

The *Shōbōgenzō*
A Trainee's Translation
of Great Master Dōgen's Spiritual Masterpiece
Translator's General Introduction

The *Shōbōgenzō* is the recognized spiritual masterpiece by the thirteenth-century Japanese Sōtō Zen Master Eihei Dōgen. It is comprised of discourses that he gave to his disciples, in person or in writing, at various times between 1231 and his death twenty-two years later at age fifty-three.[†] These discourses cover a wide range of topics pertinent to those in monastic life though often also relevant to those training in lay life. He discusses matters of daily behavior and religious ceremonial as well as issues involving the Master-disciple relationship. He also explores the deeper meaning that informs the so-called Zen kōan stories, which often puzzle readers by their seeming illogicality and contrary nature.

I have translated the title as *The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching*, though a fuller, more comprehensive rendering would be *The Treasure House for What the Spiritual Eye of Wise Discernment Perceives from the Vantage Point of the True Teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha and His Heirs*. The term 'Teaching' in the title is synonymous with the Buddhist use of the term 'Dharma', which refers not only to what the historical Buddha taught to His disciples but also to the Truth that flows from the Unborn and which all things give expression to when they are functioning directly from their innate True Self. However, it does not address what may be a scholar's particular interest in producing a translation, though it is obvious that translating anything from medieval Japanese and Chinese requires special academic training: hence the subtitle "A Trainee's Translation of Great Master Dōgen's Spiritual Masterpiece". That is, it is intended primarily for those who practice Zen Buddhism rather than those whose interest is purely academic.

There are various ways in which Dogen's discourses can be presented, each having its particular advantages. The way I have chosen is simply to divide the discourses into those that were completed before his death and those that were still

[†] The present translation is based primarily on Kawamura Kōdō's edition of Dōgen's complete works *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1993), in consultation with the editions by Tamaki Kōshirō, *Dōgen Shū* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1969), by Ōkubo Dōshū, *Kohon Kōtei Shōbōgenzō* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1971), by Terada Tōru and Mizunoya Ōko, *Dōgen* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1972), and by Masutani Fumio, *Gendaigoshaku Shōbōgenzō* (Tokyo: Kadokawa Shoten, 1975).

in draft form when he died, ordered where possible chronologically by the date when the discourse was given.

The discourses were originally written out by hand, primarily by his chief disciple and amanuensis, the Second Japanese Sōtō Zen Ancestor, Kōun Ejō. Most of the discourses have a two-part postscript (printed in italics, usually at the end of a discourse). The first half indicates who the recipients of the discourse were, along with when and where it was presented. If this is signed, it will customarily be by Dōgen. The second half supplies a short account of when and where the copy was made. These copies are most often signed by Ejō, though three were signed by Giun, one of Ejō's Dharma-heirs who later became the fifth abbot of Dōgen's Eihei-ji Monastery.

The majority of the discourses focus on exploring the spiritual significance of some topic drawn from Buddhist Scriptures or Chinese Chan (Zen) texts. Dōgen's commentaries on these texts are not lectures as would be understood in academic circles, but are talks that arise from a Zen Master's deepest understanding of the spiritual meaning and relevance of his topic to Buddhist training and practice. They come out of Dōgen's mind of meditation and are being presented to his monastic and lay disciples, who are presumably listening from their mind of meditation. ●

The discourses carry a strong flavor of the conversational and the personal, and he enriches them with colorful Chinese and Zen phrases, as well as with medieval Chinese and Japanese colloquialisms. When translated literally, many of these metaphors and figures of speech may well have little meaning for English-speaking readers. However, by the thirteenth century they would have been a common way for a Buddhist Meditation Master to refer to That which is the True Nature of all beings. The function of these metaphors is, to some extent, to 'ground' a Master's disciples by providing them with a colorful and more easily remembered image instead of some more abstract, 'intellectual' definition. They point to the Great Matter for which one trains in Serene Reflection Meditation, which is to awaken to one's True Nature. ●

Dōgen sometimes uses a manner of speaking that closely resembles a dialogue. One specific instance occurs in 'A Discourse on Doing One's Utmost in Practicing the Way of the Buddhas' (*Bendōwa*), his earliest dated text in the *Shōbōgenzō*. The major part of this particular discourse consists of an imaginary dialogue between Dōgen and a potential disciple. While it takes the form of someone asking questions and Dōgen giving answers, it is not a catechism. That is, it is not a series of formal questions and answers. Rather, the questions arise from an attitude of mind which has misgivings about the efficacy and worth of the type

of seated meditation that Dōgen advocates. Dōgen's responses, by contrast, arise from a place that lies beyond the intellectual, duality-based mind and are aimed at helping the questioner to recognize that duality and to let go of it. Hence, the attitude of mind of both the questioner and the Master is as important as the specific question being asked. For the translator, one challenge in rendering Dōgen's text is to convey to the reader the attitudes implied in the exchanges between the two.

These interchanges between a Master and a potential or real disciple are not speculative in nature, but invariably have the purpose of helping disciples find that spiritual certainty which is the hallmark of a genuine kenshō, 'the seeing of one's Original Face', that is, the direct experiencing of one's innate Buddha Nature. This is not the same as having an intellectual understanding or intuition, since the experience takes one beyond those functions associated with the so-called rational mind, which are the foundation and authority for those who are not dedicated to spiritual pursuits. Furthermore, the certainty arising from a kenshō is not speculative in nature or the product of rational persuasion or a form of blind faith.

Dōgen's teaching in the *Shōbōgenzō* is neither confined to nor limited by conventional mental categories, which is why practitioners of Dōgen's type of meditation are admonished to be willing to be disturbed by the Truth, that is, to have not only their intellectual preconceptions questioned but also to have their reliance on solely what makes conventional, worldly sense called into question. Despite the view of some that Dōgen is therefore 'anti-intellect', once the spiritual certainty arises in those who are doing the training, the previous need to depend solely on the 'boxes' fabricated by their intellect disappears. Or as several Meditation Masters describe it, once we give up 'the walls and fences' that our intellect constructs from the bits and pieces of experience, this dependency disappears, and we metaphorically 'drop off our body and mind' but without rejecting the intellect itself or denying its natural and useful functions.

Conventions

In the present work, when a common word is used having spiritual significance, I have employed initial capitals to signal to the reader that word *X* is not intended literally but is part of a code which Zen Masters have used to convey spiritual meaning. Indeed, when people spiritually awaken, this is customarily signaled by their expressing their understanding in some unique and personal way. When the use of this code is ignored or overlooked by a translator, a kōan story may well become totally unintelligible and give rise to the erroneous notion that

Zen promotes the indescribable. To avoid this, I have added some footnotes intended to point out places where the code may not have been spotted by readers.

An example of this may occur in a dialogue in which a Master and his disciple use the same words but with a totally different meaning. For example, a Master and his disciple are having a discussion, and the Master tests his disciple's understanding of what his True Nature is by asking, "Do you get It?" with the disciple answering, "No, I don't get it." The Master's question is a spiritual one: "Have you got to the heart of your spiritual question?" to which the disciple's reply reveals that he is still attached to conventional, worldly ways of thinking.

Elements of Style

In the present translations, four stylistic elements are used whose purpose may not be immediately apparent:

First is the capitalizing of words that would not usually be proper nouns, such as 'Original Nature', 'the Self', 'the Truth', 'It', 'One's Original Face'. Such words refer either to one's own Buddha Nature or to That which is the spiritual source of one's Buddha Nature. For instance, there is a difference between the term 'good friend' which refers to a Buddhist who has the ability to teach and train others in Buddhism (usually synonymous with a Zen Master), and the term 'Good Friend', which is another name for one's Buddha Nature.

Second, a word that is underlined is to be understood as emphatic within the context of the particular sentence in which it occurs. Were the text to be read aloud, the underlined word would be given emphasis.

Third, Dōgen sometimes abruptly changes his topic within his talks. Whereas many of these shifts are signaled by some introductory word, such as 'further' and 'also', which appears at the beginning of a new paragraph, in some instances this is not the case. Thus it has seemed advisable to aid the reader by inserting a plum blossom asterisk (Ⅱ) between paragraphs where a sudden shift might otherwise prove disconcerting.

Fourth, single quotation marks are often used in the sense of 'so-called', 'what I (or someone else) would call', or 'the term' or 'the phrase', in addition to their customary use for marking a quote within a quote.

Special Terms

Dōgen often alludes to 'training and practice'. This consistently refers specifically to doing seated meditation, applying 'the mind of meditation' to all one's daily activities, and attempting to live in accord with the Precepts of Mahayana Buddhism, that is, the Precepts as spelled out in Dōgen's *Text for a*

Precepts Master's Giving the Mahayana Precepts (Kyōjukaimon) and *The Scripture of Brahma's Net (Bommō Kyō)*. Similarly, references to 'studying' denote training under a Zen Master, and do not signify the undertaking of a scholastic regimen.

To render the Japanese word *tennin* (or *ninden*) I have used the phrase 'ordinary people and those in lofty places'. Some translators render it as 'gods and men'. There is the danger that some readers may therefore assume that it means 'immortals and mortals'. However, in a Buddhist context it refers to those who are in the celestial and human realms among the six Realms of Existence, the four others being those of beasts, those in a hellish state, those who are hungry ghosts, and those who are asuras (heaven stormers). Those in the celestial and human realms are potentially able to hear the name of Buddha and absorb the Dharma, whereas those in the other four are so preoccupied with their suffering that it is exceedingly difficult for them to believe that they can transcend their suffering long enough to hear the Teaching and thereby free themselves from their spiritual obsessions.

Dōgen often uses the terms Mahayana and Hinayana (translated as 'the Greater Course' and 'the Lesser Course'). A widely voiced view is that references in Mahayana writings to those who follow a Lesser Course denote practitioners of the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. The Theravadan tradition, however, was not active in medieval Japan during Dōgen's lifetime. Also, the Pali Canon upon which the Theravadan tradition is grounded was known to Dōgen through Chinese translations and was held in great esteem by him. Allusions in Dōgen's writings to 'those who follow the Lesser Course' are clearly to persons whom trainees may well encounter in their daily life. Thus it is likely that he is referring to shravakas (those who merely seek to gain an intellectual understanding of Buddhism) or to pratyekabuddhas (those who undertake some aspects of Buddhist practice but only for their own personal benefit).

The Issue of Gender and Sex

This issue is sometimes raised in regard to translating medieval Chinese and Japanese texts into English. It involves the attitude of Buddhism in general, and Dōgen in particular, toward women in spiritual life. While it is true that in some cultures during some periods negative social attitudes toward women have unfortunately colored the practice of Buddhism, Dōgen's view is unequivocal: males and females are spiritual and monastic equals, for enlightenment knows no such distinction as sex. The English language, however, has not yet developed a universally accepted way to express what is gender neutral. When Dōgen refers to

monks or laity in general or as 'someone who', it should be understood that he is including both males and females, even though the English pronominal reference is, for brevity's sake, 'he', 'him', or 'his': I have used 'she', 'her', and 'hers' only where the sex of the person is known to be female.

Appendices

Two appendices have been added to the book. The first is a listing of the Japanese names of the major figures in the various kōan stories along with their Chinese equivalents. The second is a glossary of words and idiomatic phrases, such as *hossu* and *kōan*, which need some explanation because they do not have an easy equivalent in English.

On Kōan Stories

Dōgen makes wide use of stories from Zen kōan collections. Since these stories may strike some readers as strange or incomprehensible, the following observations may prove helpful.

Originally, the term 'kōan' meant 'a public case', and in Chinese Zen referred to a notable, authenticated instance when a disciple came to realize his or her True Nature. By Dōgen's time, the term 'kōan' had become synonymous with the spiritual question which epitomizes that which keeps disciples, as well as anyone else, from directly experiencing what their Original Nature is. It is the spiritual doubt that keeps someone 'looking down'. The kōan stories, then, are usually accounts of how a particular trainee's doubt was resolved.

In these stories, the spiritual problem of a trainee often involves a habitual acting counter to at least one of the ten major Mahayana Buddhist Precepts on either a literal or a figurative level. That is, in some way the disciple will have persisted in taking the life from someone or something, in taking things that are not given, in giving in to covetous feelings, in saying that which is not so, in trafficking in something that intoxicates or deludes, in putting oneself up and others down, in insulting others, in giving in to anger or resentment, in being stingy, or in acting in a disrespectful manner toward Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha.

When reading such dialogues, it is prudent to consider what the mental attitude of the questioner is and not just what is being asked. This is important because the question asked arises from a particular frame of mind. Determining who is asking the question (and sometimes where and when) will help clarify what this frame of mind is and, therefore, what is really being asked, since the answer given will not be an absolute one, independent of the questioner, but one that speaks to the questioner's mental attitude and perspective. This is sometimes

referred to in Zen writings as ‘two arrows meeting in mid-air’, one meaning of which is that the questioner thinks he knows what the target, or goal, is and has ‘shot his arrow’ of discriminatory thought at that target only to have his ‘arrow’ deflected by the Master’s response so that, to mix metaphors, the disciple’s ‘train of discriminatory thought’ is derailed. At the same time, the Master’s ‘arrow’ points to a way for the disciple to go in his Buddhist training.

However, in some cases the roles are reversed: the Master asks the disciple a question or ‘invites’ him to respond from a perspective beyond the discriminatory mind. If the disciple has truly awakened, he will respond appropriately from the mind of meditation and not from the discriminatory mind of duality. In such an instance, the ‘two arrows meeting in mid-air’ is an expression for their oneness of mind.

The stories may follow any of several different patterns or their combination. Almost all will involve at least one of the following three patterns:

In the first, a disciple will ask the Master a question which arises from a reliance on dualistic thinking to comprehend his own spiritual doubt. This encounter with the Master will often occur in the context of a formal spiritual examination ceremony, but this will not always be made explicit in the text. The Master will then do or say something which cuts through the disciple’s confusion and points him directly toward ‘seeing’ his Original Nature. What the Master does or says arises from a source that transcends the dualistic, intellectual mind: it is not a philosophical, doctrinal, or ‘rational’ answer to the question. If the disciple is ‘ripe’—that is, spiritually ready to shift his perspective away from reliance on what his intellect is doing so that he can realize That which transcends intellect—he has an experience referred to by some such phrase as ‘realizing the Truth’ or ‘awakening to his True Nature’. In some kōan stories, the trigger for this experience may not be directly supplied by the Master but by some other external condition, such as seeing peach blossoms or hearing a piece of tile strike bamboo.

In the second, a Meditation Master initiates an exchange with a disciple who is still in doubt, and tries through his conversation with the disciple to steer him toward facing up to what his spiritual problem is. In such dialogues, the Master’s questions may seem upon first reading to be casual ones. In kōan stories, when a Master asks a question, he is not trying to engage the disciple in some social interchange: his question will have a deeper purpose or meaning, which the disciple may or may not pick up on. If the disciple fails to ‘get it’, the Master will usually persist in his questioning until either the disciple has an awakening or until the Master decides that the disciple is still not yet ‘ripe’ enough.

In the third pattern, a Master-disciple interchange occurs, but with a disciple who has already awakened to the Truth. In such an instance, since what the disciple is saying or doing no longer arises from the mind of duality, there will be some clear indication of the Master's approval.

In those cases where the disciple is still in doubt, one useful clue as to what his spiritual problem is can be found in how the Master addresses the disciple. For instance, in one story, a monk who is given to striving too hard is addressed as 'Shibi the Austere Monk'. In another, a monk who has become entangled in erudition through his academic pursuit of studying Scriptures is addressed by his Master as 'you who are a learned scholar of considerable intelligence'.

In identifying the disciple's spiritual problem, it is helpful to determine what the disciple's attitude of mind is, and not to treat his questions or responses on a purely informational level. Once the disciple's spiritual problem has been identified, how he responds to his Master will reflect that problem until he has an awakening, at which time he may compose a poem which expresses the change in perspective that has emerged.

Another aspect which may be difficult for the reader to fathom immediately is the relevance of the Master's actions in word or deed to what the disciple's problem is. Since such actions are not 'pre-planned' but reflect the on-the-spot skillful means of the Master, it can only be said that whatever is done will arise from the mind of meditation, will be free of any dualistic tendency, will not break any of the Precepts, and will arise out of his compassion for the suffering of the disciple. In one famous kōan story (Nansen's cat), the roles are reversed: Meditation Master Nansen puts himself in a spiritually unsupportable position by trying to teach his monks to keep to the Precepts by seriously breaking one himself, and it is his chief disciple who points this out to him.

Another topic that arises from the kōan stories deals with who the participants are. The Master is easily identified. On the other hand, the one who asks a question is often referred to simply as a monk. In such cases the person is most likely a junior monk, one who has not yet been Transmitted and who is asking his question at a ceremony called shōsan. This is the formal spiritual examination ceremony which is customarily held twice a month in Zen monasteries during which junior trainees ask a question that reflects their present spiritual state.

When the monk asking a question is specifically identified, this refers to a senior monk, one who is already Transmitted or who will be Transmitted. These are monks who will ultimately function as a Master, and often as the founder of a temple or a lineage. Whether in the kōan story they have already been Transmitted or are still juniors can only be determined by the nature of their question.

Applying the Principles

To see how the preceding principles apply to an actual kōan story, the following one, taken from Dōgen's *Bendōwa*, is given with my exegetical remarks in square brackets. The kōan story itself is given in indented text:

Long ago, there was a monk in Meditation Master Hōgen's monastic community named Gensoku, who was a subordinate under the Temple's administrative director. Master Hōgen asked him, "Director Gensoku, how long have you been in our community?"

[Although Gensoku is not the director, he is apparently acting as though he thought he was, thus breaking a Precept by 'putting himself up'. Hōgen's question is not a casual but a leading one, arising from his compassionate sensitivity to Gensoku's spiritual suffering from pride.]

Gensoku replied, "Why, I've been in the community for three years now."

[Gensoku tacitly acknowledges recognition of his importance as self-evident and responds in a casual manner. Had he not been absorbed in his pride, he might have responded, as would be expected not only from a novice but also from any Chinese, by some such statement as "You flatter me by addressing me by too exalted a title, considering that I have been training here for only three years now." Had he already had a kenshō, his response, though not predictable, would not be impolite or disrespectful in tone but, on the other hand, would probably not be a conventional, 'socially correct' one either.]

The Master asked, "As you are still a junior monk, why have you never asked me about the Buddha Dharma?"

[Hōgen gently corrects Gensoku by now pointing out his actual position as a junior monk. He then asks another leading question, which implies that Gensoku thinks that he is above all other novices and does not need instruction.]

Gensoku replied, "I will not lie to Your Reverence. Previously, when I was with Meditation Master Seihō, I fully reached the place of joyful ease in the Buddha Dharma."

[The delusion underlying Gensoku's pride begins to emerge more clearly, for he claims to have attained a spiritual state which he has not yet reached. This is what Hōgen had probably surmised and which had led him to engage Gensoku in this dialogue. Gensoku is now breaking the Precepts by saying that which is not so and by having sold himself the wine of delusion.]

The Master said, "And what was said that gained you entry to that place?"

[Hōgen now probes directly into the heart of Gensoku's problem.]

Gensoku said, “I once asked Seihō what the True Self of a novice is, and Seihō replied, ‘Here comes the Hearth God looking for fire.’ ”

[The nature of the question and the response suggest that this interchange had occurred as part of a shōsan ceremony (referred to above) held before the assembled monks, during which novices ask a Meditation Master a question which presumably reflects their current spiritual understanding. Because at this point Gensoku is still operating from the mind of duality, it is likely that the question was asked from the intellect rather than from the heart. The significance of Seihō’s response will be discussed later.]

Hōgen responded, “Nicely put by Seihō. But I’m afraid you may not have understood it.”

[Gensoku had heard Master Seihō’s words but had not grasped their import. Hōgen makes a complimentary remark about Seihō’s comment. Had Hōgen suspected that Gensoku had already had a kenshō, it is unlikely that he would have done this, but instead might have made some remark that on the surface looked as though he were disparaging Seihō, such as “That old rascal! Is he still going around saying such things?” but which Gensoku would see as being the way a Master may acknowledge another Master whilst avoiding judgmentalism.]

Gensoku said, “A Hearth God is associated with fire, so I understand it to mean that, just as fire is being used to seek for fire, so the True Self is what is used to seek for the True Self.”

[Gensoku has worked out an intellectual interpretation of Seihō’s remark, and therefore thinks that this type of understanding is what constitutes awakening to one’s True Self. Gensoku’s error is in thinking that there are two True Selves: the one that seeks and the one that is sought.]

The Master said, “Just as I suspected! You have not understood. Were the Buddha Dharma like that, it is unlikely that It would have continued on, being Transmitted down to the present day.”

[The Master now sets Gensoku straight as to where he is spiritually, in order to shake up his proud complacency and break through his deluded view.]

Gensoku was so distressed at this that he left the monastery. While on the road, he thought to himself, “In this country the Master is known as a fine and learned monastic teacher and as a great spiritual leader and guide for five hundred monks. Since he has chided me for having gone wrong, he must undoubtedly have a point.” So, he returned to his Master, respectfully bowed in apology, and said, “What is the True Self of a novice?”

[Leaving the monastery when asked to confront one's spiritual problem 'head on' is not an uncommon occurrence in kōan stories. Similarly, the turning about in one's heart by recognizing that it is oneself who may be wrong is a crucial moment in the life of a trainee. Here it marks Gensoku's letting go of his pride, so that he now returns with the appropriate attitude of mind for asking his spiritual question, which now arises from his heart-felt need to know the truth, and without any preconceptions.]

The Master replied, "Here comes the Hearth God looking for The Fire." Upon hearing these words, Gensoku awoke fully to the Buddha Dharma.

[What a Meditation Master says or does at a formal spiritual examination ceremony in response to a spiritual question is often multilayered in meaning and application. Since it is not intellectually contrived but arises from the Master's spiritual depths, it may in some way speak not only to the questioner but also to others who are present.]

[In Master Seihō's original remark to Gensoku several layers of meaning were occurring simultaneously. On one level, he was inviting Gensoku to give up his attitude of self-importance and 'play' with him; hence, the form in which the response was given: it forms a first line for a couplet and would have been spoken in the equivalent of English doggerel, the translated version read to the rhythmic pattern of *dum-dum-di-dum-dum dum-di-dum-di-dum*. If Gensoku were open enough, he would have come up with a second line, such as 'Burning up his false self upon the funeral pyre'.]

[On another level, Master Seihō was pointing Gensoku toward his spiritual problem. A 'Hearth God' is the title given to the temple boy whose task it is to light the monastery lamps. Thus, Seihō was saying in effect, "You are acting like a temple boy, not like a monk, and are seeking for that which you already have—in your case, the spiritual flame of your training."]

[Hōgen uses the same words and intonation as Seihō did, but context brings out a third level of meaning, which Gensoku now hears, "Here comes the one most innocent of heart whose practice lights the way for all of us, truly seeking That which is the True Light (The Fire)." Gensoku, upon hearing this, realized that this is what he has been truly seeking—not social position or erudition—and awoke to the Truth where the distinction of self and other completely drops away.]

[In the original Chinese text, as given by Dōgen, the words used by Seihō and Hōgen are the same, but the context indicates that there has been a shift in meaning from how Gensoku interpreted these words when spoken by Seihō and what they implied to him when reiterated by Hōgen. To convey that difference in

meaning in English, the two quotes are translated in a slightly, but significantly, different way. In other kōan stories where the same phrase is used in two different contexts, the translation will also attempt to convey the shift in meaning, rather than leave it to the reader to puzzle out from a mere repetition what that shift may be. While footnotes have occasionally been supplied to help readers over such difficult points in a kōan story, the translator has not attempted to supply full explanations of these stories, trusting that the preceding guidelines, plus the footnotes, will be sufficient.]