

# The Game of Go

## An Unexpected Path to Enlightenment

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### INTRODUCTION

THERE ARE A number of traditional practices in Japan that have been used as aids in the search for enlightenment. These include such things as the arts of flower arranging, of archery, of sword fighting, of the tea ceremony, of karate, etc. All are seen as involving one or more of the attitudes that are characteristic of a Buddhist so that by engaging in them one can experience elements of the Buddhist perspective in a concrete form that is more readily accessible than koan study or meditation practice. In addition to serving as paths to enlightenment, these practices can illuminate the nature of the Buddhist perspective for those seeking simply to understand Buddhism, and there are a number of well-known works that use a description of these practices and the experience of engaging in them as a way of explicating Buddhism. Some examples are Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Gustie L. Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958); Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Horst Hamnitzsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony* (New York: Avon Books, 1982); Thomas Hoover, *Zen Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); etc.

However, there is a major traditional practice in Japan that has been associated with Buddhism for centuries and is traditionally referred to as a “way” or *dō* (pronounced *dao* in Chinese) that has been neglected

by those seeking to explicate Buddhism, although it is an unusually effective vehicle for illuminating the Buddhist perspective. This is the game Westerners call “Go,” known in Japan as *igo* or *kidō*, “the way of Go.”<sup>1</sup>

From a Buddhist point of view, the game effectively manifests the way Buddhists conceive of the world process and straightforwardly inculcates the attitudes of mind and heart that Buddhists praise. In fact, the game provides a useful way of depicting and experiencing the fundamental aspects of life as Buddhists understand it. My intent here is to show how this is so.

### DŌGEN ON GO

That there is a special connection between playing Go and the authentication of enlightenment is suggested by a striking passage in Dōgen Zenji’s *Shōbōgenzō*. In the essay “Spring and Autumn” (*Shunjū*), written in 1244, Dōgen uses a reference to Go to help his audience understand a famous koan.<sup>2</sup> In response to a monk’s question as to how to avoid being cold or hot, the ninth century Chinese Zen master Dongshan tells the monk to go where there is no cold or heat. Dōgen refers to several traditional explanations of this response that interpret it as making a philosophical point about the unity that must be prior to all distinctions. That is, a unifying concept of temperature must be prior to the distinction between cold and hot. The traditional explanations take Dongshan to be pointing toward the denial of the ultimacy of all distinctions. However, Dōgen insists that such interpretations are inadequate: “If the buddha-dharma had been transmitted merely through the philosophical investigation of unity and distinction, how could it have reached this day?”

Dōgen says that we should instead heed the words of Hongzhi, a twelfth century Chinese Zen master, who said: “It is like when you and

<sup>1</sup> William Pinckard points out this connection although he makes little effort to explicate it. See “Go and the ‘Three Games,’” in *The Go Player’s Almanac*, edited by Richard Bozulich (Tokyo: Ishi Press, 1992), pp. 4–6.

<sup>2</sup> “Spring and Autumn” is translated by Katherine Thanas and Kazuaki Tanahashi in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi (New York: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 108–113. My quotations are based on this translation.

I are playing Go. If you do not respond to my move, I'll swallow you up. Only when you penetrate this will you understand the meaning of Dongshan's words."

Dōgen then goes on to clarify this surprising reference to playing the game of Go. He comments, "Suppose there is a Go game; who are the two players? If you answer that you and I are playing Go, it will be as if you have a handicap of eight stones, and if you have a handicap of eight stones, it will no longer be a game. What is my meaning? When you respond to my question, 'Who are the two players?', answer this way: 'You play Go by yourself; the opponents become one.' Steadying your mind and turning your body in this way, you should examine Hongzhi's words, 'If you do not respond to my move.' This means 'you' are not yet 'you'. You should also not neglect the words, 'I'll swallow you up.' Mud within mud; a jewel within a jewel. Illuminate other, illuminate the self."

Dōgen offers this as an adequate explanation of Dongshan's remark, along with an additional explanation in terms of his own notion of "dropping off body and mind" (*shinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落). His use of the reference to playing Go suggests that he assumes his audience at the Eiheiji Temple is thoroughly familiar with the experience of playing the game and that he himself is also. It also suggests that he sees playing the game as at least comparable to the experience of "dropping off body and mind." However, since I cannot assume that the readers of this paper are very familiar with Go, I will say something about the game and how it can be connected with basic Buddhist ideas before unpacking this passage from Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*.

#### THE GAME OF GO

The game of Go originated in China at least 4000 years ago and in ancient Chinese tradition was seen as one of the four activities a person had to master in order to be considered truly civilized, the other three being poetry, music, and painting. It was brought to Japan around the seventh century of the common era, probably by Buddhist monks returning from training in monasteries in China. Thus, the game is much older than Buddhism, but it was quickly recognized by Buddhists as a useful tool for Buddhist practice. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the strongest players in Japan were generally Buddhist monks.

(The oldest extant game record in Japan is traditionally ascribed to Nichiren, the 13th century founder of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism.) The game was popular as a means of instilling the virtues of overcoming fear, greed, and anger among the Samurai, whose instructors in Go were Buddhist monks. Its capacity for making its players better people is part of the reason Go is still widely popular in Japan, Korea, and China, where millions of people play regularly and there are substantial groups of professional players who make their living at Go, usually by teaching the game.<sup>3</sup> The increasing popularity of Go in Europe and America, where there are thousands of enthusiastic amateur players and a few professionals, is also connected with its tendency to foster humane attitudes and friendly relationships among players. Even among players who are unfamiliar with the history of the game and unacquainted with Buddhism, the unusual power of the game to transform the characters of its players in profound ways is experienced and recognized. Go is much more than a mere form of entertainment.

Go is a board strategy game, as is chess, though the game differs profoundly from chess.<sup>4</sup> It is played with circular black and white pieces called "stones" on an approximately square grid that is usually 19 by 19 lines. The field of play consists of the intersections of the lines, and the stones, placed on the intersections, are not moved during play, although they can be captured and removed from the board. Play begins with an empty board, and the players alternate placing stones on the board, with the player who has the black stones going first. As play proceeds, patterns of black and white stones evolve on the grid.

Winning and losing is determined by the number of open intersections one is able to surround with stones that are safe from capture. However, the point of playing is clearly understood as not that of winning games (when playing properly you lose about half of your games), but of exploring the possibilities to be found in particular arrangements of stones. Thus one seeks to create interesting games, and that re-

<sup>3</sup> William Pinckard provides a general overview of the involvement of Buddhist monks in the development of Go in Japan. See "History and Philosophy [of Go]," in *The Go Player's Almanac*, edited by Richard Bozulich (Tokyo: Ishi Press, 1992), pp. 7-19.

<sup>4</sup> A useful introduction to the rules and basic strategy of the game is Cho Chikun, *The Magic of Go* (Tokyo: Ishi Press, 1987).



## COBB: THE GAME OF GO: AN UNEXPECTED PATH

quires becoming a stronger player, that is, acquiring a greater understanding of the game. In other words, it is not misleading to say that rather than striving for victory, the players engage in a search for enlightenment—which involves moral qualities as well as intellectual understanding, because greed and fear are the greatest barriers to becoming better at the game. This aiming at understanding rather than focusing on winning is facilitated by a handicapping system that assures that players of unequal skill will have an equal chance of winning or losing. This system, which Dōgen refers to, consists in having the weaker player place an appropriate number of stones on the board before the stronger player places a stone. The effect is of the weaker player having made several plays before the stronger player makes a first play, thus giving the weaker player an advantage to offset the greater expertise of the other player. To facilitate the awarding of handicap stones, each player is given a rank, based on past performance, which changes as the player becomes stronger. Thus, a player whose level was, for example, three steps below that of the other would place three handicap stones before the stronger player plays. Traditionally, the maximum handicap is nine stones, but if the difference between two players is more than about four stones it is difficult for them to have a properly balanced game. Their understandings of what is happening in the game will diverge too widely for appropriate responsiveness in the play.

### GO AS A PATH TO ENLIGHTENMENT

A good place to begin an analysis of Go as a path to enlightenment is with four fundamental Buddhist principles, usually denoted by Sanskrit terms: *sunyata* (emptiness), *pratityasamutpada* (dependent co-arising or interconnectedness), *anitya* (impermanence), and *anatman* (no-self). Each of these is present in a clear and straightforward way in Go, and by playing the game one can experience being in a world that is based on these principles—a world that is quite different from that normally inhabited by most Westerners. Thus, the manifestation of these principles in the game makes them much more easily graspable by people for whom Buddhism is still an alien perspective.

The game begins with an empty board. That is, there are no playing pieces on the board to start with, in contrast to a game like chess. This situation makes the range of possibilities that the board offers much

greater because the game is not restricted by the impact of an initial disposition of playing pieces. In fact, because of the size of the standard board, with 361 intersections, and the fact that all the pieces have the same initial status, namely, being able to occupy a point on the board, the number of possible games is astronomical, vastly greater than the number of possible games of chess. This is part of the reason there is not yet a computer program that can play Go at a high level, despite considerable market demand for one. The non-linear logic of Go is an additional problem for programmers.

This starting position in the game illustrates an important point about the notion of *sunyata*. Emptiness, in Buddhism as well as in ordinary language, does not refer to an absolute lack of everything. Thus, the earlier translation of *sunyata* as “void” was very misleading. Emptiness refers to the absence of something that one for some reason expects to find, as we say a glass, normally used to hold liquids, is empty even though it is full of air, or we say a room is empty when there are no people in it even though it is full of furniture.

The emptiness that Buddhism affirms is very similar to that in Go. The Buddhist point is that potentiality precedes actuality. There are no ultimate limits on the possibilities of being. Reality is open-ended in an absolute sense. This has many implications for understanding the human situation, and the game of Go effectively incorporates many aspects of this. The game does have some limits, of course, since it is a particular form of being, but they are extremely minimal. The size of the board can vary. Using a 19 by 19 line grid is simply customary and convenient—big enough to be interesting, small enough to be manageable. The game can be played on virtually any size board, and smaller boards of 9 by 9 or 13 by 13 lines are often used by beginners. In ancient China 17 by 17 lines was a popular size. The rules of play can be reduced to the single principle that a stone (or a group of stones that are adjacent to each other along horizontal or vertical lines) remains on the board as long as it is connected to at least one empty intersection. Thus the game lacks as much of the usual structures of games as it can and still be a game, yet the effect of this is not to create something of little interest but to greatly enrich the range of possibilities.

The player of Go discovers that the absence of an absolute fixed structure or of ultimate limits on reality is not the disaster one might expect. On the contrary, it makes things much more interesting. The fact

that the openness of Go means that there probably is no perfect game does not in the slightest undermine the enjoyment of playing. In fact, as chess players are beginning to discover with the advance of computer programs that play their game, a fixed structure that creates the possibility of solving the game may be a great weakness. Whether Go can be solved is a matter of controversy, but it is clear that it is vastly more complex than chess because of its indefiniteness, that is, its emptiness. For the player of Go, discovering how fascinating and enjoyable it is to dwell in such an open-ended world can be a revelation. One learns to revel in the creative possibilities that result from the relative absence of defined powers and fixed structures rather than being frustrated or distressed by the fact that there are no final answers regarding what constitutes good play.

In the Buddhist sense, emptiness refers to the fact that nothing is self-determining and thus nothing is eternal. What is lacking from reality as a whole and thus from everything that exists is a particular kind of being, namely, the kind of inherent being that is self-grounded or absolutely independent. Everything is what it is by virtue of its relationships to everything else, and since nothing serves as the ultimate ground of this vast complex (such a ground would lack emptiness), it is subject to constant change. This brings in the principles of impermanence (*anitya*) and interconnectedness (*pratityasamutpada*). These two principles are also fundamental to the game of Go. The most obvious manifestation of interconnectedness in Go is in the way groups of stones develop during play, while the shifting significance of these groups and the stones that compose them is a clear example of impermanence.

Play in the game is directed by the intention of one player to surround more empty intersections than the other player. The technique for doing this is to create fences or walls that encircle parts of the board by placing stones adjacent to each other so that they form solid lines. Since stones can be captured, this process becomes very complex, and the significance of stones is constantly changing as a game develops. Considered in itself, a stone has almost no significance. It can occupy an intersection on the board and if captured it will result in the reduction of one's score by one point (captured stones are returned at the end of the game and placed inside one's own territory, thus reducing one's score by one point each). A stone's real significance lies in its

potentiality for interaction with other stones. By virtue of its relations with other stones, it can surround territory or disrupt the ability of the stones of the other color to do so, and even capture stones of the other color. In this process the role that a stone plays, its meaning in the game, is entirely a function of its connections with other stones. The stones have virtually no inherent being. Thus, players experience what it means to say that things are what they are by virtue of *pratityasamutpada*. Moreover, the significance of any stone or group of stones is subject to the possibility of radical change. A stone or group of stones that is important at one point can become dispensable as a result of later developments. Stones can even be used as sacrificial offerings for the sake of later gain and may or may not be accepted as such. The significance of the vulnerability of the stones to the tides of fortune accustoms the players to the reality of impermanence, and again this is found not to be a dreadful situation, but one that greatly enriches the experience of playing.

These points are relatively easy to understand, but they represent only the first step. There is a more significant level of analysis of the significance of Go as a path to enlightenment, namely, the way it can illuminate two basic questions: how one can avoid falling into a nihilistic relativism while affirming a principle of emptiness as ultimate, and why wisdom in the form of a recognition of the fact of emptiness generates a response of compassion. These two issues are among the most challenging one encounters in trying to explicate Buddhism. They appear in the famous advice of Zen masters not to make judgments of good and bad. Since this sounds like a bit of advice that is supposed to be good rather than bad, one is not sure how to understand it. Moreover, one assumes that compassion is a good thing as well. Go is very helpful in illuminating these puzzles.

As a means of getting at these issues, something must be said about the fourth principle mentioned earlier, *anatman*, the doctrine of no-self. It is ironic that the martial arts are often advertized in the West as a means of self defense. In the East, especially among Buddhists, these arts are valued precisely for their ability to help one to overcome self, that is, to eliminate the delusion of having or being a self. The recognition that there is no self is a key step on the path to enlightenment, but non-Buddhists are often confused about what this means. One way to explicate this is to note the implications of the notion of interconnected-

ness for understanding the individual person. Since everything is what it is by virtue of its relations to other things, this means that I as an individual am constituted by my relations to other people, institutions, places, actions, etc. There is no self-grounded or self-grounding inner core of the individual. One's life is entirely a dependent process.

This has profound implications for what makes sense as a life project for an individual. Since my life is a function of relationships with others, the only way I can make my life better (not worrying for the moment about what counts as better) is by making everyone else's life better. That is to say, the only motive I could have for trying to make the lives of others worse is the notion that I could thereby make my life better in some way, but *pratityasamutpada* makes this impossible. As will become clear, this is connected with the fact that it cannot be good to win in Go because it is not bad to lose.

This view of the nature of human being is essential to the game of Go. One of the most striking consequences of playing the game is the way it leads to the diminution of self-centered behavior even in those who are merely playing the game because they like it as a game. That is, the game induces the overcoming of self even in those who are not trying to do this. A clear indication of this is the congenial interpersonal atmosphere one invariably finds at Go clubs and tournaments. Players generally are genuinely supportive of each other, rejoicing in others' successes, going out of their way to help weaker players become stronger, and generally acting like friends rather than opponents. Of course, this can be true of groups who play other games, but in the case of Go, the character of the game directly promotes this kind of behavior.

The motivation behind the Buddhist denial of the existence of an inherent self, besides the perceived lack of empirical evidence for such and the theoretical problems it involves, is the connection between the idea of such a self and the experience of suffering. The notion that one's being is ultimately independent of others implies that one's life can be improved by doing things that enhance one's own being regardless of the impact on others. This may involve enhancing the being of others at the same time, but the point is that that is not necessarily the case. This belief leads to what Buddhists call "attachment," that is, to the idea that there is something, material wealth, power, status, whatever (even enlightenment), that will make my life better if I can get

hold of it for myself. However, this only generates suffering. Either one is desperate because one does not have whatever it is, or one is desperate because one is afraid of losing it. The only solution is to abandon the idea of an independent self and to embrace the reality of one's interdependent being.

This is manifested in Go in several ways. In the Japanese tradition one always begins a game by expressing one's appreciation to the other player for the other's willingness to play as well as one's expectation that one's understanding will be enhanced by the game. It is obvious that one cannot play games other than solitaire unless there are willing partners, but in the case of Go the character of the game as an interactive process that is valued for the quality of the interaction emphasizes this. A popular metaphor for Go in Japanese is "hand conversation" (*shudan* 手談), a conversation being an interactive process valued for the quality of the process rather than any outcomes for the individual participants. (This is why classroom lectures, for example, are not conversations.)

The most effective way Go undermines players' attachment to self is the handicapping system that is an integral part of the game. If you win more than about sixty percent of your games, you are automatically promoted to the next level of the ranking system, which changes the handicap in your games. This means that you expect to lose about half your games, so on that basis alone one is encouraged not to become attached to winning. In fact, many players often say that it is better to lose than to win because when you lose it is usually obvious that you overlooked some sort of possibility and you can learn from that, while if you win it is usually because the other player made an obvious mistake. Go players say that one does not win games, one loses games, but this is not an expression of despair. Since one is more interested in learning to play well than in winning games, losing is actually better, in a sense. It would, of course, be ridiculous to suggest that you should try to lose; it is useful to lose only if you are trying to win. This may imply that the inherently good thing is to become stronger, but that is misleading, also. Getting stronger cannot be treated as good in an unqualified sense. You may be neglecting other responsibilities in order to focus on Go, for example. In the Buddhist view, judgments of good and bad are always made within a context, and there is no ultimate context to provide a final ground for such judgments. Nor is there an in-

## COBB: THE GAME OF GO: AN UNEXPECTED PATH

dependent agent to be the subject of such judgments. Moreover, it is often a matter of years of play between advances in one's level of play, and the level of most players ceases to increase after a time. Thus, the character of the game encourages players to abandon attachment to getting stronger, as well as to winning, and to focus instead on enjoying the game at the level they are able to play.

The character of the process of play in the game also tends to undermine attachment. The judgment that a particular play is good or bad is always highly provisional. The impact of a play is a function of how the other player responds as well as of one's understanding of the potentialities of the situation that is developing on the board. There are many proverbs in Go suggesting ways to play, but they are like most proverbs in that contradictory ones can be applied to almost every situation. Since the emptiness of Go prevents one from forcing a win, the players learn to greatly restrict the making of judgments of good and bad. In counseling a weaker player one may note that a particular play is "usual nowadays" rather than "good" or that a line of play is "difficult" rather than "bad." Such counsel is also usually explicitly hypothetical as well: "If you want to capture those stones, you should play there." The player tries to balance the various aspects of the game, seeking security for the stones you take to be crucial to your position while being open to changing your view of which stones are crucial, for example, and trying to surround enough empty intersections for territory to win while trying not to surround so many that your walls are too thin and can be breached. This character of the game naturally leads the players to focus on an interest in discovering the potentialities in the developing shapes on the board, and that interest may be greatest in a case where the outcome is damaging to one's own chance of winning. This, of course, is not a source of distress for Go players. It is not unusual for players to be very enthusiastic about a game which they have just lost. The delight is often shared equally when two players feel they have created a particularly elegant game. When the game is a close one, most players do not know who has won until the score can be carefully counted in a way that clarifies the board situation.

Here one begins to see how a lack of ultimate standards of good and bad may not lead to nihilism and despair. There is a context that provides the structure necessary for things to be more or less interesting,



but that context is clearly created by an agreement by the participants to play this game, rather than to do something else. The important point is that the context involves the rejection of any ultimate standards of good and bad to a remarkable extent and that this rejection is a sort of affirmation of nihilism. That is, it is a recognition that the absence of such standards can lead to an attractive situation rather than to one of despair or boredom. This is just the point that Buddhism tries to make.

There seems to be a major difference in the way one chooses to enter the world of Go and the way one enters the world of ordinary life, but the parallelism between the two worlds is surprisingly close. In both cases, from a Buddhist perspective, the values involved are more like what is usually thought of as the aesthetic than the ethical. There is no basis for ultimate pronouncements about good and bad, yet there are widely shared views of what is appropriate, even though the participants realize that these views are subject to change. In Go, there is an initial agreement about what counts as playing the game, which involves some basic rules and definitions, so that one can identify extreme possibilities that could not be reasonably proposed as appropriate. In life, Buddhists speak to this issue by saying that compassion is the natural accompaniment of wisdom. This claim is not as easy to grasp as might at first seem to be the case, because the wisdom referred to is precisely the understanding that everything (including this claim) is empty. There are no absolutes. Even this claim itself is recognized as contingent and open to interpretation without any way of providing a final answer about its meaning. This would seem to leave Buddhism open to the possibility of having no basis for objecting to behavior that seems clearly outrageous—torturing babies as a way to deal with boredom, for example. How can Buddhists support their appeal to compassion as the only appropriate response to the human situation?

The game of Go can again provide a useful model for understanding this matter. When two people confront each other across a Go board, they could do virtually anything—throw the stones at each other, carve their initials in the board, etc. Why play Go? The broader question is why do anything at all. This question seems to be about ends, and thus is usually assumed to require some sort of standard of good and bad if it is to be answered. However, there is another way of looking at it. This involves considering the kind of beings who are facing each other



## COBB: THE GAME OF GO: AN UNEXPECTED PATH

here. If one assumes the reality of emptiness and interconnectedness, any behavior that is inconsistent with this condition will clearly be inappropriate because it is based on delusion, a false view of reality. Thus, what is appropriate is going to be cooperative in some sense. Of course, this could be a matter of throwing the stones at each other, but what would be the result? Most likely, a process that is nasty, brutish, and short, hence, not very interesting. Carving initials would fail to take advantage of the rich range of possibilities the board offers. This does not mean that throwing the stones or carving initials is wrong or bad, just that it seems unlikely that people who understand the possibilities would choose to do so. It would be like an artist just pouring paint down the drain—not a crime, but a waste, nevertheless.

The point is that while it is true that, because of the nature of reality, nothing very significant (in ultimate terms) is ever at stake, it still is the case that some things seem more appropriate than others, and a good guideline for finding the more appropriate things is to say that they are the cooperative acts that increase the opportunities for cooperation, that is, the compassionate acts. Thus, one plays Go for the same reason people climb mountains, because it is there and it seems such a waste not to play it. It is the same for life in general. The game of non-attachment is a useful model for a life of non-attachment.

### CONCLUSION

So, what are we to make of Dōgen's suggestion that we can understand how to go where there is neither cold nor heat by thinking about playing a game of Go? Dōgen speaks of the authentication or experience of enlightenment as "dropping off body and mind," which means losing one's sense of being a separate being, ultimately distinct from the world and from others. He and Hongzhi are suggesting that playing Go involves this experience of nonseparateness. From the description above it should be clear how this is possible.

When Dōgen says "the opponents are one" he is not referring to the kind of mutuality commonly found in interactive experiences. That is, he is not talking about the kind of sharing that routinely occurs in activities that require the involvement of another person, from war to sex. When we do something together in the usual way, there is a sense in which, by creating a shared product or experience, we overcome our

distinctness and create a common bond, a single thing that is “us.” However, in most joint experiences our separateness is nevertheless maintained, often by having divergent or incompatible goals, such as victory, which cannot be shared by the opponents in a battle, or my pleasure, which is not yours. Hongzhi and Dōgen are suggesting that Go is different; here the separateness of the players is completely overcome—“You play Go by yourself. Mud within mud; a jewel within a jewel.”

The possibility of achieving such nonseparateness in playing Go is facilitated by the handicapping system. When Go is played in the proper spirit, there is no goal external to the activity of playing, and the players have no ulterior motives. The sole aim is to play, and both players give themselves up completely to the patterns and possibilities in the stones. The stones play themselves; the players merely facilitate this process and allow it to occur. (Dōgen’s implication that this is not possible in a high handicap game of eight stones probably reflects the fact that a separation like that between teacher and student seems unavoidable in cases where there is that much difference between the playing strengths.) Dōgen seems to take for granted that it is common in playing Go to experience a total involvement in a dynamic process in which distinctions between oneself and the other player and between oneself and the process of play are recognized as distortions of the fundamental unity of the phenomenon. This sort of activity, in which the reality of nonseparateness is actualized, will be experienced as fundamentally positive and liberating—just like the experience of authenticating enlightenment.

For Dōgen, the point is not that you lose yourself in this kind of activity, but rather that you lose the delusion that your self is essentially a separate and distinct being in the world. Thus, in playing Go you find your “true” self, “dropping off body and mind.” You lose the false “you” and actualize the real “you” that is not separable from the other player or from the play. It is this actualization of the overcoming of distinctions that Dōgen suggests Dongshan was pointing toward.

Dōgen would say that playing Go is often not like this for many players because they maintain attachments to things that require them to be separated from the other player and from the process, things like winning or improving their ratings. In order for “my” winning or “my” rating to be important, I must be a separate and independent individ-

## COBB: THE GAME OF GO: AN UNEXPECTED PATH

ual. However, it is possible to lose these delusions and for a moment at least to experience the dropping off of body and mind that is the actualization of enlightenment. So, if you're curious about what nirvana is like, learn how to play Go. Then take the advice of Dōgen and just play, not trying to do anything else. Let the game "swallow you up."