

The Dōgen Zenji's 'Gakudō Yōjin-shū' from a Theravada Perspective

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Introduction

Zen principles and concepts are often taken as mystical statements or poetical observations left for its adepts to use his/her "intuitions" and experience in order to understand them. Zen itself is presented as a teaching beyond scriptures, mysterious, transmitted from heart to heart, and impermeable to logic and reason.

"A special transmission outside the teachings, that does not rely on words and letters," is a well known statement attributed to its mythical founder, Bodhidharma. To know Zen one has to experience it directly, it is said. As Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright said, "*The image of Zen as rejecting all forms of ordinary language is reinforced by a wide variety of legendary anecdotes about Zen masters who teach in bizarre nonlinguistic ways, such as silence, "shouting and hitting," or other unusual behaviors. And when the masters do resort to language, they almost never use ordinary referential discourse. Instead they are thought to "point directly" to Zen awakening by paradoxical speech, nonsequiturs, or single words seemingly out of context. Moreover, a few Zen texts recount sacrilegious acts against the sacred canon itself, outrageous acts in which the Buddhist sutras are burned or ripped to shreds.*"¹

Western people from a whole generation eager to free themselves from the religion of their families have searched for a spiritual path in which, they hoped, action could be done without having to be explained by logic. Many have founded in Zen a teaching where they could act and think freely as Zen was supposed to be beyond logic and do not be present in the texts - a path fundamentally based on experience, intuition, and immediate feeling. Though all these kinds of strong statements have served to attract a great interest to Zen such affirmations, however, show only half of the truth of Zen.

As Andy Ferguson says, "*The current wide use of the word Zen notwithstanding, the corpus of Zen history and literature remains mostly unknown in the West (and, regrettably, in the East as well) even among advanced Zen students... Despite these wonderful works [already published in the West], the surface of Zen history and teachings has barely been scratched*".² Not knowing very well the fundamental teachings, the common Zen practitioner ends up having a suffering and agonizing understanding of Zen.

Through this article I intend to present a few points to show to the Zen practitioner some of the resources his/her own tradition has to offer and from that to reunite him/her to the more ancient Indian Buddhist Canon. As the study of Zen in Zen centers are often limited to some works of a few of its main teachers, rarely involving a knowledge of any other scriptural resource, it is hoped that knowing how the ancient canon relates to its own Zen texts, will advance his understanding and practice.

Here I will limit myself to the classical Zen text called *Gakudō Yōjin-shū*, a Soto Zen text,³ written by Dōgen Zenji, the Japanese patriarch of this school. Dōgen was born in 1200 and died in 1253. *Gakudō Yōjin-shū* means 'Guidelines for the practice of the Way'. Dōgen wrote it after having written his *Fukanzazengui*, the basic Zen text. When

¹ Heine, Steven & Wright, Dale (Ed.). *The Zen Canon: Understanding the Classic Texts*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 24.

² Ferguson, Andy. *Zen's Chinese Heritage*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000. p.1

³ Yokoi, Yūhō. *Zen Master Dōgen: An Introduction with Selected Writings*. New York: Weatherhill, 1984. pp.48-57.

one enters a Japanese Zen center, the *Fukanzazengui* is the first thing he/she gets. In roughly two pages Dōgen explains what meditation is and how to do it. Many Zen practitioners do not go beyond it.

The *Gakudō Yōjin-shū*, however, is a more mature work. It is where Dōgen will develop more deeply his orientations for the practice of the Way. There he takes ten points he considers essentials. It is not easy to write a condensed text. One is reminded when Achariya Buddhaghosa went to Sri Lanka aiming to translate the Pāli Canon. To prove his proficiency he was asked to comment a verse present in the Canon. So he wrote the *Visuddhimagga*, a compendium of the whole doctrine that in present edition has around 1000 pages in font size 8. Today, everyone ventures to translate suttas; in the past, however, one had to really prove that he/she was capable to do it! The *Visuddhimagga* is purported to be the summary of the teaching. So, Dōgen having summarized his teaching in roughly ten pages is a work of respect. We ought to investigate it.

I will be taking some of the points made by Dōgen in this work and study them from a canonical Theravada point of view. I will touch key points regarding meditation and Buddhist praxis as preserved in Theravada tradition, hoping that by doing so we can reveal that Dōgen and his work might be much nearer the Theravada exegesis than Zen practitioners often think.

Such a comparative work is useful for the understanding of Zen, in spite of the methods not being those usually employed in contemporaneous Zen centers. Such study of their own fundamental texts and a comparative investigation that links such texts to the more ancient ones ought to be useful. Such a comparative work is also useful to dilute preconceived ideas that Theravada students may have against the apparently abstruse mode that Zen employs in its transmission.

Before doing that, however, let us briefly see the history of origins that Zen tells of itself.

A Brief Genesis of Zen

“In these early years of its slow penetration, Buddhism did not influence the major social and intellectual movements we have described...Early Chinese princes and emperors who gave Buddhism limited patronage were persuaded for a time that this Buddha might be a divinity of sufficient power to be worth propitiating...The range of the early imperfect translations of Buddhist writings indicate that the few Chinese who became interested in the foreign religion were attracted by its novel formulas for the attainment of supernatural powers, immortality, or salvation and not by its ideas.”⁴

During Buddhist history, many schools appeared and, just like a living organism, they have grown and developed their own characteristics. Each was born at a certain age and region. Each has absorbed into itself the cultural, regional, geographic, political, and social environment from where it was born and developed. Though originated from the same teachings of the Buddha, each had its specific characteristics distinguishing it from each other.

In the case of Zen, it is said it has appeared through the influence of an Indian monk known as Bodhidharma, who lived around the fifth or sixth century A.D. Having traveled from India to China, his teachings came to be known as the Way of Meditation

⁴ Wright, Arthur. *Buddhism in Chinese History*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959. p.32

(Ch'an in Chinese and Zen in Japanese). Though Bodhidharma was Indian, it was China the cradle of Zen.

It is said that there were two main tendencies in the kind of Buddhism present in China at this time when Bodhidharma arrived. One was mixed with the magical, full of mantras, instructions to obtain long life, fortune, happiness in this world, and so on, perhaps influenced by forms of Tantric teachings. It was a popular form of Buddhism, mystical, full of magic and 'esoteric' formulas. The other was a Buddhism studied merely as a philosophical subject, not perhaps so different as to how Buddhism is studied in our modern academic world. Confucionists, Taoists and New Buddhist scholars of Chinese descent, got together to debate, expound, and discuss that new foreign doctrine. They lacked, however, any interest in its practical aspects.

It is said that arriving from India, Bodhidharma realized that true Buddhism was not present there. There was only discussion on magical formulas, and speculative debates. What would Bodhidharma do? Perhaps because a basic characteristic of his lineage of Indian Buddhism was meditation, Bodhidharma set out to demonstrate this teaching practically: he sat and meditated. He went to a cave, and there he remained sit cross legged in front of its walls. The days and months went by, and people began to notice that ascetic in meditation. Full of curiosity, they approached him. What was he practicing? There he was, only sitting. Practicing meditation.

From Jhāna to Zen

The word for meditation in India is *jhāna*. *Jhāna* in Pāli, or *dhyāna* in Sanskrit. And as it happens with words that travel from one country to another, what was *jhāna* became *ch'an* to the Chinese ears. Some people started to follow the ascetic's teachings who sat in meditation, and so Ch'an Buddhism was born. Same story happened as Ch'an went to Korea, Japan, Vietnam. Ch'an became, respectively, Son, Zen and Thien. Really, same origins, the Indian *jhāna* or *dhyāna*. As the word Zen is better known in English language, so I use it in this article, but with the intention to embrace the whole tradition based on Ch'an, in spite of the differences among their many branches.

From this brief account it is possible to notice that a characteristic of modern Zen was already present in its beginnings: Bodhidharma faced a situation where he perceived a false or partial Buddhism. His action was to restore it to its original essence. The strategy used was to focus on meditation, lessening the importance of philosophical discussion, intellectual study and magical ceremonies. This was the mythical beginning of his school, which was to be developed within the Chinese environment, culturally and spiritually very different from the Indian environment. Zen will take a typical Chinese color: a care for nature, a Confucionist's doctrine on social duties and obligations, a Taoist union between art and aesthetical observation of nature, the Confucionist importance of action, and so on.

As Zen advanced to Korea, Japan and Vietnam other typical elements from those cultures were added. The same occurred to Theravada as it entered in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The same to Vajrāyāna as it entered in Tibet or Japan. The same is occurring now as the various Buddhist Schools enter the West.

Zen's self image

*“At this stage the pupil will not repeat the old mistakes when meditating. He does not look now for any rational solution, having learned by his previous failures that thinking is totally useless and must be eliminated.”*⁵

As with other schools, Zen has carved its own self-image, a way that Zen itself, or its practitioners, like to think about themselves. Independent of the countries where they developed, all the various Zen schools kept such self-image. It ought to be considered an essentially meditative school, where study has a minimal place. Its transmission and understanding of Dharma comes, as the Japanese sentence “*i shin den shin*” (以心伝心) says, from heart to heart, or from mind to mind. The master transmits its essence to the chosen disciples. It does not depend of any study or scriptural knowledge. It not only emphasizes the importance of meditation, but also a basic mistrust in all rational discourse, perhaps a heritage of that first encounter of Bodhidharma with the scholars in China.

Changing Words

Within a religion or a school of thought, there are many phases of development. It means that depending of the time of its history we look at, a school or religion favors a specific vocabulary. In Hinduism today, for example, we can see the importance of the Trimurti (Brahma, Viśnu and Śiva). Mainly Viśnu and Śiva are important gods in the Hindu day to day life. We see their statues and paintings everywhere when we visit India. One of Viśnu’s manifestations is Kṛṣṇa, a central figure of the famous Bhagavad Gita. However, the situation was not like this since the beginning. There was a time in Hinduism where the Trimurti had no importance and its main gods had different names.

We do not have a so different experience in the West. The Christianity of our parents and grandparents was different from ours. The religion we learned 30 years ago was quite different from the present Christianity. Today it uses a new vocabulary and mode of expression that would be unimaginable years ago. Base communities, liberation theology, electronic-Churches, new lay movements, all of it is totally different from the Renaissance Christianity, in its turn different from the Mediaeval Christianity, and even more regarding the Patristic Period. Not only vocabulary is different, but the same words are used in a different way.

In Buddhism it is no different. Words like Nirvāṇa, Buddha, Bodhisattva, Arahant, etc, do not have the meaning in all schools. And not only in Zen but in all Mahāyāna schools, a word has acquired an impressive place throughout its history, an importance unforeseen in regard to Early Buddhism. This phenomenon is common in the history of religions.

The Main Issue: Bodhicitta

In time, a word that had no presence in the early canonical teaching of Buddhism, has acquired in the Mahāyāna schools a very great importance that has persisted till today. Such word is *Bodhicitta*, usually translated as Enlightenment Mind or Awakening of the Heart.

In Tibetan schools, Bodhicitta is everything that the practitioner hears about in his/her first twenty or thirty years of practice. It is the word that gathers all the motivation the practitioner should have to engage on the Path. “*Develop the Enlightenment Mind!*,” it is what one hears constantly. Bodhicitta is what one should develop in order to become a Buddha. Treatises, expositions, talks and trainings are given around the world with the

⁵ Herrigel, Eugen. *The Method of Zen*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1960. p.55

single task to develop Bodhicitta. All Buddhas of the past have developed it and we too must do it. More we learn about Bodhicitta, more we realize that it encompasses absolutely everything in Buddhism.

*The Seeker's Glossary of Buddhism*⁶ has a three-page definition of it. It is the spirit of Buddhism, the aspiration to achieve it, the determination to achieve Buddhahood, the aspiration to rescue all beings, the aim to transcend the cycle of Birth and Death, the wish to enter the evil world to rescue sentient beings, to neglect its cultivation is the action of demons, it is the crucial step in all Mahāyāna schools, the Supreme Mind of all Buddhas, the mind that gathers in all beings and helps them achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, the condition to enter the Pure Land.

As one can see, Bodhicitta is so much everything that one incurs the risk of not really knowing what it means in the end. It is to love our neighbor, it is to meditate, it is to develop the four divine states, to cultivate all virtues and paramittas, to realize the Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. Bodhicitta is to do everything in terms of practice, in order to reach Buddhahood.

Dōgen started his work saying that the “*Bodhi-mind is known by many names; but they all refer to the One Mind of the Buddha*”. We should pay attention to it, “*Bodhicitta is known by many names*”. It is in this way we must understand: it has many names. very important first sentence!

It also means that it might be possible to look at a Zen text not from the point of view that Zen practitioners look at it every day, as something mystical or poetical, but, should we say, from a canonical way, more specifically in accordance with the early teachings of the Buddha as expressed, among other ways, by the Pāli recension of it.

Though Bodhicitta throughout the centuries came to be associated with every single practice and teaching in Buddhism, we can ask what the word truly meant by those who first used it? We do not want the developed meaning, the meaning that was inflated, expanded, till the word became a superword, a word that desiring to mean everything became so full of added meanings that ended up meaning nothing.

Bodhi mind is the mind of the Buddha. It is an Awakened Mind. And it has many names. It means then that it can be present in other schools under other names. What originally Bodhicitta pointed to, its signifier, might have been referred not only as ‘Bodhicitta’ but by other names. Will our reading of Dōgen support this interpretation?

Bodhicitta refers to a kind of awakened mind, a special mind that the Buddha has. Bodhi Mind is known by many names. Saying this, Dōgen started his work explaining that his intention is to talk about the most important subject at his time, Bodhicitta. To do that he brings the authority of no less than Nāgārjuna, the assumed great master of the Mahāyāna movement. And what Nāgārjuna has to say about Bodhicitta is so refreshing, that if all Buddhist schools kept his words in mind much of the confusions between various schools regarding Bodhicitta would disappear. As long as we do not understand properly the Bodhi Mind we have confused ideas about it. We may think it means different things to different people. We may think that some schools have it and others not. If we include, as many do, in the word ‘Bodhicitta’ each and every good meaning and practice in Buddhism, we start to think that Bodhicitta is something special and mysterious. Doing so becomes a problem!

If today one says Bodhicitta is restraint and sacrifice, the importance of looking at the needs of the other and helping them; and then tomorrow one says Bodhicitta is the development of equanimity, the need to develop an even mind; and then the next day one says that Bodhicitta is the reunion of samatha and vipassana and the synthesis of all

⁶ *Seeker's Glossary of Buddhism*. New York: Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada. p. 63

meditation practices; and yet in another day one says it embodies the Noble Eightfold Path, the accomplishment of the Four Noble Truths, and so on, then Bodhicitta becomes everything, and being everything it is really nothing. You do not know what it really is or how to practice it. And as traditions, like Theravāda, do not speak of Bodhicitta, the impression that remains is that Theravāda has not that ‘special thing’. You look at the Suttas, and where is Bodhicitta? No mention of it! Inferior school!

What however would happen if we could understand Bodhicitta in a single instant? Really understand it? We would not need to create a mystical word, a bubble word full of meanings. No need of poetry, just the straight and hard true meaning of it that could pierce and explode that bubble. We would need a master to save us from the poetry of entanglement. It is why Dōgen started his *Gakudō Yōjin-shū* (“Guidelines for studying the Way”) quoting Nāgārjuna.

“The mind that sees into the flux of arising and decaying and recognizes the transient nature of the world is also known as the Bodhi-mind,” said Nāgārjuna. Dōgen Zenji, the great master of Japanese Zen, quotes Nāgārjuna to explain that Bodhicitta is nothing more nothing less than fully seeing the transient nature of the world, its flux of arising and passing away.

It is worthwhile to call the Theravāda practitioners to read this as that is what the Buddha and the Pāli Canon state from beginning to end! Anicca! See anicca, look at anicca, understand anicca, realize and penetrate anicca. This is the aim of the Noble Path, this is what you understand in the Four Noble Truths, this is why you practice the virtues, this is what you see when practicing Vipassana. All of these is the Mind of Enlightenment. It is Bodhicitta. When you see the flux of arising and decaying, there you have Bodhicitta in front of you. One should not feel less or inferior because your texts do not mention the word ‘Bodhicitta’! It is on the major authority of Nāgārjuna, considered the father of Mahāyāna and patriarch of all Mahāyāna schools, with the support of Dōgen Zenji, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen, that Bodhicitta is explained as what it exists from beginning to end in the Pāli Canon. It is what Theravāda practitioners study from the very first day!

Yāso and Lābho

Dōgen continues his explanation of Bodhicitta in the following way, *“Why, then, is temporary dependence on this mind called the Bodhi-mind? When the transient nature of the world is recognized, the ordinary selfish mind does not arise; neither does the mind that seeks fame and profit.”*

Bodhicitta, this kind of mind that observes, penetrates and understands impermanence, the rising and passing away of all things, has the power to dissolve the sense of “I”. We can see its similitude to the series of insights described in the Pāli Canon and commentaries regarding anicca. This ‘seeing through’ is not just a seeing of the impermanence in nature, but primarily of our inner nature.⁷ When the egotistical selfish mind does not arise, also the mind that looks for fame and profit does not come. So the direct seeing of anicca is intimately connected to the non-arising of the selfish mind. In other words, the common selfish mind only arises when there is no true seeing of anicca. Without its seeing we perceive things as permanent entities. It is what is called wrong view, seeing things in a deluded way. It is from seeing in a deluded way that selfishness comes from. It is the function of selfishness to concoct the ordinary mind. It is not in

⁷ *“The contemplation of impermanence is the repeated observation of the impermanence of the five aggregates comprehended through the meditation itself.”* Nānārāma Mahātera. *The Seven Contemplations of Insight*. Kandy: BPS, 1997. p.20

dependence of Bodhicitta as a vague entity that one gets free from the ordinary selfish mind, but as a direct seeing of anicca, the true meaning of Bodhicitta.

As the practitioner reminds him/herself constantly of the transiency of all things and people, there is no room for the arising of selfishness and then fame and profit are not looked for. Here it comes immediately to the mind of a Theravāda practitioner the teaching on the *lokadhammas*. Lokadhammas are the eight things explained by the Buddha as things that men pursue in life and also as things that pursue all men, as long they live in this world.⁸ The first pair is pain (*dukkha*) and pleasure (*sukha*). As long as we live in this world they will be present. We will feel pain and become sick. It is part of the human experience. We search for pleasure and want to avoid pain. We are trapped by this pair. The second pair is to be criticized (*nindā*) and to be praised (*pasamsā*). We do not want the first and are eager for the second. It also means that independent of what we do in life, criticism and praise will be present. It is impossible to please all and avoid that some people will not like us. Hitler and Buddha, both had their critics and admirers. Third pair is fame (*yāso*) and being deprived of any favors (*ayāso*). We wish that our name is known and our efforts acknowledged. We do not want to be forgotten. Finally there is profit (*lābho*) and loss (*alābho*). It does not matter what we do, some gain and some loss will happen.

Fame and profit for Dōgen here seems to be just a summary of all the lokadhammas. He took two out of eight just for demonstration. A mind that sees impermanence does not go crazy for the lokadhammas. It sees clearly all things as transient.

“A monk who clearly sees six benefits should set up without limits the perception of impermanence in relation to all formations. These six are:

1. *‘All formations will appear to me as unstable.’*
2. *‘My mind will not take delight in all three worlds.’*
3. *‘My mind will emerge from all the three worlds.’*
4. *‘My mind will be oriented towards Nibbāna.’*
5. *‘The fetters will be abandoned by me.’*
6. *‘I will be endowed with supreme recluseship.’”⁹*

Head in flames

For Dōgen, once someone is *“Aware that time waits for no man, [he/she should] train as though you were attempting to save your head from being enveloped in flames.”* One is of course immediately reminded of the Fire Sermon of the Pāli Canon that goes at lengths to show that the whole world is in flames and that liberation means to subdue this fire. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu puts it, *“The best-known metaphor for the goal is the name nibbāna (nirvāṇa), which means the extinguishing of a fire.”*¹⁰ However, there is a much more striking borrowing by Dōgen as he is almost repeating in fact a passage from the *Maranassati Sutta* (AN.vi.20) that says, *“Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, undivided mindfulness, and alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head, in the same way the monk should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavor, undivided mindfulness, and alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskillful qualities.”*

⁸ *Atthime bhikkhave lokadhammā lokam anupari vuttanti; lokosa ime attha lokadhamme anu pari vuttati. “Bhikkhus, the eight manifestations of lokadhamma are always following all the sattavas, otherwise called loka, and all the sattavas or the loka are also following lokadhamma”.* Mahasi Sayadaw. *A Discourse on Lokadhamma*. Yangon: Buddha Sāsana Nuggaha Organization, 2000. p.5

⁹ AN.iii.443.

¹⁰ Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *The Mind Like Fire Unbound: An Image in the Early Buddhist Discourses*. <http://here-and-now.org/wwwArticles/nibbana2.html>

The Buddha raises his foot

Dōgen follows advising that, “*Reflecting on the transient nature of body and life, exert yourself just as the Buddha Śākyamuni did when he raised his foot.*” Those reading this passage without any context can become very confused. In what occasion did the Buddha raise his foot? Happily the commentary refers this passage to a story when the then Bodhisatta met a previous Buddha, called Phussa (Puṣya in Skr.), and, to demonstrate his determination to achieve Enlightenment in the future, kept his foot raised for seven days and nights. Phussa is mentioned in the Pāli Canon (*Buddhavaṃsa*) as the eighteenth of the twenty four Buddhas.¹¹

A Kinnara God

There is a recommendation that Dōgen gives that pretty much sounds poetical, but that can mean more than it seems. “*Although you hear the flattering call of the god Kinnara and the kalavinka bird, pay no heed, regarding them as merely the evening breeze blowing in your ears. Even though you see a face as beautiful as that of Mao-ch’ang or Hsi-shih, think of them as merely the morning dew blocking your vision. When freed from the bondage of sound, color, and shape, you will naturally become one with true Bodhi-mind.*”

The Kinnara god (緊那羅) is a class of bird-like celestial being with a man’s head, acting as musician. These mythological beings are well known in Theravāda countries, where they and their consorts, the kinnari, appear frequently in sculpture, dance, and paintings. They are often represented standing in front of temples in Thailand. Of the past lives of the Buddha, four were depicted as kinnara. Of the hundred and eight symbols on the footprint of Buddha, the kinnari is one of them. As celestial musicians they symbolized the highest kind of beauty in sound. Dōgen takes these celestial musicians and the kalavinka birds (another kind of beings present in many sūtras and known for singing beautifully¹²) to give the practical teaching: even if you hear the best of the sounds, do not pay attention and grab it.

One is reminded about the Odysseus’s tale, in the Western tradition, and the temptation of Sirens: “*Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans, and stay your ship, so that you can listen here to our singing; for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues from our lips; then goes on, well-pleased, knowing more than ever he did; for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods’ despite. Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens.*” So they sang, in sweet utterance, and the heart within me desired to listen, and I signaled my companions to set me free, nodding with my brows, but they leaned on and rowed hard, and Perimedes and Eurylochos, rising up, straightway fastened me with even more lashings and squeezed me together.¹³ Curiously, Sirens are depicted as having “*girls’ faces but birds’ feet and feathers.*” Deprived of their wings because they lost a musical contest to the Muses, they now sit and sing “*among the heaped bones of sailors whom they had drawn to their deaths.*”¹⁴

¹¹ Malalasekera, G. P. *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1995. *The Pali-English Dictionary* by T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede gives *phussa* as deriving from ‘*pus*’, to blossom, nourish, and related to the Vedic *puṣya*.

¹² Cf. this passage of the Lotus Sutra, “*Sage lord, heavenly being among heavenly beings, voiced like the kalavinka bird, you who pity and comfort living beings, we now pay you honor and reverence.*” (Chapter VII ~ ‘Parable of the Phantom City’.)

¹³ *Odyssey*. Richmond Lattimore’s translation: Book:12 - Line: 184-196.

¹⁴ Graves, R. *The Greek Myths*. London: The Folio Society, 2000. Vol. II, p. 653

If you listen to the Siren unmindfully (without the proper safeguards) you get dragged to the bottom of the sea and die, that is the message. So Dōgen advises to “*pay no heed, regarding them as merely the evening breeze blowing in your ears.*” He also advises the same behavior one should have if seeing “*a face as beautiful as that of Mao-ch’ang or Hsi-shih,*” who were thought to be beautiful courtesans of ancient China. Dōgen concludes, “*When freed from the bondage of sound, color, and shape, you will naturally become one with true Bodhi-mind.*” How one grounded in the earlier suttas would consider this enigmatic and poetical statement? What bondage to sounds, color and shape has to do with Bodhicitta?

Reading it from a Theravāda perspective it seems clear this teaching refers to the doctrine of *saḷāyatana*s, the six sense bases, and its role on the path to enlightenment. Dōgen mentions sound, color and shape, but it could be well extended to other sense objects as well. We could easily understand the sentence as “*freed from the bondage of sound, color, shape [color and shape constitute the characteristics of visual objects], taste, smell, touch and mental impressions*”. In the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta* (DN.ii.289-315), the sense bases are included as meditation objects during the step of *dhammānupassanā* (contemplation of dhammas). According to the *paṭiccasamuppāda* teaching, the *saḷāyatana*s are the basis that contact (*phassa*) and feeling (*vedanā*) use as support. From *vedanā*, the whole process of *dukkha* formation can take place as craving (*taṇhā*), attachment (*upadāna*), becoming (*bhava*), birth (*jāti*) and the mass of suffering (*dukkha*), develops.¹⁵

The whole idea of Dependent Origination is that once mentality-materiality (*nāmarūpa*) is there, it becomes a basis for the birth of sense bases (*nāmarūpa paccaya saḷāyatana*). *Nāma* here is name or mentality and signifies the aggregates of feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*) and mental concoctions (*sankhāra*). *Rūpa* is usually translated as form or body, and signifies the Great Essential Elements (*mahābhūta: earth, water, fire, and air*) and the Derived Matter.¹⁶ *Nāmarūpa* being, *saḷāyatana* is. The six *āyatana*s or sense bases are further divided in internal (doors) and external (objects of consciousness).¹⁷ The six *āyatana*s being, contact (*phassa*) is made possible. Contact (eye contact, ear contact, nose contact, tongue contact, body contact, mind element contact, mind-consciousness-element contact), then is explained as the contact of three elements: the sense door, the sense object and the sense consciousness. All three are necessary to exist at a given moment to produce what the Buddha calls contact (*phassa*).

From contact comes feeling (*vedanā*), that can be of three sorts: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. As it can take as basis any of the six senses the result is that we can have twelve different kinds of feelings. Up to this link there is no problem. But because usually we are influenced by ignorance, the whole process of contact and feeling is ignorant too, meaning that it will serve as a basis for the birth of craving (*taṇhā*) and attachment (*upadāna*). Craving and attachment becomes then the condition for the notion of “I” to develop, that will fully grown to a substantial, existent, solid subject that experiences pleasure, pain, craving, suffering and eventually death.

By this explanation of Dependent Origination it is clear to what Dōgen is aiming when saying, “*When freed from the bondage of sound, color, and shape, you will naturally become one with true Bodhi-mind.*” To free ourselves from the bondages born from the ignorant contact between sense bases and sense objects, is to cut craving and

¹⁵ “*The ring-leader, the trouble maker, is feeling. And we all already know well what feeling is, it arises constantly. But if you want to know it in greater details just go back along the series of Dependent Origination... Simply eliminate ignorance and none of the rest will arise. There will be no suffering.*” Buddhadasa, Bhikkhu. *Patīccasamuppāda: Dependent Origination*. Bangkok: The Foundation of Sublime Life, 1986. p.47.

¹⁶ Bodhi, Bhikkhu (Ed.). *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*. Kandy: BPS, 1993. p. 235.

¹⁷ Bodhi, Bhikkhu (Ed.). *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*. Kandy: BPS, 1993. p. 286.

ignorance with one single blow. Being mindfull to contact as just contact and feeling as just feeling, we stop the formation of the next links. We become one with true Bodhi-mind. And what is a true Bodhi-mind? It is that mind that sees deeply and directly impermanence, as we have seen above. Seeing all things in constant flux, this mind does not solidify either subject or object. As Ñānarama Mahathera says, “*This constant passing away of whatever rises shows that impermanence is an intrinsic fact of life, one which cannot be separated from the five aggregates that make up your very being. The ignorant worldling who fails to grasp this truth regards his own personal five aggregates as well as external objects as permanent. Accordingly, all his mental, verbal, and physical actions will be based on erroneous assumptions.*”¹⁸ We can see that there is nothing esoteric or poetical regarding becoming “one” with the Mind of Enlightenment (*bodhicitta*). It is the purest description of Dependent Origination in action. What Dōgen is saying is, do not let *phassa* become cravings, desires, clinging. You will then be free, all the time, to see impermanence. Your mind will be an enlightened mind where attachment cannot get hold of. Therefore you will not suffer; you will not have deluded desires for anything. In one single sentence Dōgen tells the whole story of Dependent Origination.

Partial Conclusion

Throughout this article we could see that when we study a Zen text without assuming Zen’s lack of emphasis in the mind’s analytical process and in the importance of study, we are able to see it in a way quite different from what a common Zen practitioner would see it. Instead of poetical, mysterious, full of riddles and paradoxes, one is able to see in its literature something nearer to the Ancient Indian Canon. The text is able to reveal another side that was hidden by the constraints of tradition. Such a comparative approach can be immensely valuable not only to the scholar interested in the history of different schools, but mainly to practitioners of both traditions that can have a stronger basis to understand each other, let aside their preconceptions, and collaborate towards a common aim.

This article is only part of an ongoing study comparing Theravāda and Canonical Literature with other Buddhist traditions. I hope that it is able to give a glimpse of how valuable it is to have a comparative approach when studying a particular tradition within Buddhism.

¹⁸ Ñānarama Mahathera. *The Seven Contemplations of Insight*. Kandy: BPS, 1997. p.16