

Bendowa

Today's talk is on Dogen's essay "Bendowa" and its emphasis on zazen. The essay has been called variously in English as 'On the Endeavour of the way', 'The Wholehearted way' 'A Talk about Practicing Zazen' and 'Dialog on the Way of Commitment.' Take your pick. If we break down the word into its component literal parts we have Ben which means Endeavour, Do means Way and Wa, which means a dialogue or discussion. Most of the essay is structured as 18 questions and answers.

Today's talk steals its ideas and words from many people. Many teachers. In particular I will be reading the words of Eihei Dogen himself, translated by different teachers I respect, reading their words. I'll also be reading the words of Podcaster and punk Brad Warner, Buddhist nun Domyo Burk and Scholar Bob Myers. Wikipedia and other writers are in here as well.

So let's start by looking at the context for when and why Dogen composed this essay which he named Bendowa. It is a short (11 page) introduction to the essentials of Soto Zen.

"Bendowa" was written by the 13th century Japanese Buddhist monk named Eihei Dogen who travelled to China to search for the true Dharma. In China, Dogen discovered a teacher, Rujing, who emphasized zazen above all else. While studying with Rujing for 2-3 years, Dogen found the resolution to his personal koan. Why Practice if we are already enlightened? He then travelled back to Japan to share what he had learned, we call the school of Zen that descends from him "Soto." And this is our lineage.

Three years after his return from China, Dogen still hadn't established a monastery. In Bendowa, he explains how he hoped to spread the teaching he received in China and thereby save all sentient beings, but he was waiting until it was the right time. In the meantime, however, some students, lay and monastic, had begun to gather around him and ask for his teaching. In response, Dogen composed Bendowa, in 1231, saying, "I wish to leave for students of the way the teaching of the Buddha's house. This is indeed the essence."

So Bendowa is Dogen introducing 13th century Japanese students of Buddhism to Chinese Chan Zen, or as it is pronounced in Japanese, Soto Zen.

In the first quarter or so of the text Dogen establishes the legitimacy of the Zen lineage tradition he is teaching in the traditional Chinese Chan manner. He does this by stating where and with whom he studied and explaining how this lineage traces its origin back to Shakyamuni Buddha himself.

Then Dogen makes his claim: that zazen is not only central in the form of Buddhism he's teaching, it's really the only practice you need.

This is most important section of the essay and in Japanese it is called Jijuyu Zanmai (the self-receiving and self-using Samadhi). It is chanted regularly in Soto Zen monasteries during sessins.

Jijuyu Zanmai, or Self-Receiving and Employing Samadhi, is the core practice of Zen Buddhism as taught by Dogen, emphasizing upright sitting (zazen) and the merging of practice and realization. It involves wholeheartedly "just sitting" (shikantaza) and allowing the world to reveal itself without discrimination, leading to the realization of the Buddha-nature within oneself and all things. This "self-fulfilling" state allows the practitioner to drop away the dualistic mind of subject and object, letting body and mind merge with the entirety of existence.

Let's examine the words Jijuyu Zanmai in more detail?

- **Ji (自):** Self or in oneself
- **Ju (受):** To receive, accept, or to employ
- **Yu (用):** To use, work, or function in concentrated union
- **Zanmai (三昧):** A Japanese term for samadhi, referring to deep, focused concentration or right acceptance

This is how it's Practiced:

- **Upright Sitting (Zazen):**

The primary method is to sit with correct posture, allowing the illusory mind of discrimination to dissolve naturally.

- **Dropping Body and Mind:**

Instead of using techniques like chanting or bowing, one simply lets go of all concepts, ideas, and thoughts by "dropping away" the self.

- **Shikantaza (Just Sitting):**

This is the direct expression of Jijuyu Zanmai, where the practitioner "hits the moment" of sitting with pure, open awareness, allowing phenomena to manifest without engagement.

What Happens During Practice

- **Unity of Practice and Realization:**

Jijuyu Zanmai is a state where practice and realization are not separate; they are the same act of being.

- **Merging of Subject and Object:**

The practitioner and the world merge into one, with no distinction between the self and the phenomena of existence.

- **Manifestation of the "Buddha Seal":**

As the practitioner sits, the entire world is seen to be infused with the Buddha's nature, and the self becomes aligned with this "Buddha seal".

- **Realization of Original Nature:**

Through this practice, one awakens to their true, unconstructed nature, which is one with the fundamental reality of the universe.

Key Principles

- **Transmission from Teacher to Disciple:**

Jijuyu Zanmai was transmitted directly from teachers to disciples as the essence of the Dharma.

- **The Unsurpassable Practice:**

It is considered the most direct and profound method, superior to all other forms of religious practice.

- **Beyond Discrimination:**

The practice emphasizes the non-discriminatory nature of reality, where all things, whether earth, grass, or pebbles, are engaged in the same Buddha activity.

- **Immeasurable Merit:**

The merit of one person's practice of Jijuyu Zanmai is considered immeasurable and extends to all things and all time.

Let's read Jijuyu Zanmai in full, in a colloquial paraphrasing by Brad Warner . I think his paraphrasing of Dogen, is easily the most accessible way to understand Dogen's ideas and I recommend his writing as a way to first come

face to face with Dogen in our modern era. Here we go, Brad Warner does Dogen.

Every Buddhist ancestor has practiced upright sitting in the midst of the Samadhi of giving and using the self (ie Zazen). Every single person who followed the Way in India and China did this. So that's what they taught people.

Real Buddhists all say that zazen is the best thing ever. From the first time you learn it from a teacher you never need to burn incense, do prostration, recite Buddha's name, or read sutras anymore. Just sit and get the state that's free of body and mind.

If one person sits zazen, being right in body, speech, and mind for just one moment, the whole universe enters this state. Every living thing becomes clear in body and mind at the same time, and they all experience the greatest freedom. It makes all Buddhas increase the joy surging up from the original source and renews their enlightenment. Every being everywhere together realizes themselves and experiences enlightenment.

Anyone who practices zazen enters directly into this state and receives the imperceptible mutual assistance of all things in the entire universe. Everyone shares in the benefits thus produced.

The perception of those individual who practice zazen never interferes with the reality of zazen. It doesn't matter if you notice this wonderfulness or not. This is because in the quietness, with nothing to accomplish, there is only direct experience. This realization takes place in the stillness of the self-receiving and self-using Samadhi and doesn't disturb so much as a single speck of dust.

If we were to divide zazen into two parts, practice and experience, we could consider each part separately. We could say that we practice in order to achieve enlightenment. But your perceptions cannot be the standard of enlightenment, because deluded human sentiment cannot reach the standard of enlightenment. Basically you cannot know your own enlightenment because whatever you call enlightenment can't be enlightenment.

The experience of zazen is eternal. It's the same for everyone. We touch the deepest experience of all human beings throughout history when we allow ourselves to be truly quiet.

Thanks Brad These are bold claims Dogen makes.

For example, Dogen claims that the truth transmitted through the generations by the buddhas has “self-fulfilling samadhi as its standard.” Samadhi is often translated as concentration, but its meaning is broader than a willful focus of attention – it refers to a settled, grounded, collected mind or way of being. It's referred to as self-fulfilling at least in part because it's its own reward. Dogen then says, “Sitting upright, practicing Zen, is the authentic gate to the unconfined realm of this samadhi.”

In the text Dogen states zazen alone is the “front gate” for buddha-dharma because all buddhas of the past, and all ancestors in India and China, have attained the way by doing zazen.

The zazen advocated by Dogen is way beyond a mere method for cultivating calm, insight, or even enlightenment. Instead, it's portrayed as a sort of enactment or actualization of enlightenment itself. His description of zazen sounds transcendent, even grandiose.

He tells us all we need to do is just sit zazen (shikantaza).

He then counters other Buddhist ideas and sects such as the Shin that were being introduced from China at the same time. They argued all you needed for practice was to chant the Nembutsu: namu amidha butsu. Dogen dismissed these ideas. It's okay to read sutras and so on but he argues all that is needed is zazen. You might think, hearing these words of Dogen, that Soto Zen doesn't include the practices of studying the teachings and sutras, or chanting, or ritual, or emphasis on precepts – but it does. It's just that such things are always considered supplementary to practice – useful in their own ways, at times, but not ultimately the way to awaken to the truth of the buddhadharma.

If one person sits zazen, being right in body, speech, and mind for just one moment, the whole universe enters this state.

Jijuyu Zanmai is a state where practice and realization are not separate; they are the same act of being.

The practitioner and the world merge into one, with no distinction between the self and the phenomena of existence.

As the practitioner sits, the entire world is seen to be infused with the Buddha's nature, and the self becomes aligned with this "Buddha seal".

Here I'm going into the voice and words of Domyo Burk: The *actual experience* of zazen is grounded and even mundane, but it tends to make such descriptions make a certain kind of sense. Someone's first taste of expansive awareness or profound stillness may feel remarkable, but ultimately, in the space of zazen, the entire sky turning into enlightenment tends to feel... almost... commonplace. Kind of like, "Oh yeah, look, the whole phenomenal world is part of this same seamless reality." And we just keep sitting there, breathing. It's not that such an experience isn't profound or precious, it's just that it doesn't occur in some parallel, rarefied spiritual universe, or as a result of getting ourselves all whipped up. It's just right here, as obvious as whether water is hot or cold when you drink it.

Dogen then tells us we cannot divide zazen into two parts, practice and experience. Instead he argues practice is enlightenment. This is one of his key teachings.

He tells us of the ubiquitous and unconditioned nature of the "inconceivable dharma," and the importance of practice in allowing us to actualize and experience it.

Domyo Burk continues: Another of Dogen's key teachings in Bendowa – and therefore, in his view, an essential aspect of Soto Zen – is that the inconceivable dharma is *always present*. Before I get to how it's always present, what is the "inconceivable dharma" Dogen refers to multiple times in this essay? It's very difficult, if not impossible, to define or describe; after all, it's "inconceivable!" In this case "dharma" refers to reality or truth, and particularly to the profound and enlightening truth to which buddhas awaken. Although it's beyond words, let me once again take a stab at putting words to it: The inconceivable dharma is what we taste in a moment of pure being. It's a reality that spiritual mystics throughout time have awakened to, and it goes by many names. In Bendowa alone, Dogen calls it enlightenment, realization, "all-inclusiveness with detachment," and "the buddha's seal." Words can only dance around reality, especially a reality this vast. So, if you try to grasp intellectually what the point of Zen or zazen is, it will elude you. At the same

time, although It can never be pinned down, all beings have a sense of It, and a longing for It. When we taste this inconceivable dharma, everything somehow has a rightful place.

The point Dogen makes in Bendowa, and the point that's central to Soto Zen in general, is that the inconceivable dharma is all around you, within you, operating through you, and *is* you. You're as close to It as a fish is to water – and therefore you can be oblivious to It, because It's so all-pervasive.

We tend to think the Ineffable is something separate from our everyday existence: A special experience or viewpoint or understanding, a reality ordinarily hidden behind a screen that we might be able to access by breaking through the screen with effort. Or we conceive of it as a perfected way of being we might achieve after ridding ourselves of all defilements. In contrast, Dogen's telling us it's not like that at all. In fact, personal striving is so irrelevant to the whole equation that even inanimate objects have what it is we so long for. In Bendowa he says, “earth, grass, trees, walls, tiles, and pebbles all engage in buddha activity,” and not only that! “Grass, trees, and lands which are embraced by this teaching together radiate a great light and endlessly expound the inconceivable, profound dharma.” It's not only that grasses, trees and the like are practicing, they've got the essence of the Buddha dharma and are actually *teaching* it.

Remember / am not “doing” zazen – that zazen is about being, and opening up to what Shunryu Suzuki called, “Things-as-it-is,” –It's like, as Zen master Keizan put it, “returning home and sitting in peace.”

Practice actualizes the inconceivable dharma because our practice – even though it's imperfect, even before we're realized anything – *is* the inconceivable dharma itself operating and manifesting. There's no wonderful reality called “inconceivable dharma” separate from this life, here and now. Sentient beings reach for the truth and are motivated by compassion because they're ultimately all part of the one, luminous, complete, seamless reality we sometimes call “the inconceivable dharma.” Part of the way the inconceivable dharma functions and manifests *is* sentient beings reaching for the truth and being motivated by compassion. This is why Dogen describes what happens when even for a moment you sit in zazen and “express the buddha's seal” (the characteristic mind of a buddha).

Thank you Domyo Burk.

The rest of Bendowa is devoted to eighteen sets of questions and answers. The questions reflect his students' previous experience of the other sects of Buddhism already established in Japan for centuries (including Tendai, Shingon, Kegon, and sects based on Vinaya adherence or on Yogacara philosophy).

In other words, Dogen's audience was familiar with Buddhism, just not with Zen or its particular Soto form. Based on the questions he chose to address in Bendowa, some of the main concerns or points of confusion for Dogen's students included:

- Did Dogen teach that the nature of mind is permanent, and therefore that it exists after the death of the body?
He answers No, and he writes "Buddhism teaches that body and mind are not separate things... You should understand that human daily life is, in itself nirvana. If we think that Buddhism is about understanding that mind/spirit is eternal while body/matter is temporary and that Buddhist wisdom is separate from birth and death, even this thought is ephemeral and fleeting. Pretty ironic, eh? Buddhism teaches that the nature of mind totally includes all forms. That means that nothing – not the material world or even nirvana – lacks the nature of mind. All entities can be considered as just one undivided mind. The mind is not separate from matter.
- Was it important for a Zen practitioner to follow moral precepts?
Yes, Keeping the precepts and observing pure moral conduct is the habit of Buddhism. But even those who haven't formally received the precepts or have broken them can benefit from doing zazen.
- Was lay practice legitimate and feasible? (That is, did the goal of Zen require someone to become ordained and practice as a monk or nun?).
Dogen answers that according to Gautama Buddha, men and women, nobles and commoners, are not distinguished from one another. Everyone can do zazen.
- Why is practice necessary at all if, as some forms of Buddhism say, "Mind itself is Buddha?"

Dogen answers: This is completely wrong. If what you say were true then anyone with any intelligence at all could not fail to understand it on having heard it. Studying the Buddha Dharma is letting go of the perspective of self and other. If you could become Awakened by thinking that the "mind" itself is the Buddha, then Shakyamuni would not have gone to the travails of giving instructions long ago. This is evident in the subtle standards of the ancient Masters. Long ago there was a monk named Gensoku who was the chief administrator in the community of Zen Master Hogen. Hogen asked him, "Gensoku, how long have you been at this monastery?" Gensoku answered, "I have been here three years already." Hogen asked, "You are fairly new then. Why don't you ever ask me about the Buddha Dharma?" Gensoku said, "I will not deceive you, Master. While studying under Zen Master Seiho, I understood the serene joy of the Buddha Dharma."

Hogen asked, "By what words did you enter this understanding?" Gensoku said, "I asked Seiho, 'What is the real self of the practitioner?' He answered, 'The Fire Boy calls for fire.'" Hogen said, "That's a good expression. But you did not understand it." Gensoku said, "The Fire Boy belongs to fire. Fire seeks fire. It is like saying that the self seeks the self. This is how I understood it." Hogen said, "I see clearly that you did not understand. If the Buddha Dharma were like that, it would not have been Transmitted up to now." This distressed Gensoku deeply, and he left there. On the way home he thought, "The Master is one of the nation's great Teachers and the leader of five hundred disciples. He has pointed out my fault. There must be a valuable point in his words." Gensoku then returned to Hogen's monastery. Repenting and giving his salutation, he asked, "What is the real self of the practitioner?" Hogen answered, "The Fire Boy calls for fire." On hearing this, Gensoku was fully Awakened about the Buddha Dharma.

Obviously one does not know the Buddha Dharma by merely thinking that "the self is Buddha". If thinking "self is Buddha" was the Buddha Dharma, Hogen could not have guided Gensoku with those words, nor would he have given the instruction he did. Right from the first meeting with a Master, you should ask for the standards of practice, and single-mindedly follow the Way of zazen and

avoid cluttering your mind with knowing about one thing only half understood. Then the wondrous means of the Buddha Dharma will not be wasted.

Dogen finishes his essay by urging his readers on in their practice. Brad Warner transliterates : It's not always a good thing to wait for favourable circumstances, since you never know when or even if those will come. Shall we just consider today to be the starting point. To this end I have written this piece so that true students who want to experience Buddhism in practice will have a guide.

Bob Myers choose these words for his translation and I think they give us insight into the beauty of Dogen's language: Why don't we just start today? Thus I gather these thoughts and leave them for distinguished seekers after truth as well as those who wander, like drifting clouds or floating weeds, in search of the way.

Thank you.

