital Kyoto and Soto with the rural area around Eihei-ji and its inhabitants.

Dogen's most renowned successor was Keizan (1268-1325), who founded Soji-ji temple, the second head temple of Soto Zen in Japan. By broadening the teachings of the school, Keizan greatly increased its popularity and helped expand its presence throughout Japan, especially at first in rural areas.<sup>4</sup>

### **Dogen's Teachings**

Dogen's teachings are rhetorically rich, and seemingly metaphorically obscure and overly subtle, and thus difficult to understand for the uninitiated; to add to their obscureness, they changed through time as his audience changed.<sup>5</sup> For the non-poetically minded, his teachings can be incomprehensible. For example, "take the backward step and turn the light inward" can be rephrased simply as "Stop mulling about in daily activities, and reflect, instead, inwardly on essential practice zazen."<sup>6</sup> But the richness and brilliance of his teachings like those of all great poets elevate the mundane to the spiritually insightful, though this realization for readers takes time, training, great resolve, and extensive background information about Chan in China. During this process, it is essential to remember that Dogen's intent was not to create a philosophy, but as a Buddhist religious thinker to teach his students Zen spiritual practice. Dogen's great gift for word play has led to his comparison with later Western philosophers of language like Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Whitehead. Dogen considered his just sitting understanding not just that of a school or sect within Buddhism, but the Buddha's true teaching.

There is a certain repetitiveness in Dogen's teachings, for they revolve around the central importance of zazen or seated meditation. Ten teachings are summarized.

**Dogen's theory of time (Uji).** A fundamental understanding in Dogen's thought is his understanding of time, which is an instantaneous present (the Now) versus our

Western linear view of time.<sup>7</sup> This view is described in the *Uji* fascicle of his *Shobogenzo* and is the received view in classical Buddhism. According to this view, all time exists only at the present (the Now), the past and future are arranged in the Now, the Now is eternally present, our life takes place in the Now, only the Now is real, the Now is the universe itself, and each Now is complete in itself. All actions take place in the Now, the eternal present, and we are always here in this place at this time. The present is always present. It is always Now. This understanding permeates all of Dogen's teachings.

**The nature of buddhanature.** For Dogen, buddhanature is not a substantial, permanent inner self as some sutras argue, but a vast emptiness and an impermanence that even inanimate things like trees and grass are an expression of. It is the nature of reality and of all beings (of the Now):

On this account, plants and trees, and thicket and forest, are impermanent; as such, they are Buddha-nature. Humans and things and bodies and minds are impermanent; thus, they are Buddha-nature. Countries and lands, and mountains and rivers are impermanent because they are Buddha-nature. Supreme enlightenment, because it is Buddha-nature, is impermanent. The perfect quietude of nirvana, because it is impermanent, is Buddha-nature.<sup>8</sup>

A goal of practice then is to see “the unity of all things in the world based on the commonality of Buddha-nature” in the Now.<sup>9</sup>

**Zazen (“just sitting) is Buddhism.** For Dogen, the central practice (the essence) of Buddhism is zazen or seated meditation, for it is the realization and enactment of Now. By seated meditation, he is usually referring to shikantaza, which in mature practice is just sitting, fully aware, fully present, without an object of attention (not even the breath),

just being in the Now. Dogen called this zazen practice “without thinking” or “thinking non-thinking,” for it was a practice in which one is simply aware of things as they are Now; not interpreting life, but expressing it. The goal is not to strive to attain enlightenment, but to manifest the buddhahood that one has already, to be the Buddha that one already is. In a number of writings, he provides detailed instructions on zazen practice, as in *Fukanzazengi*, “For zazen, a quiet room is suitable. Eat and drink moderately” [and so on].”<sup>10</sup>

**Practice and enlightenment are one.** Another notion fundamental to Dogen’s concept of practice is the oneness of practice and enlightenment, for according to Dogen they are the same. He explains the identity in *Fukanzazengi* this way:

Zazen is not “step-by-step meditation.” Rather it is simply the easy and pleasant practice of a Buddha, the realization of the Buddha’s Wisdom. The Truth appears, there being no delusion. If you understand this, you are completely free, like a dragon that has obtained water or a tiger that reclines on a mountain. The supreme Law will then appear of itself, and you will be free of weariness and confusion. [and] To practice the Way single heartedly is, in itself, enlightenment. There is no gap between practice and enlightenment or zazen and daily life.<sup>11</sup>

He repeats the same teaching later in the *Bendowa*:

Thinking that practice and enlightenment are not one is no more than a view that is outside the Way. In buddha-dharma [i.e., Buddhism], practice and enlightenment are one and the same. Because it is the practice of enlightenment, a beginner’s wholehearted practice of the Way is exactly the totality of original enlightenment. For

this reason, in conveying the essential attitude for practice, it is taught not to wait for enlightenment outside practice.<sup>12</sup>

**The necessity of total exertion.** During introductions to zazen meditation instructions in Zen centers in the West, participants are generally told to be single-minded, that is, to focus on one thing (most often the breath) at the expense of everything else. Dogen's total exertion is also single-mindedness, but with an attitude and with qualifications. In brief, total exertion requires being fully and totally present with one's experience in the here and now. Since the past, present, and future are all occurring in the present moment, all there is is Now, whether one is washing dishes, walking, eating, working, each situation becomes totally exerted. As Kim expresses it, "the total exertion of a single thing ... was maintained less in the static mode of emptiness and more in the dynamic and creative mode in which every single act (dying, eating, what not) was totally exerted contemporaneously, coextensively, and coessentially with total mind – not with a fragment of the mind"; total exertion is "the expression of absolute reality as that reality manifests in one's moment-to-moment lived experience."<sup>13</sup> As Cook notes, for Dogen "that which is appearing, manifest, or being present as datum of one's experience is the absolute reality," the Now.<sup>14</sup> He reminds us as well, "that it's in the ordinariness of simple, everyday activities that self-transcendence truly takes place."<sup>15</sup> He quotes Dogen who says, "enlightenment is just eating rice and drinking tea." So chop wood, carry water, and when eating, just eat – all of which express the ordinariness (and extraordinariness!) of Zen practice.

**The necessity of faith in the way.** For Dogen, faith (trust or confidence) lay in accepting our original sense of being enlightened, of our authentic nature: "... in Dogen's

thought, faith and enlightenment interpenetrated one another so that without one, the other could not be fully meaningful. The inferior status of faith was repudiated once and for all by Dogen; it now became for him the very core of enlightenment.”<sup>16</sup> According to Dogen, faith is as much a prerequisite for setting out on the path as is critical reflection and total exertion.

**The proper use of koans.** Dogen is often considered an outstanding critic of koan study. However, textual research indicates that Dogen commented on a wide range of koans in virtually every chapter of his *Shobogenzo (Treasury of the True Drama Eye)*.<sup>17</sup> He had also collected 300 koans during his travels in China (*The Shobogenzo of Three Hundred Koans*). Though in contrast to the formulaic method of koan study in Rinzai Zen, he routinely held up koans as topics for analysis and commentary when instructing his followers. While Dogen’s use of koans generally followed a pattern already established by numerous Chan masters in Song China, as an innovative thinker and teacher he also used koans in surprisingly unexpected ways. For example, T. Griffith Foulk has argued that when Dogen uses the phrase “just sitting,” he is using the phrase as a topic (a koan) to be understood and commented on.<sup>18</sup>

**The place of sutra reading and ritual in the way.** Despite the widespread certainty today that Dogen’s view of practice was just sitting, numerous examples in his writings clearly show that he also advocated the conventional Buddhist practices he learned during his stay in China and that are described in the *Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries*.<sup>19</sup> Dogen’s contribution was to bring these practices back to Japan, and to describe in great detail how and why they are to be carried out in the daily life of a monastery. The practices include burning incense, prostrations (bowing), buddha-mindfulness (the

recitation of sayings, such as invoking the Buddha Amitabha or the Ten Buddha Names), and repentance, as well as studying the sutras and commentaries, devotional worship, prayer, upholding the moral precepts, merit-making, and, of course, zazen.<sup>20</sup> T. Griffith Faulk argues that the notion that Dogen only emphasized “just sitting” is but another misreading of the subtlety of Dogen’s thought. As Faulk points out, that when read carefully Dogen actually “enthusiastically embraced all of those practices and taught them to his followers. Those practices were not mere formalities for Dōgen, but heartfelt expressions of his Buddhist faith.”<sup>21</sup> In this regard, “Dōgen gave extensive verbal instructions to his followers over the course of his career as an abbot, [which] shows that he did not expect them to ‘just sit’ in any literal sense, but to listen to his teachings and practice zazen with the proper understanding that he strove to instill in them.”<sup>22</sup> When understood metaphorically, just sitting becomes an expression for a practice that requires deep-seated understanding of the dharma, an understanding in which burning incense, prostration, buddha-mindfulness, repentance, and sutra reading all have their place.

**Taking up the life-style of the patriarchs.** Although Dogen is famous for his “dropping off of body and mind,” he was intent as well on having his students take on the body and mind of a patriarch, an ancestor in their lineage, by studying his deeds and stories. By doing so, one becomes a legitimate heir of the family of patriarchs in the lineage. And just as past patriarchs transmitted the teachings of the way to their students, it was the duty of a legitimate heir to pass on their teachings to future generations. To do this one had to join the community, don the robe, and take-up the life-style of a patriarch, which was best done according to Dogen as a member of a Zen monastery. As a member of the community, one observed the rules and embodied them in their comportment and

behavior throughout the day. As Dogen said, the rites of the church are themselves the essential point.

**The notion that all dualities are delusions.** Exposing duality (contrasting pairs, such as male and female, good and bad, and this and that) for the delusion that it is, opens the way to suchness, which sees the duality of this and that in their oneness, their wholeness, and their interdependence. The practice of the Great Way, the opening of delusion to wisdom, involves a transcendent shift from one kind of consciousness to another. Inevitably elements of our delusive consciousness become unknowingly embodied in the very practice whereby we hope to achieve this existential revolution. This perception is experienced in dualistic terms that Dogen was determined, again and again, to uproot. Rather than seeing the mastery of the specialized technique of meditation as the key to awakening, Dogen emphasized the need to free one's meditation from any trace of gaining or achieving: what is important is sustained practice. "If you wish to practice the way of the Buddhas ... you should not expect nothing, seek nothing. Cast off the mind that seeks and do not cherish a desire to gain Buddhahood".<sup>23</sup> In zazen, he taught, enlightenment and practice are one and the same. Thus, our buddhanature is already enlightened before we mature sufficiently to open fully to enlightenment.

### **Dogen's Relevance Today**

What relevance do Dogen's teachings and life have to Zen lay practitioners today?<sup>24</sup> What are we as lay practitioners to make of his insistence on a monastic life, his ritualism, or his inflexible sectarianism? Is our goal in reading Dogen to understand what he said for its own sake or to try to understand how what he said fits into our own time? Fortunately, to answer our lead question, we need go no further than Dogen himself.

Although Dogen's zazen involved just sitting in the Now while non-thinking, he insisted as well that practitioners should be actively engaged in what they were doing, whether it was just sitting, chopping wood, or carrying water. As buddhas, practitioners must display the compassion and kindness of a Buddha, and in so doing become what he called a practicing Buddha, a Buddha consciously aware of what he/she is doing with compassion and kindness.

So choices have to be made. When Katagiri Roshi was head teacher at MZMC, he placed signs around the Zen center reminding us to be mindful and fully engaged when we brush our teeth, wash dishes, or go to the bathroom – for we are buddhas and should act like one. And he exhibited his buddhahood through his comportment, whether sitting, standing, or walking around the Center. We can, in addition, become socially and environmentally engaged or try to make the world a better place in other ways, for bodhisattvas vow to save all beings, which includes mountains, streams, and insects. But, again, choices must be made.<sup>25</sup>

### **Notes**

1. For introductions to Dogen, see LaFleur (1985), Yokoi and Victoria (1990), Abe (1991), Cleary (1992), Tanahashi (1985, 1999), Tanahashi and Levitt (2013), Kim (2004), and Heine (2012, 2015). A strong word of caution, however: scholars' understanding of Dogen's life and teachings has been dramatically shifting in the last fifteen to twenty years as higher standards of expository study have been applied to existing documents. For a start, read Kodera (1980), Bielefeldt (1985), Putney (1996), Bodiford (2006, 2012) and Heine (2003, 2006, 2018). Also see Tanaka (2013), Heine (1997), Leighton (2007), and Verkuilen (2011). For the historical and cultural context of Soto Zen in Japan at the time, see Bodiford (1993, 2008), Dumoulin (2005), Heine (2018), and the "Soto Zen in Japan" primer in this series.

2. For a standard overview of Dogen's life, see Kim's 1975 summary as updated by Okumura (2010:211-61).
3. Dumoulin (2005:52). For example, Dogen emphasized karma, ethics, and repentance more in his later teachings than in earlier teachings, and zazen practice more in earlier teachings. It should be emphasized, too, that his recorded teachings are teachings he gave to specific students (and not writings written primarily for inclusion in a book or journal, though the fact that he did write them down was unusual for a Zen master at the time).
4. For the development of early Soto Zen in Japan, see the "Soto Zen in Japan" primer in this series.
5. See Putney (1996) and Heine (2006) for Dogen's teachings and how they changed over time.
6. From, "Beyond Thinking, Recommending Zazen to All People".
7. There are numerous publications on Dogen's difficult concept of time. I have relied for the most part on Raud (2012), Roberts (2018), and especially Luetchford (2008). Roberts (2018) effectively relates *Uji* to our everyday practice. Also see Heine (1985), Stambaugh (1990), Kim (2004: 143-65), and Katagiri (2007).
8. Kim (2004:141). For starters, see Kim (2004:107-75) and King (1991).
9. Keown (2004:44).
10. For Dogen's view of zazen, see Bielefeldt (1988), Dogen (1993), Tanahashi (2004), and Kim (2007).
11. Yokoi and Victoria (1990:46, 47).
12. Okumura et al. (1997:300).
13. Kim (2004:125).
14. Cook (1989:22).
15. Cook (2002:54).
16. Kim (2004: 66).
17. For Dogen's use of koans, see Heine (1993, 1994, 2004), Kim (1985), Looi and Tanahashi (2005), and Looi (2006).
18. Foulk (2012, 2015).
19. Foulk (2004, 2015).

20. Foulk (2006, 2007).
21. Foulk (2012:103-04).
22. Foulk (2012:104).
23. From Dogen's *Zuimonki*.
24. For a sampling of answers to these questions, see Bielefeldt (1999) and Leighton (2003). In answering this question, we as readers should be aware of the distinction between what Dogen said and Dogen Zen. While what Dogen said is what he said, of course, Dogen Zen is how the Soto tradition has interpreted and used what he said in a shifting manner over the centuries since his death. The intent here is to recount as best we can what he said (but then as far as we understand it!).
25. Unless we consider Dogen's teachings and practice eternal truths, we have to remember that Dogen was a medieval Japanese monk who was responding to the concerns and understandings of his time. History shows that Zen teachings have changed through time in adaptation to changing social-political-historical-cultural contexts. For example, in our modern Western practice we emphasize a zazen (just sitting) practice; in the late nineteenth-century *Shushōgi*, a Zen handbook for laypeople in Japan, zazen is not mentioned at all. As the writer of this primer and an anthropologist, I favor a "choices have to be made" answer to Dogen's relevance to our times. As a reader of this primer, what's your view?

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### **Appendix: Dogen's Writings**

Dogen is renown worldwide today for the insight, variety, and complexity of his writings, which span it seems from before he left for China to shortly before his death. As expressed by Dogen scholar Steven Heine, "Dōgen's poetic and philosophical works are characterized by a continued effort to express the inexpressible by perfecting imperfectable speech through the creative use of wordplay, neologism, and lyricism, as well as the recasting of traditional expression."<sup>1</sup> To better express his thought he wrote at times in Japanese rather than classical Chinese, which was the norm at the time. The following is a short list of his most discussed writings that are in English translation; they are arranged by what is thought to be earliest to latest.<sup>2</sup> If one is to become intimately acquainted with Dogen, one must become intimately acquainted as well with these basic writings.

**Shobogenzo** (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye). A collection of Dogen's writings and talks that is considered his masterpiece. It occurs in popular ninety-five and ninety-two chapter (fascicle) versions, as well as at least in eighty-four, seventy-five, sixty, twenty-eight, and twelve chapter versions. Subjects range from the relation of time to existence, the nature of change and stability in the world, the inseparability of practice and enlightenment, the equality of women and men, to monastic practice. Only twelve of

the chapters had gone through a final revision by Dogen before his death in 1253, so the remainder should be considered preliminary drafts of thoughts. It is also noteworthy that the *Shobogenz* was the first piece of Soto Zen literature to be written in the Japanese vernacular in contrast to the normal classical Chinese style. It is thought to have been written between 1231 and 1253.<sup>3</sup>

**Shinji Shobogenzo** (Dogen's Chinese-language Shobogenzo). A three-fascicle collection of 301 koans written in Chinese that was compiled by Dogen without commentary. The preface is date 1235 but some scholars suggest that Dogen began compiling the collection before he left for China.<sup>4</sup>

**Eihei Koroku** (The Extensive Record of Teacher Dogen's Sayings). A ten-volume collection of lectures that Dogen gave to his monks at Eihei-ji that was put together by his main disciples shortly after his death. Three different editions are known. Some consider this text comparable in importance to *Shobogenzo* because of the depth and breath of thought exhibited by Dogen in the text.<sup>5</sup>

**Shobogenzo Zuimonki** (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, Record of What Was Heard). Talks in six volumes given by Dogen to his leading disciple Ejo that were recorded and edited by Ejo. The text is sometimes simply referred to as *Zuimonki* since the text records what a disciple thought he heard Dogen saying.<sup>6</sup>

**Hokyoki** (Memoirs of the Hokyō Era). A one-volume scripture that is Dogen's earliest work. It records questions and answers between Dogen and his Chinese teacher, Ju-ching. The memoir was discovered by Ejo among Dogen's papers shortly after Dogen's death.<sup>7</sup>

**Bendowa** (Rules for the Practice of the Way). A one-volume scripture written soon after Dogen's return to Japan on the essential meaning of zazen or seated meditation practice.<sup>8</sup>

**Tenzo Kyokun** (Instructions to the Chief Cook). A one-volume work that instructs the chief cook (and monastics in general) to regard every activity in the kitchen (and elsewhere) as sacred.<sup>9</sup>

**Fukan zazengi** (General Advice of the Principle of Zazen). Another one volume work that emphasizes the importance of the notion that zazen-only is the rightly

transmitted buddhadharma. Like other works by Dogen it is a manifesto of Dogen's view of Buddhism.<sup>10</sup>

**Notes:** (See the Bibliography section above for complete references.)

1. Heine (1997: 67).
2. For a more complete list, see Kim (2004), Appendix B, pp. 243-46. For a review of the genealogy of this text and many other Dogen texts, see Bodiford (2012).
3. For the *Shobogenzo*, see Dogen and Cleary (1991), Dogen (2002), Nishijima and Cross (2006, 2007-2009), Okumura (2010), Tanahashi (2010), and Waddell and Abe (2002). For the names in English of the ninety-two-chapter version of the text, see Kim (2004:247-50). For an overview of the often-complex genealogy of this and other Dogen texts, see Bodiford (2012). Also see Warner (2007), Yasutani (1996), and Bokusan et al. (2011)..
4. Tanahashi and Loori (2005).
5. Dogen, Leighton, and Okumura (2010).
6. Tanahashi (2013) and Cleary (1980).
7. Takashi (1980).
8. Dogen (1993).
9. Dogen and Uchiyama (2005).
10. Bielefeldt (1988).