Discourse and truth
—Dōgen’s case*—

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The event of Vulture’s Peak (Ryōzen 鷲山) is an important episode in the Buddhist tradition and for the transmission of Buddha Dharma (buppō 佛法). When Śākyamuni Buddha was at Mount Grdhra, he held out a flower to his listeners. Everyone was silent. Only Mahākāśyapa broke into a broad smile. The Buddha said, ‘I have the True Dharma Eye (Shōbōgenzō 正方眼蔵), the Marvellous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, and the Subtle Dharma Gate, independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine. This I have entrusted to Mahākāśyapa.’

This legendary episode, considered to mark the beginning of the Chan/Zen tradition, rests on a fundamentally sceptical attitude towards language, an attitude which sees language as being unable to express, or to give access to, the truth of ultimate reality. Truth is said to be independent of words (fūryū monji 不立文字) or doctrine and therefore must be transmitted in a special way (kyōge betsuden 教外別傳). Dōgen (道元) mentions this event on several occasions in his main work, the Shōbōgenzō 正方眼蔵, and draws the title of the work from it. For instance, in Bendōwa 排道話, the second text3 he wrote after his return from Sung China (1231), the Vulture’s Peak event is used in order to show the direct lineage of transmission of True Dharma (shōbō 正法) from Śākyamuni to Dōgen himself.

This expresses his will to go back to the origin of Buddhism which for him is nothing else than a return to the original truth. Yet, if the language or discourse promoted by the sūtras is said to be inappropriate for transmitting the original truth, what kind of return to original teachings is possible? I will discuss here Dōgen’s position regarding the relation between discourse and truth.

The insufficiency of discourse and necessity of practice

Buddhism maintains that because ordinary people confuse appearance and ultimate reality they do not make any distinction between relative and absolute truth. This is known as the two truths theory of Buddhism. It is said that conventional truth (zokuitai 誠語) concerns relative reality, while ultimate truth (shōgaitai 勝語) is related to absolute reality. Language seems able to express and transmit conventional truth, but not ultimate truth, which would be directly transmitted. Here, the relation between language and truth seems to be double sided: on the one hand, truth can be expressed through discourse but it loses his absolute value; on the other hand, the discourse must be abandoned or overridden when it comes to ultimate truth. This situation reflects a sceptical attitude towards language, reduced to a merely “expedient/skilful means” (upāya, hōben 方便), What about Dōgen’s case?

The Bendōwa fascicle contains a dialogue in which Dōgen tries to show the right way to realise Buddha’s truth. For him, the main gate (seimon 正門) to access truth is nothing else than the correct practice of zazen (坐禪) under the close surveillance of a true master. The practice of zazen, or sitting meditation, is then considered to be the right transmission (shōden 正傳) of Buddha Dharma from master to pupil. But, in the third question, an objection is raised: even if it may be true that Buddha Dharma is correctly transmitted by zazen, ordinary people (bonryo 凡庸) can hardly access to this understanding, therefore reading sūtras or reciting nembutsu (念佛) could be an alternative means. Besides, how could just sitting meditation lead to salvation? In the answer Dōgen gives, zazen is equated to Buddha Dharma and to jijuyū sanmai (自受用三味), and this, he says, cannot be considered as simply sitting. The realm/state of buddhas (shobutsu no kyōkai 諸佛の境界) is not merely a matter of discursive understanding, therefore it cannot be reached only through the work of mind and consciousness (shinshiki 心識). Only few persons with true faith (shōshin 正信) can reach it by correctly sitting in Samadhi. The practice of zazen appears as necessary, because accessing Buddhist truth through discursive means is insufficient. The problem raised by Dōgen’s response concerns precisely the relation between truth and discourse. Arguing that Buddhist truth is not accessible by using sūtra recitation, Dōgen affirms, at the same time, that...
equating sūtra recitation and nenbutsu with Buddha Dharma can only be misleading. Discourse is then not only insufficient, but having recourse to it this way can also easily remove one from truth.

To this point, discourse (or a certain usage of it) appears to be insufficient, yet, is it unnecessary for the transmission of Buddha Dharma? Is Dōgen condemning all discourse?

The necessity of discourse as practice

Śākyamuni himself maintained that truth is not only expresses reality as it is (tathatā, shinnyō 真如), clear as a “bright pearl” (myōjū 明珠) (Faure 1987, 60), but is rather reality itself. Even a short practice is enough for the entire universe to be marked by Buddha’s seal (butsu in 佛印) and to become altogether enlightenment15. It is because the original face (honrai menmoku 本來面目) of the universe is already such. In this case, truth needs no form of mediation16; it reveals itself immediately when satori occurs. Nevertheless, Dōgen maintains that reading or studying sūtras should be used for better understanding and for clarifying rules and principles regarding the practice and study of sudden or gradual enlightenment (tonzen shūkyō 頓漸修行) and this cannot be simply abandoned. Sūtras are rhetorical proofs (shō 説)17 testifying to the veracity of enlightenment (bodai 菩提) and to the certainty of attaining it. When Dōgen declares that sūtras should be followed and practiced as something unavoidable20, he is arguing for the necessity of words or language. Is it to say that truth is enclosed by words into the text? Or, are words images or reflections of truth? In what way or to what extent is truth transmitted throughout discourse? Dōgen opposes the idea of a merely exegetic work on canonical texts for the idea of an authentic study of Dharma (Faure 1987, 25) which directly accesses or apprehends reality as “written” in “Mountains and Water Sūtra” (Sansuikyō 山水経). It is indeed the title of another Shōbōgenzō fascicle, where he declares that: ““Sticking to words and sticking to phrases” are not the words of liberation” (Bielefeldt tr. 2001)19. Nonetheless, by condemning the attachment to words and phrases, Dōgen does not concede to an irrational approach.

Words about mountains walking and mountains flowing are not beyond rational understanding (muiri kaiwa 無理会話). Dōgen aims to underline the danger represented by a certain usage of words and language, inevitably leading to an attitude of passivity. For him this danger has a name: the naturalist view (jinen 自然)21. To have a kind of sceptical attitude towards language, to hold the naturalist point of view, is to reject rational understanding in favour of pure spontaneity22. But, the naturalist view neglects what Dōgen calls “learning in practice” (sangaku 参究)23, the expression of his theory of the unity/identity of practice and realization (shūshō ichinyō 修行一如)24.

Affirming that enlightenment and practice are not two, but one, Dōgen maintains the necessity of
practice imitating the way of ancient masters described in the sūtras. However, even when he advocates zazen as the most excellent method, he does so discursively, as for him language and enlightenment/truth are not exclusive of one another; on the contrary, enlightenment can and should be realized within language (Faure 1993, 190). Rather than a rejection of language then, Dōgen defends a certain relationship to it as founded in practice. In this sense, sitting meditation suffices to counteract a misleading usage of language. Following the Mahayanistic teachings about non-duality, Dōgen equates Buddha-nature with every being by a special reinterpretation of the utterance of Śākyamuni reported by Nirvāṇa Sūtra: “all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature.” Moreover, at an absolute level there is no possible distinction between ultimate and conventional truth, as there is no identity between them at a relative level. Therefore, language neither expresses nor represents absolute reality, but reality itself is nothing else than Dharma’s discourse; the whole universe “says” the ultimate truth. In addition, Buddhist doctrine stresses the impermanence of things. From this perspective, it is illusory to think that truth is to be found in the sūtras, by reading or reciting them, as if truth had an unchanging objective essence which could be grasped into discourse or reflected by words. For Dōgen, truth is dynamic and as such, the right way of accessing it is by ceaseless action or practice following the principles enounced in the sūtras. Truth then is not a question of merely reading or reciting sūtras, but of experience in one’s activity through correct practice of zazen, prolonged to each aspect of the ordinary life. The relationship between language and reality; or between discourse and truth, does not appear then as a merely representational one. If it is apprehended correctly through practice, truth manifests itself as it is (tathatā, shinnyō 真如). In Dōgen’s words, this is to realize genjō kōan (現成公案) – the kōan manifestation in action.

In conclusion: Dōgen did not in fact reject words or discourse as his many writings testify. Why then, was he so preoccupied with reaffirming the necessity of zazen practice? Is it because he advocated a combined practice between sūtra recitation and sitting meditation? As for him, the privileged gate to Buddhist Dharma is zazen, all other practices would only have dissipated those engaged on the Buddhist path. On the other hand, no practice at all could only have lead to a quietist attitude. While other practices were understood as means to obtain enlightenment, for Dōgen, practicing zazen is nothing else than enlightenment. This is why truth can reveal itself in sitting meditation, as it does in the sūtras texts or in the mountains and water “discourse”. Rather than arguing against discourse, Dōgen refutes a loose usage of sūtras and condemns abandonment of active practice.

Notes
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1. Buddha Dharma is referring here to Buddha’s teachings.
2. Chinese Ch’an master Wu-men Hui-hai (Mumon Ekai 無門慧開 1183-1260), The Gateless Gate (無門関門: 六世尊拈花: 世尊、普、在靈山會上拈花示眾、時、眾皆默然、
3. This fascicle was not originally destined to be a part of Shobōgenzō 正法眼藏, but was first included in a manuscript version in 1684 (cf. Waddell & Abe tr. 2002).
4. The first one is Fukanzazengi 菩覩坐禅儀 (1227).
5. A commonly used and convenient way to establish the truth of a master’s teachings, though not one exempt from questioning. Claiming that the sūtras attest to the veracity of Patriarch’s tradition, Dōgen is founding the authenticity of its own teachings on that tradition. In this way, tradition seems to verify itself circularly (Wright, 1986, 261). Besides this, other interpretations of Dharma held by different Buddhists sects of the time and criticized by Dōgen as inadequate, apply the same strategy of justifying their authenticity. Noticing the plurality of interpretations of the Buddhist doctrine, Dōgen mentions the necessity of determining which way could be deemed to be the right one. This rescue only to tradition appears however as insufficient to recognize the right interpretation.
6. The appearance of phenomena and the existence of things, their relations and causality.
7. The totality of things and phenomena as they are in their true nature.
8. Mind to mind transmission (ishin-denshin 以心伝心).
9. Dōgen declares that sūtras transmitted from the west (India) to China during the Later Han Dynasty confirmed the fact that zazen is the right way of transmitting and accessing the truth: いはく、佛法を住持せし諸祖ならびに仏教を伝授せし諸師に
10. The notion jijuyū sanmai expresses the state of those who attained enlightenment, received merits and virtues, and are rightly using this state of intense concentration in order to transmit merits and virtues to all beings.

11. True faith appears in this context as a kind of previous condition for the practice under a master’s supervision. One could be considered as true believer when radically resolute himself to follow True Dharma, shrugging of gain or glory.

12. “Intending to attain the Buddha Way by foolishly working your lips, repeating some words incessantly a thousand or ten thousand times, is like pointing the tills of a cart northward when you want to go south, or like trying to fit a square piece of wood into a round hole. To read the Buddha’s words when still unaware of the way of practice is as worthless a pastime as perusing a medical prescription and overlooking to mix the compound for it. If you merely raise your voice in endless recitation, you are in no way different from a frog in a spring field – although you croak from morning to nightfall, it will bring you no benefit at all”. (Bendōwa (辨道話) Waddell & Abe tr. 2002, 15).

13. See Bendōwa (辨道話).


15. もし人、一時なりといふとも、三業に佛印を標し、三昧に端坐するとき、遍法界みな佛印となり、盡虚空ことごとくさとりとなる。– Bendōwa (辨道話).

16. Discourse (or language) is not a means for truth, but one of its ways of manifestation.

17. This notion means not only “witness” but also “realization” and “actualization”.

18. これらみな、したがひ學すべき經卷なり。したがはざらんと廻避せんとすとも、うべからざるなり。– Jishōzanmai (自證三昧).

19. The naturalist view is attributed by Dōgen to what he calls the Senika heresy, which, by neglecting karmic causality and moral values, stresses on a certain spontaneity.


Bibliography


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