



# Being Time

by Shinshu Roberts

## Introduction to Approaching the Study of Dōgen

Dōgen Zenji founded the Sōtō School of Japanese Buddhism (thirteenth century) after returning from China, where he became a lineage holder of the Chinese Caodong (J. Sōtō) School. At this point he began a series of writings and teachings that have rocked the Zen world ever since. His ideas have gone beyond the realm of practice to become part of a larger Western philosophical discussion, and this is particularly true of his text “Uji.”

“Uji” (Being-Time) is part of a larger work called *Shōbōgenzō* (The True Dharma Eye). Dōgen wrote “Uji” in 1240, while he was teaching at Kōshōji in Kyoto. He was forty years old.<sup>1</sup>

In almost all of his writings, Dōgen uses poetic wording and seemingly abstruse metaphors, which add to our difficulty in understanding his teaching. At the same time, this language encourages us to drop our quest for intellectual understanding and enter the realm of the intuitive. We often begin our journey with Dōgen through our sense that there is something we glimpse but cannot yet articulate. Based upon this feeling we return again and again to his teachings until a glimmer of understanding begins to appear. Finally we are able to take a stab at articulating his meaning.

We must persevere and meet Dōgen. Meeting him includes the intellectual process of understanding the basic meaning of the text. My focus in this book is twofold: first, to explore the meaning of Dōgen's thesis in order to understand the basic flow of the text and, second, to give examples of ways to apply Dōgen's understanding to our practice. In some ways, the first task seems more difficult than the second. And of course, the second depends upon the first.

## Going beyond the Intellectual

Ultimately, as practitioners, we must move beyond an intellectual deconstruction of Dōgen and enter the realm of practice. We take up Dōgen's teaching in our everyday life as a *kōan* and ask, "How does this apply to my life?" until we gain insight into his teaching. Intellectual understanding is only a beginning. To progress, we must have a deep faith in Dōgen's understanding and its practice application ... Our understanding must be organic and reflect the truth of our situation as individuals.

Dōgen's teachings do apply to our everyday life. His intention is to bring us back to our true nature within the context of daily experience. I think that the difficulty we experience with his language will bring us closer to this goal if we approach his teaching with faith, intelligence, and an open mind. Because Dōgen is not easy to understand, the difficulties we encounter with the text may free us from our preconceived ideas about practice-realization. We have to work with Dōgen and open our minds to his point of view.

Dōgen's vision is vast and holds the many threads of reality's presencing in a coherent whole. A friend once told me that his teacher said "no one can understand Dōgen, so you shouldn't try." I agree that it is probably impossible to completely penetrate Dōgen's mind and heart on the subject of this life. But I do not agree that we should give up

working to share his vision. For me, Dōgen's writings are encouraging as well as challenging. Dōgen wrote:

Not limited by language, It is ceaselessly expressed; So,  
too, the way of letters Can display but not exhaust it.<sup>2</sup>

“Uji” is a display of being-time that cannot exhaust the truth of being-time. But the beauty of Dōgen's language is that it offers so many possibilities and yet still manages to push us toward a particular understanding. His words compel us to enter into the “what” of our own experience, forcing us to go beyond concepts. He both engages the intellect and frees the intellect; he picks up reality, shows it to us, and then drops us back into the soup of life.

My approach to the text has been to have faith that his teaching is knowable and true in daily life. Dōgen's teaching can inform how I drive my car as much as it informs formal practice. How could it be otherwise? What would be the point of presenting a teaching that only applied to some rarefied situation?

## Excerpt from Chapter 14: Time Passing

Being-time has the virtue of seriatim passage [j. kyōryaku].<sup>3</sup> It passes from today to tomorrow, passes from today to yesterday, passes from yesterday to today, passes from today to today, passes from tomorrow to tomorrow, this because passing seriatim is a virtue of time. Past time and present time do not overlap or pile up in a row—and yet Qingyuan is time, Huangbo is time. Mazu and Shitou are times too. Since self and other are both times, practice and realization are times. “Entering the mud, entering the water” is time as well.<sup>4</sup>

Dōgen does not deny that time has the quality of sequential passage, but his understanding of its passage is not sequential. He writes that today becomes tomorrow, as well as yesterday. Or today can be yesterday becoming

today, which can just skip to becoming tomorrow. In other words, Dōgen's understanding of passage cannot be explained by sequential time. Joan Stambaugh writes about time: "Since it is not a static container or a rapid stream flowing inexorably by—since, more precisely, it is nothing by itself separate from being—it is to be found right in the middle of all beings."<sup>5</sup> Each independent time is also yesterday, today, and tomorrow all making passage as this time. Passage is not sequential in the way we think it might be, nor is it chaotic.

By naming specific individuals and events, Dōgen indicates passage through the independent aspect of dharmas. Time is not separate from being; time and being are two sides of one event. Dharmas are both a being-time and all being-time, as embodied in each being-time. A person is empty of a fixed identity and universal, yet simultaneously functions as a particular being-time. The problem arises when we try to fix these states as sequential and separate. Passage is life as process, not a life fixed and explicated.

Interpenetrating continuous practice or passage is being-time's virtue. Virtue is a buddha's golden radiance, and it is the goodness and compassion of each being's individual and continuous passage. This is because Dōgen's description of being-time's passage as virtue is based upon the idea that the interconnection of all things is the engine of altruistic response. Virtue is inherent in the structure of each being's true nature. A being-time becomes the totality of life living life at the juncture of time and being as this particular moment. It is the moment's total expression (self and all being simultaneously) that is passage; it is not time's passage alone. This passage of mutual and interpenetrating events or moments happens even when we try to force it into a particular shape. It is the forcing that is suffering. Forcing arises when we misunderstand the nature of being-time or impermanence, thereby thinking we can impede or control its passage or transformation.

## How We Perceive Being-Time's Passage

If time cannot be understood as a progression from past to present to future, what is it we experience as time? Time is our experience of a being-time's impermanence. Nevertheless we often can't see passage as it is happening in each moment. Perhaps this is so because we cannot perceive subtle change through our senses. When we do notice a being-time's passage, we understand it not as many simultaneous events' passage, but as one fixed moment of recognized change, such as "I am now old." We look at ourselves in the mirror and notice we look older or have become old. How did that happen? We imagine it happens over time, when we are not looking. Somehow it piles up, it accumulates, and then we see it. We exclaim, "Oh no, I have gray hair; I have wrinkles!" We perceive transformation as gradual (piling up) or sudden (without precedent), yet transformation is enacted as the mutual interdependence of all things and each thing expressed in each and every interpenetrating moment.

Shohaku Okumura writes, "There is always some gap between the actual experience of the present moment and our thoughts about the present moment and how we define it; the present moment is ungraspable even though it is the only actual moment of experience."<sup>6</sup> Before we can define a moment to ourselves, that moment is gone.

To compound matters we think that a moment defined is encapsulated. This is not true, as there is really no moment to capture. In the case of old age, we are making comparisons to a previous time when we were younger. From Dōgen's point of universally inclusive being-time, old age is a label and perhaps not a useful one. The actuality of our situation is the fluidity of "just this" as passage. Okumura continues with this thought when he writes, "There is nothing, no actual unit of time ... The present does not exist and therefore time itself does not really exist."<sup>7</sup> Time is the continuous interactions, processes, or

changes during the passage of the various aspects of being-time that can only be expressed in this moment, within the context of a particular dharma position.

Although we think of time as something separate from our own being, it resides in each particularity. When we speak of all being-time, that time is still particular to all being. And all being-time is still found in the particularity of each being-time. Finding our center of response at the intersection of time and being is important because this is how being-time interacts and expresses as the world, our world, making itself. Since we are part of this process, we must pay attention and actualize this moment's passage with all beings as our being-time. If we think practice can wait until the right time arrives, the time will never arrive. The time is now, being is now, continuously making the world. There is no beginning of this moment, nor is there an end. Everything is continuously simultaneously presentencing.

## Time Does Not Pile Up in a Row

We might think that time is piling up or overlapping. We learn from Western psychology and Buddhist karmic theory that our experience is predicated upon past actions that define and determine our present situation. In this way, time seems to pile up and create a predetermined or habitual response. This overlapping and piling up seems to indicate a linear timeline, which can make us feel like victims of time's passage, instead of active participants in each moment.

Dōgen discusses the problems associated with events piling up in his fascicle “Dai Shugyō” (Great Practice). The topic is the kōan “Hyakujō and the Fox.”<sup>8</sup> In the story a teacher is reborn over and over as a wild fox because he told a student that after enlightenment a person was not subject to cause and effect. In the kōan the old “fox” teacher

is telling Master Hyakujo what has happened to him and asking for some relief from his condition. Hyakujo responds, “Do not be unclear about cause and effect.”<sup>9</sup>

What Hyakujo warns against is misunderstanding karma as a piling up or cascade of events that trap us. Dogen comments, “The meaning of ... not being ignorant of cause and effect, is that because great practice is transcendent cause-and-effect itself, it gets rid of a body of a wild fox.”<sup>10</sup>

What is transcended is not responsibility for one’s misdeeds; rather it is the model of sequential piling up of one’s actions in such a way that one is forced to react unskillfully in the future. Dogen’s “great practice” is the bodhisattva practice of incorporating and responding to the whole of our situation, thereby deeply seeing cause and effect. As soon as we return to the totality of this moment’s complete expression, we are not caught by anything. Even though we are still subject to the repercussions of our past actions, we are free to respond skillfully in the present moment.

If we have been rude to someone in the past and that person is wary of us, our total participation in this moment of meeting that person will not necessarily take away the karma of our past meeting. What it will do is free us to respond skillfully in this situation. Since we are not caught by “piled up” or overlapping experiences, we are freed to enact the new paradigm of “great practice.”

Another example: If you are playing baseball and you drop the ball, you don’t let your mistakes “pile up.” You must forget dropping the ball and be present for the next opportunity to catch the ball. Holding on to a past mistake will often hinder your ability to respond skillfully in the present, although you still file away your mistake and make adjustments. From the point of view of practice this would translate to making a mistake, acknowledging the mistake, atoning for that mistake, and moving on from the mistake.

In the fascicle “Yuibutsu Yobutsu” (Only a Buddha and a Buddha), Dōgen points out that our understanding of self can become a fixed idea of accumulated traits or experiences. He observes, for example, that spring, autumn, and ourselves are independent moments that are not the results of being piled up.<sup>11</sup> He writes, “This means that we cannot see the four elements and five aggregates<sup>12</sup> of the present as our self and we cannot trace them as someone else.”<sup>13</sup> The self is both independent and the totality of all being-time. We are no-self and a particular self at the same time, caught by neither and more than both. In the case of practice-realization, we are not waiting for a particular set of experiences to line up or pile up, thereby creating the circumstances for realization. Realization is present in each moment. Realization is each moment. It is true that we may progress in our practice, but realization is not predicated upon a particular set of circumstances, since it is actualized being-time: a response to our current circumstances.

In concrete terms, this means we must engage and fulfill our understanding of practice in each moment, not putting it off. A student once said, “I know what is skillful, but I don’t want to do it right now.” This kind of procrastination usually arises when our small self is trying to avoid facing a situation that will cause us to look at our own faults. Dōgen wrote in *Zuimonki* (Record of Things Heard), “Just cast aside all affairs and devote yourself to the practice of the Way only. Do not have expectations of any later time [to practice].”<sup>14</sup>

## **Qingyuan, Huangbo, Mazu, and Shitou Are Time**

Qingyuan, Huangbo, Mazu, and Shitou are all Tang dynasty Chinese Zen masters. Steven Heine explains this passage:

By virtue of *kyōryaku* [passage], the lives of former Zen masters are not to be added up backwards in terms of



chronological sequence, but are to be understood as interpenetrating occasions of the spontaneous manifestations and continuing transmission of being-time.<sup>15</sup>

Our activities have a life that is not bound by sequential time. Each expression of the Zen master is in response to a particular situation, yet it is embedded in the interpenetration and continuous transmission of the teachings. In “Busshō” (Buddha-Nature), Dōgen writes: Buddhas such as Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni inherited the capacity that the Fourth and Fifth Patriarchs’ utterances mu-buddha-nature have to totally restrict [ordinary understanding of buddha-nature].<sup>16</sup> From the standpoint of sequential time what Daoxin and Hongren (the fourth and fifth ancestors) understood could not be the inheritance of Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni, because Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni lived hundreds of years before the fourth and fifth Zen ancestors. Yet, the mutually interpenetrating passage of being-time is not restricted by notions of time passing from past to present to future in the way we imagine.

Mu-buddha-nature<sup>17</sup> was not a phrase that Śākyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, used to describe the nature of reality. Nevertheless, the is-ness of mu-buddha-nature was fully present in the time of Śākyamuni. In that way, what the fourth and fifth ancestors transmitted was also the “inheritance of Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni.” Dōgen makes a similar statement in “Den-e” (Transmission of the Robe):

A kaśāya<sup>18</sup> [buddha’s robe] transmitted by buddha ancestors is authentically transmitted from buddha to buddha without fail ... In authentically transforming the past, present, and future, a kashaya is transmitted from past to present, from present to future, from present to past, from past to past, from present to present, from future to future, from future to present, from future to past. It is authentic transmission only between buddha and buddha.<sup>19</sup>

Here, again, Dōgen writes about a non-sequential transmission of the particular being- time of the kaṣāya as all being-time. What is transmitted is each person's understanding of mu-buddha-nature or being-time, which is more than the sequential boundaries of either self or time.

## Moving a Moment Along: Entering the Mud and Water

What exactly does this passage of “Uji” say about the relationship between a single dharma position and the passage of time? Dōgen puts his emphasis on the action and response of this moment,<sup>20</sup> which he calls practice-realization or entering the mud and water. Universal interpenetrating dynamism moves each moment along as enacted by the simultaneity of a particular independent being, self, or moment, and the moment's entirety. In plain English this refers to the interactions of our daily lives.

We greet each moment as it is. We don't add the preconceived ideas and the fixations we cling to as we try to define and control each experience. We have to let all that go and just be present with the one hundred grasses. This is total dynamic functioning or making the world. When we meet each person, moment, or particularity, we are not thinking of our life as a succession of piled-up moments. We engage each encounter afresh, not being pulled around by the past or future. Total presencing is so important for practice-realization that zazen is considered the primary dharma gate for its enactment. We sit because this dharma gate gives us a chance of directly experiencing the universality of this dualistic life. Zazen is the non-intellectual foundational activity of Sōtō Zen.

We also enact our understanding in every action of daily life by entering the mud and water. A bodhisattva's arena, like the often given example of the lotus in muddy water, is the place out of which wisdom and altruism are

born. We practice realization in the messiness of daily life. Driving our car may be just such a moment of wondrous function.

If we can go so far as to call our driving enlightened, then that driving must include the arising of compassion and selflessness as the situation requires. Ultimately our driving includes everything throughout time and space. Yet, we can't drive thinking about the nondual aspects of each thing we meet. Nor can we let our gripes about other drivers dominate our perspective. Rather we just meet each thing and respond within the context of a shared situation.

This meeting, this skillful means, wisdom, and compassion, may manifest as letting someone into a line of traffic, forgiving another driver's mistakes, or avoiding an accident. It means we can share the road when a stoplight is broken or a car is stalled. I cannot cite all the possibilities for enlightened driving, but we know when we are in its presence, especially if we are the recipient of such enlightened passage. This is our everyday experience of practicing "entering the mud, entering the water." Bodhisattva practice is not predicated upon a special religious environment; it is this moment as it is. This is the being-time of practice-realization. Entering the mud and entering the water are the activity of a bodhisattva entering his or her daily life. It is getting down in the trenches and helping ourselves and others realize the Way. This is passage as everyday occurrence.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many short biographies of Dōgen available. Two sources are: Kazuaki Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, 3–25; and Hee-Jin Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 14–49. Kim’s essay is also reprinted in Shohaku Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 211–61.

<sup>2</sup> Heine, *The Zen Poetry of Dōgen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*, 103.

<sup>3</sup> Waddell and Abe’s translation of *kyōryaku* as “seriatim passage” is unfortunate. Seriatim implies an orderly sequence, thus making it easier to become confused about Dōgen’s meaning. Waddell and Abe may want to point to the aspect of “coming and going” or sequential time that is not problematic. Or they may be acknowledging that our perception of being-time’s passage has a linear aspect and is predicated upon causal relationships. However, “passage” is the most common translation for the Japanese word *kyōryaku*. Masao Abe translates *kyōryaku* as “passageless-passage,” which may be the closest to Dōgen’s meaning. Abe, *A Study of Dōgen: His Philosophy and Religion*, 84. Kim notes that while this word has the conventional meaning of to pass through or experience, Dōgen subtly shifts the meaning to “signify ... ‘the passage of time,’ by which Dōgen denotes ‘temporal dynamicity’ or ‘temporal movement’—the dynamics of the realized present, in and through which all time and all existence are salvifically actualized.” Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking: A Reflection on his View of Zen*, 70. In other words, understanding the how of passage in “Uji” is a dharma gate to realization and of actualized presencing. This passage is in conjunction with being-time as the realized now or *nikon*. Heine writes, “*Nikon* and *kyōryaku* are two inseparable, interpenetrating and ultimately selfsame, although provisionally distinguishable standpoints for understanding Uji. Neither has priority; the difference between them is a matter of viewing either the surface (*nikon*) or the cross-section (*kyōryaku*) of a total temporal phenomenon ... *Nikon* designates the particular and immediate activity ... *kyōryaku* suggests the entire context and background of events of man and universe.” Heine, *Existential and Ontological Dimensions of Time in Heidegger and Dōgen*, 130.

<sup>4</sup> Waddell, Norman and Abe, Masao, translators. *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*. SUNY Press: New York, 2002. 51–52.

<sup>5</sup> Stambaugh, *Impermanence Is Buddha-Nature: Dōgen’s Understanding of Temporality*, 44.

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<sup>6</sup> Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, 120.

<sup>7</sup> Okumura, *Realizing Genjokoan: The Key to Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, 120. Italics in original quotation.

<sup>8</sup> This kōan appears in the collections of Mumonkan (Gateless Gate) and Shōyō Roku (Book of Serenity). Dōgen discusses this kōan several places, in particular “Dai Shugyō” (Great Practice) and “Shinjin Inga” (Deep Belief in Cause and Effect). There is some controversy about how these two fascicles reflect Dōgen's understanding of karma. For a discussion of this question see Heine's “Critical Buddhism and Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō: The Debates over the 75-Fascicle and the 12 Fascicle Texts,” *Pruning the Bodhi Tree, The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, 251–85.

<sup>9</sup> Nishijima and Cross, “Dai-shugyō, Great Practice,” *Master Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, bk. 4, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Nishijima and Cross, “Dai-shugyō, Great Practice,” *Master Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, bk. 4, 48

<sup>11</sup> “We should recognize that, just as it is inescapable for spring to be simply the spirit of spring itself, and for autumn likewise to be the beauty and ugliness of autumn itself, even if we try to be other than ourselves, we are ourselves. We should reflect also that even if we want to make these sounds of spring and autumn into ourselves, they are beyond us. Neither have they piled up upon us, nor are they thoughts just now existing in us. This means that we cannot see the four elements and five aggregates of the present as ourselves and we cannot trace them as someone else. Thus, the colors of the mind excited by a flower or the moon should not be seen as self at all, but we think of them as our self.” Nishi-jima and Cross, “Yui-butsu-yo-butsu, Buddhas Alone, Together with Buddhas,” *Master Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, bk. 4, 214.

<sup>12</sup> The four elements are earth, water, fire, and air. The five aggregates (form, feelings, perception, volition, and consciousness) are another way to refer to a person.

<sup>13</sup> Nishijima and Cross, “Yui-butsu-yo-butsu, Buddhas Alone, Together with Buddhas,” *Master Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, bk. 4, 214.

<sup>14</sup> Okumura, *Shōbōgenzō-zuimonki: Sayings of Eihei Dōgen Zenji* recorded by Koun Ejō, 174.

<sup>15</sup> Heine, *Existential and Ontological Dimensions of Time in Heidegger and Dōgen*, 55. Brackets added to original quotation.

<sup>16</sup> Waddell and Abe, “Busshō (Buddha-nature),” *The Heart of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō*, 74. Brackets in original quotation.

<sup>17</sup> Mu busshō's literal translation is “no buddha-nature,” meaning that reality is beyond saying there is buddha-nature or there is not buddha-nature. Expression of mu is essentially realization.

<sup>18</sup> A kaṣāya (Skt.) or okesa (Jap.) is a large rectangular outer stole worn by Buddhist monks, nuns, and priests.

<sup>19</sup> Tanahashi, “Transmitting the Robe,” *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen’s Shōbō Genzō*, vol. 1, 144. Brackets added to original quotation.

<sup>20</sup> Hee-Jin Kim expresses it this way: “Temporal passage . . . was not so much a succession . . . of inter-epochal wholes, as it was a dynamic experience of an intra-epochal whole of the realized now, in which selective memory of the past and the projected anticipation of the future were subjectively appropriated in a unique manner. In brief, continuity in Dōgen’s context meant dynamism.” Kim, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*, 161–62.