

Discourse and truth —Dōgen's case*—

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The event of Vulture's Peak (*Ryōzen* 靈山) is an important episode in the Buddhist tradition and for the transmission of Buddha Dharma (*buppō* 佛法)¹.

When Śākyamuni Buddha was at Mount Grdhrakūṭa, 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* 正法眼藏), 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."²

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 (*furyū 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* (正法眼藏), and draws the title of the work from it. For instance, in *Bendōwa* (辨道話)³, the second text⁴ 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 himself⁵. 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 (*zokutai* 俗諦) concerns relative reality⁶, while ultimate truth (*shōgitai* 勝義諦) is related to absolute reality⁷. Language seems able to express and transmit conventional truth, but not ultimate truth, which would be directly transmitted⁸. 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 its 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)⁹ 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* 凡慮) 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 *jijūyū sanmai* (自受用三昧)¹⁰, 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)¹¹ 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* recitation¹², Dōgen affirms, at the same time, that

equating *sūtra* recitation and *nembutsu* 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 dependent on words. Why then spend so many years exposing teachings about the truth attained under the Bodhi tree, not to mention the huge quantity of Buddhist texts and commentaries on texts produced centuries after Śākyamuni entering *parinirvāṇa*? Obviously, independence regarding words does not mean abandoning words entirely. The Buddhist way and tradition does not seem compatible with a complete economy of words. Dōgen himself declares that the problem of expressing and transmitting Buddha Dharma is one of the most important¹³. The question is: how can a *sūtra*'s words transmit the ultimate truth?

In general, when we follow and practice “the *sūtra*,” “the *sūtra*” truly comes forth. The meaning of “the *sūtra*” is the whole universe in ten directions, mountains, rivers, and the earth, grass and trees, self and others; it is eating meals and putting on clothes, instantaneous movements and demeanors. When we pursue the truth following these texts, each of which is a *sūtra*, countless thousand-myriad volumes of totally unprecedented *sūtra* manifest themselves in reality and exist before us. (Cross & Nishijima tr. 1999, 32)¹⁴

The accent is shifted from the relation between discourse and truth to the way of apprehend both discourse and truth through daily practice. The question becomes then: what is the correct use of the *sūtra*'s discourse? To follow the *sūtras*, for Dōgen, is to practice sitting meditation. Through correct practice of *sūtras* the world itself becomes a huge text manifesting the Buddhist truth (Faure 1987, 25). Furthermore, pursuing the practice in accordance with Buddhist texts and teachings, one will eventually get to realize in each and every action the truth as revealed in *satori* (悟), which not only expresses reality as it is (*tathatā*, *shinnyo* 眞如), clear as a “bright pearl” (*myōju* 明珠) (Faure 1987, 66), 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* 證)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 unavoidable¹⁸, 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* 山水經). 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.

There are [words] that are free from such realms: they are “the blue mountains constantly walking” and “the East Mountain moving over the water”. We should give them detailed investigation. (Bielefeldt tr. 2001)²⁰

Words about mountains walking and mountains flowing are not beyond rational understanding (*muri kaiwa* 無理會話). 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* 參學)²³, the expression of his theory of the unity/identity of practice and realization (*shushō ichinyō* 修證一如)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, 196). Rather than a rejection of language then, Dōgen defends a certain relationship to it as founded in practice. In this sense, sitting mediation suffices to counteract a misleading usage of language. Following the Mahayanistic teachings about non-duality²⁵, Dōgen equates Buddha-nature with every being by a special reinterpretation of the utterance of Śākyamuni reported by *Nirvana Sūtra*: “all beings without exception have the Buddha-nature”²⁶. 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 level²⁷. 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 (*mujō* 無常) of all 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 essence²⁸ 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*, *shinnyo* 眞如). 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 mediation? 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* (無門關): 六世尊拈花: 世尊、昔、在靈山會上拈花示衆。是時、衆皆默然。世尊云、吾有正法眼藏、涅槃妙心、實相無相、微妙法門、不立文字、教外別傳、付囑摩訶迦葉。 Translation by Zen master *Katsuki Sekida*, (*Two Zen Classics* 26-137), <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/mumonkan.htm>. The original Chinese text: <http://homepage1.nifty.com/poem-club/mumonkan/mumonkanwoyomu.htm>
3. This fascicle was not originally destined to be a part of *Shōbōgenzō* 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* 普觀坐禪儀 (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 recourse 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

- に諸佛、ともに自受用三昧に端坐依行するを、その開悟のまさしきみちとせり。 - *Bendōwa* (辨道話).
10. The notion *jijūyū 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).
14. *Jishō zanmai* (自證三昧).
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。 - *Jishō zanmai* (自證三昧).
19. 轉境轉心は大聖の所呵なり、説心説性は佛祖の所不肯なり。見心見性は外道の活計なり、滯言滯句は解脱の道著にあらず。
20. かくのごとくの境界を透脱せるあり、いはゆる青山常運歩なり、東山水上行なり。審細に参究すべし。
21. 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.
22. Cf. the doctrine of original enlightenment (*hongaku*, 本覺).
23. Cross & Nishijima tr.
24. *Shushō ittō* (修證一統).
25. The Mahayana theory of immanence (of truth in all beings) led to an antinomian position, characterizing different forms of Chan/Zen. But, it also played an important role in the theoretical justification of language. Dōgen was a fervent opponent of the antinomianism but, on the other hand, he shared the idea of the ontological value of language (cf. Faure 1993, 202).
26. *Issai shujō shitsu u bussō* (一切衆生悉有佛性).
27. "I should add that those who think mundane affairs hinder the practice of the Buddha Dharma know that there is no Buddha Dharma in their daily life; they do not yet know that there is not nothing "mundane" in the Buddha Dharma". (*Bendōwa* (辨道話) Waddell & Abe tr. 2002, 24).
28. Escaping history and transcending worldly affairs (Wright, 1986, 261).

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