

A Crash Course in Radical Buddhism

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“The authentic mystic,” according to Nicholas Berdyaev, that archetypal homo religiosus, “is a realist, one capable of perceiving the Real” . . . and although “by its very nature, mysticism is more musical than architectural,” he fully recognizes the existence of a “theoretical mysticism.”

Abe Masao’s inspiring but also demanding book* shows Dōgen as the “theoretical mystic” par excellence, a realist of the highest order, who in his profundity ranks with the giants of Western philosophy, from Aristotle via Aquinas and Spinoza to Hegel and Heidegger with whom Professor Abe, author of *Zen and Western Thought* (1985) is thoroughly familiar. Professor Abe is a prolific writer and highly respected figure in Buddhist/Christian dialogue, who has taught at many American universities and after the death of Nishitani Keiji in 1990 assumed an even more central role as a spokesman for the Kyoto School of Buddhist philosophy.

In this book he stresses that before the 1926 publication of Watsuji Tetsurō’s epoch-making monograph on Dōgen and his magnum opus the *Shōbōgenzō* (“Treasure of the Right Dharma”), Dōgen was mainly known as the founder of one of the two surviving schools of Zen. In his Sōtō Zen *shikantaza*, the practice of zazen, is not merely a means towards the end of attaining enlightenment, but is, in and by itself, equivalent to Enlightenment. Much has been made of Dōgen’s violent opposition to Rinzai Zen’s emphasis on the koan exercise, until recently Carl Bielefeldt showed that in his manuals of Zen meditation Dōgen nowhere refutes the validity of koan study. Since Watsuji’s monograph and more recent works such as Nishitani Keiji’s lectures on Dōgen

*Masao Abe, *A Study of Dogen: His Philosophy and Religion*, edited by Steven Heine, New York: SUNY Press, 1992.

in the seventies, the Master has become recognized as a critical genius who not only questioned hallowed traditional concepts of Buddhist thought, but declared them to be inauthentic and in need of reinterpretation. At about the same time, beginning in the early seventies, Norman Waddell in cooperation with Abe, published a series of translations of *Shōbōgenzō*, followed by various studies of Dōgen, in the *Eastern Buddhist*. Since then, ever more Dōgen studies and translations have appeared, until by now "Dōgenology" has become somewhat of an academic cottage industry.

There is indeed plenty of food for thought and theorizing in Dōgen's complex synthesis of his profound religious experience with an equally exceptional philosophical, critical and speculative lucidity. Dōgen questioned the prevalent interpretations of classical Buddhist texts, criticized conventional habits of thought, accretions and clichés, and re-thought, revitalized the central themes of Buddhism. From Buddha-nature, Life-and-Death, to Enlightenment, Emptiness, and Nirvana, he re-evaluated and re-cast these according to his rigorously independent reading of the great Chinese patriarchs Bodhidharma, Hui-neng, and Lin-chi. Seven centuries after his death in 1253, Dōgen proves to be as relevant to our own existential problematic as to that of the thirteenth century.

The essays in this book span some twenty years of Abe's preoccupation with Dōgen's life and thought. They trace his biography from the time that he, as a young Tendai monk on Mount Hiei, tormented himself trying to reconcile the Tendai idea of "Original Awakening" (*hon-gaku*) with the need for constant practice: if we are endowed with the innate Buddha-nature of the Original Awakening, if we are indeed enlightened from the very beginning, he asked himself, why do we, and why did the buddhas of all ages have to go through years of grueling meditation and asceticism?

Dōgen undertook the then hazardous journey to China in the hope of finding at the feet of Chinese sages the solution to his quandary. At long last, under Zen Master Ju-ching's guidance, he attained enlightenment: the practice of Zen is none other than the "casting off of body/mind." At the very moment of metanoia, at which body/mind is cast off, the Buddha-nature of the Original Awakening manifests itself.

Returned to Japan, Dōgen refined and developed the teaching of "the openness of practice and attainment" in which one's initial

entrance of the Way is, by itself the whole of Original Awakening. Enlightenment is not some potentiality to be actualized in some distant future at the end of long practice but at this now-moment, that encompasses all of past, present and future.

For Dōgen being=time, and time=being. The Buddha-nature always manifests itself as time, as present time, at this very now-moment. The Self is not *in* time, the Self *is* time. Dōgen turns “if the time for enlightenment comes” into: “the time has already arrived.” The fields are white for harvesting . . .

Dogen challenges us to set aside not only the nothingness of being, but also that of Nothingness. Yet every being, and each and every time has a particularity irreplaceable by any other being or time. “Life is a stage of time, death is a stage of time.”

It is important here to remember that in Oriental religiosity there is no split between spirituality and what in the West we call philosophy. Teachers like Abe and Nishitani are more than mere intellectuals, professors. Their thinking is illuminated by years of meditation practice. Beyond the discursive thinking of the Cartesian cogito, they are trained in Zen’s “non-thinking thinking” that—far from being non-thinking—is the selfless awareness of Being beyond subject and object, and its verbalizations.

Zen, as is well known, is deeply suspicious of the obliquity of “words and letters” and insists on the transmission of the Way from heart to heart, a direct pointing at the Buddha-nature. Paradoxically it has never stopped talking and writing commentaries on the great Sutras ever since Bodhidharma, even though there are some exceptions to Zen’s paradoxical *flu de bouche*. The 17th century Zen master Bankei comes to mind, whose sermons and responses to the questions of his innumerable followers show a master who relies on “the intelligence of the heart” of his listeners rather than on their cerebral agility. His words are indeed signalled from heart to heart, “pointing directly” at the Buddha-nature in everyone of those common people who flocked to wherever he spoke, reminding his listeners unceasingly of the “Unborn” at their core. Of this Unborn the Buddha had said that “there must be something Unborn, unconditioned in us without which that which is born and conditioned could not be overcome.” Bankei saw this Unborn as being constantly assaulted, distorted, perverted from the moment of birth by one’s environment. By the time

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we are four years old, we have already been made into virtuosi of anger, untruthfulness and tantrums of aggression. For Bankei what matters is not to suppress one's anger, indignation, regret, craving, and such, but on the contrary, to keep one's mind open, keep it free from being divided into two minds, one that craves and the other that suppresses it.

Dōgen's dazzling sophistication somehow conceals an equally basic simplicity and wisdom. As a thinker of genius and linguistic magician his Way was to turn traditional concepts and clichés upside down, to teach brand-new realizations of their original profundity of meaning. He insisted for example, that the traditional formulation: "All beings have the Buddha-nature" should be read as "All beings *ARE*, or 'Whole Being' *IS* the Buddha-nature." Thus with one stroke he demolished all our customary anthropocentric fantasies. Where all beings, both sentient and non-sentient, are realized to be equally impermanent, equally subject to birth and death (or to speak with Abe's greater precision: "generation/extinction") little is left of our anthropocentric conceits. He also contradicts Buddhism's hallowed but conventional view which contrasts the mutability of all phenomena with the permanence, the immutability of the Buddha-nature. For Dōgen Buddha-nature is impermanent; in fact "Buddha-nature *is* impermanence, as impermanence *is* Buddha-nature." Even Nirvana itself is impermanent. In Abe Masao's words: "If Nirvana is sought for beyond impermanence it is not Nirvana . . . True Nirvana can only be attained by emancipating oneself from Nirvana as transcending impermanence . . . True compassion can be realized only by transcending Nirvana itself, by returning to, and working amidst, the sufferings of an ever-changing world." "The casting off" of the ego's delusions does not, however, affect our true human identity, nor our specifically human capacity to realize this universal impermanence. Far from denying Lin-chi's "True Man of no rank in this hulk of red animal flesh," Dōgen confirms it radically. For this True Man is the one who has "cast off body/mind," hence sees Reality as it is, in its Suchness.

Since the Buddha Dharma is originally in the self, "to learn the Buddha Way is to learn one's self. To learn one's self is to discount, to forget, that self. To forget one's self, is to be illuminated by all things," says Dōgen.

To quote Nalimov, the great Russian mathematician, reinstated to

his Moscow University professorate after 18 years of meditation in the Gulag: "The noughting of the self makes one experience in one's own being the completeness of the self-conscious universe." For Dōgen this self-noughting does not amount to a humble muttering of: "I am nothing," but to the lucid realization that "Nothingness is me."

Abe comments that from the standpoint of the ordinary, self-centered self, before Body/Mind is cast off, self and other, subject and object are opposing dimensions, so that all beings are habitually objectified as centering around the empirical ego. This is our "normal" world view, bound by time and space. Dōgen says: "The very impermanence of grass and trees, thicket and forest is the Buddha-nature. The very impermanence of humans and things, of body and mind is the Buddha-nature. Nations and countries, mountains and rivers are impermanence/Buddha-nature. Enlightenment itself is Buddha-nature. Nirvana, because it is impermanent, radically unsubstantial, is Buddha-nature."

Indeed, this "theoretical mystic" is the radical realist par excellence. He unmaskes all the pretensions of both our individual and our in-group egos. He exposes the paucity of all Realpolitik, which ignoring generation/extinction, acts as if we lived forever, hence constantly aims at imaginary targets it is bound to miss, meanwhile inflicting indescribable suffering on countless beings.

On the subject of Karma, Abe points at its origin in Hinduism where it is largely deterministic and fatalistic, where one's good or evil deeds of the past determine one's existence in present and future. In the Buddhist view, since there is no substantial Self, we only have to awaken to the reality of no-Self, "to cast off Body/Mind" to be freed from the deterministic power of past karma and are freed to be creative towards the future.

I shall not enter into Abe's comparative study of "Dōgen and Heidegger" whom he singles out among the great Western thinkers. If Heidegger, then why not Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, or Spinoza? Neither does space permit discussing Abe's brilliant essay on "Death in Dōgen and Shinran" which concludes this monumental little book. To summarize tentatively the main points of Abe's study for this reader: For Dōgen the enlightened person is the one who has transcended all the limitations of a culturally, conventionally conditioned articulation of the world. At the precise moment of "casting off Body/Mind," of

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“Body/Mind cast off,” the same old self is transmuted into the absolute Self resuscitated from its rut, its suspended animation. The subject/object bifurcation is overcome as if it had never happened. If forgetting your own “I” means that you have become illuminated by all things, then to be illuminated by all things is none other than having obliterated the distinction between your “so-called ego” and the “so-called ego” of other things. Nishitani discussing Dōgen’s “oneness of practice and enlightenment” says: “Although we speak of practicing Zen and observing the Way, this is not to suggest that showing the Original Face of existence in observance is a matter limited to Buddhism. It is implied in all truly religious life . . . My aim is to inquire into the original form of reality and of man as part of that reality, including also the anti-religious, anti-philosophical standpoints of which the all pervading nihilism and scientism of our time are prime examples.”

As one whose “practice and observance” is the self-imposed discipline of drawing whatever the eye sees, I would have added to this study in honor of Dōgen the seer, the artist, the poet:

I see the fishes in the water,
see them swim on and on,
never reaching the boundary of the water.
I see the birds fly in the sky,
they fly on and on,
never reaching the boundary of the sky.