

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 living
and the dying
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.

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 to find 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 task of translating ten or a hundred times the amount of material in *Genjō Kōan*—understandably were not able to exercise adequate care in exploring the meaning of each sentence, or finding 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 intense 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-born, Bob lived in Japan for a total of more than fifteen years before returning to Los Angeles in 2000. Fluent in Japanese, he 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 how to translate 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.