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Two Essays on and with Dōgen

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Two Essays on and with Dōgen: A Brief Introduction

Abstract

Zen Master Dōgen (1200-1253) is one of the most important Japanese Buddhist philosophers in medieval Japan. The first essay is a short introduction to Dōgen and the significance of his teachings in the 21st century. Reading Dōgen's "Mountains and Rivers Sūtra," Owen Crum and Conor Loy emphasize the importance of recognizing Buddha-nature in every living being as a way to overcome environmental destruction. Both authors understand that Dōgen's teachings of universal Buddha-nature challenge anthropocentric views on nature and allow people in the twenty-first century to ask pressing ethical and religious questions in new and compelling ways.

Dōgen (1200-1253) was one of the most important Japanese Buddhist philosophers in medieval Japan. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk as a young man. In 1223 he traveled to China for further studies. In particular, he studied at several Chan (Japanese: Zen) monasteries, and experienced a religious awakening. After several years in China, he returned to Japan and established the Sōtō school of Japanese Zen. In 1243 he moved to a monastery in a remote area in the north; this monastery, renamed Eiheiiji in 1247, remains a major training center for Sōtō monks, and is one of the two head temples of the order.

He emphasized the Zen practice of seated meditation (*zazen*) or "just sitting" (*shikantaza*). In addition, Dōgen developed into one of the most profound philosophers of Japanese Buddhism. His collection of essays *Eye of the True Dharma* (*Shōbōgenzō*) consists largely of talks he gave to his students between 1231 and 1253. One of these essays, the "Mountains and Waters Sūtra" (also translated as "Mountains and Rivers Sūtra"; *Sansui-kyō*). The Japanese term *sansui*, "mountains and waters," from the Chinese *shān shuǐ*, is the term used for the landscape genre of painting, which has long been popular in East Asian cultures. He delivered the "Mountains and Waters Sūtra" as a talk in autumn 1240, when Dōgen still lived at Koshōji, a Zen monastery just south of the capital Kyoto. It has been translated into English more than half-a-dozen times, and in recent decades has become a foundational text for global environmental ethics. Contemporary American Buddhist environmental and social justice thinkers and activists such as Robert Aitken, Bernie Glassman, Ruben L. F. Habito, Joan Halifax, Stephanie Kaza, John Daido Looori, David Loy, Peter Matthiessen, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Alan Senauke and

Gary Snyder have written on the importance of Dōgen for the emergence of Engaged Buddhism, and many of them have written specifically on the “Mountains and Waters Sūtra.” They have used it to develop a distinctive environmental ethic to counter the widespread Western theological and philosophical emphasis on anthropocentrism, or focusing on ethical concerns largely if not solely upon humans. Students in REL-205/ENVS-205, “Religion and Nature,” read the translation of the “Mountains and Waters Sūtra” by Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi. The two essays that follow demonstrate why this short text has continued to be influential, and how it allows people in the twenty-first century to ask pressing ethical and religious questions in new and compelling ways.

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Building a Sustainable Environmental Ethic, Using Dōgen’s Teachings in the Context of Western Logic

Conor Loy¹

Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity, view the relationships amongst humanity, nature and the sacred quite differently from Buddhism. Christianity teaches that humanity has stewardship over nature; humans should dominate nature in a strict hierarchy such that nature suits the needs of humanity. In contrast, one common thread amongst Buddhist teachings is an absence of strict hierarchy. Buddhism teaches that nature can bring, or is, enlightenment. While different Buddhist monks/teachers teach varying ideas on the separation, or lack of separation, among human, nature and the divine, a non-dualistic understanding of life allows for an environmental ethic centered around knowledge and enlightenment. But how can non-dualistic approaches be applied in the context of Western scientific and spiritual understandings of humanity, nature and religion? As a radical non-

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Cort for teaching the Religion and Nature course for which I wrote this essay.

dualist, Dōgen teaches concrete ideas regarding our perception of nature and can, therefore, act as a bridge between Buddhist understanding and Western logic. Dōgen's teachings can create the foundation to form a sound environmental ethic for modern society through radical non-duality, disregarding our human perception and recognizing our self-imposed views on nature.

Dōgen's understanding of non-duality is centered on the Buddhist belief of interconnectivity, which can appear somewhat removed from Western logic. However, mathematics and science have shown that the world is connected through a constant flow of atoms and energy. Buddhist teachings realize the connection of all things as Indra's Net. Indra's Net is a web that stretches across the entire cosmos, encompassing everything. At the nodes of the net are jewels with infinite sides, reflecting infinite other jewels at infinite nodes of the net. Therefore, when one node changes, all nodes change with it and are informed by it; everything is entirely interconnected and informs itself through its interconnectivity.² The connection between seemingly distant objects (spatially and categorically) can be difficult to realize. For example, two students can be connected via sitting in the same seat during different class periods. The first student may pass a cold to the second student without either student realizing the connection they share. While the connection of two students through a chair is simple, connections within an ecosystem can be quite complex, particularly when that ecosystem is the world.

Dōgen understands interconnectivity as collapsing distinctions between entities, causing all to be Buddha-nature.³ Buddha-nature for many Buddhist thinkers is consciousness or the ability for enlightenment. However, this invokes a dualistic mindset that Dōgen rejects; instead, he claims that existence alone infers Buddha-nature.⁴ The non-duality of human, nature and the divine dismiss any sense of hierarchy, leveling all beings, living or non-living, as equal. Not differentiating between living and nonliving things contradicts Western logic of hierarchy due to the perception of the world. Dōgen understands perception as a block for many to reach what he believes is enlightenment.

Society perceives through the lens of human views, focusing on science rooted in Western Logic. But can something be completely understood through one viewpoint? Human experience of life leads to an anthropocentric view, where humanity perceives itself at the center of reality. Due to this inherent bias, Dōgen argues humanity will never understand even the most basic of elements, such as

² Francis H Cook, "The Jewel Net of Indra" in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environment Philosophy*, eds., J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 214.

³ Miranda Shaw, "Nature in Dogen's Philosophy and Poetry," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1985): 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

water. For example, what humans see as a river flowing, fish understand as a palace without flow. On the contrary, what humans see as a palace, a fish would not.⁵ Limiting the constraints of our understanding to our perception is a “superficial view” that limits enlightenment.⁶ Dōgen explains that we should not assume that water to us is the same water to everything else.

Humanity’s enlightenment is limited by society’s perception due to the characteristics and actions we assign to things. In Western society symbols of tangible objects are often used to signify intangible qualities. One such symbol for steadfastness, or immovability, are mountains. When most people see a mountain, they do not see it moving, let alone understand it to be walking. Dōgen rejects the seemingly innate belief that mountains do not move, stating that a “Mountains’ walking is just like human walking” and that human perception limits the understanding of walking.⁷ When seeing past our pre-conceived notion of walking, we can understand how mountains walk even in the context of Western logic. Tectonic plates, the driving force of geographical change from mountains, are constantly moving their shapes. It may be slow relative to human perception of movement, but it is movement nonetheless. Furthermore, mountains change, ecosystems evolve and develop. This constant change creates a flow in the mountains. Human perception of time limits flows to liquid (and plasma) objects. However, mountains flow just as water does.⁸

Western logic limits the understanding of things and the qualities they possess due to a singular perception of the world. Often, this is due to the dualistic mindset possessed by Westerners. By viewing everything as separate entities, the connectivity of the world is disregarded. This causes humanity to have self-imposed views on everything. When most people see a river, they see a stream flowing. However, Dōgen argues that we cannot “foolishly suppose that what we see as water is used as water by all other beings.”⁹ While the difference of humans seeing water as water and fish seeing water as a palace is seemingly harmless, the core practice of self-imposing views upon objects can be very harmful. Self-imposing an understanding of natural places has often lead to disenfranchising under-represented groups. While humanity’s understanding of water is different from that of a fish, every person’s understanding of water is unique and informed from their own experiences. For example, Native American land has been used for the mining of natural

⁵ Dōgen, “Mountains and Waters Sutra” in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi, tran., Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

resources. While the people responsible for mining are told of the importance of the land, they self-impose the quality of the land based on their perception and understanding of the world.

Self-imposing our understanding onto the world makes it hard to learn and understand new things. Dōgen states that when a person self-imposes their understanding based on dualistic values they “drown in small views and narrow understanding” making it difficult to understand how mountains walk and flow.¹⁰ Without understanding how mountains walk, humans are limiting their understanding of how they walk themselves, hindering their understanding of themselves and their place in the world.¹¹

Immersing the self in a holistic understanding of an entity allows for an individual to not only learn about that entity but to learn about themselves. Dōgen teaches that when a person lives by the water they not only catch fish but also catch themselves and enlightenment.¹² All this means is that things are not how we as humans define them. If we are to have an enlightened understanding of nature and the divine we must let it define itself, interact with it and have a circular interpretation of what the other is.

Changing the mindset humanity views nature through will be essential as the world begins to respond to global climate change. To change the dualistic view of humans dominating nature, humanity must lift the self-imposed understanding of what a living thing is. Humanity must go from seeing ecosystems and our planet as non-living things that do not need respect to something that lives and deserves respect. Humanity dominating nature is the same “anthropocentric delusion” as other socially constructed hierarchies such as “men over women”, “whites over blacks” or heterosexuals over homosexuals.¹³ As humanity becomes more informed, perceives the world through a different lens and understands more fully the connections among lives, humanity will collapse dualities between entities.

Collapsing the dualistic mindset with which humanity views nature will not work by studying nature as a detached observer. Rather, humanity must learn about itself as much as it learns about nature. Dōgen shows that humans can participate in the mutual informing between it and nature by explaining how when a wise person goes to the mountains they become enlightened.¹⁴ When a person goes to the mountains, even kings and people of great power will seek counsel.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹² *Ibid.*, 106.

¹³ Robert Aitken, “Gandhi, Dogen and Deep Ecology” in *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 168.

¹⁴ Dōgen, “Mountains and Waters Sutra,” 106.

This shows how engaging in mutual understanding with nature will teach not only about nature and the self but will lead to holistic enlightenment that is beyond the reach of even kings.¹⁵ When an individual understands mountains beyond the constraints of human perception they will “not doubt mountains’ flowing and not-flowing,” moving to a state of enlightenment.¹⁶

Humanity desperately needs to reform its view of nature. As Western logic and science progress, the insights of Buddhist thinkers such as Dōgen are becoming more and more applicable in creating an environmental ethic. Systems and objects that were once considered to be unrelated and unconnected are now understood to be tightly reliant upon each other, requiring a new mindset for approaching problems. Furthermore, as wilderness areas are dwindling, and resources are being used/abused, moving past our human perception will help humanity move toward a future with equality and resource consciousness. Current society must look back to Eastern thinkers such as Dōgen to drop its self-informed beliefs and perceptions to build a sustainable environmental ethic.

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¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Delusions of Escape

Owen Crum

In 2017 Antonio Martinez, a former Facebook employee and member of the Silicon Valley elite, bought five acres of densely wooded land on an island located in the Pacific Northwest. Martinez quickly marshaled his resources and shipped solar panels, generators, and countless rounds of ammunition to his newly minted safe haven.¹⁷ He is not the only member of Silicon Valley preparing for impending doom. While Martinez was contemplating land purchases, Steve Huffman, co-founder and current CEO of Reddit, went through laser eye surgery in hopes that it will improve his chances of survival.¹⁸ Although these actions might appear as alarmist, they are not out of the ordinary. They are only a fraction of the men and women found in countless Facebook groups where the world's wealthiest trade plans and promises on how they will survive climate change. What great calamity were these men so concerned about?

Climate change is no longer a question of when, but of how quickly. The latest report from the U.N.'s international panel on climate change argued that the world economy has as few as a dozen years to dramatically change if the rising global temperatures are to remain at manageable levels.¹⁹ Of course, the report did not say climate change was preventable. It now appears that the world is looking at a future where global temperatures will rise at least two degrees Celsius.

While fires, droughts, extreme weather, ocean acidification, rising sea levels, and extreme famine become possible realities, the preemptive actions of Silicon Valley elite such as Antonio Martinez and Steve Huffman bear heavy implications. In the face of major global changes these wealthy power brokers and many of their peers are clinging to the world we have now. Preparation for the worst is not inherently bad. However, these actions taken to preserve lifestyle and wealth imply a wish to retain current worldviews despite changing circumstances.

Humanity, perhaps in ignorance but certainly in selfishness, asserts an anthropocentric worldview on nature.²⁰ This assumption creates not only a hierarchy between humans and nature, but renders mountains and waters lifeless.²¹ The preparatory actions of the wealthy tech developing denizens of Silicon Valley only serve to exemplify humanity's love of power over others. Further still, their ex-

¹⁷ Evan Osnos, "Doomsday Prep for the Super-Rich." *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/01/30/doomsday-prep-for-the-super-rich>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Editorial, "The Guardian View on Climate Change: a Global Emergency | Editorial," *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 8 Oct. 2018, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/08/the-guardian-view-on-climate-change-a-global-emergency.

²⁰ Hee-jin Kim, *Dogen Kigen: Mystical Realist* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1987), 187.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 187-88.

ample illustrates a desperate need to hold onto a permanent present. In the face of considerable human ego and impossibly powerful assertions of the self, Buddhism might hold answers for those of us facing future climate change. Dōgen Kigen Zenshi (1200-1253), a Japanese Zen Buddhist master, could not have anticipated that humans would one day face current climate change conditions. However, his wisdom still has lessons to teach us. In light of this recognition the question should be asked, why is it important to think like a mountain now in our current moment? I assert that if we set aside ego and let the mountains and waters tell us what they can be, we are enabled to accept an impermanent world where our society and our own worldview will not remain the same. If we are not consumed with the question of what we are, we are not bound to a world that does not change. The climate is changing and so will we.

Dōgen collapses duality by arguing that nature and enlightenment are inseparable. Although his precursor Saigyō (1118-1190) asserted nature *could* be enlightened, Dōgen acts as a non-symbolic thinker when he claims that the mountains and waters are themselves buddha-nature. In his “Mountains and Waters Sūtra,” Dōgen begins with the assertion that mountains and waters are the actualization of the Buddha-way. This statement is accompanied by the claim that nature is alive at this very moment.²² In making this argument Dōgen reveals that his foundational ontological belief is that enlightenment is a tangible fact. In reality, this means that Dōgen sees all things, all concrete phenomena in the world, as imparting a clarity to how we understand enlightenment.²³ In the very first sentences of the sutra, Dōgen not only collapses any duality between nature and enlightenment but also reveals any separation of sentient and non-sentient beings as void. This point remains pertinent to us now because it implies that climate change is not alien to Buddha-nature. As climate change is a process in nature and an observable occurrence in our environment, Dōgen would argue that this change in our world is an embodiment of Buddha-nature. Certainly several world political leaders do not agree with this. Both President Trump and the President of Brazil Jair Bolsonaro are committed to pulling their respective countries out from the Paris Accords. How can we seek to cling to our current worldview if it stands in willful ignorance and disregard of equality of all existence and nature as the actualization of the Buddha-nature?

For Dōgen, impermanence takes on a more profound role in understanding

²² Dōgen, “Mountains and Waters Sūtra” in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, eds. Tr. Arnold Kotler and Kazuaki Tanahashi (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 97.

²³ Miranda Shaw, “Nature in Dōgen’s Philosophy and Poetry,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8 (1985): 116.

the experience of enlightenment. In his “Mountains and Waters Sūtra” Dōgen asserts that the green mountains are walking. He continues by claiming that our own walking and the walking of the mountains have never stopped since the very moment they began.²⁴ While this passage actively illustrates how Dōgen collapses time, it also articulates his sentiments on impermanence. By concluding that the Buddhist tenets of no-self, inter-causality, and impermanence infer that Buddha-nature is itself impermanent, Dōgen sees reality and its concrete phenomena as the only place one needs to look for Buddha-nature.²⁵ Dōgen is arguing that even though we might lack the Buddha-eye to see it, objects that are perceived as non-living still display the vigorous activity of impermanence and by extension Buddha-nature. In concluding this argument he asserts that true enlightenment is the recognition that all things and ourselves are impermanent.²⁶ This argument has a strikingly powerful implication for climate change when we recognize that sentient and non-sentient duality is collapsed, The mountains and waters that appear non-living and non-moving are changing. Despite lacking the Buddha-eye to see its movements, we can understand climate change as a concrete phenomenon that is *walking* so to speak. If climate change is not alien to Buddha-nature and exists as the actualization of impermanence then Dōgen would argue that climate change is enlightenment. This conclusion seems to offer up climate change as a good thing. However, Dōgen supplies us with an opportunity to understand our relationship with concrete phenomena of reality such as climate change.

The concept of Indra’s net is invaluable in the exploration of Dōgen’s understanding of our relationship to Buddha-nature.²⁷ Indra’s net is a metaphor used to explain emptiness. The net, articulating the interconnectedness of existence, proposes that we are ourselves so interdependent on the rest of reality that we cannot possibly be independent and possessing of a transcendent soul. We are empty of ourselves while simultaneously full of existence. In the “Mountains and Waters Sūtra” Dōgen articulates how the wise sages all live atop mountains. However, this is complicated with his assertion that mountains appear because of wise people.²⁸ Thus Dōgen is arguing the concept of interbeing or mutual-formation. The mountain is the embodiment of all connections in the cosmos. Each being in the cosmos confirms the mountain’s existence. In this moment the mountain’s self is defined by the other. Furthermore even while it is being confirmed by all the connections

²⁴ Dōgen, “Mountains and Waters Sūtra,” 98.

²⁵ Shaw, “Nature in Dōgen’s Philosophy and Poetry,” 118-119.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

²⁷ Francis H. Cook, “The Jewel Net of Indra” in J. eds., *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environment Philosophy, eds.*, J. Baird Callicott and Roger T Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 213-29.

²⁸ Dōgen, “Mountains and Waters Sūtra,” 105.

in the cosmos, the mountain is confirming all beings in existence. This is the inter-causal and interdependent world in which Dōgen understands enlightenment as impermanence. However, he has gone further to argue that humanity can influence nature just as nature influences humanity. As a result, Dōgen must claim that even though nature is inseparable from Buddha-nature in our inter-causal reality, humanity is ignorant of its own existing enlightenment. This would then confirm that humanity has influenced climate change even as climate change is influencing humanity. Moreover, Dōgen would argue that right now in this moment there is the actualization for the Buddha-way in climate change. At this time phenomenal expression is occurring and this is Suchness. Because the net of Indra is complete and lacks nothing, we must accept Dōgen's conclusion that only things that are changing are alive in the present. This would lead us to a better understanding of Suchness, the true nature of reality or the way things really are. But what happens when humans act counter to the idea of Suchness and refuse to accept our inter-causal relationship with climate change? This is a delusion.

In order to find enlightenment we must be open to all things. In the "Mountains and Waters Sūtra" Dōgen articulates this point by engaging with the idea of how dragons and fish see water. He argues that those in the water might see the running water as a grand palace. In doing so Dōgen effectively asserts that human perceptions of concrete phenomena alone cannot understand the impermanence of nature. Rather, Dōgen calls for us to see the water as other beings see the water. Thus he recognizes that to seek control over that which confirms our own self-nature is to fall into delusion. Dōgen argues that power over others, humanity over nature, hierarchical power, and the power of naming are all delusion. To seek power over the myriad of things is an anthropocentric construction that serves only to confirm oneself.²⁹ Accordingly we know from Dōgen that we cannot confirm our own existence in our inter-causal reality. To reject mutual formation is to wallow in the ignorance of power. Moreover, humans cannot learn enlightenment from humans.³⁰ The Silicon Valley elite who expend untold fortunes to preserve their station and worldview in the face of climate change have fallen into delusion. They seek power over the myriad of things by rejecting impermanence and clinging to the world they know now. If nature is changing and nature confirms our existence, we cannot hope to remain the same as we are. The twentieth-century Zen master Robert Aitken illustrates this by saying, "The self-imposing upon the other is not only something called delusion, but it is also the ruination of our

²⁹ Robert Aitken, "Gandhi, Dōgen, and Deep Ecology" in *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Robert Aitken (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 168-73.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

planet and all of its creatures.”³¹ In making such a claim Aitken affirms the folly of such men as Antonio Martinez and Steve Huffman. If we refuse to acknowledge that our worldview must change in the face of climate change then we will fall into delusion and a rejection of Suchness and impermanence.

We begin by believing we know what a mountain is. However, we realize that our view point must change as we reject anthropocentric ideas. Instead of seeking to control the mountain we must listen to what the mountain is saying. We need to let the mountain speak for itself. Yet, the mountain is never consumed with the question of what it is. To think like a mountain is to also think like the trees and the rivers. The mountain is none other than itself even as it is all other things.³² The tech giants of Silicon Valley preparing for climate change have yet to learn to think like a mountain. By seeking power over the myriad of things they reject openness to all beings. In accepting climate change as an expression of concrete phenomena that is the actualization of the Buddha-nature, we also accept that our own worldview and indeed we ourselves must change also. However, there are more questions that demand investigation. Since Dōgen understands time as collapsed and the world as inter-causal, how can we reconcile that the delusion that is occurring now is simultaneously occurring alongside Siddhartha Gautama’s achieving enlightenment twenty-five hundred years ago? In spite of the many questions that have blossomed from my original inquiry I am struck by the recognition that to effectively prepare for climate change we do not need bunkers and islands. Rather, we need to let go of ego and accept that as our environment changes we cannot remain the same.

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