This morning I'm going be giving a talk on a Medieval Japanese monk by the name of Eihei Dogen Zenji. Our Dharma ancestor.

Dōgen was born in Kyoto, in Japan in the year 1200 and he died in Kyoto in 1253.

In the first half of my talk I'll look at his life story and then I'll go on to discuss his ideas – That's the heavy part.

Dogen is actually a title which means 'source of the Way'. We don't know the name he was given as a child.

I've based this talk mainly on the writings of Rein Raud and Okumura Shohaku.

Dōgen is these days considered one of the most important Japanese thinkers. He was an aristocrat by birth and he entered the head monastery of the Tendai Buddhist school at an early age, a sect that was favoured by the nobility. He left the monastery when he did not find satisfactory answers to his questions. He later studied briefly with the first Japanese Zen monks in Kyoto and then left for China, where he studied with Tiantong Rujing of the Caodong Chan tradition.

This is the tradition Dōgen later inaugurated in Japan as Sōtō Zen, which has since become the most populous branch of Zen Buddhism in Japan. In the twentieth century it spread to America and worldwide. This is the sect that comes down to us, sitting here this morning.

He tried for a number of years to establish himself in Kyoto, the imperial capital, but Dōgen was not very satisfied with the results of his activities and the ongoing political machinations. Upon receiving an invitation from a follower, a provincial samurai leader, he moved his community 200 kilometres north to the isolated and rugged mountainous Echizen area, where he founded a temple called Eiheiji – still one of the headquarters of the Sōtō school in Japan.

The concept of practice articulated by Dōgen differs from the Buddhist tradition before him in two main respects.

- On the one hand, according to Dōgen, there is no gap between practice and enlightenment – in other words, 'enlightenment' is not a threshold the practitioner has to cross in order to attain an altered state of mind. However, anyone can ever only be enlightened while they are practicing.
- On the other hand, however, 'practice' does not consist solely in the performance of certain exercises, such as zazen-seated meditation, but is primarily a state of the body-mind, which can

and should extend beyond actual sitting. Thus, any activity of the practitioner, such as washing oneself, cooking food or performing any other everyday task can constitute ‘practice’. These views are grounded in a sophisticated philosophical worldview that Dōgen expounded throughout his works and were also implemented by him as principles of monastic life, especially during the later years of his life.

So let’s look more deeply at Dōgen’s life.

As I said, Dōgen was born in the year 1200 in Kyoto, which makes it very easy for us to tell how old he was at any particular date. Kyoto was where the emperor resided, the imperial capital of Japan, the epicentre of court culture. However it was not the centre of actual political power, which had moved to Kamakura, near modern day Tokyo.

His mother was called Ishi, she was the daughter of Fujiwara no Motofusa, an influential court official. Ishi was reportedly also one of the most famous beauties of the time. She had had a sad fate, however, as she had been given as a wife to the samurai leader of an army that conquered and pillaged the capital, but later fell in disgrace himself with his overlords. Ishi had thus married below her status, to a man she detested, and her husband had been proclaimed a traitor in addition to that. Later, Ishi was married for the second

time to Minamoto no Michichika, an elderly statesman and master of political intrigue. It is unclear whether Dōgen's father was Michichika or his son Michitomo, a renowned poet, who was reportedly a more frequent visitor to Ishi's house and who helped to raise Dōgen after Michichika's death.

So Dogen was born into the very upper echelons of Japanese society. He was schooled in writing poetry, calligraphy and Chinese classics. And all skills needed to be a functioning member of the aristocratic society.

However, the comforts of aristocratic life were short-lived for young Dogen. By the age of seven, both his parents had died, an experience that obviously scared him and profoundly shaped his worldview and set him on the path of Buddhist inquiry.

Legend has it that as Dogen watched the incense smoke rise at his mother's funeral, he had his first intimate encounter with the impermanence of life, a central tenet of Buddhist philosophy. This early brush with mortality kindled in him a burning desire to understand the nature of existence and to seek a way beyond suffering.

On her deathbed, his mother had told Dōgen to renounce the court career his relatives had been preparing him for.

So at the age of 13, demonstrating a maturity beyond his years, Dogen made the decision to be ordained as a Buddhist monk. He went to Mount Hiei (just to the north-east of Kyoto), the epicentre of Tendai Buddhism in Japan, to begin his formal religious education. The Tendai school, known for its comprehensive and syncretic approach to Buddhism, provided Dogen with a solid foundation in Buddhist doctrine and practice.

Incidentally, it is still an amazing place to visit today.

Dogen's earnest search for the truth can be seen in the emphasis he placed on the need to live seriously. "The arising and decaying of all things occur quickly; birth and death is gravely important' he later wrote. The impermanence of existence did not lead him to fatalism or the pessimism that pervaded the age; on the contrary it led him to heightened vitality in the search for the Way.

However, he gradually became disappointed with the situation on Mt Hiei, as the Buddhist clergy there had become increasingly involved with worldly affairs and learning was in decline.

The doctrines of the Tendai school included the teaching about original enlightenment, or the idea that all beings are actually enlightened, just entangled in worldly affairs to the extent that this enlightenment has been buried under illusions.

However, when Dōgen asked why it is necessary for him to practice in order to attain this enlightenment if he is enlightened already, he did not receive a satisfactory answer from his teachers and so he eventually left the mountain and wandered, staying at different temples.

His search finally led him to seek advice with Myōzen, the lead disciple of Eisai, who is usually considered to be the first importer of the Chan/Zen school to Japan. He studied under Myozen for six years. Then at Myōzen's advice and together with him, Dōgen decided in 1223 to travel to China for further study. A dangerous sea voyage that did not go smoothly.

Dogen had to remain on the ship in the harbour in China for many months as his credentials as a monk were not recognized. One of the first deep impressions he had in China was an encounter with a monastery cook, who had come to the harbour to purchase mushrooms Japanese ships usually carried, and during the dialogue Dōgen first encountered the idea that daily tasks can be of equal importance to goal-oriented Buddhist practice – an idea that later became one of the central tenets of his doctrine.

Dōgen eventually studied in several of the main Chan monasteries of the present-day Zhejiang (Je-jang) province (just south of modern

Shanghai), but he remained unsatisfied with all of the teachers he met.

At the time, most Ch'an teachers were of the Rinzai school and relied heavily on the use of koans.

Dogen studied these koans, but he didn't understand why so much emphasis was placed on them. He found them useful, but only to a certain point. He wondered why there wasn't more emphasis on sitting meditation and sutra study.

At the time Dogen visited China, Buddhism was in decline for a number of reasons. The revival of Neo-Confucianism. Also the moral degeneration due to the sale of monastic certificates and honorary clerical titles by the government.

He was offered Dharma transmission, and he turned it down. He wasn't happy with the teachings, so he rejected the teacher's approval. He wanted to find a lineage that was more in line with his views. He didn't want Dharma transmission from a teacher that disappointed him.

In 1225 after Dogen had been in China for two years he was ready to return to Japan disappointed with the degenerate state of Chinese

Zen. Then he heard about a Ch'an master who had a different style of teaching. Rujing was a teacher in the Caodong School of Ch'an.

Dogen travelled to Mount Tiantong to meet him. Rujing dreamt of his coming and welcomed Dogen and told him to visit him and ask questions at his own private quarters at any time without the slightest ceremony. The availability of the great teacher rekindled in Dogen a burning desire for truth. He wrote, "When you don't meet the right teacher it is better not to study Buddhism at all."

In 1225, a decisive moment in Dogen's life came during an early morning zazen session during a three month intensive retreat. In the course of zazen, a monk next to Dogen inadvertently had fallen asleep. Upon noticing the monk, Rujing thundered at him: "In zazen it is imperative to cast off the body and mind. How could you indulge in sleeping?" This remark shook Dogen's whole being to its very core, and then an inexpressible, ecstatic joy engulfed his heart. In Rujing's private quarters that same morning, Dogen offered incense and worshiped Buddha. This unusual action of Dogen prompted Rujing to ask: "What is the incense burning for?" Dogen replied: "My body and mind are cast off." "The body and mind are cast off (shinjin-datsuraku), joined the teacher, "cast off are the body and mind (datsuraku-shinjin). Thus, Rujing acknowledged the authenticity of Dogen's enlightenment.

Dogen described Enlightenment this way:
To study the Way is to study the Self. To study the Self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever.

This event was not an isolated one but the result of his long spiritual struggle. To cast off body and mind meant zazen-only (shikantaza) which symbolized the totality of self and embodied Buddha nature. In being cast off, concrete human existence was fashioned in the mode of radical freedom – purposeless, goalless, objectless and meaningless. Buddha nature was not to be enfolded in, but was to enfold through, human activities and expressions.

In 1227, after seven years in China, Dōgen (who was how old? –that's right 27) returned to Japan and started to look for sponsors, who could support him in establishing his own temple.

However due to the rise of tensions with the Tendai community, to which the first Zen and Pure Land temples officially still belonged, in 1230 he left the Tendai temple where he lived, and took up

residence in a small chapel south of the capital. His first texts are traditionally thought to have been written in that period – a seated meditation manual *Fukan Zazengi* (‘Universal principles of seated meditation’) and *Bendōwa* (‘Telling the Way’) a short summary of Dōgen’s views.

Over the following two years, Dōgen secured enough support to begin building his own temple. By 1232, he had even attracted enough disciples of his own to conduct an intensive Zen training period. The 1230s were the most productive and possibly happiest years of his life. In those years, he supervised the construction works of his temple, called Kōshōhōrinji, meant to become the first Chinese-style Zen temple in Japan.

During that period, Dōgen also wrote the bulk of the essays that are included in his most famous work, the *Shōbōgenzō* , which takes its title from the foundational myth of the Chan school. *Shōbōgenzō*, or literally ‘the storehouse of the eye of the true law’, refers to the teaching that Buddha allegedly transmitted to Mahākāśyapa in private, after the latter had spontaneously smiled when the Buddha showed a flower to his disciples without any rationalizing comment. The smile is supposed to have demonstrated superior understanding, singling Mahākāśyapa out for the safekeeping of the most precious part of Buddhist teaching, on which the Chan/Zen school claims to rely. Face to face transmission of the Dharma.

Dogen also repudiated religious discrimination He wrote: “ The understanding of Dharma, as the ancestors taught, does not depend on differences in sex and in rank. Some people, foolish to the extreme, think of a woman as nothing but the object of sensual pleasures…A Buddhist should not do so. What charge is there against woman? What virtue is there in man? There are wicked men in the world; there are virtuous women in the world The desire to hear Dharma and the search for enlightenment do not necessarily rely on the difference in sex.”

Dōgen’s community continued to grow as did his reputation, which of course increased tensions with the Tendai Buddhist authorities. Dōgen had cut his ties with the institution, but had not been authorized to establish a new school. He himself did not consider his teaching to constitute a separate school – on the contrary, he regarded the very idea of the dividing the teaching into schools as a grievous mistake – but this was not how the Buddhist communities were seen by the institutions of the state.

Certain other communities, for example the Darumashū had tried to establish Chinese-style Chan/Zen in Japan in the 1190s, They had attracted serious trouble as a result of non-compliance with the state authorities.

Doctrinally, Dōgen was very critical of this school, but when the Tendai institutions cracked down on it, Dōgen accepted many of its former members into his own community, including Ejō, who became his main disciple and heir.

This caused further conflict with the Tendai authorities. In 1242, as tensions continued to mount, Dōgen decided to accept the invitation of Hatano Yoshishige, a powerful samurai lord from the isolated, mountainous Echizen area, to move his headquarters there, a safe distance from the intrigues of the capital.

A temple called Daibutsuji was built for him, and though the living conditions were difficult and not at all comparable to those in the capital, his school now had a more secure footing.

While the temple was being built however, he fell into depression. He became more critical of other groups, especially Rinzai Zen.

In 1246, the name of his temple was changed into Eiheiji, temple of eternal peace, the name it still bears today.

Dōgen's manner of teaching changed in these later years, gradually leaving behind the philosophical style of his earlier years. He focused on short sermons and on his monastic community and its rules.

While some scholars see his late work as the pinnacle of his teaching, others criticize it for its bitter tone and ever-growing obsession with discipline.

In 1247 (aged ?- 47) he reluctantly left Eiheiji and his community and travelled to Kamakura at the urging of his patron to teach the ruling Regent but ultimately his visit was unsuccessful. After 8 months away he returned to Eiheiji.

Dōgen's health began to deteriorate. In 1252, he gave up his position as the head of the temple and transferred his responsibilities to Ejō. Soon after he travelled back to the Kyoto in search of better medical care.

On his final journey back to his beloved Kyoto he wrote one of his most moving poems:

Just when my longing to see the moon over Kyoto one last time grows deepest, The image I behold this Autumn leaves me sleepless for its beauty.

He died in Kyoto, sitting in the posture of zazen in 1253.

His death poem references a poem by his master Rujing and was written while he waited to die. It encapsulated his view of life and all things impermanent. It displays confidence and bravado mixed with irony and uncertainty about the final outcome:

Fifty-four years lighting up the sky.

A quivering leap smashes a billion worlds.

Hah!

Entire body looks for nothing.

Living, I plunge into the Yellow Springs.

So now let's change direction from his biography and have a look at his teachings.

The authority of Dōgen as a thinker is based on the SBGZ, of which there are several versions. Dōgen himself continued to edit and re-edit the collection over the years.

Uncharacteristically for serious Buddhist works of the time, the SBGZ is written in Japanese rather than Chinese. On the one hand, this demonstrates the intent of Dōgen to be understood by his audience, however, on the other, it is also the only possible way for him to expound his idiosyncratic views, which often derive from deliberate misinterpretations of quotations from Chinese sources. For example, one of his most famous innovative concepts, uji, 'the existential moment' or 'being-time', is a misreading of an ordinary, colloquial Chinese expression 'at a certain time'.

Such conceptualizations abound in Dōgen's work and make it extremely hard to interpret, which is also why his philosophical legacy was not widely known outside a very small Zen circle.

How big was the readership for these writings. Less than 50 people it is believed.

Let's examine six of Dogen's original ideas.

His first idea: overcoming dualism.

One of the principal problems of Buddhism always has been the overcoming of dualism.

On the one hand, Buddhism denies the validity of strict binary oppositions as a way to adequately describe reality, on the other, however, any discourse of 'non-dualism' has to be articulated in opposition to dualism, which makes it an example of what it tries to negate.

That's a paradox and that is why many Buddhist thinkers, especially Zen teachers have often been sceptical about the capability of language to say the essential.

The Rinzai Chan/Zen school before him had conceptualized the experience of enlightenment as Kensho -an irreversible, momentarily

reachable threshold that reorganized the entire experience of the practitioner, who would thereafter be liberated from the bondage of illusions and see reality for what it is.

Dōgen, however, distinguished between two mutually incompatible registers of understanding.

In the dualistic register (everyday life), the non-dual and the dualist understanding of the world were indeed opposable to each other.

In the non-dual register this was no longer the case – there was just ‘understanding’. ‘Enlightenment’ in his view, is not a world-transforming experience, but a state of mind that can be entered and exited.

The state of mind called 'enlightenment' is no more and no less than what a practitioner of Dōgen-style Zen experiences, during practice. The unity of practice and enlightenment.

Dogen taught that zazen (seated meditation) is not a means to achieve enlightenment, but is itself the expression of one's inherent Buddha nature.

He described zazen and enlightenment as one. Sometimes we might feel like our meditation is unproductive. Dogen is telling us that that’s not the case, that Enlightenment is right here for us to get. This is important because when we think of enlightenment as

something ‘out there’ that can be harmful to our spiritual practice. It can cause us to look outside of ourselves instead of within.

Each moment in time is effectively the creation of a new space-time that determines anew the character of the everything in the universe and of all the past and future.

Got That? Easy.

His second idea: The importance of zazen

Dogen repeatedly emphasized the importance of ‘zazen’ or sitting meditation. He said that meditation is the core of Zen practice and study. He taught it to both monks and the laity, saying that everyone should learn it. This is a departure from some teachers in the past who had said that these teachings should only be available for monks and nuns.

This is what he wrote about it:

“For zazen, a quiet room is suitable. Eat and drink moderately. Cast aside all involvements and cease all affairs. Do not think good or bad. Do not administer pros and cons. Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of all thoughts and views. Have no designs on becoming a Buddha. Zazen has nothing whatever to do with sitting or lying down.”

His third idea: There is the ‘just-sitting’ of the mind, which is different from the ‘just-sitting’ of the body.

The equation of enlightenment and practice also contained a deeper layer. It was thought to be possible for the practitioner to eventually transpose the inner disposition achievable during meditation also to other activities, so that the most ordinary daily tasks could also become practice.

Practice is simply the complete presence of the mind in what is taking place, without a split occurring between the action performed and the mind that thinks about it:

When a bird is flying through the sky, this is just the event of skyflying. The bird does not reflect on its activity of skyflying. This is because skyflying is the entire universe and the entire universe is skyflying

In other words, an activity performed as practice is where the doer and the deed become one ‘existential moment’ and from the particular point of view within that moment, that event is everything that takes place at all.

Washing yourself is practice, if you do it as practice. Even getting drunk may be done as practice. This is an idea Dōgen developed even further during his later years and which finally materialized in the set of strict monastic rules, *Eihei shingi*. These detail even minor aspects

of behaviour, for example the proper way to take one's meals. Dōgen appeared to presuppose that such codification would make monks mindful, or enable them to see their entire life as practice.

His forth idea: The nature of time and being:

In his famous essay "Uji" (Being-Time), Dogen presents a profound and nuanced understanding of time and existence. He suggests that being and time are inseparable, and that each moment fully embodies the entire reality. This goes beyond simply challenging conventional notions of past, present, and future; it proposes a radical reimagining of the nature of reality itself.

His fifth idea: Buddha nature is universal:

While affirming the traditional Mahayana teaching that all beings possess Buddha nature, Dogen reinterpreted this concept in radical ways, suggesting that Buddha nature is not a latent potential to be realized, but the very fabric of existence itself.

Dōgen develops that thought, and states that all things existing, including mountains and rivers for example, are sentient beings in the broadest meaning of the word, and therefore 'buddha-nature' pertains to everything that is. In that sense, we can interpret 'buddha-nature' as the universal within the particular, including ourselves – it is what we share with all other things.

However, if we start to look for anything concrete that we share with everything and everyone else, we find nothing. And this 'nothing', the unfeasibility of any permanent ground or final point of reference, is precisely what 'buddha-nature' signifies.

As the heart sutra teaches us:

Form is not different to Emptiness

Emptiness is not different from Form.

Finally: The importance of continuous practice:

Dogen emphasized the need for ongoing, moment-to-moment practice, even after experiences of awakening.

"We wave a fan because wind is everywhere"

This was the answer to his original question which had lead him to China and Rujing.

So how was Dōgen's thought received?

Dōgen's position at the head of the Sōtō school was inherited by Ejō, his chief disciple but soon afterwards, and not without heated succession debates, Soto Zen took a completely different direction under the guidance of Keizan Jōkin.

Keizan integrated popular religious beliefs in the spirit world and shamanistic practices into the teachings of the school, building his reputation on miraculous stories about himself so that Soto Zen's connections to Dōgen became merely formal. As I said earlier, Dōgen's work remained out of circulation for a long time, except for a small number of intellectually curious Sōtō Zen masters.

Virtually hidden from the rest of the world by the Zen circles of the Sōtō school for almost seven centuries, Dōgen's thought only emerged onto the broader intellectual scene after the Meiji restoration of 1868.

During this period, Japan renewed its communications with the outside world and started to re-evaluate its own cultural tradition, which included introspection to identify aspects of Japanese culture that would make it a cultural equal of the Western powers. Dogen seemed to fit that bill.

In Conclusion: I'd like to suggest a couple of ways Dōgen's teachings can relevant to us today?

- The first of these is raising the potential of any being to partake of 'buddhahood' to the status of a core aspect of existence itself, thereby proclaiming the equality of all beings on a very basic level. This has become especially relevant in the context

of the climate crisis, for which the human-centred approach to nature has been responsible.

What Dōgen has posited is a fundamental lack of hierarchical, qualitative difference between all entities, even sentient and insentient ones

- The second point in Dōgen's thought that could be helpful to us today is the central duo of his practice-related views – there is no gap between practice and enlightenment, and any activity, conducted in the appropriate state of mind, equals practice. This latter claim certainly also includes the study of Dōgen's work.

I'll finish here a special thank you to the teachers and writers whose ideas and words I used in this talk and open the floor to any comments or questions you may have.