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Multiple Dimensions of Impermanence in Dōgen's "Genjōkōan"

by *Steven Heine*

When all *dharmas* are of the Buddha Dharma, that is delusion and enlightenment, practice, birth and death, Buddhas and sentient beings. When ten thousand *dharmas* are without self, there is neither delusion nor enlightenment, neither Buddhas nor sentient beings, neither arising nor extinction. Because the Buddha Way originally springs out of abundance and shortage, there is arising and extinction, delusion and enlightenment, beings and Buddhas. And yet, even though this has been said, blossoms scatter in sadness and weeds spring up in dismay.¹

Dōgen,^a "Genjōkōan"^b

I. Introduction: Ambiguity of the Passage

One of the most challenging and compelling passages in Dōgen's collected writings is the opening paragraph of "Genjōkōan," which in most editions (apparently according to Dōgen's own editing) is the first fascicle of *Shōbōgenzō*^c and thus the central introduction to his work. The first three sentences appear to evoke the Tendai doctrine of "three truths in their perfect harmony": the truth or perspective of the temporary or provisional (*ke*)^d; the truth of the void or empty of own-being (*kū*)^e; and the middle truth (*chū*)^f between and beyond the empty and provisional, absolute and relative, being and non-being, transcendental and worldly.

Thus, the first sentence expresses (in light of primordial non-differentiation—"of the Buddha Dharma") the realm of provisional duality encompassing the concrete ups and downs of religious aspiration (to transform oneself from a sentient being to Buddha) and existential achievement (in the struggle between delusion and enlightenment) while perpetually confronting the ever-present and pervasive reality of impermanence (birth and death). The category of

practice, which seems to bind all spheres of existence, is not mentioned in the remaining sentences. The second sentence reveals the more fundamental perspective of emptiness—not mere negation and denial—underlying the provisionally bifurcated dimensions, which recognizes the relativity and non-substantiality of interdependent and contingent polarities. The third sentence (recalling the *Diamond Sutra*'s "A is not A, therefore A") shows that true non-differentiation is not opposed to dichotomization, but eliminates the very distinction between difference and non-difference. It equalizes the first two sentences, not only by reversing their order, but by highlighting the creatively dynamic interplay uniting both perspectives. The middle is both provisional and empty, and therefore neither provisional nor empty; only in light of complete equality can the full range and multiplicity of differentiation be conveyed.

The fourth and final sentence of the paragraph clearly illustrates Dōgen's attempt to re-raise the question of impermanence (*mujo*)^g and of human reaction to transiency as crucial to an understanding of Buddhist Dharma. What does it add to the Tendai doctrine? Is it an afterthought or a challenge? The meaning and significance of the final statement is so rich and ambiguous in its brevity that it can be and has been translated and interpreted (both in *gendaiyaku*^h or modern Japanese translation² and in English) from a variety of perspectives, including two nearly opposite views: either as representing an unenlightened standpoint of attachment, longing and regret which must be negated; or as an absolutism which at once encompasses and transcends human emotions of sorrow and grief concerning incessant change.

According to the first interpretation, the sentence represents a misguided stance in contrast to the Buddhist doctrine preceding it. That is, for those who do not fully comprehend the Dharma, suffering arises due to volitional involvement with uncertain and unstable phenomena that should be altogether attenuated. The other position, however, suggests that the final sentence actually deepens and challenges the first three by stressing personal encounter with impermanence, continuing even beyond enlightenment, as the direct and unavoidable pointer to the truth of non-substantiality (*muga*)ⁱ. According to this interpretation, the sentence discloses a new vantage point reversing the eternalist tendency in previous Mahāyāna and Zen efforts to attain *nirvāṇa* in terms of an immutable Buddha-nature beyond the ephemeral world. Genuine realization must be found in

terms of—rather than by elimination of—one’s emotional response to variability and inevitable loss.

What is the source of the controversy, and on what basis can it be resolved? It seems that the key to interpreting the sentence lies in the double-edged quality of the terms “sadness” (*aijaku*)^j and “dismay” (*kiken*)^k, which can imply either sentimentality and clinging or a deeper religio-aesthetic sense of attunement and commitment to the cares of the perpetual flux.³ Yet, this ambiguity is not necessarily problematically inconclusive. Two or more meanings seen in a single phrase may not imply contradiction, but indicate that in Dōgen’s understanding there are multiple and paradoxical dimensions of impermanence.

In order to explicate the ambiguity of the passage, I will first discuss the underlying aims of the “Genjōkōan” fascicle which expresses Dōgen’s fundamental religious quest and philosophical project of reconciling and clarifying the Mahāyāna (particularly Japanese Tendai) notion of original Buddha-nature (*bushshō*)^l with the transiency and sorrow of existence as he himself experienced it. Second, I will examine alternative translations of the passage by Nakamura Sōichi, Masutani Fumio, Tanahashi Ikkō and Tamaki Kōshirō (in *gendaiyaku*) and Waddell/Abe and Maezumi/Cook (in English) to highlight the textual difficulties and variety of possible interpretations. Finally, I will show that the ambiguity of the final sentence is grounded in Dōgen’s multi-dimensional view of impermanence and multi-perspectival theory of truth: impermanence at once signifies an unenlightened sense of fragility and uncertainty; an emotional sensitivity to the poignant and heartfelt passing of things, which is essential to awaken the resolve for enlightenment; and the spontaneous and complete manifestation of the realization (*genjōkōan*)⁴ that existence is thoroughly free of substratum and duration or of a fixated notion of substance in self and world that conceals evanescence.

II. Aims of the Fascicle: Historical and Doctrinal Background

The composition of “Genjōkōan” in 1233 represents a distinct change in Dōgen’s expression of Zen. The fascicle is neither a straightforward admonition or restatement of Buddhist principles nor a deliberately non-sensical utterance, but a cogent, organic philosophical essay at once disturbing and persuasive, poetic and discursive.

“Genjōkōan” is the third fascicle of *Shōbōgenzō* written by Dōgen,⁵ but the first of the foremost philosophical pieces which are the foundation and hallmark of his doctrine, preceding by nearly a decade the creative peak in which he composed “Uji,”^m “Busshō” and “Gyōji,”ⁿ among others. This was a significant period of transition for Dōgen after his return to Japan from his training under Chinese master Ju-ching and consequent attainment of *satori*.^o Yet it preceded the establishment of his own strictly disciplined Eihei temple in relatively remote Echizen province, which fulfilled Ju-ching’s exhortation to stay free of any involvement in the political controversy and wordly affairs that seemed to have corrupted Kyoto and the Tendai center on Mt. Hiei. In these years, however, Dōgen occupied several temples in Fukakusa and areas near Kyoto, advocating “liberal” positions—later largely repudiated—such as the involvement of lay men and women disciples in Zen practice. He also participated in Court poetry through attendance of *uta-awase*^p (poetry contests) where he wrote *renga*^q (linked verse), one of which was later included in an imperial anthology, and befriended Fujiwara Teika, prominent poet and co-compiler of *Shinkokinshū*^r (New Collection of Old and Recent Poems).⁶

An essay written and given to a lay disciple rather than a sermon delivered to (and frequently recorded by) monks as is typical of many of the subsequent fascicles of *Shōbōgenzō*, “Genjōkōan” marks Dōgen’s stylistic liberation from more conventional presentations in his three previous major works: “Hōkyō-ki”^s (1226), a fragmentary and posthumously discovered autobiographical account of his practice with Ju-ching and record of the Chinese teacher’s central sayings and interpretations of doctrine; “Fukanzazengi”^t (1227), the first piece Dōgen wrote in Japan recommending the universal merits of *zazen*^u and considered his “manifesto” on the theory and practice of meditation; and “Bendōwa”^v (1231), a pronouncement through the question-answer format of Dōgen’s Sōtō views on key Zen issues, including the role of *sūtras* and language in transmitting the Buddhist Dharma, from the standpoint of the priority of *zazen*-only.

“Genjōkōan” is largely thematically consistent with and an amplification of notions expressed in these works, such as the temporal unity of practice and realization fully disclosed here-and-now and perpetually renewed throughout all moments, and the universal equalization of all phenomena as manifestations of Buddha-nature. The innovative element in “Genjōkōan” is its metaphorical and philosophical deepening and enrichment of the impermanent/non-

substantial moment as the ground of selfless realization. Dōgen uses an indirect or poetic communication with naturalistic symbolism, as in the final sentence of the opening paragraph, to divulge the essential multi-dimensional structure of *mujō*.

The common basis of these writings as well as his collected works is Dōgen's enlightenment experience, achieved under Ju-ching's guidance, of *shinjin-datsuraku*^w (body-mind dropping off)—a liberation from conceptual and volitional fixations realized in and through one's selfless immersion in ephemeral reality. According to Dōgen's traditional biography, *Kenzeiki*^x, the tragic early deaths of his parents amidst unpredictable political upheavals and natural disorders had aroused in Dōgen a profound awareness of the all-pervasive conditions of transiency beyond particular experiences yet most directly and despairingly realized through them. Dōgen's religious quest began when, even as a youth, he rejected the aristocratic background and Court poetic tradition in which he was raised for the sake of *shukke*^y (Buddhist renunciation). Poetic classics, he apparently felt, conveyed an emotional attunement to the fleeting beauty of transitory existence symbolized by changing seasons, falling blossoms and the bird's winter flight. Yet they tended to indulge in either a romanticized fatalism or an idle and sentimental attachment to the hedonic moment, and thereby perpetuated bondage to a supposedly persistent and enduring self underlying change. The Buddhist conception of *karma* (moral causation) was inauthentically portrayed as a psychological crutch to rationalize the uncertain and unstable quality of personal and social contingency and consequent loneliness, longing, frustration and failure. In his pursuit of Dharma, Dōgen was determined to penetrate to a genuine understanding of *mujō-as-mujō* unbound by arbitrary ego-oriented decisions to accept and enjoy or reject and dismiss evanescence or self-centered attitudes of optimism, nostalgia and nihilism.

As a monk, Dōgen soon found that the basic Buddhist analysis of the relative, interdependent and non-substantial nature of the universal flux was somewhat subverted in then-current Tendai and Rinzai Zen centers on Mt. Hiei. He was disturbed by the prevailing conception of an absolute and unvarying Buddha-nature which transcended time and yet manifested itself *in* time but was achieved only through the *elimination* of time. This problematic standpoint is metaphorically depicted in the "Uji" fascicle by the image of a "ruby palace" which represents an unreflective and ignorant attempt to be

free of the tribulations of impermanence (symbolized by crossing a valley to climb a mountain) by projecting an illusory eternalism—a tendency he felt plagued Japanese Buddhism: “Although the mountains and river are indeed here right-now, I [from the standpoint of the average man] seem to think that I have left them far behind and I act as if I occupy a palace made of rubies, thereby believing that there is a separation between myself and the mountains [as great] as that between heaven and earth.”⁷ Dōgen’s pilgrimage to China was motivated by the view that the Japanese Court poetic and Buddhist religious/philosophical traditions had hopelessly weakened one another, resulting in the heterodoxical notion underlying Zen practice of a statically-conceived eternal Buddha-nature. This inauthentic view created bifurcations between a supposedly substantive self and the fragile movement it undergoes as well as the contingency of enlightenment and the immutability of Buddha-nature attained at the end of a linear sequence.

The fundamental question Dōgen forced himself and Buddhists to confront in the quest for a release from suffering was later framed in “Fukanzazengi”: “Originally, the Way is complete and all-pervasive. How does it depend on practice and realization?”⁸ Dōgen thereby challenged the conception of Buddha-nature as a potentiality somehow falsely detached from everyday experience, or as an unactualized possibility awaiting the appropriate time for fulfillment. He was wary of any misleading objectification of *busshō* either as something substantive and unchanging that did not require exertion or effort (*jiriki*)² or as an obtainable goal reached only at the completion of practice. The profound and troubling soteriological dilemma which Dōgen faced—increased by the apparent gap between his existential awareness of *mujō* and the Tendai notion of an eternal *busshō*—is intriguingly expressed in the following *mondō*^{aa} in “Genjōkōan”: A monk approaches Zen master Hōtetsu, who is fanning himself, and asks, “The wind-nature is constant. There is no place it does not circulate. Why do you still use a fan?” The master replies, “You merely know that the wind-nature is constant. You do not yet know the meaning of it circulating every place,”⁹ and continues fanning himself. That is, the permeation of wind, symbolic of Buddha-nature, seems to render superfluous any contingent human activity, such as waving a fan. But, if the fan, which represents full immersion in impermanence actively realized, is not used, the coolness and freshness of the breeze will never be felt.

Dōgen's breakthrough to a new understanding of impermanence occurred in China during a prolonged and intensive session of meditation when Ju-ching reprimanded the slumbering monk sitting next to Dōgen, "In *zazen* it is imperative to drop off body-mind. How could you indulge in sleeping at such a critical time?" The remark had the effect of liberating Dōgen, whose *satori* was soon confirmed by Ju-ching, by dissolving the fabricated boundaries he had previously accepted between eternal and instantaneous, nirvāṇic and contingent, purposeless and directional time. It seems that upon that occasion of awakening, Dōgen no longer viewed impermanence from the standpoint of the spectator self surveying the multiple variations of a continuing process of change moving from one point in time to the next. Rather, he spontaneously penetrated *mujō* as the self-generating and self-renewing non-substantial totality of each and every moment without reference to or contrast with any other supposedly stable entity outside it.

The task which remained for Dōgen upon his return to Japan was to perfect an expression of impermanence now freed of the bonds of subtle eternalism to show that "... blooming flowers and falling leaves, such itself is true nature [of *dharmas*]. But fools believe that there must be no blooming flowers and falling leaves in the world of the true nature of *dharmas* (*hosshō*)^{ab}."¹⁰ "Genjōkōan" is his first attempt to re-orient and re-explore both the Japanese aesthetic and religious traditions so that they enhance and deepen rather than hinder each other—to use naturalistic imagery and existential sensitivity to transiency to purify the Buddhist conception of interdependence from overly speculative and eternalistic tendencies, and similarly to ground poetics in the experience of *shinjin-datsuraku* unbound by sentimentality and fully reflective of the non-substantiality of all phenomena.

III. Problematics of Translation and Interpretation of the Text

The aim of this section is to illustrate and analyze how the ambiguity of the final sentence of the opening paragraph of "Genjōkōan" has led to a variety of modern Japanese and English translations. Each of the translations presupposes and conveys a distinctive interpretation concerning two central interrelated issues in Dōgen's thought: the role of human feelings about transiency, and Dōgen's

relation to previous Mahāyāna philosophy, which he seems to evoke in the first three sentences of the passage.

Before examining the various translations, I will discuss the philological basis of the sentence's ambiguity and point out possible discrepancies in translations which overlook the double-edged quality of Dōgen's literary style or impose an interpretation that may not reflect the text itself. Two linguistic elements are controversial: the use of conjunctions and the terms of emotion. Nishio Minoru in his study *Dōgen to Zeami*^{ac} (Dōgen and Zeami) maintains that the conjunctions—for example, “when” (*jūsetsu*)^{ad} in sentences 1 and 2, and “because” (*yuheni*) in the third sentence—are especially noteworthy for an understanding of the complex inner unity of the passage. The fourth sentence is interesting for the conjunctive phrases that are included and excluded both by Dōgen and the translators. The lengthy phrase which opens the sentence (*shikamo kakuno gotoku nari toihe domo*) has a literal meaning which can be and generally is translated more succinctly as “in spite of this” or the one-word conjunction “nevertheless.” But Dōgen, having chosen this original expression, probably intended the length itself to serve as a kind of buffer which would offset the sentence from the previous ones and call attention to it.

More significant, however, is the addition of certain conjunctions by some of the translators in the latter part of the sentence. Nakamura and Maezumi/Cook, for example, add that the flowers fall “because” of man's longing; Tamaki's rendering is that “if” flowers fall, then human feeling emerges; Masutani adds that flowers fall “even though” it is regrettable. None of these are actually stated in the original text. Both Tanahashi and Waddell/Abe make note of Dōgen's poem in his *Eihei Kōroku*^{ae} (Record of Eihei), “Blossoms scatter by [or because of (*yoru*)]^{af} sorrow, weeds spring up by [or because of] dismay,”¹¹ but they do not impose that implication here since the sentence must be interpreted in its own context. Similarly, most of the translations add that the sadness or longing which is felt is “ours.” Although it can be argued that the possessive pronoun is naturally implied by the original Japanese, Dōgen's omission of such a pronoun may have been intended to imply a holistic and impersonal context of shared and pervasive sorrow as well as an individual sense of loss.

The central controversy which influences an interpretation of the fourth sentence and perhaps the entire passage concerning Dōgen's view of impermanence pertains to the two terms for emotion,

both of which are compound words: the first, composed of *ai* (love, affection, loathing to part) and *jaku* (regret, reluctance); the second, *ki* (abandon, renounce) and *ken* (dislike, hate). Both compounds contain one passive and one active emotive term which tend to moderate and transmute each other, an element of resignation or renunciation coloring the active emotion. In the modern Japanese and the Maetzumi/Cook translations, however, only one part of each compound is used—*ai* and *ken*, respectively—which may overlook the ambiguity and drastically alter the meaning of the entire sentence by suggesting that emotions only play a negative or destructive role in human affairs and religious pursuit.

Furthermore, it should be noted that *ai* by itself is a technical Buddhist term for desire (Skt., *trṣṇā*) with an obviously negative connotation. Yet, *ai* used in various compounds is also a Buddhist term that connotes the positive and constructive aspect of love, as in the words *aipō*^{ag} (love of Dharma) and *aigo*^{ah} (the *bodhisattva*'s beneficent words of edification). *Aijaku* indicates the compassionate caring of a *bodhisattva*'s unwillingness to relinquish the struggle for universal release from suffering. Just as *ai* has the double-edged Buddhist sense of desire and compassion, it is also commonly used in Japanese poetics with a similarly two-fold meaning: it can either signify love for a particular person, or a deeper aesthetic sense of care and commitment. It is likely that Dōgen deliberately intended to suggest both the positive and negative connotations of emotions by using these terms and not merely the latter.

I will now cite the various translations with a brief analysis of how each one interprets the role of human emotions and the relation of Dōgen's view of impermanence to earlier Mahāyāna thought:

1. Nakamura Sōichi's *gendaiyaku*.¹²

Man knows this, and yet he sees the blossoms scatter because he regrets the scattering blossoms, he is grieved that blossoms scatter when he wants them to keep blooming, and he sees that weeds spring up because he hates the weeds.

By adding the causative element ("because") between feelings and the realm of transiency and the additional clause which is implicitly critical of human attachments, Nakamura takes the strongest stand amongst the translators in denigrating emotions and contrasting what he sees as the desire and ignorance represented by the fourth sen-

tence with the Mahāyāna truths stated in the first three. For Nakamura, the passage is not ambiguous but a straightforward critique of human folly as opposed to detachment from any involvement in the realm of evanescence.

2. Tanahashi's Ikkō's *gendaiyaku*:¹³

We know this, and yet if we are attached to enlightenment, enlightenment becomes remote, and if we seek separation from delusion, delusion only becomes greater.

Tanahashi loses the intriguing symbolism of the sentence by equating flowers with enlightenment and weeds with unenlightenment, but heightens (compared to Nakamura) the ambiguity concerning emotive experience. Here the sentence becomes a warning that false detachment is as spiritually deficient as attachment even to a noble end. Thus, emotions are relative and variable depending on the context and timing.

3. Masutani Fumio's *gendaiyaku*:¹⁴

And yet, we know that blossoms scatter even though we regret it, and that weeds grow thick and spread even though we hate it.

Much more direct than the two *gendaiyaku* cited above, Masutani's version stresses man's continual existential confrontation with the pervasive reality of impermanence. That is, in spite of traditionally accepted Tendai doctrine recapitulated in the first three sentences, transiency is not so easily dismissed and must be dealt with emotionally and experientially ever anew. Even though man struggles to attain enlightenment, the effects of impermanence continue to plague him and stir an emotional response.

4. Tamaki Kōshirō's *gendaiyaku*:¹⁵

This is so, and yet if blossoms scatter it is regrettable, and if weeds grow thick it is truly deplorable.

Tamaki is very close to Masutani. Yet, the subtle change of conjunction from "even though" to "if" seems to imply that there may be an eternalized state in contrast to impermanence and in which the effects of transiency are no longer felt.

5. Maezumi/Cook's English translation:¹⁶

Nevertheless, flowers fall with our attachment, and weeds spring up with our aversion.

This English version, although adhering to the brevity of the original, basically concurs with Nakamura's *gendaiyaku* in castigating the emotions which are translated with "negative" words and contrasted with traditional Buddhist doctrine. (Interestingly, in a book which is nearly entirely a commentary on the "Genjōkōan" fascicle, no further interpretation of his sentence is offered.)

6. Waddell/Abe's English translation:¹⁷

In spite of this, flowers fall always amid our grudging, and weeds flourish in our chagrin.

The addition of "always," although not literal, accentuates the inevitable and unceasing permeation of impermanence as a continual challenge even—or especially—to the enlightened one, thereby largely agreeing with Masutani and Tamaki. The use of the prepositions "amid" and "in" suggests a two-fold sense of causation and resolute acceptance in the relation between emotions and transiency. In their introductory comments, however, the translators go even further in elevating the status of emotions by declaring that here "Dōgen clarifies the absolute reality . . . of man's own feelings of yearning and dislike toward [the flower and weed] . . . insofar as both are ultimately human reality."¹⁸ Thus, in opposition to Nakamura and Maezumi/Cook, Waddell/Abe proclaim Dōgen's expression to represent a paradoxical standpoint which at once fully recaptures and transforms the significance of emotions in Buddhist realization, although the translation itself does not necessarily convey the perspective espoused in the commentary.

IV. Conclusions: The Multi-Dimensionality of Impermanence

In this section, I will show that the fundamental ambiguity of the sentence in question—and the controversy in interpretation to which it gives rise—is both grounded and reconcilable in terms of Dōgen's multi-dimensional understanding of impermanence. The translations previously examined seem to fall into three interpretive models:

1. The position of Nakamura and Maezumi/Cook that the fourth sentence advocates the need for man's thorough negation of his emotions, which egoistically and self-defeatingly *cause* the contingent flux that in turn perpetuates volitional bondage. According to this view, the final sentence represents an unenlightened perspective in contrast to Dōgen's acceptance and restatement of traditional doctrine in the first three sentences.

2. The view espoused by Masutani, Tamaki and Tanahashi that in the fourth sentence Dōgen accentuates man's continuing existential confrontation with and aesthetically-attuned sorrow concerning the pervasive reality of impermanence, an emotional response used advantageously to awaken the "Buddha-seeking mind" in pursuit of enlightenment. Dōgen thus deepens previous doctrine by warning that it must not be understood substantively or eternalistically but in terms of incessant vicissitude—*despite* apparent Buddhist truths, genuine realization is experienced by means of loss and regret, dismay and chagrin.

3. The third interpretation, indicated by the Waddell/Abe commentary (if not necessarily by the translation itself), suggests that Dōgen here challenges and reorients previous Mahāyāna expressions by disclosing an absolute *equality* of longing and no-longing, regret and no-regret as spontaneous expressions of impermanence. Grounded in the detachment of selfless realization, emotional response is as justifiable and illuminative as the inevitable rise and fall of transient phenomena so long as it overcomes itself and remains free of substance-fixations.

What is the relation between the respective interpretations? Are they complementary or contradictory? Is the third position the opposite of the first or somehow compatible with it? It is possible to show that the ambiguity of the sentence is not hopelessly inconclusive by analyzing two other significant passages from the "Genjōkōan" fascicle, which help clarify the issues of selfhood and momentariness raised by the opening paragraph.

The first passage deals with the role of the self in the quest for enlightenment:

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be authenticated through all *dharma*s. To be authenticated through all *dharma*s is to drop off body-mind of self and others.¹⁹

Dōgen seems to indicate three levels of self-understanding in this passage. The first level, implicitly conveyed, is that of a separation or barrier between self and Buddhism. From the ordinary standpoint, the Buddha Way is seen as something substantive and objective, an entity to be attained. Second, Dōgen establishes an intimate relation between the Way and selfhood. Not a conceptualizable and acquirable goal, the Way is sought in and through introspection and personal experience. The third level points to the fundamental paradox that self-learning necessarily involves self-forgetfulness, inner evaluation is achieved in terms of outward manifestations. Thus, self and other, subject and object are ultimately identifiable yet allow for infinite differentiation.

The next passage explains the meaning and structure of the impermanent moment in terms of the doctrine of the “abiding *dharma*-position” (*jū-hōi*)²¹, and also allows for three levels of interpretation:

Firewood is reduced to ash and cannot become firewood again. So, one should not hold the view that ash is succeeding and firewood is preceding. One must know that firewood dwells in the *dharma*-position of firewood [of which] there is preceding and succeeding. Although there is before and after, it is cut off from before and after.²⁰

The first level of momentariness implied by the passage is that before and after, past and future, life and death are seen as enduring entities in opposition to each other. The next level suggests that before and after are simultaneous and interdependent stages of impermanent phenomena. The third level again represents the paradoxical viewpoint that the *dharma*-position possesses and yet is cut off from before and after. Just as the firewood is completely manifest in itself without reference to what precedes and succeeds it, the impermanent moment is spontaneous yet simultaneously inclusive of all possibilities, independent yet interdependent with the temporal phases of the totality of phenomena.

In both cases, Dōgen expresses a three-fold understanding which also seems to echo the opening sentences of the first paragraph of the fascicle. The three levels are: a dualistic standpoint, an interdependent and non-substantive perspective, and finally a paradoxical identity-in-difference that reveals the middle path unbound by, yet giving rise to, all polarities. The relation among these dimensions

seems to be one of sublation rather than negation, and of paradox rather than contradiction. That is, the levels do not contradict but tend to deepen and expand upon one another so that the third is the most comprehensive stance, even while it transcends the previous two. Dōgen suggests such a multi-perspectival theory of truth in “Genjōkōan” by the example of someone who rides a boat in a mountainless sea and assumes that the ocean is a circle. From his particular vantage point at the time, the ocean may legitimately appear round, but to a fish the ocean looks like a palatial dwelling and to a *deva* it seems to be a jewelled necklace. None of these viewpoints should be negated as wrong, but each is one-sided, relative and misleading if taken in an isolated context. The truth of the situation can only be appropriated through an holistic outlook that is not limited to any particular perspective. “To understand the variety of perspectives, we must know that the virtue of the mountains and sea is limitless extending beyond apparent circularity or angularity, and that there are worlds in every direction.”²¹

Dōgen’s multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival vision, expressed in the first three sentences of the opening paragraph and demonstrated in the analyses of self and *dharma*-position, can now resolve the ambiguity of the sentence in question because the three interpretive models of the sentence are grounded in the multi-dimensionality of impermanence. The first interpretation suggests the dualistic view of impermanence seen as the human attitude of fragility and uncertainty about the coming and going of unstable things. Just as self is misguidedly severed from the objectified Way and before and after are similarly hypostatized, man considers himself as a single entity who must resist the flux of other entities or lose a grasp of his ego. The limitation of the translation which evaluates this as the only dimension of impermanence is that it interprets emotional response toward transiency as the actual cause of impermanence. Emotions, however, do not create the pervasive and perpetual process of impermanence, although it is true that they may aggravate suffering by not comprehending the non-substantive ground of *mujō*. Yet the distinction between cause and response, evanescence and self-imposed bondage must be highlighted by the translation in order to divulge the multiplicity of dimensions. If the sentence were only intended to imply the unenlightened standpoint it would probably have been more effective at the outset of the paragraph (to illustrate the problem) than at the conclusion (where it suggests a resolution).

Nevertheless, that dimension should not be fully discounted; it is just not complete in itself.

The second model of translation is more comprehensive than the first, for it suggests the intimate connection between subjectivity and realization. When self and Way and before and after are understood in terms of their unity, the experience of longing and regret should be interpreted as a necessary and essential stage in the quest for the termination of suffering through awakening to non-self. This viewpoint could, however, create the impression that for Dōgen an aesthetic sensitivity to vicissitude and loss is spiritually sufficient in itself. Emotional response to transiency is only legitimate, however, when it leads beyond itself to realization of non-substantiality.

The third interpretation shows the fundamental paradox of the deepest dimension of impermanence—the level at which each and every manifestation (*genjō*) of natural phenomena and human response are ultimately and paradoxically identifiable in disclosing a realization of the riddle (*kōan*) of impermanent/non-substantial existence. In the “Busshō” fascicle, Dōgen refers to this essential standpoint as *mujō-busshō* (impermanence-Buddha-nature), another paradoxical doctrinal means of resolving his initial soteriological dilemma. Just as self-learning is fulfilled through self-forgetfulness, and just as the *dharma*-position encompasses and yet is cut off from before and after, Zen enlightenment includes and is free from longing and regret; it contains both an aversion and a profound resignation to suffering as well as a desire for release without expectation or attachment. Intense emotional attunement spontaneously disturbed by sorrow and simultaneously detached from the tribulations of evanescence, independent of egoistic clinging and interdependently linked to the suffering experienced by all beings, is the basis of the initial and sustained resolve that seeks to cultivate and renew enlightenment beyond the (statically conceived) attainment of enlightenment.

If the three dimensions of impermanence²² conveyed by the final sentence of the paragraph mirror the multiple perspectives expressed in the first three sentences, what does it contribute? Does the final sentence have special significance? In highlighting the pervasiveness of impermanence poetically, the sentence seems at once to undercut traditional Tendai doctrine by warning against and overcoming eternalist or substantive attachments that had plagued Japanese Buddhist practice, and to fulfill and surpass previous notions through a poetic evocation of the contrasting shades and textures of

emotional struggle. The sentence does not state a truth that is reducible to formula, but naturalistically conveys the disturbing and inspiring encounters at the basis of the quest for truth. Here Dōgen expresses the religio-aesthetic category of *sabi*^{aj} in its highest form—the paradox of pursuing release yet finding it directly through both ephemeral beauty and lyric melancholy rather than philosophical reflection, from which standpoint the loneliness of emotional response is seen as the fulfilled locus of spiritual renewal. When one opposes the flux by wishfully seeking a state of immutability or stagnation, Dōgen points out in the final sentence, the result tends to be just the reverse in that flowers still fall even more painfully than before. The same dilemma confronts both those who claim to have overcome their passions and those who have not yet reflected on their problematic self-centeredness. Dōgen's phrase thus recalls Saigyō's *waka*^{ak}: "A heart subdued, yet poignant sadness (*aware*) is deeply felt/ The snipe takes off over the marsh as an autumn dusk descends."²³

On the other hand, truly to penetrate impermanence as the manifestation of non-substantive reality (*genjōkōan*) terminates neither the perpetual scattering of blossoms nor the haunting and sorrowful atmosphere evanescence generates. Impermanence as *genjōkōan*, which is neither strictly subjective nor objective although it includes the interdependence of both realms, persists regardless of how one feels about it. To accord genuinely with *genjōkōan* is at once to accept uncompromisingly and resign oneself to the flux and to struggle urgently against the grief it causes by seeking realization of no-self. The fundamental paradox of impermanence at the third and deepest level is that even the effort to overcome self must be abandoned through uncompromising renunciation, but self cannot be dropped off without continual aesthetic-emotional attunement to the sorrow from which it seeks release.

Therefore, the final sentence of the opening paragraph expresses the issue of Dōgen's "primal question" (as framed in "Fukan-zazengi": what is the need for renewed practice if Buddha-nature is immanent?) but from the perspective of having resolved—while still remaining deeply disturbed by—that concern. It articulates the initial and naive yet profound longing for release which he and all Buddhist seekers share, suggesting a distinct value judgement about what should be prevented (flowers are preferable to weeds) as well as the sense of futility when this effort falls short in the face of impermanence (weeds still grow). The sentence also conveys a paradoxical

equalization of sustained despair that stimulates continuing realization grounded in universal non-substantiality.

The sentence could be rewritten as the following: "Even so, to learn the Dharma is to be sorrowful about transiency. To be sorrowful is to transcend sorrow (as a source of attachment) and to realize impermanence as the non-substantiality of all phenomena." But, the complexity and depth of the sentence lies in its utter simplicity. It is literally a *kōan* because it presents a disturbing and puzzling ambiguity whereby question and answer, problematic and resolution, speech and silence are unified. It also expresses what Dōgen seems to mean by the term *genjōkōan* as the fundamental dimension of impermanence—the full and unimpeded manifestation of each occasion in which one encounters, is moved by and seeks to subdue the effects of transiency.

NOTES

1. Dōgen Zenji, *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of True Dharma-Eye) in *Nihon shisō taikēi*^{al}, volumes 12 and 13, ed. Terada Tōru and Mizuno Yaoko. Tokyo, Iwanami shoten, 1970 and 1972, vol. 12, p. 35. For a complete and generally excellent translation of the "Genjōkōan" fascicle, see Norman Waddell and Abe Masao's version in *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 7, no. 1 (May 1974), pp. 129–40. This rendering will be discussed in the course of the essay.

2. Because of the complexity and difficulty of Dōgen's Sino-Japanese writing, many recent *gendaiyaku* or translations into modern Japanese have appeared. These are not necessarily intended to be a strict translation, but a combination translation-commentary with additional notes or interpretive materials; generally they are accompanied by the original text on the same page for easy reference. The translations of the *gendaiyaku* into English are mine. For a critical examination of the relation between some English translations of Dōgen and the *gendaiyaku* on which they tend to rely, see Thomas Kasulis, "The Zen Philosopher: A review article on Dōgen scholarship in English," *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 28, no. 3 (July 1978), pp. 353–73.

In addition to the two English translations discussed here, the following ones have appeared: Kōsen Nishiyama and John Stevens, *A Complete English Translation of Dōgen Zenji's Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 1 (Sendai, Japan: Daihokkai, 1975); Jiyu Kennett, *Selling Water by the River* (New York: Vintage, 1972); Reihō Masunaga, *The Sōtō Approach to Zen* (Tokyo: Layman Buddhist Society Press, 1958).

3. Two noted Japanese aestheticians, Nishio Minoru (in *Dōgen to Zeami*. Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1967) and Karaki Junzō (*Mujō*, Tokyo Chikuma shobō, 1967) have attempted to relate Dōgen's philosophical/religious expressions to the Japanese Court poetic tradition in which he was raised and trained, but which he ultimately renounced in order to pursue the Buddhist Dharma. They reach essentially different conclusions. Nishio stresses that Dōgen never fully abandoned aesthetics, which must not be

overlooked in interpreting texts such as “Genjōkōan”; Karaki maintains that Dōgen’s “metaphysics (*kejijōgaku*) of impermanence” surpasses the sentimentality of the Court tradition. My view is that this controversy itself points to the creative tension in Dōgen’s thought—he relied on poetics for the power of his writing yet disdained idle or self-indulgent aestheticism. Perhaps the issue cannot be resolved until there is a study of Dōgen’s considerable accomplishments as a composer of *waka* (31-syllable Japanese verse).

4. “Genjōkōan” as used by Dōgen seems to mean “complete and spontaneous manifestation” (*gen-jō*) of “Zen realization” (*kōan*), and should be contrasted with another possible reading as that which is “ready-made” or merely inmanent, which suggests the pantheistic heresy Dōgen repeatedly refutes.

5. The first two fascicles are “Bendōwa” (sometimes not included in *Shōbōgenzō*) and “Mahakanyaharamitsu.”^{an} For a chronology of Dōgen’s life and writings, see Hee-jin Kim, *Dōgen-Kigen-Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), pp. 309–11.

6. For an examination of Dōgen’s poetic production and involvements, see Okubo Dōshū, *Dōgen zenji-den no kenkyū*^{ao} (Biographical Studies of Zen master Dōgen) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1966), pp. 358–62.

7. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 12, p. 257.

8. Dōgen, “Fukanzazengi” in *Dōgen zenji zenshū*^{ap} (Complete Works of Zen Master Dōgen), ed. Okubo Dōshū (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1969–1970), vol. 2, p. 3.

9. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 12, pp. 38–39.

10. *ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 85.

11. Dōgen, *Dōgen zenji zenshū*, vol. 2, p. 18.

12. Nakamura Sōichi, *Gendaiyaku Shōbōgenzō* (Modern Japanese Translation of *Shōbōgenzō*), 4 volumes (Tokyo: Seishin shobō, 1970), vol. 1, p. 1.

13. Tanahashi Ikkō (of Zen beunkagakuin hen), *Gendaiyaku Shōbōgenzō* (Modern Japanese Translation of *Shōbōgenzō*) (Tokyo: Seishin shobō, 1959), p. 3.

14. Masutani Fumio, *Zenyaku Shōbōgenzō* (Complete Japanese Translation of *Shōbōgenzō*), 8 volumes (Tokyo: Kadakawa shoten, 1970), vol. 1, p. 24.

15. Tamaki Kōshirō, *Dōgen shū* (Selected Writings of Dōgen) (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1968), pp. 120–121.

16. Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi and Francis Cook, *The Way of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Center Publications, 1979) (pages unnumbered).

17. Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, “Genjōkōan,” p. 133.

18. *ibid.*, p. 132.

19. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 12, p. 36.

20. *ibid.*

21. *ibid.*, p. 37.

22. The three interpretive levels or dimensions would roughly correspond to the following categories of Japanese religio-aesthetic tradition: *hakanashi* (fleetingness), *mujō-kan*^{aq} (sense of impermanence), *mujō-kan*^{at} (clear observation of impermanence-as-non-substantiality).

23. For original Japanese and another translation, see William LaFleur, *Mirror for the Moon* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 24.

Kanji

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|-------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| a. 道元 | b. 現成公按 | c. 正法眼藏 |
| d. 仮 | e. 空 | f. 中 |
| g. 無常 | h. 現代譯 | i. 無我 |
| j. 愛惜 | k. 棄嫌 | l. 仏性 |
| m. 有時 | n. 行持 | o. 悟り |
| p. 歌合 <small>わせ</small> | q. 連歌 | r. 新古今 <small>身</small> |
| s. 寶慶記 | t. 普勸坐禪 | u. 坐禪 |
| v. 辦道話 | w. 心身脱落 | x. 建徳記 |
| y. 出家 | z. 助 | aa. 問答 |
| ab. 法性 | ac. 道元と世阿彌 | ad. 時節 |
| ae. 永平廣録 | af. 依る | ag. 愛法 |
| ah. 愛語 | ai. 住法位 | aj. 寂 |
| ak. 和歌 | al. 日本思想大系 | am. 形而上學 |
| an. 摩訶般若波羅蜜 | ao. 道元禪師傳の研究 | ap. 道元禪師全集 |
| aq. 無常感 | ar. 無常觀 | |