Article

Zazen and Self as Environment

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Abstract: The teachings of Eihei Dōgen Zenji (1200–1253) emphasize a non-instrumental orientation to zazen as “practice-realization”, which might be described as a single movement of purposeful action and actualization of aims. Yet the question remains, if zazen is not in some sense a set of clearly defined steps toward specific ends, exactly how are its benefits manifested, and why would Dōgen place such an elusive approach at the centre of practice? In the following, I will discuss how Dōgen’s conception of practice does not necessarily function as a prescriptive methodology leading to specified results, but might better be described as an orientation to everyday experience that facilitates a comprehensive integration of physical and perceptual interactions within shared environments. Any sense of the utility or benefit of zazen is inseparable from reference to these relations within specific contexts of practice. Exploring close parallels between Dōgen’s conception of universal self (jiko) and gestalt theory, particularly as it is referenced in ecophilosophy and sociomaterial practices literature, suggests ontological and ethical implications of “practice-realization” from contemporary secular perspectives.

Keywords: zazen; Dōgen; ecophilosophy; sociomaterial practice; Zen Buddhism; gestalt ontology; theories of self

1. Introduction

What is meditation good for? Eihei Dōgen Zenji, through his use of the term “practice-realization”, emphasized zazen as a non-instrumental practice, focused on the immediacy of one’s perceptions and actions as they unfold in specific circumstances (Dōgen 2013, pp. 12–14). Shikantaza (“just sitting”) is, as twentieth century Sōtō priest Kodo Sawaki puts it, “useless in terms of being utilitarian or beneficial to you or society” (in Uchiyama 2004, p. 155). Yet forms of meditation bearing the influence of Dōgen’s teaching are to be found in a wide range of contemporary sources, including mindfulness apps, corporate and organizational training programs, and in the medical professions (Grieve and McGuire 2019; Purser 2019; Raski 2015). If zazen is useless, why do we keep using it? What is it being used for?

It is understandable that contemporary practitioners and scholars have an interest in questions of the more utilitarian or quantifiable aspects of Buddhist philosophy. How, for example, can contemporary interpretations of Mahayana Buddhist principles support psychological and physical well-being, social justice, or current concerns with ecological devastation? To better understand what Dōgen’s conception of zazen is “good for”, it is necessary to explore how it functions in a more holistic sense. If we accept certain interpretations of Dōgen’s account of what constitutes self and other-than-self, further specification of utility can only occur through the direct experience of actualizing the practice—not necessarily as a set of applied methodologies, but as engagement with various phenomena within a specific context. The “content” of one’s life then shapes what zazen is, just as zazen might influence our perception of and response to what we experience. Such an interpretation begins to suggest deeper levels of ontological and ethical orientations implicit in Dōgen’s philosophy, which are predicated not only on attentive sensitization to experience as it unfolds, but on the de-centring of self within a context of activity, other beings, and various elements of environment.
In the first part of my discussion of Dōgen’s philosophy, I will rely predominantly—although not exclusively—on the interpretations of twentieth century Sōtō priest and Dōgen scholar Kosho Uchiyama. Of particular relevance for the following discussion is Uchiyama’s unique and prolonged interest in the meaning of *jiko* (self) in key Dōgen texts such as the *Shobōgenzō* ("The True Dharma-Eye Treasury") and, especially, the *Tenzo Kyōkun* ("Instructions for the Cook"). According to Uchiyama, Dōgen uses this term to convey a self that is individuated yet also whole or universal (Uchiyama 2004, pp. 27–31). As I hope to relate, it is Uchiyama’s exposition of this term that can plausibly provide a direct connection, through Deep Ecology literature, to twentieth century gestalt theories that have developed independent of Buddhist philosophy yet convey surprisingly compatible accounts of how diverse beings exert and absorb influence within shared environments. Uchiyama, conversant as he was in western philosophy, psychology, and contemporary culture in general, serves to bridge the distances between these perspectives and the 12th century Zen practice of Dōgen.

In the first part of my discussion, I will focus on the relationship between zazen and Dōgen’s conception of practice-realization; this will serve as a basis for discussion of his *Tenzo Kyōkun* ("Instructions to the Cook"), which emphasizes zazen not only as a specialized form of sitting meditation, but as a broader orientation toward all life activities. This will be further amplified by clarification of Dōgen’s use of the word *jiko* (self), which carries various implications of a self that is synonymous with activity and what is encountered in direct experience. In the second part of my discussion, I will survey the intersection of Dōgen’s view of self-as-activity and self-as-environment with two trajectories of gestalt theory, one leading to the intensive examination of Dōgen’s thought in early Deep Ecology literature, and the other leading to parallels in recent scholarship in sociomaterial practices. Part three will provide a summative discussion of these views in terms of agential potentials within everyday activities.

My intention is to outline how Dōgen’s view of practice-realization does not separate self-actualization from environmental, economic, and sociopolitical context, and how his conception of self-cultivation can lead to engagement with, rather than avoidance of, uncomfortable truths in ourselves and in the world around us. It is not necessarily important that norms derived from Zen Buddhism, gestalt theory, or sociomaterial practice are reproduced, but rather how they might lend understanding to the directly observable consequences of our being in a shared world of evolving conditions. These combined perspectives suggest how we ourselves, just as all factors of any environment, evolve in a dynamic of mutual influence. An important intersection of Dōgen’s philosophy and gestalt theory is that both can be plausibly interpreted as being grounded in the workings of everyday conditions in which our lives unfold. The immediate and particular is emphasized over abstract generalizations: how does one manifest one’s perceptions and values in this situation? We do not need to be experts or specialists in any field in order to look to our own lives and judge for ourselves what validity these views might hold. Dōgen’s self-as-other and self-as-environment, as the locus of diverse possibilities of perception and action, is inseparable from the specificity of immediate circumstances. Although no condition may be inherently ideal, the possibility of agential action is always to some degree available to us.

2. Dōgen and Zazen

Eihei Dōgen Zenji (1200–1253) is generally acknowledged as establishing the Sōtō lineage of Zen Buddhism in Japan. He originally trained as a monk in the Tendai and early Rinzai Buddhist schools in Japan, but, dissatisfied with the quality of instruction, travelled to China to study in 1223. He received dharma transmission from Tiantong Rujing, a teacher in the Caodong (Japanese: Sōtō) school, and upon returning to Japan in 1227, established a teaching style in keeping with the Caodong prioritization of zazen as a central activity around which temple activities were organized. Not only was Dōgen a prolific writer who left a detailed record of his teachings (including codifications of temple
practices), but there is also a parallel contemporaneous record of Dōgen’s instruction from students such as Koun Ejō (Dōgen and Ejō 2004). This combination of materials offers a comprehensive body of work from which to cross-reference the intentions and approaches comprising Dōgen’s philosophy and practice.

Dōgen’s central contention was that zazen practice was inseparable from enlightenment, yet zazen was not to be viewed as an instrumental means to this end. The Caodong school relied on a form of zazen called mokushō (“silent illumination”), an approach based on the premise that all beings are innately enlightened, and that this state can be realized through the maintenance of attentive consciousness while sitting in the zazen posture (Gu 2021, p. 11). Although this view was not held by all schools of Zen Buddhism, the differences between schools were not always so clearly delineated. For example, Linji (Japanese: Rinzai), a contemporary rival school, emphasized kōan study, or the contemplation of paradoxical phrases, but this was often done in the context of intensive zazen as a means of non-discursive, fully embodied concentration (Foulk 2015). Dōgen, for his part, recognized the instructional value of deep contemplation of classic kōan “cases”, going as far as to present Rujing’s instruction to “just sit” as a kōan in itself (Foulk 2015, p. 11).

Despite these shared approaches, the philosophical implications of the Sōtō and Rinzai teaching styles reveal some genuine differences. Mokushō was sometimes characterized by proponents of the Rinzai school as ineffectual because it was too unfocused or lax (Bowring 2019, p. 935), whereas Dōgen generally subscribed to the Caodong perspective that the Rinzai emphasis on kōan and kenshō (a breakthrough realization experience) too heavily implied an erroneous duality between enlightened and un-enlightened states, or artificially codified stages of practice that contradicted the notion of the innately enlightened state of all beings.

One of the problems Dōgen observed with mokushō was that the presumption of such an innate state of enlightenment could, if taken to its logical conclusion, invalidate the necessity of training practices of any kind, but it was clear that something was required in order to fully experience this state and manifest it in one’s life activities. Although never repudiating silent illumination outright, Dōgen’s distinct form of zazen, shikantaza (“just sitting”) slightly modified this orientation by equating practice with realization, or zazen itself as the manifestation and expression of one’s innate buddha-nature and buddha-consciousness, rather than zazen (or any other training practice) as a means of achieving these states (Ishii n.d., pp. 3–4).

It should be noted that different schools of Zen often shared common sources as inspiration for diverse practices, and that approaches within the same schools could also be varied. As Sōtō historian T. Griffith Foulk (n.d.) points out, the development and spread of Zen Buddhism has always been complex, with “official” histories in different schools often failing to account for the intricate ways in which local political and socio-economic influences have been interwoven with the proliferation of certain teaching styles. As Foulk (n.d.) notes, this situation renders assertions of “pure” or “true” practice somewhat questionable, including Dōgen’s assertions of Caodong-derived methods as embodying the essence of Buddhist teachings (para. 6). Caodong, just as the Tendai school that was dominant in Japan during Dōgen’s lifetime, was itself an evolving combination of diverse practices, and often shared with rival schools common historical sources for teachings (Foulk n.d., para. 22). For example, both kōan study and mokushō were in part inspired by the work of Tang Dynasty Zen monk Dongshan Liangjie (807–869), whose poem “The Five Ranks” explicitly concerns the nature of the relative and absolute. Even lineages within the Sōtō school might favour either the “The Five Ranks” or Dōgen’s Sshōdōgenzō as foundational texts. This nuanced divergence of interpretation might ultimately be seen not so much as contested best practices, but as variant possibilities toward the ultimate aims of Zen Buddhist practice—cutting through conditioning and conceptualizations to directly access experience as it unfolds. As Norman Fischer (2011) explains in his own commentary on Dōgen’s Genjokōan: “Dōgen, in effect, is saying in this text, ‘You don’t need to go out and find a Zen story in order to do this. In fact,’ as he is saying here, ‘living every moment
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of time as a human being is already a kōan. You don’t need a Zen story from Chinese lore. All you need to do is look and see what it means to live every moment of time.” (para. 4).

In contrast to a more commonsensical understanding of methodology, where desired results are arrived at through prescribed actions, Dōgen (2013) asserted that practice and realization were one and the same activity, manifested by assuming the posture and mental orientation of zazen (p. 12). Dōgen did not posit such realization as a permanent state, but rather as a certain quality of ongoing awareness of the fundamental relations of phenomena as they are experienced. Such interdependence of phenomena is characterized in the earliest Buddhist scriptures in terms of “emptiness” or “aggregations”, both of which denote evolving somatic, cognitive, and environmental conditions, or “self” and “world”, as an ongoing coalescence and dissolution of elements (Uchiyama 2004, p. 97). The practice and realization of zazen may best be understood as a first-hand investigation into the nature of such relations as they are perceived in our direct experience.

Twentieth century Dōgen scholar and priest Kosho Uchiyama sought to demystify Dōgen’s approach to zazen by describing how embodied experience can be differentiated from ideas about embodied experience: “The actuality of the world that I live in and experience is not merely a conglomeration of abstractions” (Uchiyama 2005, p. 26). According to Uchiyama, this also applies to the abstractions commonly used to describe elements of Buddhist practice itself, including speculations regarding states of enlightenment, concentration in activity, or “oneness with all things.” To counteract such habituated recourse to abstraction, Uchiyama (1973), rather than positing what one is supposed to experience, instead describes Dōgen’s approach to zazen simply as a baseline of wakeful attentiveness to which we might return from the inevitable distractions, inattention, and daydreaming that arises during any activity (p. 33). This description stands in contrast to a view of zazen as a specialized activity that will enable us to reach an imagined ideal state of quiescence or equanimity, and, incidentally, in contrast to conceptions of zazen as a means attaining an enlightened state or somehow transforming an un-enlightened state into an enlightened one.

2.1. Shikantaza and Locus of Practice

Dōgen’s (2013) instructions for sitting meditation are notable for balancing directives for mental attitude and physical posture with directives for the general organization of conditions within the practice environment (pp. 10–12). In this sense, Dōgen emphasizes something like a unified context of practice, in which somatic, psychological, environmental, and material concerns are part of an indivisible whole. His statement “mind and environment are one” can shift one’s sense of what is implied by the word dōjō or “place of practice”—the self, just as much as a geographical location or temporal circumstance, might be recognized as something like a defining framework of realization as much as the egoic subject who experiences enlightenment (Uchiyama 2005, p. 110).

Dōgen’s (2017b) instructions for formal sitting meditation are intended to minimize environmental distraction and discomfort, emphasizing a neutral space that is neither too warm nor cool, bright nor dark (pp. 225–26). Within this setting, a stable bodily posture is maintained by means of the full or half-lotus position in combination with the use of a meditation mat and cushion (zabuton and zafu). Once in a settled state, one breathes naturally and faces either towards the centre of the meditation hall or the wall (depending on temple customs), maintaining a natural flow of breath and an alert yet relaxed downward gaze. With respect to mental orientation, Dōgen’s term “practice-realization” (sometimes rendered as “practice and enlightenment are one”) conveys the essence of his teaching: zazen practice is not an instrumental means of achieving enlightenment, but rather, enlightenment is actualized simply in the form of the activity of zazen itself. Dōgen (2017a) illustrates this point by reference to the traditional story of Nangaku and Baso, where Baso asserts that he is sitting zazen to become a Buddha, and Nangaku responds by pretending to polish a tile in order to make a mirror. In response to Baso’s mystification as
to how polishing a tile will result in a mirror, Nangaku replies “How can sitting in zazen make you a Buddha?” (pp. 118–19).

2.2. Zazen and the Tenzo Kyôkun

Dôgen’s Tenzo Kyôkun (“Instructions to the Cook”) discusses zazen in two distinct ways, as both formal sitting meditation and, in a broader way, as everything that one encounters in daily affairs, including what we experience in regular social relations and work-related activities. The Tenzo Kyôkun is on one level a literal codification of management duties for the cook in Zen Buddhist monasteries but is also clearly intended as an amplification of Dôgen’s principles of practice in relation to the contingencies we encounter outside of formal meditation. To provide some context for this document, before Dôgen’s influence, the role of the tenzo in Japanese monasteries had become one of more straightforward resource and kitchen management (Uchiyama 2005, pp. 14–15). Dôgen, profoundly influenced by two encounters with tenzos during his studies in China, sought to eliminate strict distinctions between specialized formal practice and the necessary practical activities supporting formal meditation and temple life in general. The work of the tenzo was not a light responsibility—temples at the time could have dozens or even hundreds of visitors and resident practitioners, which required constant assessment and management of material resources (p. 4). In Dôgen’s conception of the role, the tenzo was expected to model the full scope of practice-realization through intensive involvement with all aspects of food preparation and coordination of meals, demonstrating a highly sensitized yet decisive approach to work activity—and by extension, all life activity—as a teaching in itself (pp. 10, 84). Dôgen is clear in that the supposedly “mundane” reality of what we do every day is inseparable from the pursuit of spiritual insight, summing up that “The way-seeking mind of a tenzo is actuated by rolling up your sleeves” (in Uchiyama 2005, p. 5). Dôgen is primarily concerned with the cultivation and expression of attentional care in both perception and activity, not just as a philosophical orientation but with reference to specific material conditions and circumstances as they arise. Deane Curtin (1994) explains Dôgen’s approach in this way: “Nirvana is not reached suddenly at the end of a process that leaves daily life behind; it is realized in mindful, everyday action” (p. 202).

Because Dôgen’s perspective is equally informed by the Mahayana doctrine of non-discrimination and Liangjie’s inquiry into the nature of the relative and absolute, the phrasing in the Tenzo Kyôkun can sometimes convey a certain ambiguity regarding categorical states that are commonly differentiated, such as spiritual/ secular, self/ environment, self/ other, and living/ inanimate. With reference to spiritual versus secular activity, Uchiyama (2005) emphasizes Dôgen’s perspective that if enlightenment were only available to spiritual professionals, “Zen would have no connection with people who devote most of their time and energies just to making a living” (p. 53), which, presumably, would account for most people in any given community. Although Uchiyama’s choice of the word “religion” may be ill-advised in the context of Zen Buddhism, with its possible associations with the worship of divine beings or states of being separate from the worldly self, his intention seems to be to re-inscribe this term as meaning something like reverence for all aspects of our everyday existence:

The wonderful point of Dôgen’s practice of zazen is that it is religion which must function concretely in one’s daily life. He taught through the office of the tenzo, which he felt to be indispensable in a Buddhist community, and which requires physical work, because he felt that zazen as religion must never be relegated to those seeking to indulge in some rapturous state of mind. (p. 53)

Dôgen extends such non-discrimination to all elements of common experience, which is inevitably comprised not only of our thoughts, sensory perceptions, and feelings about things, but of relations between actual living beings, inanimate objects, physical activities, and materials. In tandem with such non-discrimination is Dôgen’s levelling of an implicit “hierarchy of care”, including a hierarchy of care distinguishing elements of the natural world from objects of human manufacture, as evident in his exhortation to treat a single
leaf of a green “in such a way that it manifests the body of the Buddha”, or a cooking pot and water as “one’s own head” and “lifeblood” (in Uchiyama 2005, pp. 6–8). Elsewhere, Dōgen (quoting earlier Buddhist texts) explicitly conflates “mountains and grasses” with “fences, tiles, and pebbles” (Dōgen 2013, p. 126), refusing to judge their worthiness as manifestations of buddhahood based on whether they can be categorized as elements of the “natural” world or as “artificially” crafted materials or objects. Dōgen’s softening of such categorizations as human/non-human and living/inanimate echoes elements of animist belief that no doubt would have been part of Shinto and Japanese folk culture in Dōgen’s time. Festivals such as Hari-Kuyo (“Broken Needle Festival”), for example, are rooted in a similar sense of care and gratitude for tools and awareness of how they have benefitted people (Kretschmer 2000, pp. 379–404). As I will relate in the second part of my discussion, this view is also consistent with certain contemporary non-Buddhist views, such as Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess’s (1989) suggestion of replacing the term “biosphere” with “ecosphere” in his Deep Ecology platform, by which he hoped to convey the complex interrelationship between entities we commonly think of as living, and environmental factors generally considered distinct from living beings, such as minerals, nutrients, rocks, air, and water (p. 29). Although Naess does not go so far as to include the plethora of materials and objects created by and used on a daily basis by humanity, his point, similar to what Dōgen implies in the Tenzo Kyokun, is that it is open to question to what degree we can assert strict conceptual and categorical distinctions when describing and defining elements of our experience of the world, and that our sense of “care” might be extended to a wider range of phenomena, not just those we prioritize according to individual or community self-interest or exclusively anthropocentric designations of value.

2.3. Jiko: Individual and Universal Self

Dōgen’s integration of contemplative and work-related activity provides a framework for his understanding of “self.” According to Uchiyama (2004), Dōgen’s “true self” is the self that exists before, after and despite thought. To illustrate this more clearly, Uchiyama inverts Descartes’ “cogito, ergo sum” to read “I am, therefore I think”, further commenting “We are, whether we think so or not” (p. 29).

Uchiyama (2004) characterizes Dōgen’s view of “whole” or “universal” self as being our everyday experience of our individual egoic self, with likes, dislikes, and personality traits, yet as also a more expansive self of extended relations that exist whether or not we are aware of them, and despite whatever beliefs we may hold as individuals about the nature of reality (p. 29). As Uchiyama relates, the original Japanese term used by Dōgen is jiko, which means, in regular usage, individual, conditioned, or even egoic self, and, in the Buddhist lexicon, “original self” or “universal self” (p. 27). At the heart of this conception of self is the rejection that conscious thought and feeling are the locus and measure of reality, and the understanding of all modes of experience, whether somatic or cognitive, as unique manifestations of a more pervasive life force and reality. However, Dōgen is explicitly not describing such a pervasive life force as something along the lines of a permanent “self” or “Cartesian identity writ large” (Curtin 1994, pp. 204–5), such as a conception of a deity that is the totality of diverse fragmentary phenomena. The self, according to Dōgen’s perspective, is indivisible from the field of interrelated phenomena at any given moment, yet cannot be definitively categorized as either a separate entity or as a subsidiary part of a greater whole.

It may be possible to reformulate what Dōgen is describing in terms of a biological analogy. For example, we might imagine certain types of plants as manifestations of an array of factors that generally give rise to life in our biosphere (nutrients in soil, water, sun, processes such as photosynthesis, etc.), but also a diversity of specific forms of plants within an ecosystem. These more general complementary forces may be expressed not only as a certain species of plant, but in unique iterations as individual plants. The very same processes, however, might also give rise to many other forms of plants, which are connected in potentially symbiotic ways to yet other elements beyond themselves,
including “inanimate” factors such as minerals and, in the other direction, to other more complex living beings. If we consider our human form in the same way, concepts such as “internal” and “external” begin to break down somewhat, in that “environmental” factors are metabolized as nutrients and thus move freely between being outside of oneself and, literally, constituting oneself. The self, in short, “must be reconstructed as impermanent and relational” (Curtin 1994, p. 203). Dogen’s “true reality”, in one respect, simply places human beings within this nexus of relations. A. N. Whitehead (1968) arrives at a similar view in his process philosophy, in which he discusses our individual self, and human beings as a species, as literal expressions of environmental and biological processes in which “there is no definite boundary to determine where the body begins and external nature ends” (p. 161). From this perspective self is not “within” environment, self literally is environment.

Dogen frames such interdependent relations in terms of everyday activities, in circumstances and forms in which we might experience them directly. The sense in which he employs the term jiko emphasizes the dual nature of self (at once individuated, in the sense of a temporary coalescence of phenomena, and relational). As Dogen frames it, in activities such as cooking we handle rice, greens, water, and utensils as though they are our very body and lifeblood (in Uchiyama 2005, pp. 7–8, 53). The implication is that there is no special state of consciousness or perception to access apart from everyday experience, yet this immediately familiar experience is comprised of a vast array of interrelationships unfolding from moment to moment. Another way to put it is that we might perceive certain “bandwidths” of this array of relations at different moments as they are manifested in the immediacy of our everyday affairs. So jiko is at once inconceivably vast, yet as matter of fact as “each and every thing that you encounter, no matter what it might be” (Uchiyama 2004, p. 30).

2.4. Symbolic Representations of Experience

Uchiyama (2004) points out how this multi-faceted conception of self contradicts our expectations of definitive categorical differentiation, so it is difficult to convey from a more rationalist perspective. He identifies the source of the problem as having to do with the confusion of abstract generalizations and conceptualizations, as expressed through thought and language, with the actualities to which they refer:

Because of this approach, some western philosophers try to grasp “self” and even the life force itself by definition. The life of the self does not come about by being defined. Life lives as real experience even if it is not understood or defined. Even the power to understand things by means of definitions is the power of our own life . . . if one thinks about a reality that exists before the definitions of speculative thought, that in itself creates a kind of definition, recreating the problem. The speculated-about and re-defined reality no longer exists prior to definition—you can easily wind up thinking that definitions are reality. (p. 31)

The substance of this passage closely parallels Charles Sanders Peirce’s pragmatism, in which he contends that an accurate definition of something would be a comprehensive—yet provisional—description of a totality of its characteristics and potential relations (De Waal 2013, p. 113). In his early twentieth century writing in philosophy of science, Whitehead (1949) similarly addressed this issue as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”, or confusion of conceptual models of relations, such as physics, mathematics, philosophy, and religion, with the actualities they are in reference to (pp. 52, 59). The premise, in all three cases, is that remaining unconscious of the difference between experience as it unfolds and reified representations of experience may lead to valuing conceptual models as more substantial and accurate than they really are. In the same way that our hearts beat and we breathe without conscious thought, Uchiyama’s rendering of Dogen suggests there exists a greater range of relations and capacities outside of language and thought that are in operation whether or not we are aware of them, and that the reality of our being in the world—as life and self—is not dependent on either language or conscious thought. The “evidence”
supporting this view seems to be the very changeability of our perceptions, interpretations, and definitions of whatever we encounter in our experience. Although it is debatable to what degree we might separate reflective consciousness from symbolic representation, Uchiyama emphasizes that what we think of as “self”, “reality”, or “the world”, is in fact a single realm we can never be outside of, and which we could say simultaneously permeates ourselves, gives rise to ourselves, and supports our very ability to conceive of ourselves as perceiving, reflective beings.

3. Dōgen, Ecophilosophy, and Gestalt

To summarize some key ideas from the first part of my discussion, Dōgen’s conception of self (jiko) might be thought of as an individuated yet relational self that is inseparable from conditioning factors of environment. The self might be thought of as a unique expression of shared environmental and processual potentials, whose conscious actions and volitions can also influence these potentials as they unfold. In this way, “practice” becomes synonymous with the means of its realization, and the conditions of practice as evolving in tandem with agential action. On one hand it seems a somewhat “cosmic” view, yet, as we have seen in the Tenzo Kyōkun, this view can also translate into something more down-to-earth such as encouragement toward a more non-hierarchical ethic of care for who and what we encounter in the course of our daily activities, or simply a persistent, contextually responsive de-conditioning of habits of perception and response.

In the following section I will begin with the explicit reference to Dōgen’s concept of self in early Deep Ecology literature, which similarly sought to articulate the meaning of a self that is at once individuated yet in some sense “universal.” I will then trace the implications of Dōgen’s thought through two branches of gestalt theory, the first with reference to Arne Naess’s conception of “gestalt ontology” (discussion of which has also unfolded vis-à-vis Dōgen in the context of ecophilosophy), and the second with reference to a particular trajectory of sociomaterial theory extending from the work of J.J. Gibson. This combination of views will hopefully provide a more fulsome account of how diverse beings, processes, and materials interact within shared environment, furthering parallels to the preceding exposition of Dōgen’s conceptions of self, zazen, and practice-realization.

3.1. Conceptions of Self in Deep Ecology

Deep ecology literature provides a rich history of exploration of Dōgen’s philosophy through its intersections with gestalt and ecofeminist theory. Precisely what does “self” mean in relation to other-than-self, if we include non-human beings as well as environment in general? The intricacy of these discussions uncovers a range of ontological and ethical considerations implicit in Dōgen’s term “practice-realization”, leading to considerations of how we bridge difference and incorporate our sense of other-than-self into our personal identity.

As Deane Curtin (1994) outlines, Deep Ecology literature makes frequent reference to Buddhist philosophy, and shows a particular interest in Dōgen’s thought in relation to conceptions of individual and universal self. However, Curtin points out that Dōgen’s term “universal self” has sometimes been used in Deep Ecology literature in ways that suggest the self as a substantive or egoic identity, which not only contradicts the Mahayana rejection of a substantial self, but potentially contradicts Dōgen’s inclusion of sentient and non-sentient beings in buddha-nature—all beings and everything we encounter in our lives—as comprising self (p. 197). The main target of this critique is Arne Naess’s (2005b) early articulations of the Deep Ecology platform, which attempted to address the ontological divide between humanity and environment by positing a small-s “self”, or an individuated egoic self, in contrast to a “Self”, or a self expanded and deepened through identification with a world of relations outside the confines of individual or anthropocentric perspectives. For Naess, this process included identification with other beings as well as with elements of the natural world in which humanity is situated, although, as previously
mentioned, Naess excluded discussion of identification with materials and objects of human manufacture. In tandem with this view, Naess emphasizes “Self-Realization” as a basic norm of his Deep Ecology outlook, which conveys the recognition of the right of all beings to flourish according to their inclinations and capacities. Even this preliminary rendering of Naess’s view suggests (at least as a coherent set of principles) potential contradictions. It is instructive to revisit how Deane Curtin and Val Plumwood addressed in what ways Naess’s conceptions of individual and universal self contradict those suggested by Dōgen.

Curtin’s (1994) objections are based on what he perceived as three potentially contradictory models of self put forward in early Deep Ecology literature: the “Cartesian atomic self, the Spinozist, holist Self expanded to the supreme whole, and Dōgen’s relational self” (p. 206). As has been discussed, the very view of a Cartesian atomic self is antithetical to Mahayana Buddhist thought, which emphasizes self as an ever-changing coalescence of mutually influencing factors. More specific to his critique of Naess’s varying usage of the terms “self” and “Self” to denote limited and “expanded” perspectives, Curtin describes Spinoza’s view as a refutation of Cartesian identity, yet with the permanence of individual identity (soul or atman) retained as “modes” of a “supreme whole”, which could be expressed as “God”, “Nature”, or “Universal Self.” In Curtin’s estimation, these views may be a step in the right direction, but remain incompatible with Dōgen’s philosophy because “The relational self cannot be expressed in terms of parts and wholes” (p. 206).

Ecofeminist theorist Val Plumwood (1991) connects such a view of a non-relational “expanded self” with problematic socio-political aspects of Western philosophy, a perspective that potentially renders Naess’s view vulnerable to both ecofeminist and post-colonial critiques (pp. 14–15). Plumwood illustrates the problem by citing examples where the interests of an entity or place are conflated with the interests of an egoic self—for example the defence of a river being justified as a defence of oneself, which presumes that such identification validates a particular view of stewardship, utility, and the like as both universal and normative (p. 12). This is obviously problematic—who is to say that alternative treatments of the river could not also be justified as defence of oneself, or “for its own good” according to differing conceptions of identification or stewardship? Whose identification is the right one? What is at issue is both the nature of the “self” that is projected, and the very notion of it as “universal.”

Plumwood (1991) extends this perspective further in the direction of feminist theory, characterizing the “Kantian-rationalist” account of self as associating moral action with universalized principles of obligations and duties, which are partly defined through the parallel devaluation of personal, responsive, and embedded forms of relationality and care (pp. 5–7). Leaving aside to what degree these contrasting views of self can be categorized as predominantly “masculine” or “feminine” (Hallen 1999, p. 277), ecofeminist critique offers important perspectives for how we might start connecting more widespread or “universal” change with the intimacy and direct nature of relations that is so central to Dōgen’s philosophy, and question how we evaluate actions as either “self-centred” or “universally beneficial”, based on whether or not they are in a realm of intimate relations and experience or presumed to be fulfilling more universalized public obligations. Like Carol Hanisch’s (1972) insight that the personal is political, Dōgen emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between “scale” and “value”, in that small acts can be significant acts with far-reaching consequences. Thus, the language of the Tenzo Kyōkun emphasizes the everyday human scale of participation with objects and resources: do not waste a single grain of rice because, cumulatively, such intimate attention to detail makes a difference within a larger frame of reference. From the perspective of Mahayana traditions, respecting our needs and limitations, “self-care”, is not necessarily self-centredness, but concomitant with the cultivation of outer-directed care; what matters is developing our capacity for care and its judicious application. To heal one’s experience of anger, hatred or inattention can potentially alter the landscape of our immediate horizons of influence. In short, what we do and think on an immediate relational level radiates influence, whether or not we conceive our actions as fulfilling a broader program of more universalized obligations.
3.2. Gestalt Ontology

There is debate to what degree Curtin and Plumwood present an accurate rendering of Naess’s views (Warren 1999). Naess’s introduction of “gestalt ontology” significantly shifted his vision of ecosophy somewhat closer to the range of views espoused by Dōgen. Christian Diehm (2006), in his discussion of Arne Naess’s use of the term “gestalt ontology”, defines a gestalt as “a network of relationships whose various elements are mutually defining” (p. 25), a characterization that can be plausibly interpreted as reflecting the Mahayana doctrine of pratīyāsamattpāda, or “dependent origination.” Diehm (2006) argues that Naess’s invocation of gestalt theory implies something more like the interdependence of self, other, and environment within conditions as they unfold:

Seeking to go beyond the prevailing atomism of natural sciences, [Naess] offered a ‘gestalt ontology’ that views reality as consisting not of discrete material parts, but of a network of interrelated elements. The real, he proposed, is not comprised of numerous, externally related components, but instead of a vast relational field. (p. 22)

In Diehm’s view, gestalt ontology does not suggest the projection or expansion of egoic self, the view that Curtin (1994) so strongly objected to, but rather the expanded integration of what we conceive of as other-than-self, including the other-than-human, into our direct experience as an individuated self. In Diehm’s view, Naess’s “Self-realization!” [sic] as a foundational norm of his Deep Ecology platform connotes the expansion of one’s capacity to meaningfully incorporate the world of the other—not just any one but any thing we might conceive as being outside ourselves—into our sense of identity. In this way, difference is not a threat to personal integrity, but is part of how all beings evolve through mutual influence.

David Rothenberg (in Naess 1989) further supports this view in that he describes Naess’s conception of gestalt in a way that emphasizes identity itself as being relational in nature: “The world provides us with a flood of information, but that which presents itself to us as living entities is characterized by a certain natural life, which comes to us as a conviction that identity is inherent only in the relationships that make up the entity” (p. 6). Naess (1989) further amplifies this view:

When one is absorbed in contemplation of a concrete, natural thing there is no experience of a subject-object relation. Nor when absorbed in vivid action, whether in movement or not. There is no epistemological ego reaching out to see and understand a tree or an opponent in a fight, or a problem of decision. A tree as experienced spontaneously is always part of a totality, a gestalt. Analysis may discover many structural ingredients. Sometimes an ego-relation, sometimes not. The gestalt is a whole, self-determining and self-reliant. If we call it “experience of the gestalt”, we are misled in a subjectivist direction. (p. 66)

3.3. Pluralism and Articulation of Difference

Karen Warren (1999) points out that ecofeminist critiques of conceptions of self are not universally applicable to Deep Ecology literature because ecosophy itself was never, at least as Naess conceived it, intended as a single set of prescriptive viewpoints to be fulfilled (p. 263). Further unpacking of Naess’s conception of ecosophy as a “platform” of basic norms which might be variously interpreted, an approach derived from his earlier communication theory, demonstrates the degree to which his thinking aligns with Dōgen in unexpected ways. Starting from a basic premise of “revisability”, Naess’s (1989, p. 69) emphasis on the importance of a clear articulation of one’s views serves two primary functions: delineation of how and where one might genuinely agree or disagree with others, and ongoing consideration of how one might actualize one’s values as practical activities within specific circumstances. This is why Naess makes clear distinctions between ecosophy as a general platform of normative principles, and “Ecosophy T” (“T” for “Tvergastein”,...
his mountain cabin) as an illustration of how he personally fulfills these basic norms (Naess 2005a, pp. 339–59).

Naess’s approach to ecosophy was informed not only by his decades-long work in semantics, but by his intensive interest in Gandhian conflict resolution, philosophy of science, and pluralism. Naess observed that we often base communication and actions on the erroneous assumption that our use of certain terminology implies agreement with others when they use the same words and phrases. However, it is only through social and dialogical interactions that we can ascertain the degree of difference and depth of intention behind each other’s words. It is not just an academic or theoretical problem, but a potential source of real conflict. In Naess’s view, it is incumbent on each of us to not only understand our own interpretive lens, but to try to understand the perspectives of others as independently of our biases as is possible. Regarding concepts of self, this suggests—in accord with ecofeminist perspectives—a reflective and evolving self that respects the other on its own terms. Naess is explicit that ecosophy, as the provisional definition and expression of one’s philosophical orientations as lived actions, develops in response to grounded contexts in which self and other-than-self serve to define each other (Naess 1989, p. 37). Such a “grounded context” could be literal dialogue with others, whether casual or with intensive purpose, but could also be construed as the “dialogue” between our intentions and “everything we encounter” in the specific conditions in which we attempt to realize them, echoing themes of responsive engagement previously encountered in the Tenzo Kyōkun.

A feature common to both Dōgen’s and Naess’s perspectives is their focus on the relationship between what is relatively fixed and un-fixed in human experience, especially regarding how we conceive of our self in relation to others and the world around us, and act upon those notions of self, other, and world. This view, in accordance with pratīyasamutpāda, recognizes that each of our views evolves in tandem with the evolution of the views of others, as well as within the conditions in which those views are formed. This echoes Uchiyama’s (2004, pp. 14, 30–31) discussion of the central conflict of subjective perception in Dōgen’s thought—we can only have our own subjective view (which is inevitably influenced by the views of others), yet our subjective view—any subjective view—is both conditioned and endlessly evolving.

3.4. Sociomaterial Practice

Certain branches of sociomaterial practices literature, similarly derived from gestalt theory, further articulate the ways in which the reciprocal influence of self, other, and activity within environment can blur strict categorical distinctions between living beings, processual change, and material conditions. These perspectives offer a complementary theoretical framework that further enrich and extend the contemporary relevance of Dōgen’s philosophy, particularly regarding a central theme of the Tenzo Kyōkun: agency and influence within environment.

The consideration of diverse others within shared environment is advanced in recent literature in sociomaterial practices. Kiverstein et al. (2021), through a modulation of the work of Karl Koffka and J. J. Gibson, offer an explicit theoretical framework describing how self and environment are mutually influenced. It is significant that this account is not limited to human beings in general but suggests a comprehensive range of relations mirroring those found in the previous discussion of Dōgen and ecophilosophy.

To summarize the general scope of Karl Koffka’s research, behaviour is shaped by sense perception of a geographical environment and is also framed by differing needs and interests. A diversity of beings, each with varying perceptual capacities, needs, and interests, can occupy a single geographical environment, yet perceive, interact with, and to a degree shape the environment according to such unique characteristics. The “environmental field” for each being or class of beings is comprised of both “things and not-things”, meaning both the physical environment and non-material aspects of environment which might be acted upon as though they were a “thing”, such as “darkness” (Koffka 1963,
Koffka, referring to Wolfgang Köhler’s earlier research with primates, emphasized that environment is not just perceived, but acted upon in response to perception. In Köhler’s famous experiment, one chimpanzee uses a series of boxes as a seat, whereas another stacks the boxes to access fruit (p. 31). This points to the reciprocal nature of perception and environment—environment is perceived and shaped according to needs and interests yet needs and interests are determined by what is available to perception within an environment. Another way to put it is that a dog, a honeybee, and a human being will perceive, act upon, and to a degree shape aspects of a shared environment according to differing needs and interests, even though these needs and interests may sometimes overlap to a degree (flowers and pollen are relevant to bees in a different way than they are relevant to human beings; a dog may perceive and “use” a lamp-post in a different way than a bird).

J.J. Gibson (2015), rejecting the more simplistic notion of subjective response to “stimuli”, modified Koffka’s basic account of the relationship between geographical and behavioural environment with his theory of “affordances”, describing an affordance as something within an environment that might “demand or invite appropriate behaviors” (p. 94). Gibson describes how affordances can bridge strict categorizations of material and non-material, subjective or objective aspects of environment, functioning in a manner analogous to the shape-shifting nature of the relative and absolute as encountered in Liangjie’s “The Five Ranks”:

An important fact about the affordances of the environment is that they are in a sense objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental. But, actually, an affordance is neither an objective property nor a subjective property; or it is both if you like. An affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy. It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer. (p. 121)

Kiverstein et al. (2021) expand on this view by distinguishing between a field and landscape (or geographical and behavioural environment) of relevant affordances, or affordances perceived within a “shared meaningfully structured world” (p. 2283). There is one environment, yet everything within it is perceived differently according to the evolving and responsive needs and interests of different beings. Any given environment is the totality of such “revisable” contextual interrelations. By way of illustration, the authors describe how a public mailbox presents a certain “demand character” when one needs to mail a letter yet may be a matter of indifference when one doesn’t; on the other hand, the mailbox’s “demand character” may be perceived differently—as something to lean against—if it is next to a bus stop. The important point is that perceptions of relevance, and qualities of interaction, shape each other over time according to agential action, and that such action regulates the continued availability of certain characteristics of environment:

Insofar as affordances have an already determined, material and shared character they belong to the landscape. Insofar as affordances have a future directed, open-ended and affective character they give shape to the field of particular individuals. By being responsive to inviting affordances, individuals, each in their own way, act in ways that contribute to maintaining and determining the availability of the landscape in the future. (p. 2291)

To further illustrate their point, the authors describe how present-day streets in New York City have been shaped by a history of different modes of transportation, building practices and usage, or by the entanglement of material landscape with “normatively regulated patterns of individuals’ activity” (p. 2291). This is essentially a processual view of the interrelationship of diverse beings shaping, and being shaped, by environment over time. Of particular interest vis-a-vis Dōgen is the “future-directed, open-ended and affective character” of the influence of “particular individuals” on environments; the “world” as
conceived by individuals or any collective of individuals is not a fixed object or set of objects that are acted upon, any more than the “self” is a fixed entity independent of environmental influence of “other-than-self.”

4. Hitting the Drum

Dōgen’s philosophy offers a complex range of perspectives that not only inspire consideration within our contemporary context but carry a resonance beyond the specificity of Buddhist theology and practice. Reading his thought in light of gestalt theory, as expressed in both ecophilosophy and literature in sociomaterial practices, offers perspectives that render such a seemingly esoteric philosophy a complementary framework for understanding our everyday experience—a non-specialist experience of a world of material objects, work-related tasks, and relationships with other beings. Curtin (1994) describes how such “ordinary, daily practices” are too often abstracted, discounted, or made invisible in philosophical discourse (p. 210). The point of zazen is to stop looking somewhere else to discover the significance of where (and who) we are right now. Similarly, gestalt theory, by way of the preceding discussions, leads us to recognize the importance of immediate contexts of relations.

If zazen can raise the interaction of self, other, and environment to consciousness, it will inevitably bring awareness of both positive and negative aspects of our experience. In contrast to what Ronald Purser (2019) terms “McMindfulness”, Dōgen’s philosophy is not necessarily “nice”—it does not specify results through clearly delineated stages of development, nor a template for what to do and how to think in every circumstance. It is neither training in concentration (Dōgen 2013, pp. 12–14) nor, as Purser (2019) suggests, self-pacification in the service of a neo-liberal agenda. Our own “personal growth” cannot be separated from environmental, economic, and socio-political context, nor can the cultivation of attentive consciousness selectively avoid critical analysis of broader determinations such as race, privilege, and power (Anālayo 2020; Magee 2016). If zazen seems to bring the practitioner face to face with actualities, it demands that, instead of retreating into fantasies of ideal states of mind or ideal conditions of practice, we commit to patiently untangling the contradictions we encounter in ourselves and in our immediate circumstances. We are right to ask hard questions, such as that posed by activist Angela Davis to Jon Kabat-Zinn: “In a racially unjust world, what good is mindfulness?” (Rowe 2015). A different way of framing the question is to consider the practical means by which one’s own “practice-realization” as self-development might be manifested by way of instigating systemic, community, or institutional changes that benefit others. According to Dōgen, these seemingly external entities would also be manifestations of self—engagement with them is part of self-work. The cultivation of “awareness” seems pointless if it does not include the imperative to experiment with practical means of correcting perceived errors of judgment and action. The Mahayana view is that all phenomena—what we think of as our self as well as everything we encounter—is inherently transitory and changeable. We can choose to see this in the most positive light: we might integrate new perspectives and change our erroneous views and behaviour; we might exercise what agency is available to us in ways that make our lives better and promote the well-being of our communities.

Dōgen often described zazen simply as sanzen or san—“to practice, to examine carefully” (Tatsugami 2002, I. para. 12). This does not mean just better crafting of our conceptualizations of self, world, and other, but cultivating greater intimacy with how our perceptions are manifested as specific activities in the world. It is the “activism” of living out our lives as reflective beings who can, to a greater or lesser degree, redirect the currents of both self and context of self. Dōgen (2013) simply describes “beneficial action” as the cultivation of the ability to “benefit all classes of sentient beings skillfully...to care about their distant and near future [emphasis added] and to help them by using skillful means” (p. 69).

It is hard to say what this means as a set of specific principles, from the perspective of either Buddhist thought or theories derived from western traditions. The important thing is that it can only be interpreted in relation to our immediate experience, in which
neither ourselves nor environmental conditions are ever static or wholly independent of one another. Compare the following passage from the Shobogenzo with Arne Naess’s account of relationality:

Sitting in zazen and pursuing the truth is establishment of the bodhi-mind. Establishment of the mind is beyond oneness and difference, and sitting in zazen is beyond oneness and difference; they are beyond repetition, and beyond division. All things should be investigated like this. (Dogen 2017b, p. 340)

We must abandon fixed, solid points, retaining the relatively straightforward, persistent relations of interdependence. “Objective descriptions of nature” offered us by physics ought to be regarded not as descriptions of nature, but as descriptions of certain conditions of interdependence and thereby can be universal, common for all cultures. Cooperation along these lines would in any case fulfill intentions of universality and at the same time safeguard the diversity of human cultures. (Naess 1989, p. 50)

How do we address simultaneously individual, community, and global challenges such as racism, addiction, or the climate crisis? If we are genuinely committed to positive change in our own lives, can we wait for imagined ideal conditions in which change will supposedly be easier to realize? We only have the present, inevitably non-ideal conditions of our lives here and now in which to make a difference. Despite the Rinzai characterization of shikantaza as a “gradual” path, Dogen’s zazen in fact emphasizes immediacy; it is not an incremental teleological process, nor rumination as habituated deferral of action, but unification of action and motivation in a single movement. Sotan Tatsugami (2002) illustrates what Dogen means with the example of hitting a drum:

The moment that you hit the drum, a sound appears: “Boom!” Hitting the drum and creating the sound are identical. Let us apply this to zazen. Imagine that in sitting meditation some sound appears: “Boom!”, which is enlightenment itself. But, as with the drum, or bell, sitting and the sound of enlightenment are completely one . . . This is what Dogen means when he says that practice is identical with enlightenment itself. This is the proper way of zazen. (II. para. 9)

Dogen’s zazen is about living out this life in this world, which includes all the complications and contradictions we encounter in relationship. We in part comprise the conditioning world, so there is always the possibility of exerting a measure of positive influence, even in the worst situations. According to Dogen (2013), to “offer a particle of dust” is to manifest Buddha-dharma and incrementally shift the whole universe of relations in a certain direction (p. 68). Each of us can help shape conditions in ways that can alleviate suffering and promote well-being without limit or exception—how can we, so to speak, “hit the drum”, and realize it in our present circumstances?

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