

Like a kangaroo on the land

Like a fish in the water

Like a bird in the sky

A kangaroo is hopping like a kangaroo

A fish is swimming like a fish

A bird is flying like a bird

Genjokoan.

Good morning. So once again we come to face to face with Dogen and his teachings. Today I'll be exploring one of Dogen's most revered essays. Genjokoan. Truth unfolding. What is truth? Genjokoan posits an answer. Dogen faces the contradictions of explaining the unexplainable in an explainable language.

Dogen brings the Dharma to life by means of analogies, using the vivid imagery of the natural world. The ocean, falling blossoms, weeds, sailing along on a boat, scanning the shore, the moon, the dew on a reed, the sky, they all teach us lessons in a concrete way.

I'll be reading slowly through the text of Genjokoan, using different translations, picking up on just a few of teachings –all connected, like the threads of a spider web. And I'll also be reading passages from some of the many helpful and enlightening books that have been published about this essay. Especially I want to mention my first reading of \_Realizing Genjokoan. The Key to realizing Dogen's Shobogenzo. by Shohaku Okumura

Now Genjokoan was so important to Dogen that he took pains to revise it before his death and he placed it prominently at the beginning of the Shobogenzo – his collection of essays.

Genjokoan was originally written in 1233 (so Dogen was 33 years old when he wrote it. Still in a youngish man. But a man who was fearless and a man who had gone to China. What do we see of Dogen the man in the text? Unlike his other essays, we know Genjokoan was written as a letter to a Buddhist lay student Koshu You, in Kyushuu, which is the southernmost of Japan's four main islands and a very long way from Kyoto where Dogen lived. Otherwise it's a mystery.

Here we go.

What does the word Genjokoan mean? An interesting question. and different translators have come up with different answers. Here are just a few attempts to convey its meaning.

**"Actualizing the Fundamental Point"** or **"Actualization of Reality"**, but can also be understood as **"to answer the question from true reality through the practice of our everyday activity"**. The title signifies making the core truth of reality—the unity of the relative (individual) and the absolute (universal) aspects—present in one's life through ordinary actions.

- **"Actualizing the Fundamental Point"**: This translation emphasizes the importance of making the central truth of our existence a present, lived reality.
- **"Actualization of Reality" or my favourite: "Truth Unfolding"**: This translation highlights the act of making reality, as it truly is, come into being.
- **"To complete that which appears"**: This is a more literal translation of the individual characters that make up *Genjo* and suggests a process of completing the appearance of things through our interaction with them.

**Now Let's break the word Genjokoan in two.**

**Shohaku Okamura defines Genjo as** "reality actually and presently taking place". It means that the universal is always manifest in the particular, the present moment is the "heart of the matter". Realized.

Koan. Dogen uses this word – koan, in its original, broader sense of 'unerring truth or principal'. it refers to the intersection of the relative (individual) and absolute (universal) truths. It is the authority of the Buddha-dharma, showing that all things—beings, delusion, realization—are expressions of this same truth. It has the connotation of great authority or veracity. truth. What precisely is this truth? Is it Dogen describing enlightenment? Is it him describing the process of getting there? A deeper understanding would synthesize these two ideas, viewing the essay as providing us with Dogen's answer to the basic problem of practice and enlightenment: why, if we are all inherently perfect, do we need to work at being so? This was the paradox that consumed Dogen and was the existential question that motivated him to take the dangerous journey to China where he found his answer.

So Genjo -koan

*Genjokoan* is a foundational text for our lineage: Soto Zen Buddhism

It explains the concept of "actualizing reality" or "manifesting the present."

It teaches that all things are an expression of the universe, but from a dualistic perspective, we often see ourselves as separate from the world.

The practice is to understand that everyday actions, and every experience, are both complete expressions of the absolute truth and an ongoing process that requires our present, full engagement.

So let's take it slowly...

Genjokoan opens by presenting three different ideas about how we can see the world. The essay begins and ends with "we have wisdom we have practice"

So firstly he discusses a worldview called Buddhism, the doctrines of Buddhism. This gives rise to and promotes a variety of concepts. He is not criticizing but is preparing to say this represents only one side of the coin. Three specific concepts are presented as contrasting pairs.

'Viewing various things as Buddhist things then we have wisdom and we have practice, we have life and we have death, we have Buddhas and we have sentient beings'.

Dogen then proceeds to a second alternative worldview presenting three paired concepts again.

'Stripping all things of their essence, we have no delusion and no satori, we have no Buddhas and no sentient beings, we have no beginnings and no endings.'

This sentence paints a nihilistic content-less philosophy that deprives the world of recognizable concepts. (as in the Heart sutra). The self of things are stripped of the concepts and expectations we possess regarding them.

Dogen finally describes the true Way:

It is a synthesis of the two previous prevailing, yet as Dogen saw them, flawed worldviews.

'The way of the Buddha inherently soars above such extravagance and austerity, uniting beginning and ending, uniting delusion and satori, uniting sentient beings and buddha.'

Finishing

The ideas introduced in these first three sentences are the topics Dogen will be addressing throughout the rest of the essay.

The three pairs can be viewed as alternative perspectives on the same basic issue. Practice, life and sentient beings can be grouped together on one side and wisdom (enlightenment), death and buddhas on the other. This synthesis, Dogen now says, applies not just to abstract concepts such as life and death, but to our everyday experiences.

'It is like falling blossoms uniting love and sorrow, spreading weeds uniting indifference and dislike, nothing more.

This gives, in a concrete way, the truth to which the first three sentences are pointing. Koans demand a demonstration, not an explanation.

Blossoms falling and weeds spreading are not separate events but two sides of the same coin, expressing both attachment and aversion, and both the complete nature of reality and the need for continued action.

Dogen then directly addresses the questions of how we are to be free of our suffering and the ignorance that is our usual way of viewing the world.

He tells us it is delusion to impose yourself and your desires upon life, demanding that the myriad things of the world be as you wish. And this is the ordinary human experience of an individual self encountering a separate world.

Bob Myers translates this section:

If delusion is betaking oneself to practice and realize everything,  
enlightenment is everything moving ahead to practice and realize oneself.

This is the moment when the illusion of separation falls away, and the interdependent nature of reality is experienced. This is not a passive state. It requires vigilance as we constantly slip back into reaching outwards.

Practice is our vigilance. Vigilance is our practice.

Dogen continues:

Perceiving forms and sounds with a unified mind is intimate perception unlike reflections in a mirror or the moon reflected in water, when one side is light and the other darkness.

Reminding us that Consciousness is always dualistic and this state leads to a constant feeling of dissatisfaction. Our true home is unity, wholeness.

Now we come to some of the most well known and much argued over phrases:

To know the Buddha way is to know the self; to know the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be one with the ten thousand things. To be one with the ten thousand things means body and mind of oneself and others drop away. No trace of awakening remains; and the traceless awakening goes on without end.

Shohaku Okumura reminds us that to study the self does not mean an intellectual study but to become familiar with, to get used to or to become intimate with the self. Like a bird learning to fly to become a bird, a human being must study the self in order to thoroughly become human. Even when we say, to know the Buddha way there is still a subject an object that are separate. But this is a mistaken way of thinking and a basic problem that keeps us human beings from seeing reality as it actually is.

When we truly practice the Buddha Way or study the self there is no separation between I , the self, the Buddha way, study and practice.

When we genuinely study the self I is the self and there is no I apart from the activity of studying. Subject, object, and activity are completely one thing.

In our practice we just sit with our bodies and minds and we aim to practice the Buddha Way in our daily life as well. There is no such thing as a self that is separate from our activity. Dogen defined this as Jijuyu-zanmai – the self selfing the self as Sawada Kodo roshi described it.

Okumura sensei uses the metaphor of a runner and the relationship of the runner with running. No runner is separate from running. They are the same thing. Running as well as sitting, eating, drinking and breathing are ordinary things. Our teachers are trying to express a very ordinary thing in a truly realistic way.

When we practice the Buddha Way, there is no self, no Buddha Way, and no others. This is because self, Buddha Way, and others work together as one.

And when we study ourselves as the Buddha Way we find that there is no self that is separate from others because the self is connected with all beings. We see that the self does not really exist. The self forgets the self in studying the self.

To be one with the ten thousand things means body and mind of oneself and others drop away.

Dropping off body and mind. Shinjin-datsuraku. This is a key word in Dogen's teachings. Traditionally, as Okumura sensei tells us, it is said that Dogen Zenji had an enlightenment experience when Rujing (his teacher in China), scolding a monk who was sitting next to Dogen, said 'Zazen is dropping off body and mind. Why are you just sleeping?' Throwing a pair of shoes at the sleeping monk.

It's a fun story, but its veracity is now disputed by many scholars as it suggests Dogen experienced a kensho or enlightenment experience. Which makes no sense about him and is incompatible with his negative views on kensho.

Rujing said, 'Sanzen is dropping off body and mind' and 'dropping off body and mind is zazen.' In other words, dropping off body and mind is not some special psychological condition resulting from zazen practice; rather, zazen is itself dropping off body and mind...That's it. In zazen we take off all of our clothing and become the naked self.

An interesting alternative translation is given by Bob Myers which reads rather: "Learning this way of the Buddha means learning oneself. Learning oneself means forgetting oneself. Forgetting oneself means being illuminated by all things. Being illuminated by all things means dropping the veil from the body and mind of oneself and the body and mind of others'

No trace of awakening remains, and traceless awakening goes on without end.

Albert Low alerted me to these quotes:

Bassui says 'The gurgle of the stream and the sigh of the pine are the voices of the master. no one is left to say 'I am awakened.' As Hakuin would say, 'True self is no-self.'

Our traces are our attachments to our own actions. Therefore, leaving no traces is of course a positive thing. In zazen and in all the activities of our daily lives, our practice is to try to express this traceless trace of realization and the reality of interdependent origination. All things are the product of an infinite number of causes and conditions. All these causes and conditions are also infinitely interconnected and constantly changing, hence all things are impermanent and lack independent existence. They are empty, without boundary.

When we practice in order to express this reality, we can see that practice and realization are one. Realization is only manifested within the process of practice, moment by moment.

Dogen goes on to discuss delusion and enlightenment in relation to the search for truth within our practice. He discusses the centrality of the relationship between self and all things in the search for the Way.

This relationship is discussed first, in terms of space,

‘If one riding in a boat watches the coast, one mistakenly perceives the coast as moving. If one watches the boat in relation to the surface of the water, then one notices that the boat is moving. Similarly, when we perceive the body and mind in a confused way and grasp all things with a discriminating mind, we mistakenly think that the self-nature of the mind is permanent’

And then in terms of time.

Here he uses the analogy of firewood. ‘Firewood turns to ash and cannot return to firewood, but we should not believe that ash comes after and firewood before. Firewood is firewood and, having its past and its future, is still independent of past and future. Ash is ash and has its own past and future. Just as firewood does not return to being firewood after it has become ash, we cannot return to birth after death... Birth is now; death is now.’

Using another analogy from nature the relationship between the individual and realization is compared to a drop of dew and boundless moonlight.

‘Coming to awakening is like the moon being reflected on water’

Wait a minute, you may recall earlier that he wrote “a unified mind is intimate perception unlike reflections in a mirror or the moon reflected in water”.

Well. Yes he did. Dogen’s writings are filled with contradictions and play. The critical consensus is these are deliberate. Why ? What is their purpose?

This time Dogen tells us awakening does not affect you any more than the moon disturbs water. With awakening what is important is not the experience of joy, nor being liberated from suffering. Awakening is no change. A monk asked a brother who was awakened, ‘What is it like?’ The brother monk replied, ‘Nothing special.’

When awakening is mentally and physically incomplete, we believe that we have arrived. But with full awakening we feel something is missing. True awakening is an awakening to a more urgent need to go deeper.

Dogen continues onward using an extended metaphor of fish in the ocean and birds in the sky: Fish swim in an endless ocean, and birds fly in an endless sky, yet they are always within their world and cannot leave it without dying.

He illustrates how our existence is totally dependent on the universe we are in, just as we are. Water is life, the air is life; the fish is life, the bird is life... If we find the Way our daily activities manifest awakening; all our actions are the supreme reality. Now is the place; now the way unfolds.

Finally, Dogen finishes Genjokoan with a koan, concerning enlightenment vs. practice, coming back to the same pair of concepts he highlighted right at the very start. He does this with a witty word play switching languages between the formal Chinese of the monk and the colloquial Japanese of the master.

Bob Myers explains that roughly speaking,

the breeze corresponds to enlightenment and the fanning to practice.

And the master is saying that although the wind blows constantly it is necessary to fan.

Actually, the breeze and the fanning are interdependent: the breeze is the concerted effect of the master and countless others fanning themselves, while at the same time, the breeze is what moves their fans,



Hotetsu Zenji of Mt Mayoku was fanning himself. A monk approached and asked, 'They say 'Wind's nature eternally abides, no place not visited.' So why does the master use a fan too?'

The teacher replied, 'You understand only that the breeze is by its nature constant, but not the notion that there is nowhere it has never reached.'

The monk said, 'What do you mean, then, what is this notion of No place not visited?'

At this point the master simply fanned himself. The monk clasped his hands in veneration.

Such is the experience that validates Buddhist doctrine, its true message comes alive... It is this natural, constant breeze through the buddha's mansion that unfolds the gilding of the earth and transfigures the milky water of the Great River.

So .That's it. Dogen finishes Genjokoan with a big finish- with a vision of the YangTze river.

So Now ...I'm going to close this talk with the same poem that I started this talk with.

First I'm going to admit I just may... have taken some liberties with the original words of Okumura sensei's capping poem.

At the very end of this book: Realizing Genjokoan, after all of the words, after all of the teachings, Okumura sensei shares with us his capping poem. Here it is with my additions.

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