

TRUTH UNFOLDING: TRANSLATION

When various things are Buddhist things, then there is wisdom and there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are sentient beings. When all things have no self, there is no delusion and there is no satori, there are no buddhas and there are no sentient beings, there are no beginnings and there are no endings. The way of the buddha inherently soars above such extravagance and austerity, uniting beginnings and endings, uniting delusion and satori, uniting sentient beings and buddhas. It is falling blossoms uniting love and sorrow, spreading weeds uniting indifference and dislike, nothing more.

If delusion is betaking oneself to practice and realize everything, enlightenment is everything moving ahead to practice and realize oneself. Buddhas are greatly enlightened about such delusion. Sentient beings are greatly deluded about such enlightenment. Some gain enlightenment atop enlightenment; some compound delusion amid delusion. Buddhas who are truly buddhas do not necessarily realize that they are buddhas. The fact remains, though, that they are illuminated buddhas and go on illuminating buddhahness.

While you may get closer to understanding by exerting body and soul to take in sights, or exerting body and soul to take in sounds, such is not the harboring of a reflection in a mirror, such is not water and moon. When one thing is illuminated others will be dark.

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. There may be pauses along this trail of enlightenment, stretching out its emergence.

People who start off by going out and looking for the dharma will only distance themselves from where it lies. Receive the truth innate in yourself, and you will instantly

assume the measure of the real person.

Sailing along on a boat, scanning the shore, you may mistake the land as sliding by. You need to focus closely on the boat to see that it's what's moving along. In the same way, surveying all things with body and mind in disarray, you may mistake your own mind and own nature as enduring. Focusing closely on your life and turning back within will clear up the notion that all things are without self.

Firewood turns to ash, which does not turn back again to firewood. But do not view the ASH as coming next after the FIREWOOD that comes first. FIREWOOD occupies the status of FIREWOOD in the world, coming first before coming next. It is disassociated from anything you may say precedes or follows it. ASH has the status of ASH in the world, coming next after coming first.

Life too is an ephemeral status; death too is an ephemeral status. Consider the example of winter and spring. We do not think of winter turning to spring, or speak of spring turning to summer.

A person gaining satori is like the moon nestling in water. The moon remains dry, the water unbroken. A broad, intense glow nestles in inches of water; the entirety of the orb and arching sky both nestle even in the dew on a reed, nestle even in a single drop of water. Just as the moon does not

pierce the water, satori does not rend the person. Just as the dewdrop does not obstruct the moon, the person does not obstruct satori. [One is] deep to the extent [the other] is high. The longer you probe the shallows and depths, the broader the moon you should discern in the heavens.

If you think that the truth you know already suffices, then that truth has not yet permeated your body and mind. Not until truth suffuses your body and mind will you find that part of it is insufficient.

Imagine, for example, looking out from a boat in the middle of the sea, no land in sight, nothing but the curving horizon. But we know the ocean is not really curved, nor straight. It has a boundless number of additional aspects. It could be a palace or a jeweled necklace. It is simply our eyes which at this moment cannot go beyond seeing it as curved. The same holds for everything. Whether amidst the grit or beyond the ordinary, of all the many aspects you see and understand only those that you have developed the ability to. You must realize things are not merely curved or straight; the features of land and sea are countless, constituting entire worlds. You must realize this holds not only for yourself, but for things beneath your feet as well, or even a drop of water.

Swim as they may, fish find no end to the sea; fly as they may, birds find no end to the sky. Yet fish and bird still remain

in the sea and sky as they have for ages. They simply make greater use of it when needs are great. They make lesser use of it when demands are less. There may be no creatures that do not thus fully explore their contour and no places where they do not rove, but birds would perish instantly if they left the sky, fish would perish instantly if they left the sea. Obviously with sea comes life; obviously with sky comes life. With bird comes life; with fish comes life. Obviously with life comes bird; obviously with life comes fish.

Beyond this there is an inevitable further progression. Such is the nature of practice/realization.

Yet were bird or fish to attempt to completely understand sea or completely understand sky before trying to move through sea or sky, they would not be able to attain their way or attain their place, in either sea or sky. This place, if attained, unfolds truth in accord with life there. This way, if attained, is truth unfolding in accord with life along it. This way and this place are neither great nor small, neither within nor without, neither already there nor yet to appear

In similar fashion, to seek and find the way of the buddha, learn a single thing and apply a single thing; engage a single deed and master a single deed. Here lies the place and here passes the way, blurry at first because they emerge and evolve as one exhausts Buddhist teachings. Do not assume that the goal is necessarily a lesson knowable by

one's own intellect. Ultimate answers may unfold instantly but not always unfold mysteries; how then can this be called unfolding?

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 come alive. "I don't need to use a fan, since even if I don't I'll be able to feel the breeze if it's really constant." Saying this misses the meaning both of constancy and of the nature of the breeze. It is this natural, constant breeze through the buddha's mansion that unfolds the gilding of the earth and transfigures the milky waters of the Great River.

Shobogenzo Genjo Koan Fascicle One

This was written around mid-autumn, the first year of Tempuku and given to lay student Koshu Yo of Chinzei.

[Revised in] the Mizunoe-ne year of Kencho.

TRUTH UNFOLDING: NOTES

This essay is one of Dogen's most important. He took pains to revise it before his death and placed it prominently at the beginning of *Shobogenzo*.¹ Given the title *Genjo Koan*, a newcomer to Dogen or Zen might think it was about koans, those Zen riddles such as "the sound of one hand clapping." People with some familiarity with Zen will have a more sophisticated understanding of koans, knowing them as stories or sayings traditionally used in study and practice. But whether they are riddles or didactic devices, why would Dogen write an entire essay about koans?

The answer is that Dogen is using *koan* in its original, broader sense of "unerring truth or principle." Originally it referred to a public notice, issued by the central government or other public authority; a public record, such as of a court case; or a magistrate's table. It thus gained the connotation of something of great authority or veracity, an immutable decree. In this translation we use the translation "truth."²

What precisely is this truth? Everyone reading this essay will have

¹ In the case of the 75-fascicle version. *Genjo Koan* comes third in the later 95-fascicle version, in which *Dialog on the Way of Commitment* comes first.

² Ideas from other translators include "universe" (Nishijima/Cross), "issue" (Cleary), "fundamental point" (Tanahashi), "suchness" (Waddell/Abe), and "absolute reality" (Cook). Augusto Alcade claims that "ko" means the absolute and "an" means the relative.

their own answer. Some will see Dogen describing enlightenment. Some will see him describing the process of getting there. A deeper understanding would synthesize the two, 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 paradox consumed Dogen from his early years, and was the existential question that motivated him to make his ambitious crossing to China at the age of 24.

In the essay, Dogen starts by describing the way of the buddha as a synthesis of prevailing worldviews; presents the steps in the progression toward it; examines the relationship between before and after, comparing them to fire and ash; describes enlightenment as something reflected in us like moon in water; ponders the interrelatedness of ourselves and our environment, birds and fish serving as metaphor; and concludes with a story about a stubborn old Zen master who insists on pushing air around with his fan even though a breeze is blowing all around him.

Woven throughout the essay is an important subtext: we cannot attain the way with our own efforts or faculties; we cannot assume we are the center of the universe; we cannot necessarily trust our perceptions, and we cannot succeed in intellectualizing our way to truth.

These, says Dogen, are the truths that “unfold.” “Unfold” is the first half of the essay's Japanese title, *genjo*, commonly translated as “manifest” or “realize.” It is constructed from two individual Sino-Japanese ideographs.

The first character, pronounced *gen*, originally evoked the luster of a gem, the radical (component) for which can be found at its left.³ This character's meanings include “appear,” “current,” “actual,” “present,” and even “reality.”

The second character, *jo*, depicts a semi-circular cutting instrument. From this comes the meaning of a repeated shaving motion, giving rise to senses including “take form,” “become,” “complete,” “make,” “develop,” “achieve,” “accomplish,” and “bear fruit.” (This wide range of

³ The right side is the character for “sight,” but in this case is providing only the phonetic value.

meanings is typical of Chinese characters.)

(Both the *gen* and the *jo* of *genjo* can refer to either the process or the resulting state. Thus *gen* can be either the appearance or the state of having appeared; *jo* can be either the becoming or the state of having become. To the Eastern mind the two overlap, are two sides of the same coin.)

The combined word *genjo* does not exist in contemporary Japanese.⁴ Its two component characters could combine in different ways: “appears and then takes form”; “the apparent takes form,” or “the forming appears.” Among commonly seen translations, “manifest” overemphasizes the “appearing,” while “realize” and “actualize” focus too heavily on the “taking form.” This translation uses “unfold” as the most succinct, balanced expression that encompasses both appearing and taking form.⁵

The final task is to combine *genjo* and *koan* into an English title for the essay’s title. (The result should ideally be able to function as either a noun or a verb, since Dogen uses it in both ways within the essay.) After selecting “truth” for *koan* and “unfold” for *genjo*, it is a quick step to “Truth Unfolding.” (“Unfolding Truth” or “Truth of Unfolding”⁶ would be additional possibilities.)

We now move on to the essay itself.

When various things are Buddhist things, then there is wisdom and there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are sentient beings.

Although this sentence is framed in a Buddhist perspective, it can easily be recast to give it a contemporary, Western tilt: “When you look at various things in religious terms, you see divine knowledge and prayer, life and death, and saints and sinners.” Dogen, in other words, is talking about a particular worldview called Buddhism, which, like any

⁴ In modern Chinese it has the unrelated meaning “ready-made.”

⁵ Yasutani, however, claims that *genjo* simply means phenomena.

⁶ Alternative views include Nishiari, in *Shobogenzo Keiteki*, who says that *genjo koan* means “everything in the world as it actually is.” He emphasizes the “public notice” etymology of *koan* and interprets it as “immutable decree from above.” Kim believes that *genjo koan* refers to a *koan* realized in everyday life, as opposed to *kosoku koan*, a *koan* for study.

worldview, calls out certain things, identifies them, and assigns them names. By “Buddhism” Dogen is referring not to the way of the buddha which he will go on to describe in the essay, but to Buddhism with a capital “B”: the prevailing religion of the time, and its doctrines. He is saying, in other words, that the application of Buddhist doctrines to the various things in the world gives rise to and promotes a variety of concepts. Dogen is not criticizing this view per se, but is preparing to say that it represents only one side of the coin.

This translation hews closely to Dogen’s original sentence structure.

“Things,” occurring twice in the sentence, is the Sino-Japanese character commonly rendered as *dharma*. By itself, *dharma* has a complex range of connotations, including phenomenon, law, truth, and doctrine. In conjunction with “various,” it simply refers to “various things.” In conjunction with “buddha,” it forms the word *buddhadharma*, which most commonly refers to Buddhist teachings or doctrine. This translation somewhat unconventionally renders this as “Buddhist things,” to tie together “various things” and “Buddhist things” in the same way that the appearance of the word *dharma* in both does in the original.⁷

The specific Buddhist concepts are presented as three contrasting pairs: wisdom vs. practice, life vs. death, and buddhas vs. sentient beings. Dogen is emphasizing how Buddhist theology *distinguishes* between the elements of these pairs.⁸

“Wisdom” is, in the original, a Sino-Japanese compound composed of two characters indicating delusion and enlightenment. The emphasis is not on the individual components or the dichotomy between them, but

⁷ *Buddhadharma* can also have the connotation of the “truth of the buddha” or “the law of the buddha.” Taking that interpretation would give rise to translations such as “when various things are the law of the buddha.” But this gives rise to two problems. First, how can things be the law of the buddha sometimes but not others? Second, shouldn’t all things be the law of the buddha, not just some “various” things? The first problem has led at least one popular English translation (Tanahashi) to try to dodge the inconsistency by switching from “when” to “as,” but that finds scant support in the original, commentaries, modern Japanese translations, or the following context. The second problem has led some translators to arbitrarily translate “various things” as “all things” (even though Dogen explicitly uses a different word in the very next sentence where he does actually mean “all things”).

⁸ Yasuda translates this passage as “can be clearly discerned” to emphasize the point about distinctions. (Kimura 2005) uses “complementarity of selfsame A and B.”

rather the concept bracketed by the two extremes—in other words, “wisdom.”

The lower-case “buddha” simply refers to awakened people. “Sentient beings” is used in the informal sense of non-buddhas, or ordinary people. The characters used to write this word could be literally transcribed as “hosts of the living.”

Dogen now proceeds to present a second, alternative worldview.

When all things have no self, there is no delusion and there is no satori, there are no buddhas and there are no sentient beings, there are no beginnings and there are no endings.

This sentence paints a nihilistic, content-less philosophy that strips the world of recognizable concepts. The “self” that things lack is the bundle of concepts and expectations that we possess regarding them—in other words, their identities.⁹ Dogen makes frequent reference to things’ selves in his writings.

“All things” here is literally “ten thousand *dharmas*,” where “ten thousand,” often translated as “myriad,” is used in the sense of “a great many.” (Compare this to “various things” in the preceding sentence, literally “various/many/several *dharmas*.”¹⁰)

The structure of the series of concepts in this sentence is, like the first, highly symmetrical, with three similarly contrasting pairs: NO confusion NO *satori*, NO buddhas NO sentient beings, NO growth NO decay. While in the first sentence Dogen paired wisdom (delusion/enlightenment) with practice, here he is pairing confusion and

⁹ Tanahashi uses “myriad things without an abiding self.” Cleary misreads the syntax as “when myriad things are all not self.” Waddell/Abe have “when all things are without self.” Nishijima/Cross have the garbled “when the myriad *dharmas* are each not of the self.” Masunaga gets a special prize for creativity with “when all things belong to the not-self.” A few translators assume that the *ware* or self must refer to the reader, leading to odd results along the lines of “when we have no self with all things.”

¹⁰ Some translators (Tanahashi, Cleary, Nishijima/Cross) do distinguish, although incompletely, between the two, using “all things” (or “all *dharmas*”) in the first sentence and “myriad things” (or “myriad *dharmas*”) in the second. In *Understanding Shobogenzo* Nishijima translates the first as “all things and phenomena” and the second as “millions of things and phenomena.”

Mizuno claims that “various things” refers to the four elements, five skandhas, and eighteen worlds. Nishiari and Yasutani both claim that “all things” is equivalent to “various things.”

satori, using native Japanese words for both.¹¹ While in the first sentence he paired life and death, here he pairs beginnings with endings.¹² Actually, the character for life and beginning is the same. This versatile character has a wide range of meanings also including “birth” and “arising.”

The way of the buddha inherently soars above such extravagance and austerity, uniting beginnings and endings, uniting delusion and satori, uniting sentient beings and buddhas.

Dogen now describes the true way—*butsudo*, the “path of the *buddha*.” It “soars beyond” the “extravagance” of Buddhist doctrine and the “austerity” of nihilism.¹³ It is a synthesis of the two prevailing, yet flawed, worldviews.

What the synthesis yields is presented as yet another triplet of pairs, but with a key difference: each is a single, two-character Chinese compound. For example, in contrast to the first sentence where we had “life and death,” or the second where we found “beginnings and endings,” in this sentence we encounter a compound which might best be rendered in English with a slash as “beginning/ending.” Dogen’s intent is to show that these are an indivisible, united pair. In the absence of a comparable lexical device in English, the translation conveys this explicitly by introducing the word “uniting.”

The specific concepts introduced in these first three paragraphs were by no means chosen lightly. In fact, they are precisely the topics Dogen

¹¹ A distinction which is lost if the two different sets of words are mechanically translated identically as “delusion” and “realization” as most translators do.

¹² These two characters are the same as those used, in negative form, in the firewood section to come, where they are translated “without beginning” and “without end.”

¹³ The “extravagance and austerity”—a single Sino-Japanese compound—has confused an entire generation of translators, who fail to link it to the excess of concepts in the first sentence and the poverty thereof in the second. At least two modern Japanese translations (Nakamura and Mizuno) simply take this as a general metaphor for opposites. Cleary thinks that the buddha way “sprang forth **from** abundance and paucity”, although this would seem to be a misreading. Tanahashi thinks that “the buddha way is...leaping clear of the many and the one,” while Waddell has “beyond any fullness and lack.” Bennett thinks this means “transcends unity and duality,” while Nishiyama/Stevens somehow believe that the buddha way transcends “**itself** and any idea of abundance or lack”; another translator thinks it transcends the relative and the absolute. Yasuda has “transcends nothing or something.”

will be addressing throughout the rest of the essay. And they are also closely related to each other. In fact, 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, death and buddhas on the other.

These first three sentences have been the subject of extensive analysis and commentary since first written more than seven hundred and fifty years ago.¹⁴

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

This synthesis, Dogen now says, applies not just to abstract concepts such as life and death, but to our everyday experiences—including a single pink cherry blossom drifting down to the ground. The marriage of love and sorrow in the scattering of the blossoms is itself the way of the buddha. There is no need here to cast about for analogies of flowers to enlightenment or weeds to delusion.

This seems like a fitting, even obvious, conclusion to the paragraph. Yet this sentence has tormented translators and commentators through the years. Superficially, it might appear that Dogen is abruptly switching gears from philosophy to an admittedly pretty metaphor about flowers and weeds (or grasses). The only transition is one of Dogen's verbal tics that literally means something like "and even if it can be said that it is

¹⁴ One commentator, a revered if opinionated Japanese Zen master, comments on the first sentence as follows. "This is the 'gate of setting up differences.' It's the relative position. But it's not the simple relative position that the unenlightened person sees. It's the relative position that has the absolute position as its ground. In other words it's the relative in the midst of the absolute. If we reduce this 'relative in the midst of the absolute' to 'affirmation with negation as its ground,' conceptually it seems easy to grasp, but that's a delusion.

"It's the absolute position. The absolute position definitely cannot be pictured in the mind of the unenlightened person. This, also, is not the simple absolute position; it's the absolute position with the relative position as its ground. In other words it's the absolute in the midst of the relative. If you express this 'absolute in the midst of the relative' conceptually as 'negation with affirmation as its ground,' it seems to give you the feeling of understanding, but that also, after all, is a delusion."

This would seem to be seriously overcomplicating the matter; it sounds like a graduate seminar on Eastern Philosophy. The reader is probably better off appreciating Dogen's clearly presented, compelling insights directly.

like the above". Many translations shorten this to "but" or "yet," giving the misleading impression that the flowers falling and weeds spreading somehow contrast with what was said in the previous sentence about the way of the buddha.

Compounding the mystery is Dogen's use of two unfamiliar compounds with reference to the flowers falling and weeds spreading. The first combines love with sorrow (or regret), the second abandonment (or resignation or indifference) with dislike. Failing to find any additional clues to work from, and in some cases misled by Japanese commentators, translators have interpreted the first as "attachment" and the second as "aversion."¹⁵

But why would Dogen would suddenly segue into a critique of attachment here, following his succinct description of the "way of the buddha"? The key to understanding the sentence is to realize that the two unfamiliar compounds in the original, the ones describing flowers falling and weeds spreading, serve to pair opposites (love/sorrow, indifference/dislike) in exactly the same way as the compounds in the previous sentence (beginning/ending). Dogen has adopted (or possibly invented) unfamiliar words precisely for this reason. The sentence, then, far from being a disconnected aside about attachment, is in fact an integral part of, a natural conclusion to, the entire paragraph.

If delusion is betaking oneself to practice and realize everything, enlightenment is everything moving ahead to practice and realize oneself. Buddhas are greatly enlightened about such delusion. Sentient beings are greatly deluded about such enlightenment. Some gain enlightenment atop enlightenment; some compound delusion amid delusion.

Dogen now turns immediately to the first of the pairs of concepts mentioned in the initial paragraph, to show us how his concept of synthe-

¹⁵ Yielding translations such as "flowers fall in attachment," "flowers fall amid our longing," or "flowers, while loved, fall" (although in all three cases, it almost certainly should be "blossoms," not "flowers"). Nishiyama/Stevens simply give with "people hate to see flowers fall and do not like weeds to grow." Some scholars believe that it is the attachment which *causes* the flowers to fall, the aversion which *causes* the weeds to spread. This interpretation may stem from an incorrect parsing of the Japanese *nomi* ("only/merely/simplely/solely"), as indicating that blossoms scatter *only* when we are attached to them. Some translators, including Tanahashi, omit this "simply".

sizing worldviews applies to delusion and enlightenment. He defines delusion and enlightenment, then explains how enlightenment is not separate from delusion but rather is about delusion; delusion is not separate from enlightenment but rather is about enlightenment. This paragraph boasts the extremely clean structure typical of Dogen, one that is not only esthetically pleasing but also helps to convey the message more clearly.

The slightly awkward “betaking” translates a Japanese word referring to carrying a relatively heavy object for some distance. “Practice and realize” translates the troublesome Japanese word *shusho*, the first part of which undeniably refers to practice or training, while the second, translated “realize” here, literally means proof or evidence (or, as a verb, prove, validate, or demonstrate).

Dogen is saying, in other words, that enlightenment is self-reinforcing, confusion self-perpetuating. In this he is echoing Jesus, who preached: “For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath.”¹⁶

Buddhas who are truly buddhas do not necessarily realize that they are buddhas. The fact remains, though, that they are illuminated buddhas and go on illuminating buddhanness.

“Illuminated buddhas” and “illuminating buddhanness” both use the *sho* word meaning witness, prove, enlighten, realize, or actualize. Translators have handled this in a number of ways.¹⁷

While you may get closer to understanding by exerting body and soul to take in sights, or exerting body and soul to take in sounds, such is not the harboring of a reflection in a mirror, such is not water and moon. When

¹⁶ Matthew 13:12.

¹⁷ Tanahashi gives “They are actualized buddhas, who go on actualizing buddhas.” Other translations include Waddell: “Yet they are realized, fully confirmed Buddhas—and they go on realizing Buddhahood continuously.” Nishijima/Cross: “They are buddhas in the state of experience, and they go on experiencing the state of buddha.” Cleary: “nevertheless it is realizing buddhahood—Buddhas go on realizing.” Nishiyama/Stevens: “However, they are still enlightened buddhas and continually realize Buddha.” Luetchford: “We are still buddhas, and we go on experiencing the state of buddha.” Bennett: “A truly enlightened Buddha expresses his Buddhahood in his daily life.”

one thing is illuminated others will be dark.

Elaborating on his counsel not to “betake” ourselves to practice and realize everything, Dogen now cautions against overdependence on our visual and auditory faculties. The mirror does not set out to find things to reflect, he says; water does not set out to find the moon. Self-initiated efforts will invariably end up focusing on one thing to the detriment of others.¹⁸

This interpretation, however, is one with which very few commentators and translators concur. Some believe that Dogen is telling us about how the buddhas from the previous paragraph perceive things. That, however, would seem to be excluded by the final sentence, the one about illumination and darkness; the unlikely implication would be that buddhas illuminate some things but are in the dark about others.

Other commentators—most, actually—believe that Dogen was telling us how we *should* perceive things, rather than how *not* to. But there is ample evidence to contradict this view. First, note that the well-known image of the moon in the water, which Dogen says our visual and auditory attempts at perception do *not* resemble, nearly always has positive associations.¹⁹ Second, the Japanese word used to refer to “exerting” body and mind can be construed as having a negative tone, as in “straining” or “struggling,” rather than the upbeat “unified” that many translators adopt.²⁰ Third, it would seem to be hard to interpret the final phrase/sentence about illuminating some things and leaving others in the dark as being positive.²¹ Fourth, there are syntactic clues in the sentence,

¹⁸ Indeed, scientists have recently found that sustained attention on an object impairs one’s perception of it [Ling, Carrasco].

¹⁹ Although opinions vary on this point, such as that of Nishiari Bokusan.

²⁰ The repetition of “exerting body and soul,” found in the original and replicated in the translation, also hints at straining. However, instead of “exerting” the Japanese could also be “raising (or engaging or mustering) body/mind”, as well as, arguably, “uniting body and mind,” “body and mind as one,” “whole body and mind,” “all our body and mind.”

²¹ Although that does not prevent many translators from doing so. Mizuno believes this refers to subject vs. object, giving an elaborate rendition: “If there is one side of seeing and hearing, it is not necessary to speak of being seen or being heard; when speaking of being seen or being heard, there is no need to speak of the subject seeing or hearing.” Murakami agrees, saying “subject and object are one, so attempts to know just one will result in the other disappearing.”

including a *but* (rendered as the initial “while” in the translation) in “...understand more closely, *but* such is not the harboring...” Finally, recall the earlier part of the essay where Dogen clearly cautioned us against “betaking oneself to practice and realize” things.

In conclusion, it seems indisputable that Dogen is in fact making a cautionary statement about unilateral attempts to understand the world via our visual and auditory organs of perception, as if reality was something “out there” that we could reach towards with light beams coming out of our eyes. Jesus taught something similar: “By hearing you will hear, and will in no way understand; seeing you will see, and will in no way perceive.”²²

“Sights” in the original is literally “colors”; “sounds” is “voices.”

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.

If reaching this state of synthesis—the way of the buddha—is not possible by means of watching and listening with our eyes and ears, then what is the right approach? Dogen lays out a simple roadmap. This passage has come to be perhaps the most widely quoted of any in Dogen’s writings, thanks to the unmatched economy and clarity with which it encapsulates the path of Buddhist spiritual development.

One common translation of the first sentence is “to study the buddha way is to study yourself,” differing both in sentence structure and in the choice of “study” instead of “learn.” With regard to the structure, “X means Y,” the approach taken here, seems closer to the meaning of the

Most English translators give more literal translations. Tanahashi thinks this phrase is connected to the previous and gives “Unlike things and their reflections in the mirror, and unlike the moon and its reflection in the water, when one side is illumined, the other side is dark.” Others include Waddell and Abe, who think we’re still talking about buddhas: “When they [buddhas] realize one side, the other side is in darkness”; also, “When one side is realized the other side is dark.” “When we affirm one side, we are blind to the other side”; “when one side is enlightened, the other side is dark”; “when you witness one side, one side is obscure”; “if you look at only one side, the other is dark”; “when we understand one side, the other side remains in darkness”; and “when we are experiencing one side, we are blind to the other side.”

²² Matthew 13:14.

original, which literally is “*saying X is Y.*” With regard to studying vs. learning, the original Japanese word²³ has a broad range of meanings, including “following” and “mastering.” “Learn” conveys this better than “study,” and also works better in opposition to “forget,” which comes up in the following sentence.

Some translations use “the self” rather than “oneself.” The original word,²⁴ however, is best thought of as having the everyday meaning of “oneself,” rather than referring to some specific Buddhist concept of “self.”²⁵

“Let all things illuminate you” involves the same *sho* character used in the statements about illuminated buddhas continuing to illuminate and about illuminating one thing while others are dark. It might also be “let all things bear witness to you.”

We now encounter Dogen’s renowned formulation “dropping the veil from body and mind.” It is said that Dogen achieved enlightenment at Mt. Tendo in China, where he was studying, when he heard his master Nyojo say to a fellow meditator who was nodding off, “Zazen is dropping the veil from body and mind,” perhaps slapping him at the same time with his slipper as was said to be his habit.²⁶

The phrase in question, *shinjin datsuraku* in Japanese, has, for the entire decades-long history of English-language Dogen scholarship, been translated consistently as “casting off body and mind,” with only minor variations such as “drop off,” “drop away,” “slough off,” “fall away,” or “shed.” But whatever the specific English words chosen, the phrase remains impenetrable. Is it really possible to lay aside our body, any more than we can drop off our mind (or spirit, soul, heart, or essence, which are other possible renderings of the Sino-Japanese character)? Is

²³ *Narau.*

²⁴ *Jiko.*

²⁵ Which would usually be *ware.*

²⁶ One theory is that Nyojo actually said “dropping the dust from mind,” and that this was either misheard by Dogen or inspired him to come up with his own formulation. That seems less than likely, however, since the two phrases are not homophonous in Chinese (although they are in Japanese).

this a statement of Zen philosophy so profound that only advanced practitioners can understand it?²⁷

That would seem unlikely. For instance, in *Dialog on the Way of Commitment*, an introduction to Zen explicitly addressing beginners, Dogen counsels us to “neither bow, nor chant, nor read sutras, nor engage in rituals, nor burn incense; simply sit and *shinjin datsuraku*.” In the current essay as well, he is introducing the concept in the context of an eminently straightforward series of steps of personal development.

To solve the mystery of what this phrase could mean, let us deconstruct it. First, we break it into the two words *shinjin* and *datsuraku*. Then we break each of those words into their individual constituent characters, analyze them, and put them back together to see what ensues. Finally, we examine possible meanings resulting from recombining the two words.

Shinjin is the easier of the two component words. It is made up of the characters for body and for mind, essence, heart, or soul. Combined, the meaning could be “body and mind,” “body/mind,” or possibly “body vs. mind.”

The *datsu* of *datsuraku*²⁸ can mean take off, strip off, peel off, or remove (including clothing); escape, break out, release, or extricate; get rid of; or be left out. The character is said to derive from the image of re-

²⁷ Consider, for example, the following explanation by a respected Zen teacher (private communication). ‘*Shinjin* used in *shinjin datsuraku* signifies the locus of the illusory phenomenal experience or the *nirmanakaya* in forgetfulness of *sambhogakaya* and *dharmakaya*. It is the world of experience that arises through the superimposition of false predications or false thoughts upon the whole field of *nirmanakaya* that is ontologically grounded in *dharmakaya* and constitutes a whole with *dharmakaya* and *sambhogakaya*. Therefore, in the context of Zen and Dogen's teaching, “body-mind” or “bodymind” is not an incorrect translation. If one wants to be precise, the “body” (*kaya*) is the gestalt of physical geometrization, while the “mind” is the gestalt of thought/mentation arising from a complex of false predications which is superimposed on the whole process of geometrization [...] In the experience of spiritual awakening or enlightenment, this whole process of superimposition drops out or is cast off, and the triune constitution of wholeness, that is *nirmanakaya-sambhogakaya-dharmakaya*, in its wholeness shines forth.’ Note that *nirmanakaya*, *sambhogakaya*, and *dharmakaya* are elements of a Hinayana doctrine known as *Trikaya*, which holds that Buddha has three aspects or “bodies.”

²⁸ *Datsuraku* exists in contemporary Japanese, but means to miss the cut (for a sports team), fall out of contention (in a political race), or be left out (as a page from a book), meanings that are not very helpful here.

moving a piece of meat from the enclosing hide. The “escape” meaning (which is related to the other meanings in that it is you yourself being extricated, from a situation) seems implausible here; what would it mean to “escape and fall”? More likely are the meanings of undress, remove, or get rid of; think of pulling off one’s shirt and dropping it on the floor. *Raku* is straightforward: it simply means fall, drop, tumble, slide, sink, land, or decline (although it can also mean fall behind or leave behind.) We can therefore tentatively gloss *datsuraku* as “removing and dropping.”

Together *shinjin datsuraku* thus indicates that the body and mind, or body/mind is involved somehow in something being removed and dropped. The common wisdom is that it is body/mind itself which is being removed and dropped, that it is, in grammatical terms, the direct object of the removing and dropping. This is what yields the traditional translation of “cast off body and mind.”

There are clues, however, that this popular interpretation might be wrong. Dogen celebrated body and mind. For example, just a few sentences later in this very essay, he refers to “truth permeating the body and mind.” Are we to cast off that which truth permeates? Moreover, he described the layout of Eiheiji by referring to the *sodo* (monks’ hall, where they meditated, ate, and slept) on the left as providing nutrition for the mind, the *kuin* (kitchen) on the right as providing nutrition for the body. Is he counseling us to cast off the very body and mind for which the monastery was architected to provide nutrition? Finally, Dogen devoted an entire fascicle of *Shobogenzo*, called *Shinjin Gakudo*, to a discussion of the path of body/mind-based learning. How does one learn with body and mind if they are cast off?

To resolve these kinds of inconsistencies, commentators have adopted a variety of tortured interpretations. One commentator puts words in Dogen’s mouth, ending up with the formulation “letting go of the body/mind *that is not your own*.” Another imagines, essentially, that Dogen omitted the equivalent of the word “bad” before body/mind, that he was really just talking about casting off some bad, pre-enlightened body and mind, and that after enlightenment you’ll get a new, shiny,

improved one. Yet another holds that Dogen was talking about casting off the body and mind of the self, rather than some other body and mind—one presumably not of the self.

To find the solution requires exploring other possibilities, such as that Dogen is saying not to cast off body and mind themselves, but to cast off something else *with* body and mind; to cast something off *in a way* which is bodyminded; or to cast something *away from* body and mind.

There are two final clues in this particular case. The first is that here Dogen adds “of oneself” and “of others’ selves” as qualifiers to body/mind. This only deepens reservations about the “casting off body and mind” formulation; I may be able to cast off my own body and mind, but how could I possibly cast off somebody else’s? Again, commentators have developed elaborate, but ultimately unconvincing explanations to resolve this inconsistency. For instance, some say that Dogen is talking about eliminating or conflating the physical and mental aspects of objects around us. But if someone else’s body and mind are involved, not only does the hypothesis of body and mind as direct object (“cast off body and mind”) not make sense, but neither does that of body and mind as instrument (“cast off something *with* body and mind”), since I cannot cast something off or do anything else with someone else’s body and mind; nor that of body and mind as modality (“cast off in body/mind fashion”), since I cannot cast off something in the fashion of someone else’s body and mind. We are left with the final alternative: casting something away from body and mind. This makes perfect sense in the context of Dogen’s self/other distinction. We can indeed remove whatever it is from both our own body/mind and that of others.

Second, whereas elsewhere in his writings Dogen typically uses the four-character compound form *shinjin datsuraku*, leaving us no explicit clues as to the relationship between *shinjin* and *datsuraku*, here he uses the two words within a sentence, providing us with some additional syntactic hints about their relationship. It is noteworthy that he avoided the obvious, direct syntax he could have chosen had he wanted to say the equivalent of “cast off body and mind.” Instead, he chooses a more roundabout syntax which can be rendered literally as “with regard to

your own body and mind and that of others.”

It appears clear, then, that the intent is to strip off or remove something covering body and mind. But what? The answer is implicit: it's whatever is doing the covering—the cover, or veil. We thus arrive at the translation “dropping the veil from body and mind.” Far from being a loose, interpretative translation, this corresponds almost perfectly, literally, character-for-character to the original: *body-mind-unveil-drop*.

Future scholarship, of course, could well “unveil” other, more compelling meanings.

There may be pauses along this trail of enlightenment, stretching out its emergence.

Along this path, however, there may be detours, Dogen says, and the overall process is thus one that may take time.

However, once again commentators' opinions on the meaning of this sentence diverge. The original for “trail” in “trail of enlightenment” is a word which could just as easily mean “trace,” “mark,” “impression,” “remnant,” or “vestige.” The original for “pause” is a word which could also mean “cease.” “Stretch out its emergence” is an unfamiliar word, which character by character means “long-long-emerge,” interpreted by some as “eternal” or “never-ending.” Combining these alternatives can yield completely different translations such as Yasutani's “the traces of enlightenment come to an end, and this traceless enlightenment is continued endlessly.”²⁹

²⁹ Other translations include “No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly” (Tanahashi); “All trace of enlightenment disappears, and this traceless enlightenment continues on without end” (Waddell/Abe), unfortunately not matching the original, which says what is continuing is the trace, not traceless enlightenment, and does not contain the word “all”; “When you have reached this stage you will be detached even from enlightenment but will practice it continually without thinking about it” (Nishiyama/Stevens), which is completely made up; “There is ceasing the traces of enlightenment, which causes one to forever leave the traces of enlightenment which is cessation” (Cleary); “There is [also] remaining content with the traces of enlightenment, and one must eternally emerge from this resting” (Cook); “There is a state in which the traces of realization are forgotten, and it manifests the traces of forgotten realization for a long, long time” (Nishijima/Cross); “[Then] we can forget the [mental] trace of realization, and show the [real] signs of forgotten realization continually, moment by moment” (Nishijima); and the creative “It means wiping out even attachment to Satori. Wiping out attachment to Satori, we must enter actual society” (Masunaga). Mizuno, in her modern Japanese translation, gives the equivalent of “the traces of enlightenment go into a state of complete rest, and those completely resting traces of enlight-

Note, however, that the entire paragraph so far has been a clear progression, each sentence sharing a common structure and delineating one step in the sequence. That this sentence completely departs from that structure suggests that it is not describing another step, but rather commenting on the entire progression to date, which would support an interpretation of trail rather than trace. Second, the sentence in question involves syntax which does not mean just “there *are* [pauses]”, but rather “there *may be*” or “there *sometimes are*.” In other words, it is discussing something that happens only in some cases. These are the factors behind the translation presented here.

People who start off by going out and looking for the dharma will only distance themselves from where it lies. Receive the truth innate in yourself, and you will instantly assume the measure of the real person.

Dogen now repeats, for the third time, that truth (*dharma*) is not something to be found through ego-directed search.

Many translators imagine Dogen is saying that beginning seekers are far from the truth.³⁰ But the original is clear, if read carefully: the distancing from the truth is not, of course, something inherent in beginners, but rather is the fault of starting off with ego-driven pursuit of the truth. As the eighth-century Buddhist scholar Shantideva wrote: “Those seeking to escape from suffering hasten right toward their own misery.”³¹

Sailing along on a boat, scanning the shore, you may mistake the land as sliding by. You need to focus closely on the boat to see that it’s what’s moving along.

Dogen now invites us out for a sail. Perhaps he was recalling the initial leg of his trip to China in 1224, along the Inland Sea of Japan from

tenment continue as is forever.” Nakamura tries “There are not even any traces of enlightenment. That continues to be the case forever.”

³⁰ The problem is the word *hajimete*, which can mean “first time” and which many translators therefore assume refers to beginners, but can also mean “at first,” referring to how you start your quest to find the dharma, as confirmed by modern Japanese translations. Incorrect English translations include Cleary, with “when people first seek the Teaching, they are far from the bounds of the Teaching.” Tanahashi tries to wiggle his way out by adding the word “imagine” (“you imagine you re far away”) which is unfortunately not found in the original.

³¹ A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life, I:28.

Kyoto to Hakata, where the shore would likely have been in constant view to the right. In this compelling real-world analogy, he likens our tendency to self-centric views of the world to the common illusion that a moving vessel you're riding in constitutes a fixed point of reference.

An anecdote attributed to Ludwig Wittgenstein, the great twentieth century philosopher who has been compared to Dogen, comes to mind. "I've always wondered why," he once asked a friend, "people have always thought that sun rotated around the Earth." His friend replied, "Well, obviously that's because it *looks* that way." Wittgenstein's response: "But what would it have looked like if the Earth was rotating around the sun?"

In the same way, surveying all things with body and mind in disarray, you may mistake your own mind and own nature as enduring. Focusing closely on your life and turning back within will clear up the notion that all things are without self.

"Clear up the notion that all things are without self" is the opposite of what most translations say. Most give something equivalent to "clarify the idea that all things are without self."³²

The sentence in question is clearly discussing everything being without self; that is beyond dispute. The issue is whether it's a "notion" that needs to be "cleared up," as translated here, or a "truth" that "becomes evident." Let's marshal the evidence pro and con. Lexical clues are sparse. The word translated here as "clear up" can indeed also have the nuance of "clarify" or "reveal." And the word translated as the somewhat pejorative "notion" can in fact also mean "idea" or "concept" (and can also, depending on the context, be "assertion" or "teaching"). However, it sometimes comes with a slight negative tinge, as in "preconception," "abstraction," or "supposition."

Looking at the context, however, we first note that this formulation is very similar—nearly identical, actually—to that in the second paragraph

³² For instance, one popular translation has "it will be clear that nothing at all has unchanging self," which omits "principle/idea/notion" and adds "unchanging." Other attempts include "all things have no selfhood," "myriad dharmas are not self," "things are not self," and "things have no permanent self."

of the essay (p. 11). There, recall, viewing things as without self was something Dogen was holding up as a nihilistically flawed, or at best one-sided, approach to the world, one of two aspects to be synthesized into the way of the buddha. It is therefore highly implausible that he would be presenting that here as something we need to see clearly.

Second, remember that the analogy is to a boat which superficially seems to hold constant position, but on closer examination proves to be moving. Corresponding to the moving boat, Dogen says, is our mind and nature. The shore being “scanned,” which initially appears to move but then is seen to be fixed, corresponds in the analogy to the “all things” being “surveyed.” The conclusion is that the “all things” are in fact fixed like the shore. This corresponds to all things having, rather than not having, a “self” or “identity”. The notion that they do not, in other words, is what is cleared up by focusing closely on your life and turning back within, thus discovering that it is your mind and nature which are in flux.

What is translated here as “focusing closely on your life and turning back within” uses two unfamiliar words: literally, it reads “become close to *anri* (practice, [daily] life, or deeds) and [thus?] return to your *kori* (origin/right here/where you are/within you).”

Firewood turns to ash, which does not turn back again to firewood.

Dogen now directs his focus to the second of the pairs of concepts he introduced in the initial paragraph—life and death, beginnings and endings. He presents a metaphor involving that most mundane of daily necessities in thirteenth century Japan, the firewood essential to cooking and heating, and how it burns down to ash.

But do not view the ASH as coming next after the FIREWOOD that comes first. FIREWOOD occupies the status of FIREWOOD in the world, coming first before coming next. It is disassociated from anything you may say precedes or follows it. ASH has the status of ASH in the world, coming next after coming first.

ASH and FIREWOOD are capitalized here to show how in the original they are written using *kanji* characters, in contrast to the first sentence,

where they are written in native Japanese.³³ It's somewhat of a mystery what Dogen intended to accomplish with this device. Perhaps he was just trying to introduce stylistic variation in the text. Perhaps he was trying to distinguish between the native Japanese *takigi* for firewood, which may refer more to small branches and twigs gathered from the forest, and *maki*, one reading of the Chinese character, which tends to refer to prepared firewood. (Most texts give the *takigi* pronunciation in small letters (*furigana*) next to the Chinese character, but that may have been added by a later copyist.) Perhaps he was using the Chinese character to evoke associations with the firewood found in various Chinese Buddhist writings, where it is a common analogy for life; firewood running out can be a metaphor for death, or enlightenment. Perhaps he was using native Japanese to refer to the firewood itself and the Chinese character to refer to the concept of firewood.

“Firewood occupies the status of firewood in the world” is literally, “firewood resides in the dharma position (or ‘phenomenal expression’) of firewood;” the same for “ash” later in the paragraph.³⁴

Just as firewood, having turned completely to ash, cannot return to firewood again, a person, having died, cannot return to life.

Dogen now returns to using native Japanese for firewood and ash, and we therefore return to lower case.

It is up to the reader to decide whether Dogen here is talking about life and death itself, or is using it as a metaphor. Although in general we need to resist the temptation to over-interpret what Dogen is saying, here he may well be talking about practice. That would make sense, considering that this section directly follows one talking about “focusing closely on your life” and “turning back within.” Specifically, Dogen may be comparing firewood (life) to one’s pre-focused self, fire to practice, and ash (death) to the results of the process. After practicing, one never

³³ This point seems to have been overlooked by virtually all translators.

³⁴ (Kimura 2005) uses “dimensionality.”

“Existing before and existing after,” translated here as “from beginning to end,” is amenable to an alternative parsing of “a beginning exists and an end exists,” which is adopted by many translators, but seems unlikely to have been what Dogen was trying to say.

“returns” to one’s pre-practice self. Yet the pre-practice self and post-practice self are both there all along.

Yet it is established dogma in Buddhist theology that life is not held to turn to death; thus they refer to “without beginning.” It is an established Buddhist teaching that death does not turn to life; thus they refer to “without end.”

Nishiari comments that this section is extremely difficult, that it has been the subject of spirited commentary over the years, and that he himself failed to understand it for many years, imagining that Dogen must have gotten “without beginning” and “without end” backwards. Another commentator declares that he is sure that without beginning and without end are in fact reversed, but that it doesn’t really matter since this is describing such a state of consciousness so advanced that it’s all the same anyway.

The difficulty is most likely due to a failure to realize that Dogen is criticizing the official Buddhist stance. It might seem implausible that Dogen would actually criticize Buddhist teachings (*buddhadharma*, as in the very first line of the essay). But actually his writings are filled with such criticisms, including an implicit one in the very first line of this essay. Here, he is calling illogical the official Buddhist stance that life does not turn to death; of course it does. The doctrine is illogical that death does not turn to life; of course it does. As Mark Twain famously said, “I was dead for billions of years before I was born, and it caused me no great inconvenience.” The application of terms such as “without beginning” to life (or perhaps to death; the translation preserves the ambiguity), or “without end” to death (or perhaps to life), he seems to be saying, are not helpful. In other words, Dogen says, it is not surprising if you (like Nishiari) have a hard time understanding such theological concepts.

(“Without beginning” and “without end” use the same characters found in the initial paragraph of this essay, but with the negative prefix *fu*.³⁵ The resulting terms can both be found in the Chinese version of the

³⁵ Translators take a variety of approaches to the negative *fu* prefix, including “not,” “un,” and “non.” Japanese and Chinese have a number of such negative prefixes, including *mu*, *hi*, and

Heart Sutra. “Beginning” is the character for life, arising, growth, emergence, the same used earlier in the paragraph, where it was translated as “life” in the context of a human being. “End” is the character for death, extinction, or destruction.)

“Buddhist teaching” is literally “Buddhist turning of the dharma wheel,” a common expression referring to the preaching and propagation of Buddhism.

Life too is an ephemeral status; death too is an ephemeral status. Consider the example of winter and spring. We do not think of winter turning to spring, or speak of spring turning to summer.

Life, like firewood—the “too” is explicably omitted from several popular translations—is evanescent.³⁶ So is death, like ash.

The English expression “turn to” found throughout this section is the translation of the Japanese term *naru* used consistently by Dogen to characterize the relationship between firewood and ash, life and death, and the seasons. The dictionary tells us that this word means “become.” But *naru* has a range of subtle nuances which the English “become” fails to adequately convey. When we say “A becomes B,” we usually think of A assuming the *nature* of B. With *naru*, on the other hand, the flavor is that A retains its essence while assuming the *form* of B. There is also a touch of destiny and finality inherent in *naru*. This can best be seen in the reference to the seasons, where some translations have Dogen stating that “we do not think of winter as *becoming* spring.” But in English that is precisely what we think! What we do not think of is spring retaining its essence as it assumes the form of summer, or summer being the purpose of spring. In this translation, *naru* has consistently been translated as

mi, and distinguishing among them is no easy task. Generally speaking, *mu* emphasizes lack of existence, *hi* focuses on difference, and *mi* on lack so far. *Fu* can be said to emphasize the lack of an attribute—in this case, beginning or ending.

³⁶ “An expression complete this moment” according to one translation, or “an instantaneous situation” according to another. However, the Japanese *ichiji*, lit. one-time, has more of a nuance of “temporary” or “provisional” than “instantaneous” or “this moment.”

“turn to” in an attempt to more effectively convey these nuances.³⁷

A person gaining satori is like the moon nestling in water. The moon remains dry, the water unbroken. A broad, intense glow nestles in inches of water; the entirety of the orb and arching sky both nestle even in the dew on a reed, nestle even in a single drop of water. Just as the moon does not pierce the water, satori does not rend the person. Just as the dewdrop does not obstruct the moon, the person does not obstruct satori.

This meticulously constructed paragraph may be one of the most succinct, compelling and poetic ruminations on *satori* found anywhere in Buddhist literature.

The moon in the water is a powerful, recurring motif in Buddhist literature. In the eighth century, Zen Master Hsuan Chuen of Yung Chia, a student of Daikan Eno, wrote in *The Song of Enlightenment*: “It is easy to recognize images in a mirror, but who can grasp the Moon from the Water? The One Nature perfectly pervades all others. The One Dharma enfolds all other dharmas. The One Moon is reflected by all waters,” while Dogen himself, of course, devoted an entire fascicle (*Tsuki*) in *Shobogenzo* to the moon. James Austin, an eminent student of the neurobiology of Zen, believes, based in part on personal experience, that the image of the moon describes a specific visual aspect of the experience of *satori*.³⁸ Outside of the Zen tradition, haiku poets such as Buson have also celebrated the moon’s reflection in water: “Escaped the nets/Escaped the ropes/moon on water.” The moon would have been full the evenings of the mid-autumn days when Dogen dipped brush in ink to write this essay.

One existing translation simply has “enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water.” Unfortunately, nothing in this translation but the moon and the water matches the original. First, the original explicitly refers to a *person* and to his or her *gaining* of *satori*, elements which certainly should be preserved in translation. Second, the target of the

³⁷ Other translators use a variety of constructions for this, such as, in addition to “become,” “turn into,” “pass into,” or “change into,” and for the reverse process (here “end up again”) “return,” “revert,” and “go back to being.”

³⁸ [Aus 2006], p. 406.

analogy—what the gaining of *satori* is being compared to—is not the moon, reflected or otherwise, but rather the *fact* of the moon’s nestling in the water, the nestling itself. Third, the original clearly has the moon “nestling” (or “resting,” “being harbored,” or “being cradled”; less poetically, “being housed” or “being stationed”) rather than “reflected.” One does wish translators would take more care with such important passages.

[One is] deep to the extent [the other] is high.

This sentence is difficult, and translations diverge. The original makes no explicit mention of the moon, water, *satori*, or person, leaving the reader to make those connections. This translation mirrors the original in omitting these concrete references.³⁹

The longer you probe the shallows and depths, the broader the moon you should discern in the heavens.

Virtually every element of this sentence is subject to multiple interpretations, which has yielded a bewildering variety of translations (one translator simply omitted it, perhaps wisely).⁴⁰ The original says literally “long-short of time (subj.), study big-water small-water, should/must determine moon’s width-narrowness.”

Interpretations of the reference to time in this sentence range from the duration of the reflection, to the speed of the arrival of enlightenment or the length of time it persists. This translation assumes that it refers to the inspection or probing process—in other words, the length of practice.

³⁹ A number of translations attempt to provide unwanted help by inserting words not present in the original. Examples include “the depth of the drop is the height of the moon”; “the deeper the moonlight reflected in the water, the higher the moon itself”; and “depths of the dewdrop cannot contain the heights of the moon and the sky” (although that translation seems to reverse the meaning). One contemporary Japanese translation inserts words from the *satori*/person side of the analogy with “the depth of your self-knowledge is invariably the magnitude of the height [of the dharma].”

⁴⁰ One popular translation imagines that instead of probing bodies of water of various sizes, or determining the width of the moon, what is involved here is “manifesting” the “vastness” of the dewdrop and “realizing” the “limitlessness” of the “moonlight in the sky.” One is at a loss where to start in analyzing this fanciful translation. The original does not refer to a dewdrop, but simply bodies of waters large and small; contains nothing that could be construed as “manifesting” them or their “vastness”; fails to refer to “realizing”; and talks about the moon, not moonlight.

If you think that the truth you know already suffices, then that truth has not yet permeated your body and mind. Not until truth suffuses your body and mind will you find that part of it is insufficient.

The words “suffice” and “suffuse” in the translation here are an attempt to reproduce a stylistic feature of the original where the Japanese for the two words⁴¹ share a character component.

Imagine, for example, looking out from a boat in the middle of the sea, no land in sight, nothing but the curving horizon. But we know the ocean is not really curved, nor straight. It has a boundless number of additional aspects. It could be a palace or a jeweled necklace. It is simply our eyes which at this moment cannot go beyond seeing it as curved. The same holds for everything. Whether amidst the grit or beyond the ordinary, of all the many aspects you see and understand only those that you have developed the ability to. You must realize things are not merely curved or straight; the features of land and sea are countless, constituting entire worlds. You must realize this holds not only for yourself, but for things beneath your feet as well, or even a drop of water.

Dogen now takes us on another boat ride, this one in the middle of the ocean. Here he may be recalling his open-ocean crossing of the East China Sea in 1224, where he would have been out of sight of land for nearly the entire three-week voyage. His point is to emphasize the subjective and partial nature of our vision, in particular with regard to the topic just discussed—our knowledge of our own level of the truth.

The reference to palace and jeweled necklace is an allusion to a sage in Buddhist literature.⁴² A fish—swimming through the water—would see it as a palace, an angel—floating above it—would see it as a jeweled necklace; and, although not mentioned here, a devil would see it as pus and blood.

“Amidst the grit or beyond the ordinary” is a four-character Chinese compound. Translations vary.⁴³

⁴¹ *tareri* and *juusoku*.

⁴² Asvabhava’s commentary on Asanga’s *Treatise on Emerging Mahayana*.

⁴³ (Kimura 2005) has “in the realms of samsara and nirvana.” Tanahashi has “dusty world and world beyond conditions.” Nishijima/Cross: “in dust and out of the frame,” which literal if slightly infelicitous, commenting that this refers to the secular world vs. the world experienced in the Buddhist state.

Swim as they may, fish find no end to the sea; fly as they may, birds find no end to the sky. Yet fish and bird still remain in the sea and sky as they have for ages. They simply make greater use of it when needs are great. They make lesser use of it when demands are less.

Dogen now introduces a double analogy involving fish and birds and sea and sky, as a vehicle for discussing ourselves and our environment.

Is some distinction between fish and bird implied? The fish, in Buddhism, signifies fearlessness and happiness, swimming as it does freely and spontaneously through the ocean of suffering, suspended effortlessly, eyes always open. There is also the *mokugyo*, or wooden fish, a roundish, hollow percussion instrument used in Mahayana Buddhism as an accompaniment to group chanting, or as a signal to start and end meditation sessions. Another type of wooden fish may be hung either in front of the *kuin* (dining hall), where it is struck to call monks to a meal, or in the *sodo* (monks' residence hall), as at Eihei-ji, where the fish in question measures a massive twelve feet in length.

Birds have been favored topics of analogies by spiritual leaders, poets, and writers throughout the ages. Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns."⁴⁴ The historical Buddha reportedly compared monks to birds: "Just as a bird takes its wings with it wherever it flies, so the monk takes his robes and bowl with him wherever he goes." William Blake explicitly associated flight with detachment: "He who Binds Himself to a Joy/Does the winged life destroy/He who kisses the joy as it flies/Lives in Eternity's sunrise." Perhaps Dogen was associating a bird's two wings with the two worldviews he presented in the initial lines of the essay. Perhaps the ocean represents suffering and the sky liberation. But this is all mere speculation.

What are the "needs" and "demands" referred to here? Two contemporary Japanese translators think it means the need to move around. Others take different approaches.⁴⁵ This translation treats the original

⁴⁴ Matthew 6:26.

⁴⁵ Tanahashi has "When their activity is large their field is large. When their need is small their field is small," but the first "activity" seems questionable, it's hard to see where "field" comes

fairly literally.

There may be no creatures that do not thus fully explore their contour and no places where they do not rove, but birds would perish instantly if they left the sky, fish would perish instantly if they left the sea.

The “contours” in question here could be either those of the creatures or of the space in which they find themselves, an ambiguity preserved in the translation. However, other translators have different ideas about this sentence.⁴⁶

Obviously with sea comes life; obviously with sky comes life. With bird comes life; with fish comes life. Obviously with life comes bird; obviously with life comes fish.

This paragraph bears the hallmarks of Dogen’s obsessively elegant prosodic structure. To make the point here that bird, fish, sky, sea, and life stand in an intimate interrelationship, he employs a compact Chinese construction,⁴⁷ rendered here as “with A comes B” to precisely mimic not only the four-beat cadence of the original but also its internal structure, something that is possible thanks to the relative syntactical

from, and the “simply” in the original is missing. Masunaga has “When their need is great, there is great activity. When their need is small, there is small activity,” conflating the two words used in the Japanese into the single English word “need” and also forgetting “simply.” Cook sticks closely to the original, with “It is just that when there is a great need, the use is great, and when there is a small need, the use is small,” finally picking up the “only” in the original Japanese that other translators inexplicably skipped over. For “use,” another translator has “function.” Nishijima has an interesting twist: “The more [water or sky] they use, the more useful it is; the less [water or sky] they need, the less useful it is.” This is similar to Nishiari’s commentary.

⁴⁶ Tanahashi gives “each of them totally covers its full range, and each of them totally experiences its realm, eliminating Dogen’s double negative, substituting “range” for “contour” (which also could be “edge” or “boundary”), repeating “totally” in the second phrase even though the original contains no such word, and replacing “rove” (an obscure two-character compound meaning literally “step-fly” with “experience.” (Kimura 2005): has “they always reach the furthest bound of the moment, and explore the whole distance of the moment,” introducing the concept of moment. Nishijima/Cross also depart substantially from the original, with “none fails to realize its limitations at every moment, and none fails to somewhat freely at every place,” successfully if awkwardly preserving the double negative, but getting most of the rest of the sentence wrong. Neither translation manages to connect to the following phrase about fish and birds dying if they leave their environs.

⁴⁷以○為○.

closeness of English and Chinese.⁴⁸ The overall translation here also follows the structure of the original closely, particularly with regard to Dogen's use of "obviously," or "you should know."

Beyond this there is an inevitable further progression.

The progression mentioned here may refer to an extension of the analogy, or to the progress of the student (or creature), or both. Most translators assume the first.⁴⁹ The translation presented here is quite faithful to the original, preserving whatever ambiguity it contained.

Such is the nature of practice/realization.

There are two fundamentally differing interpretations of the overall thrust of this essay. One holds that Dogen is conveying the way he sees reality, the other that he is conveying the way he sees spiritual development. Obviously the two are intertwined. But in many regards the second interpretation would seem a better fit. Here Dogen explains why he has introduced the analogy of birds and fish: it can be applied, he says, to our own practice. Dogen is equating the movements of the bird and fish with practice and the sky and sea with enlightenment. He is saying that no matter how vast the sky or ocean, the bird must still flap its wings, the fish wiggle its fins. There is, however, another potential interpretation: that the nature of practice/realization lies in the progression itself.

A phrase that follows "practice/realization" in the original has been omitted in the translation here due to its obscure nature. It is a four-letter Chinese compound, and thus probably a reference to something in Buddhist literature, possibly one of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras. It's composed of two pairs of ideograms, "longevity/happiness+person/thing" and "life+person/thing." where the character

⁴⁸ Many translators (Tanahashi, Nishijima and Cook) use "X is Y," Waddell/Abe "X means Y," Jaffe "because of X there is Y." (Kimura 2005): "X constitutes Y."

⁴⁹ Sample translations include Tanahashi: "it is possible to illustrate this with more analogies." Masunaga: "You probably will be able to find other variations of this idea among men." Nishiyama/Stevens: "Many more conclusions can be drawn like this." Cleary: "There must be progress beyond this." Cook: "Besides these [ideas], you can probably think of others." Nishijima: "There may be other expressions that go even further." Jaffe: "Besides this we could proceed further." Waddell/Abe: "We could continue in this way even further." Nishiari, however, interprets the "progress" as our own progress towards buddhahood.

used for “life” has connotations of limited duration as well as destiny and fate, but also can mean “decree.” Some translators conflate the two to their ostensibly shared meaning of “life.” Others imagine a contrast being drawn between long life and short life. Perhaps Dogen is referring to the relatively short, one- or two-year lifespan of birds compared to that of fish, some specimens of which have been known to live for a hundred years or more. However, it’s unclear why Dogen would emphasize lifespan in this particular context.⁵⁰

Yet were bird or fish to attempt to completely understand sea or completely understand sky before trying to move through sea or sky, they would not be able to attain their way or attain their place, in either sea or sky.

The creatures, however, do not have the luxury of trying to figure out everything about their surroundings before they set out, and in the same way humans can ill afford to wait until they’ve got everything figured out before starting practice.

For “completely understand” the original uses a term which literally means “take to the limit,” but often has the meaning of understanding in depth, as it does here.⁵¹

For “attain (their way and place),” many translations use “find.” But this carries the potentially unfortunate connotation of there being a path or place “out there” somewhere that one’s self sets out to find—something Dogen has recommended against more than once in the essay so far. The original Japanese is the same as used earlier in the passage “a person gaining *satori*,” and can mean obtain, get, earn, acquire, receive, or benefit from, as well as learn (as in obtaining knowledge). “Gain,” however, does not work very well with the English “place” and “way.”

⁵⁰ Some translators focus on the “person” meaning of the second character in each pair. Tanahashi has simply “people,” Waddell “all that is possessed of life,” Jaffe “lives of people,” Cook “long and short lives,” Cleary “the existence of the living one.” Murakami renders this as the equivalent of “lives transcending long and short are realized.” Mizuno has “lifespan” (*jumyou*).

⁵¹ Other translators interpret this more literally. Tanahashi has “Now if a bird or a fish tries to reach the end of its element before moving in it”; Nishijima/Cross have “a bird or fish that aimed to move through the water or the sky [only] after getting to the bottom of water or utterly penetrating the sky, could never find its way or find its place in the water or in the sky.”

For these reasons this translation uses “attain.”

Japanese has no plural forms. Therefore, in theory it could be, and perhaps should be, “ways” and “places.”

A minor point: the phrase “completely understand sea or completely understand sky” seems repetitive and awkward, with “sea and sky” repeated yet another time at the end of the paragraph. But Dogen, for whatever reason, made the stylistic choice to make this repetition in the original, and the translation reflects this choice.

This place, if attained, unfolds truth in accord with life there. This way, if attained, is truth unfolding in accord with life along it. This way and this place are neither great nor small, neither within nor without, neither already there nor yet to appear, thus is it so.

The way and the place—it doesn’t really matter, in some sense, whether Dogen is still taking about birds and fishes here, or is addressing the reader⁵²—are where truth unfolds and is unfolding. “Truth unfolds” is a verbal form of *genjo koan*. “Truth unfolding,” of course, is precisely *genjo koan*.

“Life” here is *anri*, the same word encountered in the first boat ride, where Dogen counseled us to focus closely on our life. As mentioned in the notes on that passage, its somewhat obscure meanings can include practice, daily life, and deeds.

“Not yet to appear” is interpreted by many⁵³ as “not now appearing,” but this is clearly wrong.

In similar fashion, to seek and find the way of the buddha, learn a single

⁵² Other translations switch to talking about “you” and “us” here. Tanahashi gives “When you find your place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point.” However, the original has no “where you are,” and even assuming “practice” is a valid translation for *anri* it is unclear why this would be “practice occurs” rather than “in accordance with practice.” He continues “When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point;” but again “at this moment” is nowhere in the original, and he has completely ignored Dogen’s elegant stylistic device of using *genjo koan* in both verbal and nominal forms. Nishijima/Cross attempt to use “action” for *anri*, forcing them to interpret the finding as the action in question, with spotty results: “When we find this place, this action is inevitably realized as the Universe. When we find this way, this action is inevitably the realized Universe [itself].”

⁵³ For example, Tanahashi’s “not merely arising now” (although the original has no “merely”), or Nishijima/Cross’s “do not appear in the present.”

thing and apply a single thing; engage a single deed and master a single deed.

The fish and bird, navigating their way through their element, are models for us as we “seek and find” (*shusho*, or practice/realization) the way of the buddha. The process is incremental: we learn things and apply them as we do so, we engage in acts and master them as we do so. The original takes the form of pair of six-character Chinese phrases, insinuating that Dogen is quoting from Chinese literature, but in this case we do not know the source and face the usual difficulties in interpretation. “Learn” is the term often used in contexts such as gaining enlightenment; “thing” is *dharma*, which, as we have seen, has a plethora of meanings;⁵⁴ “apply” is sometimes translated “penetrate” and can have the meaning of delving into or understanding deeply, but also indicate doing something thoroughly—in other words, applying it.⁵⁵

Any or all of the occurrences of “single,” the translation used here for the character “one” in the original, might refer to a unique, unitary thing or deed rather than individual things or deeds. For instance, the two occurrences of “single” in the first phrase could be describing a unitary *dharma*, those in the second a series of individual deeds.⁵⁶ The English translation is designed to preserve this ambiguity.

Here lies the place and here passes the way, blurry at first because they emerge and evolve as one exhausts Buddhist teachings. Do not assume that the goal is necessarily a lesson knowable by one’s own intellect. Ultimate answers may unfold instantly but not always unfold mysteries; how then can this be called unfolding?

Dogen again refers to the official Buddhist teachings of the day

⁵⁴ One dictionary lists senses including custom, practice, code of behavior; obligation or mission; social order or system; good, or good behavior; truth or incontrovertible meaning; basis of the universe; religious obligation; method of realizing truth; teaching; true nature or characteristic; and tenet. And those are just the meanings not specific to Buddhism; there may be a score or more additional senses of the word in Buddhist theology.

⁵⁵ One translator has “Meeting one thing is mastering it—doing one practice is practicing completely.” (Kimura 2005): “learning one principle, mastering that principle; meeting one practice, realizing that practice.”

⁵⁶ One commentator thinks it has the first meaning in the earlier part of the initial phrase and the second in the later part: “gain the unitary *dharma*, penetrate each individual *dharma*.”

(*buddhadharma*) he mentioned in the first sentence of the essay, and the need to move beyond, or exhaust, them. Most translators, however, fail to capture Dogen's distinction between the official Buddhist line and the way of the buddha he teaches. Instead of "exhaust Buddhist teachings" one translator thinks that we need to "master" them; another that we need to "perfectly realize" them. In fact, Dogen lived in a time when Buddhism was, in the form of many sects, a widely popular religion and he preached against its rigid doctrines, much as Martin Luther taught against Catholicism three centuries later.

In the last sentence of the paragraph, Dogen denigrates so-called timate answers, the intellectual lessons he referred to in the previous sentence, which one can jump to quickly but leave real questions unanswered.⁵⁷ The final "unfold" in the sentence uses an alternative character for *gen*, "see" instead of "appear." It is unclear what Dogen was trying to accomplish by using that character; perhaps this is merely a copying error. In any case, the same character is used to write *genjo koan* in the colophon.

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.

The essay now comes full circle with this compelling analogy⁵⁸ involving Hotetsu,⁵⁹ an eighth century Chinese master and student of Baso. The analogy concerns enlightenment vs. practice, the very same pair of concepts Dogen highlighted in the first line, and promised, implicitly, to show us how his way of the buddha synthesizes and integrates. Roughly

⁵⁷ Most translators miss this, one imagining that "ultimate answers" is "experience of the ultimate state" which is "realized at once."

⁵⁸ From Shinji Shobogenzo, pt. 2, no. 23.

⁵⁹ Magu Baoche in Chinese.

speaking, the breeze corresponds to enlightenment, the fanning to practice. The master is saying that although the wind blows constantly it is still 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.

According to Christian scripture, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? Can faith save him?” “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”⁶⁰

The monk presents his question in Chinese, indicated here by capital letters. The Chinese given as “eternally abides,” in reference to the wind, is a technical Buddhist term, literally “always resident,” often translated into English as “never-changing,” “permanent,” or “ever-present.”

Dogen employs an intriguing stylistic device here to highlight the distinction between formalistic and personal understanding. In the monk’s first question, the use of Chinese, here translated character-for-character, evokes a scripturalist nuance. When Hotetsu responds, however, at least in Dogen’s retelling of the story, he uses the native Japanese constructions “constant” and “nowhere it has never reached,” using direct, everyday language to convey a direct, everyday experience. In the monk’s follow-up question, he once again uses the Chinese formulation NO PLACE NOT VISITED, indicating that he is still stuck at the formalistic level of understanding.⁶¹ The master helps him break through his fixation by simply continuing to fan himself silently. The monk’s response was to clasp his hands in veneration, but the term in the original could also be interpreted as doing prostrations or bowing deeply.

Such is the experience that validates Buddhist doctrine, its true message come alive. “I don’t need to use a fan, since even if I don’t I’ll be able to feel the breeze if it’s really constant.” Saying this misses the meaning both of constancy and of the nature of the breeze. It is this natural, constant breeze through the buddha’s mansion that unfolds the gilding of

⁶⁰ James 2:14 and 2:26.

⁶¹ No existing English translations succeed in bringing across this nuance.

the earth and transfigures the milky waters of the Great River.

In a final reference to Buddhist doctrine, Dogen makes the point that its real essence is this interplay between practice and enlightenment. He connects to popular conceptions of Buddhism with the mention of the gilded earth, which refers to the Amida Sutra, where Gautama taught: “Also, Shariputra, in Amitabha (Amida) Buddha’s land of Ultimate Bliss, there is always heavenly music playing. Moreover, the ground is made of gold, and flower petals float down from the skies six times every day.” Dogen was appealing to his readers’ familiarity with Pure Land Buddhism, newly popular in his day, for which this is one of the key scriptures. In other words, we can read Dogen’s words as saying: “here is the real way to get to that gilded earth your holy writings talk about.” The transfiguring of the milky waters is also a scriptural reference, to the Flower Garland Sutra that served as the chief text of the Kegon School, a dominant form of Buddhism in Japan at the time, where it is written, “The light of this great jewel solar matrix, when it shines on seawater, turns it to milk; the light of the great jewel removing moisture, when it shines on the milk, turns it to cream; the light of the great jewel flame light, when it shines on the cream, turns it to butter; the light of the great jewel thorough exhaustion, when it shines on the butter, turns it to ghee, blazing like fire, consuming it without remainder.”⁶²

“Milky waters” in our translation corresponds to “milk” in the translation just quoted. The original is an obscure word said to refer to some liquid of a milky nature, which is then “transfigured”—“ripen” would also be possible—but Dogen does not specify into what, most likely assuming his readers know the reference to cream.⁶³

⁶² Cleary, p. 1000.

⁶³ Many translators have made their own guesses. Nishijima/Cross have “ripen into curds and whey,” claiming the substance in question was a “kind of edible dairy product, like yogurt or cheese,” but whatever it is the original syntax would indicate it is the pre-ripened, not post-ripened state. Waddell/Abe have “ripens the sweet milk,” Cleary “develop into butter,” Tanahashi “make fragrant the cream,” Jaffe “turn into sweet cream,” Nishijima (from “Understanding the Shobogenzo”) “ripens into delicious cheese,” Nishiyama/Stevens “causes to flow with sweet, fermented milk,” Masunaga “ripens the rivers to ghee.” The translators using “ghee” or “butter” or “curds” apparently assume that that must be what a milky substance can ripen into, but the process of making butter is not one of “ripening.” Mizuno says that this sentence means “ripening the milky substance (into reality).” Our translation follows Nishia-

“Great River” may refer to the Yangtze (Chang Jiang) River, which flows symbolically from Tibet across China, emptying into the East China Sea near where Dogen studied. It could equally well refer to all the great rivers of the world.

Shobogenzo Genjo Koan Fascicle One

This was written around mid-autumn, the first year of Tempuku and given to lay student Koshu Yo of Chinzei. [Revised in] the Mizunoe-ne year of Kencho.

Mid-autumn would have been the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, corresponding to mid to late September in our modern calendar; the year this essay was written, this day would have fallen on or near September 20. The first year (and only) year of the Tempuku era was 1233. Chinzei is current-day Kyushu, the southernmost of the four major islands constituting the Japanese archipelago. Kencho is a Japanese era which began in 1249. *Mizunoe-ne* refers to the 49th year in a 60-year cycle used in the Orient to count years; in this case, it corresponds to 1252, the year before Dogen’s death.

ri’s commentary, which emphasizes that the rivers are already filled with some kind of milky substance, which practice etc. (the breeze) then gives a superior taste.