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Eihei Dôgen: Unveiling Interconnectedness and Buddha-Nature Across Boundaries

Dr Revathy Menon

Eihei Dôgen, a seminal figure in Zen Buddhism, transcends cultural and temporal boundaries, offering insights into the interconnectedness of existence. His philosophy, deeply rooted in the concept of Buddha-nature, challenges conventional perspectives by extending this notion beyond sentient beings to include all aspects of the natural world. Dôgen's writings, particularly in the *Shôbôgenzô*, explore the intrinsic unity of all phenomena, advocating for a holistic understanding of life that encompasses both sentient and nonsentient beings. Through his concept of 'corealization,' Dôgen emphasizes the mutual interdependence of all forms of existence, urging a compassionate and mindful engagement with the world. This paper delves into Dôgen's philosophical discourse, highlighting his unique approach to Buddha-nature and its implications for understanding the relational self and the broader ecological context. Exploring Dôgen's teachings enriches one's understanding of life's complexity and underscores the significance of adopting an inclusive, interconnected worldview, which holds the promise of elevating our global community and contributing to environmental improvement and restoration promising a sustainable world for all.

Keywords: Eihei Dôgen, Zen Buddhism, Buddha-nature, Interconnectedness, Corealization.

Eihei Dôgen stands as a beacon of literary and philosophical brilliance, transcending the confines of Japanese culture to become a luminous star in the constellation of great philosophers. His writings

beckon us into a realm where profound wisdom seamlessly intertwines with ethical clarity, creating a tapestry of meaning that resonates across time and borders. In the unfathomable depths of Dôgen's philosophy, one finds a flawless expression of truth, a testament to his unparalleled insight into the nature of existence and consciousness. Remarkably, his words serve as exquisite brushstrokes, meticulously painting a compelling portrait of universal truths and beauty that encompasses both the human and non-human realms.

Dôgen, a 13th-century Buddhist Philosopher, esteemed monk, and the founder of the Soto School of Zen (26 January 1200 – 22 September 1253), also revered as Dôgen Zenji, Dôgen Kigen, Kôso Jôyô Daishi, or Busshô Dentô Kokushi, introduced a philosophical vision where humans and the nonhuman world are seen as fundamentally interconnected. Originating from an aristocratic lineage during the Kamakura period, Dôgen faced the loss of his parents at the tender age of seven. By the age of 13, he had embarked on a monastic journey, delving into Buddhist scriptures at Mount Hiei, the heartland of Tendai Buddhism. Between 1223 and 1227, his quest for deeper understanding led him to China, where he studied Zen meditation and attained enlightenment under the guidance of Master Rujing. Upon his return to Japan, he fervently disseminated Soto Zen teachings across various temples. In his later years, Dôgen settled at Eihei Temple, a haven he founded atop a secluded hill in present-day Fukui. His first significant work, *Fukan zazengi* (1227; "General Teachings for the Promotion of Zazen"), serves as a succinct guide to Zen practice. Dôgen's literary legacy includes numerous instructive compositions, among which his magnum opus, the *Shôbôgenzô* (1231–53; "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye"), a voluminous masterpiece of 95 chapters crafted over two decades, encapsulates the essence of Buddhist doctrine.

Dôgen's philosophy is characterized by the valorisation of non-human elements in the world, which adds an extra layer of richness to his perspective. By recognizing the interconnectedness of all existence and appreciating the profound web of connections that bind us together, one can gain a greater appreciation for the complexities

of life. Dôgen's idea of 'corealization' serves as a timeless guide for navigating these complexities, encouraging contemplation and appreciation of the relationships that exist between humans and non-human entities, both in the past and present. Dôgen's holistic perspective goes beyond individual concerns and fosters a collective consciousness that can lead to compassionate actions benefiting both ourselves and others. As one faces the challenges of the present, Dôgen's teachings serve as a source of wisdom, inviting one to embrace a vision that transcends the limitations of self-interest and contributes to the well-being of the broader interconnected whole.

Central to Dôgen's philosophy is his nuanced understanding of time, impermanence, and the concept of Buddha-nature. His philosophy introduces a distinctive perspective on Buddha-nature, wherein he expands the notion beyond sentient beings to encompass the impermanence of all entities. This nonanthropocentric and nondualistic foundation, articulated by Dôgen, underscores the interconnectedness shared by all beings, both sentient and nonsentient. Additionally, Dôgen's conceptualization of Buddha-nature shapes his understanding of the relational self, illuminating a profound interconnectedness informed by this fundamental concept.

In Dôgen's seminal work, the *Shôbôgenzô* (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye), he embarks on an intricate examination of the Buddha-nature (*Busho*) concept within a fascicle bearing the same title. Initiated by a citation from the *Nirvâna Sûtra*, a paramount Mahâyâna text addressing Buddha-nature, Dôgen demonstrates a deferential engagement with traditional sources. Yet, he remains cognizant of the inherent dualistic implications embedded in the conventional formulation: "*All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature*" (Dôgen, 1986, p. 60). This phrasing inadvertently establishes a dichotomy between the Buddha-nature essence and the sentient entities endowed with it, positioning Buddha-nature as a potential attribute rather than an ontological reality. In an endeavour to mitigate such dualistic readings, Dôgen undertakes a transformative re-articulation of the statement. He recalibrates it to assert: "*entire being is the Buddha-nature*" (p. 61). This nuanced

revision serves to obviate any semblance of Buddha-nature as a contingent attribute, firmly positing it as the intrinsic essence permeating all sentient phenomena. Dôgen, in contemplating the essence of Buddha-nature, suggests that “it is that thing which should not get splattered with mud or wet with water . . . -it is walls, tiles, and pebbles” (Dôgen, 2012, p. 269). For Dôgen, Buddha-nature transcends mere qualitative attribution; it emerges as an ineffable dimension of fundamental reality. It encapsulates an inherently egalitarian notion that includes all beings without differentiation.

Deepening this perspective is Dôgen’s nondualistic view, which broadens the traditional boundaries of Buddha-nature found in Buddhist thought. While conventional interpretations often limited this concept to sentient beings believed to be capable of enlightenment, either presently or in future lives, Dôgen’s approach challenges such confines. He invites a more expansive understanding, suggesting that even entities traditionally seen as lacking consciousness, like rivers and mountains, are not excluded from the vast embrace of Buddha-nature. He unequivocally asserts: “[M]ountains, rivers, and the great earth are all the Buddha-nature Sea. . . . As the Buddha-nature Sea is like this, seeing mountains and rivers is seeing the Buddha-nature. Seeing the Buddha-nature is seeing a donkey’s jowls or a horse’s mouth” (Dôgen, 1986, p. 67). Indeed, according to Dôgen’s perspective, Buddha-nature is not something abstract or separate from the tangible, everyday phenomena that surround us. Instead, it permeates and is intrinsic to the very fabric of existence, encompassing both sentient and nonsentient beings. This perspective invites a transformative understanding, emphasizing that enlightenment and spiritual realization are not distant goals but are inherently present within the here and now, within the very tangible and immediate experiences of our lives. This philosophy fosters a deep sense of fraternal connection with every element of existence by acknowledging the intrinsic value and interconnectedness of all beings, including soil, land, mountains, air, water, plants, trees, animals, and humans.

In his study, Masao Abe thoroughly explains Dôgen’s perspective on Buddha-nature. He offers a comprehensive analysis,

elucidating the intricacies of Dôgen's viewpoint. For Abe, Dôgen extends Mahayana Buddhism's scope to assert that not only living beings but also nonliving entities can achieve Buddhahood, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all existence. He redefines the concept of Buddha-nature to include all entities, suggesting that understanding impermanence allows one to see Buddha-nature in everything. By stating "All beings are the Buddha-nature," Dôgen challenges traditional perceptions, proposing an infinite, immeasurable realm where Buddha-nature and all forms of existence are intrinsically linked, neither confined within nor existing beyond each other (Curtin, 1994, p. 53-54). It beckons us to not only recognise but also embrace our collective existence within the expansive tapestry of the cosmos, shedding light on the profound interdependence that unites all phenomena. This, according to Dôgen, represents the ultimate realization—one that transcends boundaries and underscores the intrinsic unity of all elements in the vast symphony of existence.

Dôgen's *Shôbôgenzô* delves into the exploration of human consciousness as it engages with the universe. This endeavour is characterized by a deliberate avoidance of invalid presuppositions, ontological assumptions, metaphysical concepts, and any other forms of inauthenticity. The aim is to present an unencumbered and genuine depiction of the human experience to the universe. Dôgen attempts (and succeeds), through references to everyday experience, to faithfully describe the most direct encounters with the world as presented to human consciousness. Every fascicle of *Shôbôgenzô* examines distinct components of experience such as its ethics, temporality, structure, and so on (p. 135). What begins as a description of the correct practice of seated meditation or *zazen* and its influence on the history of Buddhism, evolves into a deep and philosophical expression of the experience of *zazen*.

Dôgen justifies seated meditation (*zazen*) by appealing for the cultivation of an absolute experience of the world or situation, without any impairment. He employs the metaphor of a dewdrop reflecting moonlight to illustrate the state of meditation. He suggests that, like the way a dewdrop encapsulates the entire moon, an individual

can attain a comprehensive awakening to the truth. An individual who undergoes this transformative experience is referred to as a Buddha, signifying one who has attained enlightenment or awakened to the ultimate truth. The metaphor of the full moon illuminating the entire cosmos encapsulates the profound enlightenment symbolized in Zen teachings. Similarly, in Dôgen's poem titled "On Zazen Practice," he eloquently captures the vibrant interplay of concentration and serenity inherent in meditation.

The moon
 abiding in the midst of
 serene mind;
 billows break
 into light. (Dôgen, 1985, p.13)

The seemingly motionless moonlight reflects upon the tumultuous ocean waves that collide with the ruggedness of rocks, erupting into myriad luminous droplets. These countless fragments of light intermingle, disperse, and unite in a dance of brilliance. For Dôgen, the practice of meditation embodies this intricate interplay between an individual's inner luminance and the ceaseless activities of the world. While each person's practice contributes to the collective awakening, individual engagement remains indispensable, as it actualizes and fulfills the activity of all beings as Buddhas.

The extensive passages within Dôgen's *Shôbôgenzô*, advocate a more ecological approach to daily activities, such as the creation and care of clothes, cooking, and consumption of meals, and maintaining personal hygiene, accord this masterpiece a unique position within the realms of world philosophy. "At Eiheiji," Kaoru Nonomura writes, "along with sitting, which is done morning and night, collective manual labor is done twice daily...[by] cleaning the Monks' hall, the washroom, the walking corridor, the common quarters, the work area, and its washroom and toilet." Furthermore, he reports, "it isn't done on special days or in special places, but takes place every single day, whether or not there is any dirt to speak of" (Nonomura, 1986, p.133).

This commitment to integrating the profound with the mundane resonates deeply in *Dôgen's Pure Standards for the Zen*

Community: A Translation of Eihei Shingi. The meticulous regulations and procedural details outlined in *The Eihei Shingi* extend even to seemingly trivial aspects like the manner of sleeping and brushing teeth. In the book's introductory section by Taigen Daniel Leighton, he emphasizes Dôgen's practical approach, which lays the groundwork for specific monastic forms that promote mindful care for daily life and communal harmony. Dôgen integrates ultimate truth into everyday activities, asserting that profound understanding coexists with ordinary actions. This seamless blend manifests in Dôgen's writings, where he interlaces the transcendent with everyday tasks. Dôgen envisions the Zen community as a manifestation of Buddha-nature, advocating for ecological harmony and mutual interdependence with the natural world (p. 4-5). Furthermore, Dôgen delicately underscores the intricate equilibrium between the spiritual coherence of the community and the devoted contributions of individuals, exemplified by roles such as that of the *tenzo* [cook]. With unwavering dedication, the *tenzo* transcends the confines of mere duty, assuming a pivotal role in cultivating an ambiance conducive to spiritual practice, thereby fostering equilibrium and serenity among all denizens (Dôgen, 2013, p.10). While the *tenzo*'s responsibilities may ostensibly appear mundane, their meticulous management of ingredients, conscientious avoidance of even the smallest wastage—such as a single grain of rice—and their expansive service embody a level of commitment far from trivial. Dôgen went so far as to craft a meticulous treatise on this subject titled *Instructions for the Zen Cook*, which elevates the practical realm by emphasizing profound philosophical underpinnings within seemingly routine endeavours. Ultimately, Dôgen's elucidations unveil the latent transformative potency embedded within quotidian tasks, underscoring the imperativeness of mindfulness and unwavering dedication as conduits to enlightenment.

Masao Abe highlights that while Dôgen acknowledges the transformative potential inherent in everyday activities, he also remains wary of solely engaging in actions for the sake of achieving an end. The problem with such an approach is that the current activity often loses its intrinsic value, becoming disconnected from genuine experience. We consistently find ourselves in a state of “becoming,”

always in pursuit of a goal. Even if we come close to reaching our intended objective, we never truly attain it. Consequently, a fundamental restlessness persists within us. This restlessness arises because, in our goal-oriented mindset, we not only conceptualize the future but also objectify the present, leading us to drift further away from genuine reality (Dôgen, 1992, p. 31). Dôgen's notion of the oneness of practice and attainment heralds a profound shift in our understanding of the present and future. Embracing the unity of means and end, each moment in the present crystallizes as the ultimate culmination, transcending its role as a mere stepping stone. Within this framework, distinctions between the general and the particular, as well as between oneness and differentiation, dissolve.

In Eihei Dôgen's *Shôbôgenzô*, the *Genjôkôan* fascicle stands as a cornerstone of profound significance. Among his extensive literary oeuvre, none resonates more deeply or offers greater illumination than this particular essay. Artfully tailored for a lay readership, the *Genjôkôan* elegantly encapsulates the quintessence of the Buddha's teachings. Serving as a luminous guide, this text adeptly elucidates and fortifies the authentic path toward awakening. It provides a vital foundation for us to understand both *Shôbôgenzô* and Dôgen's philosophy in depth. It is quite apparent that the term 'koan' is a significant concept for Dôgen, and it appears in multiple places in *Shôbôgenzô*, and twice in *Genjôkôan*. While the English translation for the word is not adequate to express its full connotations, Dôgen does not limit himself to its traditional meaning in Rinzai Zen where it indicates a problem. However, he enriches it with his unique interpretations, pushing its meaning to its broadest conceivable limits. 'Koan' is considered to express Dôgen's realization of the Buddhist Dharma. Together with the term 'Genjo', which is taken to mean 'immediate manifestation' in the context of Dôgen's philosophy, *Genjôkôan* means the manifesting of the totality of the present moment - an "ultimate reality" - wherein everything is equally significant and distinct. The esteemed Soto master Nishiari Bokuzan, spoke of *Genjôkôan* thus: "This is the most difficult of all the fascicles. . . . "This is Dôgen's skin, flesh, bone, and marrow. His entire teaching begins and ends with this fascicle . . . the other ninety-five fascicles

are all offshoots of this one”“(Dôgen,1986, p. 39). Buddhist academia has long appreciated the beauty, complexity, and depth of *Genjôkôan*. Every part of this great work is distinct yet bears a similarity and a consistency that presents itself as a uniting undercurrent to create a consistent whole.

Moreover, in *Genjôkôan*, Dôgen suggests that through mindful practice, individuals can continually awaken to the reality of both their individuality and their connection to the universal. This implies that the awareness of one’s unique self and the recognition of shared universal qualities are not mutually exclusive but can be simultaneously embraced and understood. In Shohaku Okumara’s words:

In *Genjôkôan*, Dôgen created a metaphor to express the reality of individuality and universality. He said that individuality can be expressed as a drop of water and universality or equality as moonlight. He said that this universal moonlight is reflected in even the smallest drop of water. This is the reality of our life; we are individual and yet universal. The vast, boundless moonlight is reflected in our lives and through our practice we can keep awakening to the reality of both individuality and universality. (Dôgen, 2010, p. 21)

The metaphor encourages a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of these seemingly contrasting aspects, emphasizing that the universal is not separate from the individual but intricately reflected within it. Dôgen’s notion of practicing to awaken to the reality of individuality and universality resonates with the idea that the practice of awakening itself is *Nirvâna*. Dôgen sees *Nirvâna* as the realization of the true nature of existence, not as an elusive state of mind or a means of escape from life. To him, *Nirvâna* represents a lifestyle rooted in the understanding of impermanence and the absence of self-sufficiency. It isn’t a distinct phase of spiritual practice or a specific mental state but rather a way of aligning one’s life with the truth of existence. Recognizing the transient nature of all things and the interconnectedness of existence leads to the realization that nothing is permanent and clinging is futile. This profound comprehension shifts our perspective, diminishing the need for competition and the

pursuit of superiority or self-fulfillment. Embracing this path of enlightenment, which is Nirvâna itself, we adapt to the truths of impermanence and interdependence, resulting in a more harmonious and peaceful way of living. (Dôgen, 2010, p. 30)

Dôgen's conceptualization of *Nirvâna*, accentuating interconnectedness, impermanence, and the transformative odyssey through dedicated practice, seamlessly aligns with the foundational principles of deep ecology. These perspectives collectively yield insights that cultivate a more refined and harmonious interplay among individuals, society, and the natural world, sharing a common strand in the recognition of the profound interconnectedness and interdependence intrinsic to our existence. Dôgen's affirmation that the pursuit of awakening begets a more tranquil existence resonates harmoniously with the deep ecological worldview, emphasizing the imperative of coexisting symbiotically with nature. Moreover, Dôgen's renouncement of competition and the relentless quest for power echoes the deep ecological criticism of anthropocentrism and exploitative orientations towards nature. This paradigm shifts towards a humbler and ecocentric standpoint, valuing the inherent worth of all life forms, and advocating for a more nuanced, balanced, and sustainable rapport with the natural world, encapsulating the ethos essential for our contemporary era.

Dôgen's wisdom also reminds us that the belief in our own happiness as the centre of the universe is nothing but a false notion. While such a perspective underlies many contemporary views and values, the wisdom imparted by the Buddha and Dôgen challenges this paradigm, revealing it to be an inverted and misconstrued understanding of the nature of things. In essence, our ability to perceive universal reality often falters due to our inherent self-centeredness. This perspective leads to complications for ourselves and others, necessitating a commitment to practice for a harmonious existence aligned with reality. The desire to overcome self-centered tendencies propels us to engage in practices such as zazen and the study of Buddha Dharma, underscoring the importance of our delusions as a motivating force for positive change in our lives.

The practice of zazen serves as a transformative gateway for individuals to deeply engage with and comprehend the interconnectedness of reality. Through this meditative practice, practitioners come to recognize that their very existence is not isolated but rather intricately integrated into the vast tapestry of the universe. Such an experiential understanding transcends mere intellectual appreciation, offering a profound realization of the inherent unity and interdependence that permeates all aspects of existence. Furthermore, Enlightenment is revealed not as a distant, elusive objective but as an ever-present reality awaiting recognition and actualization. This enlightened state emerges not through passive waiting but through active, dedicated engagement with the practice of zazen, leading to a heightened awareness of the universal principles that govern existence. The profound insight into the interconnected reality and the immediacy of Enlightenment is beautifully captured in Dôgen's poem No. 101 from *Eihei Kôroku*. This verse vividly illustrates the deep understanding that actively participating in the way, particularly in the serene solitude of mountain forests during a late-night zazen session, emerges as the most optimal path to realization.

Sitting as the night gets late, sleep not yet arrived,
Ever more I realize engaging the way is best
in mountain forests.

Sound of valley streams enters my ears;
moonlight pierces my eyes.

Other than this, not a thought's in my mind. (Dôgen, 2010, p. 639)

The poem encapsulates the essence of Dôgen's teachings, emphasizing the transformative power of engaged meditation in the natural world, where the practitioner transcends ordinary thought and attains a heightened state of awareness. Through the simplicity and eloquence of Dôgen's verse, one is invited to contemplate the profound interdependence between the practitioner and the environment.

Dôgen believed that any form of expression, no matter how trivial or significant it may seem, has the power to create an awareness that goes beyond the conventional boundaries of speaker, voice, and listener. When we transcend all limitations, we gain wisdom that forms

the foundation of compassion, making it a crucial aspect of our lives. True benevolence unfurls only when we attune ourselves empathetically to the experiences of others. Simultaneously, in the practical and ethical realms of our quotidian pursuits, it becomes imperative to uphold the demarcations between self and other. An enlightened individual manifests an innate comprehension of nonduality, seamlessly navigating the realms of unity and distinction, liberating themselves from the constraints of both domains, and engaging in actions with unbridled yet harmonious freedom. This awakening is poised to herald a profound transformation in human cognition, nurturing an elevated consciousness that surpasses mere self-realization. While it resonates with the core tenets of Arne Naess's deep ecology, it transcends individual awareness to embrace a collective Corealization. This intellectual evolution bears the potential to uplift the entirety of Earth, embodying a progressive stride towards environmental amelioration and rejuvenation.

Dôgen's teachings encourage a shift from viewing the nonhuman world merely as a resource or a backdrop for human activity, towards recognizing it as an active, equal partner in the journey towards enlightenment and ecological balance. This paradigmatic shift, as suggested by Dôgen's philosophy, is not just a theoretical ideal but a practical necessity for addressing the multifaceted ecological challenges of the modern world. In light of this, the paper posits that integrating Dôgen's insights into the contemporary philosophical discourse could provide a more inclusive, balanced, and holistic approach, that not only aligns with the deep ecological principles of valuing the nonhuman world but also mitigates the risk of alienation by fostering a sense of shared destiny and mutual respect among all beings. It is through this lens of 'Corealization' that we might find a viable path forward, one that embraces the complexity of the ecological challenges we face while nurturing a profound connection with the entire web of life.

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