

The Tao of Inquiry: First Encounters Between Zen Master Dōgen and Contemporary Western Readers.

The following thoughts are intended to introduce a few closely related ways a first reading of Dōgen can be made more fruitful. This general outline will be followed: selecting one (Katto, or “Twining Vines”) from among Dōgen’s many lectures, we will examine the central question of this text. We will then give a name to his way of asking this question. From this single text, we will expand our study to consider four themes common to all of his writings. Finally, we will compare Dōgen to a thinker more familiar to Western students.

I.

Dōgen begins and ends his lecture called Kattō or “twining vines” by discussing the life and death of Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth Buddhist Ancestor, who brought the teaching of Buddhism to China. The central focus of the lecture is authentic transmission of the teaching – how this transmission is achieved, what steps are necessary to ensure that the teaching is kept both effective and unchanged.

We could begin with “twining vines” as a way to look more broadly at Dōgen’s particular method of teaching by way of question and answer. From Kattō, section 1:

“By a direct transmission of correct realization through 28 generations, [Buddha’s treasury of the true dharma eye] reached the venerable Bodhidharma... Bodhidharma went to China as the first teacher there... [he became] The first Chinese Ancestor... through realization, he attained the source through the source and made it the root of branches and leaves.”

And from the final section of Kattō:

“It is said that the First Ancestor [Bodhidharma] returned to India. I have learned that this is wrong. What Songyun saw on the road as Bodhidharma could not have been actual. How could Songyun have discovered Bodhidharma’s destination?”

Between the opening and closing statements we’ve just heard are Dōgen’s reflections on what it means to be Bodhidharma, what it means to receive the teaching, and what it means to master the teaching. The discussion consists almost entirely of short anecdotes

followed by questions – questions which Dōgen consistently leaves without definite answers.

As we consider the notion of questions and answers in Dōgen, it first comes to mind that we are meant to think not only of the words, but also of the motivations and assumptions behind the words. A question posed to Dōgen or by him may appear grammatically simple, but throughout the course of a lecture, the direction of the question is radically altered. We might propose that Dōgen is not only looking for the right question, but also for the question to be asked from the right frame of mind. He is not merely looking for the right answer, but for the right *direction* of answer.

II.

To give this change of direction a name, We could call Dōgen's kind of inquiry the **Gravid Question and the Endless Answer**. Gravid is a fascinating word, related to the more common Gravity, and meaning “weighty” “full of meaning” and literally or figuratively “pregnant.” Dōgen's questions are Gravid because they are full of possible answers, though the answers are hidden. Dōgen's questions are “gravid” because they are heavy with meaning and are open to answers from all worlds, all times, all consciousnesses.

If we pair this with Endless Answer, we find a response to the Gravid Question that resists formulas, systems and commonality. First impressions, simple solutions and historical facts can only be part of the Endless Answer. In the end, Dōgen is training the heart of his disciples in a particular way of approaching answers: the answer as orientation, rather than destination. Dōgen's fascicles are models of his Tao, his way, of Investigation. Questions and answers are spacious rooms to enter, not mathematical formulas balanced on either side of an equal sign.

The Gravid Question implied at the beginning and end of Twining Vines is, “what happened to body of the First Ancestor?” The answer generally believed is, “the First Ancestor returned to India.” But Dōgen rejects this direct, simple and straightforward question/answer pair. He says, “This is wrong.”

If we are beginning to study Dōgen, and have just entered his philosophy, we must be skeptical of such a simple response from him. What, exactly, is “wrong” here? I propose that Dōgen is not merely denying the question/answer pair as stated. He rejects the whole mentality behind them. If by “body of the First Ancestor” we imagine a physical, chronologically-bound individual, then this is wrong. If by “returned to India” we mean a country in Asia west of Japan, then this, too, is wrong. It is our image and meaning that are wrong; it's the shallow well from which the question and answer emerge that is wrong.

Since we are looking at a specific passage, the end of *Twining Vines*, a few specific proposals could now be made concerning the idea of Gravid Questions and Endless Answers. First, Dōgen's answers are not unrelated to the questions he poses, as may appear. Second, his offering of multiple answers is never incoherent if we enter his perspective. He has a peculiar logic which becomes clear only after careful study. Finally, while some philosophies might suggest abandoning answers altogether, Dōgen's does not. His constant admonition to his disciples is "investigate thoroughly."

Dōgen's admonition to investigate is especially clear in *Twining Vines*. In sections 3, 5 and 7, respectively, Dōgen urges his listener-readers: "...you should investigate these words...", "...you should examine thoroughly the meaning...", "...you should study and examine..." Similar admonitions pepper the canon of Dōgen's writings. This is important to remember, because first encounters with Dōgen must trundle over the bumpy road of his baffling remarks. Because he continually tells us to search, it must mean that the task inherent in any question (i.e., the search for an answer) is not simple, but neither is it fruitless or futile. Dōgen intends that we genuinely ask and search, and that our search should be "thoroughly".

A thorough search of Dōgen might mean many things. Comparing one passage or text to another. Reading and discussing the fascicles in a learning community. Sometimes it means proposing possibly impossible solutions to "problems" in the texts, when more obvious solutions elude us. In the case of the "wrong" question and answer at the end of *Twining Vines*, the solution is a reevaluation of "body" and a reevaluation of "First Ancestor." When we ask the correct question – and also ask the question correctly – then the right answer will emerge. Conversely, if the right answer hasn't emerged, then the correct question hasn't been asked correctly. I have called the correct pair the Gravid Question and the Endless Answer precisely because correct pairing of question and answer is (or will become) great enough to hold all paradox and all tension in harmony.

So how should we reevaluate "body" and "First Ancestor"? If, as I propose, the whole of *Twining Vines* is an Endless Answer to the question of the ancestor's body, then our way of approach is, "how can we make 'where is the body of the First Ancestor' into a Gravid Question?" Let's consider this from a broad perspective of Dōgen's style.

When we first encounter the phrase "twining vines" it is an image Dōgen employs to describe the relationship of teachers and disciples in Buddhism. But nothing is quite so simple in Dōgen. For Dōgen the "twining vines" are also the many layers of our exterior and interior worlds, our birth and our beliefs, our intentions and our limitations. These "vines," these various categories of our experience, are not separate things, though most

of us (mistakenly?) see them as separate. Dōgen's pedagogy, the goal of his teaching, concerns the re-naming and unifying of these vines in the minds of his disciples, so that their inner and outer experience will be a seamless whole. The truly Gravid Question is one asked from this whole self; the Endless Answer emerges from this same whole self.

III.

We might be so bold as to tentatively name the vines that Dōgen sees twining within and outside of human experience – the same vines which he twines around his discourse. After a comparison of themes from many of his fascicles, I see four:

1. Transmission of the teaching
2. The physical body
3. Time and place
4. The use of words

These are very general, but I think they capture how Dōgen is helping to expand the questions and answers of his disciples. I call these four his “twining vines,” because, like tangled roots and branches, they can only be separated in description, not in essence. In the Twining Vines lecture Dōgen demonstrates that any part of Buddhist thought is connected to any other part, and any line of inquiry will draw the questioner into a densely populated world of interconnected ideas.

Now we have a framework for making a Gravid Question about the body of the First Ancestor. The “vine” of the physical body is particularly prominent in this discourse, but it is not to be separated from the other vines. Before asking where is the body, Dōgen directs us to ask what is the body – how does the body become a question? What is the Endless Answer to the question of the body?

Body imagery floods this fascicle from the very beginning. Section 1 recalls the travels of Bodhidharma from India to China. Dōgen equates the physical journey with a metaphysical journey. Just as the names and numbers of the Ancestors are intermingled, so their lives and their teachings are inseparable. Section 3 brings us the story of the 28th Ancestor's transmission. His disciples, by their understanding, become his skin, flesh, bones and marrow. In this story, the disciples are the body of the Ancestor. What is his body? What is their body? What are their expressed beliefs? All are inseparably twining vines.

In historic context, Buddhism is relatively new to Japan, and Dōgen is concerned that it be placed in good soil and receive proper fertilization. In the background of every speech is both a guarding against false teaching on one hand and a hope for clear transmission of authentic Dharma on the other. Dōgen is not presenting hearsay. He has been to

China; he has met authentic teachers; he has encountered enlightenment. The reader should keep this in mind when considering Dōgen's unique use of questions and answers.

Dōgen must tend to all four of his twining vines. In the Gravid Question of ancestors' bodies, all four need attention because this Question concerns not only the physical body, but the manner of transmission of the teaching, historical context, and the words which carry the teaching from one generation to the next. Dōgen must demonstrate that time and place have no necessary hierarchy. There are no better, more important or more desirable times and places. It is true that all places are "here" and it is true that India is far from Japan. The disciple must be able to examine both truths simultaneously.

The First Ancestor is both with us now and scattered as ashes on a mountain. He is the kind of ash that never needed fire. He is the kind of body that never needed place. The First Ancestor is one among the many twining vines that cannot be separated. We don't know where the Buddha ends and the First Ancestor begins. We don't know where the First Ancestor ends and we begin. Skin, flesh, bones and marrow are one body. Take one element away, it ceases to be a body.

Given time, we could go into most of Dōgen's fascicles and show how the four vines (transmission, body, time, words) are being revealed, pruned, cultivated. It seems that within Dōgen's method, any humble, honest question can become the Gravid Question. Any genuine impetus or motivation can become correctness of asking. Dōgen begins with questions of life and death, of proper sitting posture and of rice cakes. The natural world and the world of the body stimulate us always to be asking. When this asking is broadened, the right answers appear.

Gravid Questions and Endless Answers in the hearts of sincere disciples are the soil in which the new teaching will thrive – not in mere theories or institutions. Dōgen might tell us that when we have found and entered the Endless Answer, we should stay there. No given is fully given. No assumption can be fully assumed. Everywhere is a place to rest, but any particular place will deprive us of sleep. He might tell us to keep to the eye of the hurricane, where the storm of investigation inevitably brings us what we need even while remain still at the "true dharma eye" of the center.

To close, we might offer a comparison of Dōgen's thought with that of a teacher more familiar to Western audiences. Might we say that the Socratic Method is a way of beginning to understand Dōgen? Many approach Dōgen from literary or philosophical-critical perspectives. But Dōgen eludes criticism and systematizing. We must approach

him on his own terms, which are more personal, and frankly, more mystical. Would Socrates' "Tao of Inquiry" be our closest connection to Dōgen? A better way to begin?

Both Socrates and Dōgen insist on face-to-face transmission. They both use questions to connect (or re-connect) the student with a transcendent Truth, a Truth accessible, but not easily accessed. Both Socrates and Dōgen do the work of teaching selflessly, more concerned with the students' benefit than their own success. And both believe in a greater world, one that includes but is not limited by what is seen.

We make this comparison in conclusion not for the sake of "explaining" Dōgen – which would betray the essence of his teaching. Dōgen is beyond mere explanation. Rather, we want to give the new reader of Dōgen a way to enter the spacious mode of his discourse. For both Socrates and Dōgen, the Gravid Question is the key to opening the door to the Endless Answer. And perhaps, the "door" is the student. The student, the learner, the inquirer can be either the hindrance or admittance to the fullest human life.

So: what, in the end, is Dōgen's "Tao of Inquiry?" We must thoroughly investigate this question. We must open to the possibility that "thoroughly" means Gravid and Endless. The Gravid Question and the Endless Answer are given, yet ungraspable. To borrow from many of Dōgen's works: The real Question and the real Answer are inseparably twining vines. They are Buddha eyes seen and not seen in the plum blossoms. They are culinary guidelines for the monastery cook. They are the many kinds of right. They are questions flying like questions and answers swimming like answers.