

UNFOLDING PUZZLE

DŌGEN ZENJI'S *GENJŌ KŌAN*

TRANSLATED BY BOB MYERS

Unfolding Puzzle

A translation of Dōgen Zenji's *Genjō Kōan*

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Sometimes,
God shows us a world
replete with
wisdom and foolishness,
daily practice,
life and death,
saints and sinners.

Other times,
the clarity
and the confusion
and the growth
and the decay
and the saints
and the sinners
and everything else
all vanish into namelessness.

The true way
naturally transcends such opposites.

It *joins*
life with death,
wisdom with foolishness,
the ordinary with the divine.

Be that as it may—
the blossoms you adore
will wither and fall;
the weeds you abhor
will flourish and sprawl.

The fool bustles around trying to figure out what things are.
The wise man lets things move along and tell him what he is.

The wise man understands completely how little he understands.
The fool completely fails to understand how much he does.

Ignorance is self-perpetuating.

Wisdom is self-reinforcing.

The truly wise are not self-consciously so.
But their proven wisdom continues to prove itself.

When we experience sights and sounds,
body and mind outstretched,
we do so directly,
not as reflections in a mirror,
not as the moon and the water.

Seeing one thing, we are blind to others.

As you learn the right way,
you will learn who you are.

As you learn who you are,
you will forget who you are.

As you forget who you are,
things will show you what you are.

As things show you what you are,
the gap between your body and mind,
and that of others,
will drop away.

And the hidden vestiges of this process will echo on and on.

Start off by going out and looking for the truth,
and you only distance yourself from it.

Accept the truth in yourself,
and before you know it you will become who you really are.

Out for a sail, gazing at the shore,
it can appear that the land is sliding by.

You need to focus on the boat
to see that it's what's moving along.

In the same way,
assaying the world with scrambled body and mind,
it can appear that your heart's own nature is constant.

You need to dig back deeply inside your life
to see clearly that the world is not about you.

Burn firewood and it will turn into ash,
never to revert to firewood.

But don't think of ash as being some future state
and firewood as being some prior state.

Firewood is firewood,
with self-contained future and past.

(Although we say "future and past,"
these are actually quite separate.)

And ash is ash, with its own future and past.

Just as the piece of firewood that has burned to ash
will never return to being firewood,
a human being that has died
will never return to life.

This is why teachers counsel us to think of death
not as a consequence of life,
but rather as “un-life.”

And life not as a consequence of death,
but rather as “un-death.”

Life is a state that pertains when it does,
and death is a state that pertains when it does.

It's like winter and spring.

We don't think of spring as a “consequence” of winter,
or summer as a “consequence” of spring.

Gaining enlightenment
is like water cradling the reflection of the moon.

The moon remains dry,
the water unbroken.

However large and bright the moon,
it can be reflected in mere inches of water,
or in the dew on a reed,
or even in a single drop.

Man is no more ruffled by enlightenment
than the water is ruffled by the moon.
Enlightenment can no more be blocked by man
than the moon can be blocked by a dewdrop,
whose depth inevitably fits it to perfection.

Briefly or at length,
examine the expanse of the water;
observe the extent of the moon in the heaven.

Until reality permeates your body and mind,
you may feel that you grasp it completely.
Not until reality *does* pervade your body and mind
will you find that you do not.

Imagine looking out from a boat in the middle of the ocean,
no land in sight,
nothing but the curving horizon.

But we know the ocean is not really curved, nor straight.

Its aspects are boundless.

It is simply our eyes which, as of now,
cannot go beyond seeing it as curved.

A fish might see it as a palace, an angel as a jewel.

The same holds for everything.
Of all the many aspects of heaven and earth,
you see and understand only those
that you have developed the ability to.

Things are not merely curved or straight;
their features are countless, constituting entire worlds.
Realizing this is the key to grasping their nature.

This holds not just for objects around you,
but you yourself—or even a drop of water—as well.

Swim as it may, the fish finds no end to the sea.

Fly as it may, the bird finds no end to the sky.

For ages both have remained in their element.

Within it, they roam far or near, as the need arises.

Thus always fully engaged,
always fully living out their potential.

But separated from the sky, the bird would instantly perish.

Separated from the sea, the fish would instantly perish.

Obviously, the sea gives life to the fish.

And the sky gives life to the bird.

At the same time the bird gives life to the sky,

and the fish gives life to the sea.

Does it not then follow that life gives the bird to the sky?

That life gives the fish to the sea?

Carry this thought forward.
It applies to your practice, your enlightenment,
and your time on this earth.

You are not a bird that has managed to explore
the farthest reaches of its sky,
nor a fish that has managed to explore
the farthest reaches of its sea.

For then you would not find more paths to tread or places to rest.

When you find your place, rest there,
unfolding the puzzle.

When you find your path, travel it,
and the puzzle will unfold.

This place, this path,
is neither large nor small,
neither within nor without,
neither old nor new.

As you seek and find the true way,
apply each thing you learn,
refine each deed you perform.

Your sense that you have found the place and the path,
blurry at first,
will emerge and evolve.

Do not assume that the goal is a lesson knowable by the intellect.
Such “ultimate answers” may pass over mysteries
that perception cannot unfold.

Hōtetsu, head abbot at Mt. Mayoku, was fanning himself.

A monk approached and asked,

“They say the natural, constant wafting of the breeze
carries it everywhere.

So why is the Master fanning himself?”

The teacher replied,

“You may understand the natural, constant wafting of the breeze,
but not the meaning of it being carried everywhere.”

To which the monk asked,

“So what *is* the meaning of it being carried everywhere?”

But the master simply continued fanning himself.

In response to which the monk bowed deeply.

This story embodies the crux of my approach,
the key lesson we must pass on.

“I don’t need to fan myself,
since the constant wafting of the breeze
will carry it to me anyway.”

Saying this misses the meaning both of constancy
and of the natural wafting of the breeze.

In the holy mansion,
it is precisely thanks to the natural, constant wafting of the breeze
that the gilded earth unfolds,
its rivers glistening with nectar.

About Dōgen Zenji, Shōbō Genzō, and Genjō Kōan

Dōgen Zenji (“Zenji” meaning “Zen Master”) was a preeminent philosopher and religious leader in 13th century Japan. Born to nobility, he entered the priesthood as a youth, then in his early twenties embarked on a perilous ocean journey to China in a relentless quest for the truth. Succeeding there in answering life’s basic question, he returned to Japan, later founding Eihei-ji, a monastery in the mountains of current-day Fukui Prefecture, where he wrote and taught until his death in 1253. He is the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism in Japan.

A prolific, creative, and compelling writer, Dōgen’s magnum opus was Shōbō Genzō, the voluminous collection of essays known in English as “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye.” Of the various *fascicles*, as the essays were known, Dōgen placed special weight on *Genjō Kōan*, regarding it as the crystallization of his teaching, placing it first in the 75-essay version he is believed to have edited, and revising it immediately before his death.

The essay’s title, which I have rendered as “Unfolding Puzzle,” can be read in at least two ways: “the unfolding of the puzzle,” and “the puzzle of unfolding.” This essay is an ultimately succinct expression of Buddhism, presented in its first few paragraphs; goes on to give a blueprint for Buddhist study; proceeds to outline the fundamentals of the Buddhist view of existence, and concludes with a story reaffirming one of the key points of Dōgen’s teachings: although divinity (the breeze, in the story) intrinsically surrounds us, we must nevertheless make the effort (by fanning ourselves, in the analogy) to experience and fulfill it. We will refrain from providing any additional commentary because we think it’s not necessary; Dōgen’s work speaks for itself.

About this translation

Genjō Kōan has been translated into English at least half a dozen times by noted Dōgen scholars and Zen masters. Why another translation?

In *Genjō Kōan*, Dōgen was speaking directly to the people of his time, in terms they presumably found easily understandable. His words taught and inspired them. So a translation, as well, should speak directly to the people of *our* time, similarly teaching and inspiring them. Unfortunately, most existing translations mechanically replicate Dōgen's precise vocabulary and medieval syntax—often to the extent of incomprehensibility. They use Buddhist terminology that cloaks Dōgen's message. Inevitably, they include mistranslations. And the translators—in many cases faced with the daunting task of translating ten or a hundred times the amount of material in *Genjō Kōan*—understandably were not able to fully explore the meaning of each sentence, or find the best English to express its sense. For all these reasons, I felt a strong need for a translation into modern English, appealing to the contemporary Western spirit.

The present translation is based on scrupulous analysis of Dogen's original medieval Japanese, supplemented by insights from a number of commentaries, translations into modern Japanese, and other English translations.

About the translator

Bob Myers is a writer, translator, and software consultant currently living in West Hollywood, California, USA. Ohio-raised, Bob lived in Japan for more than fifteen years before returning to Los Angeles in 1999. He is fluent in Japanese and has been translating for more than two decades.

As a beginning student of Zen, Bob's interest in Dōgen was stoked by an English translation that led him to wonder: "What on earth could Dōgen really have been saying here?" He delved into the original Japanese text and a variety of commentaries, beginning a years-long process of wrestling with Dōgen and exploring approaches to translating him.

Bob is an avid student of neurotheology, the study of the relationship between religion and the brain, and authors a blog on the subject, Numenware, available at <http://www.numenware.com>. Bob is also the author of "Bobby and the A-Bomb Factory," a childhood memoir about growing up in the shadow of the Hanford, Washington nuclear facility in the 1950s.