

WHO IS ARGUING ABOUT THE CAT? MORAL ACTION AND ENLIGHTENMENT ACCORDING TO DŌGEN

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Once Ejō asked: "What is meant by the expression: 'Cause and effect are not clouded'?"

Dōgen said: "Cause and effect are immovable."

Ejō asked: "If this is so, how can we escape?"

Dōgen replied: "Cause and effect emerge clearly at the same time."

Ejō asked: "If this is so, does cause prompt the next effect, or does effect bring about the next cause?"

Dōgen said: "If everything were like that, it would be like Nan-ch'üan cutting the cat. Because the assembly was unable to say anything, Nan-ch'üan cut the cat in two. Later, when Nan-ch'üan told this story to Chao-chou, the latter put his straw sandal on his head and went out, an excellent performance. If I had been Nan-ch'üan, I would have said: 'Even if you can speak, I will cut the cat, and even if you cannot speak, I will still cut it. Who is arguing about the cat? Who can save the cat?'"

Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, I.6¹

Zen Buddhism has often been attacked as an amoral, even immoral, religious tradition. In support of such claims, critics sometime cite anecdotes wherein a Zen Master's action is clearly immoral by conventional moral standards, such as the following passage from the *Mumonkan* titled "Nansen Cuts the Cat in Two":

Nansen Oshō [Chin: Nan-ch'üan] saw monks of the Eastern and Western halls quarreling over a cat. He held up the cat and said, "If you can give an answer, you will save the cat. If not, I will kill it." No one could answer, and Nansen cut the cat in two.

That evening Jōshū [Chin: Chao-chou] returned, and Nansen told him of the incident. Jōshū took off his sandal, placed it on his head, and walked out. "If you had been there, you would have saved the cat," Nansen remarked.²

True story or not, this *kōan* does pose a challenge to those who would defend Zen Buddhism against its moralistic critics. As we shall see, in his appropriation of this *kōan*, Dōgen's own moral vision becomes manifest.

Since Dōgen's commentary on the Nan-ch'üan story is embedded in section I.6 of the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, we should actually start our close reading with the beginning of this passage in order to appreciate the context of his remarks. The opening line reads as follows:

Once Ejō asked: "What is meant by the expression: 'Cause and effect are not clouded'?"

This expression is found in the famous *kōan* known as "Hyakujō's [Chin: Po-chang or Pai-chang] Fox"; the following is the first part of the story as it appears in the *Mumonkan*:

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When Hyakujō Oshō delivered a certain series of sermons, an old man always followed the monks to the main hall and listened to him. When the monks left the hall, the old man would also leave. One day, however, he remained behind and Hyakujō asked him, "Who are you, standing there before me?" The old man replied, "I am not a human being. In the old days of Kāshyapa buddha, I was a head monk living here on this mountain. One day a student asked me, 'Does a man of enlightenment fall under the yoke of causation or not?' I answered, 'No, he does not.' Since then I have been doomed to undergo five hundred rebirths as a fox. I beg you now to give the turning word to release me from my life as a fox. Tell me, does a man of enlightenment fall under the yoke of causation or not?" Hyakujō answered, "He does not ignore [cloud] causation [cause and effect]." No sooner had the old man heard these words than he was enlightened.³

"Causation" in this passage refers to "moral causation." The Buddhist concept of karma acknowledges that good/bad deeds, thoughts, and so forth result in good/bad effects. Thus the import of the question posed by the "fox" is whether or not the enlightened person is subject to karma. Hyakujō's answer, in effect, affirms that the enlightened person is subject to moral causation. Katsuki Sekida offers a common Zen interpretation of this passage in his comment: "Thus to ignore causation only compounds one's malady. To recognize causation constitutes the remedy for it."⁴

Dōgen's employment of this story in the "Daishugyō" chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* implies that, on one level, he thinks Hyakujō's answer indeed provides a "remedy" for the old man's predicament.⁵ Yet Dōgen was rarely content with merely citing traditional Zen interpretations of passages; typically, he sought to push his students to a further understanding by a creative reinterpretation of a passage. Lest his disciple therefore think this not-ignoring/recognition of causation is de facto a release from it in an ultimate sense, Dōgen answers that the passage means "cause and effect are immovable." In other words, moral causation, for Dōgen, is an inexorable fact of human existence.

Given this fact, Ejō then asks how we can ever "escape" moral causation. Dōgen's response is enigmatic: "Cause and effect arise at the same time." Nowhere in the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* does he further clarify this passage. However, the key to understanding this statement can be gleaned from his discussion of causation in the "Shoakumakusa" chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*, wherein he observes that "cause is not before and effect is not after."⁶ As Hee-Jin Kim explains, Dōgen saw cause and effect as absolutely discontinuous moments that, in any given action, arise simultaneously from "thusness." Therefore,

no sooner does one choose and act according to a particular course of action than are the results thereof (heavens, hells, or otherwise) realized in it. . . . Man lives in the midst of causation from which he cannot escape even for a moment; nevertheless, he can live from moment to moment in such a way

that these moments are the fulfilled moments of moral and spiritual freedom and purity in thusness.⁷

This analysis enables us to make sense of the third question-and-answer exchange between Ejō and Dōgen. Ejō asks: “If this is so [i.e., if cause and effect emerge at the same time], does cause prompt the next effect, or does effect bring about the next cause?” Dōgen replies: “If everything were like that, it would be like Nan-ch’üan cutting the cat,” a reference to the *kōan* from the *Mumonkan* cited above. Ejō’s question reveals that he has not understood Dōgen’s previous answer, and is still bound by the notion of continuous cause and effect. Dōgen’s reply is that if cause and effect were like Ejō’s conception (and not understood as “discontinuous moments of cause and effect grounded in thusness”), then human beings would be paralyzed by causation, unable to engage in “fulfilled moments of moral and spiritual freedom and purity,” just as Nan-ch’üan’s disciples were paralyzed by the Master’s challenge, “unable to say anything.” This contrasts with the “excellent performance” of Chao-chou, a response drawing praise from both Nan-ch’üan and Dōgen.

How does Dōgen understand Chao-chou’s response to Nan-ch’üan? This is best approached by introducing Dōgen’s notion of *hishiryō* (“without thinking”). The “Zazenshin” chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* begins:

The Great Teacher Yüeh-shan Kung-tao was practicing *zazen* when a certain monk said, “What do you think of, doing *zazen*?” Yüeh-shan said, “I think about not-thinking [about anything].” When he then said, “How is this done?” Yüeh-shan replied, “By *hishiryō* (without thinking).” Realizing this answer, we must study and correctly transmit *zazen*. This is the practice of *zazen* which has been transmitted in the Way. Though there are some other talks about thinking in *zazen*, yet this talk is one of them.⁸

Within this passage we find three kinds of mental activities: thinking, not-thinking, and without-thinking. What is meant by the first two terms are processes familiar to all of us. We can certainly think about a cat—analyze it, worry over it, decide whether or not to kill it, and so forth. We can also not think about the cat or, for that matter, anything at all; that is, we can stop the thinking process altogether. Beyond the dichotomy of thinking and not-thinking, however, can be found without-thinking.

Actually, it would be more accurate to describe without-thinking as *before* thinking and not-thinking. Some philosophers have written at considerable length to articulate and defend this concept,⁹ but for our purposes a thumbnail sketch will suffice. Without-thinking encapsulates what is meant by the prereflective experiences of life. We might, for example, suddenly find ourselves looking at a cat. In this initial moment of without-thinking, there is only the experience-of-looking-at-the-cat.

Douglas K. Mikkelsen

Only subsequent to this moment does the mental act of thinking set in, wherein there emerges the sense of a subject (oneself, or one's self) looking at an object (a cat). Thus without-thinking is a mental process prior to this emergence of self and other in everyday life.

Mundane as this without-thinking may appear, in fact it is central to both Dōgen's moral theory and the theme of moral causation articulated in the Nan-ch'üan passage. From without-thinking, we see things "as they really are" (*genjōkōan*). "Genjōkōan" is the title of the first chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*, and its foremost position in the text is indicative of the importance of this concept in Dōgen's thought. The word is a conjunction of *genjō* ("presence itself") and *kōan*. Interpretations of this concept differ; my own accords with the view that Dōgen viewed *genjō* itself to be a *kōan*.¹⁰ In one sense, then, *genjōkōan* can be understood as the name of a *kōan* which, when correctly grasped, indicates "things as they really are." "Correctly grasping" this *kōan* proceeds from the pre-reflective experience manifested by without-thinking.

A famous passage from the "Genjōkōan" states:

To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.¹¹

"Being enlightened by all things" expresses the mental activity of without-thinking wherein the "self" (and also "other") is "forgotten," because awareness of such distinctions is not present. No separate self is present to perceive "other" things. Rather, the self is all these things, and vice versa, in this moment. From without-thinking flows the only identifiable "reality," namely the unceasing, ever-changing, impermanent unfolding of experience. From without-thinking/enlightenment, therefore, we see things as they really are (*genjōkōan*).

For Dōgen, *genjōkōan* is none other than *prajñā*, or "intuitive wisdom." Furthermore, Dōgen is in accord with the Mahāyāna tradition in arguing that *prajñā* and *karunā*, "compassion," are "not-two." He also holds to the traditional Mahāyāna conception of right moral action as proceeding from *prajñā/karunā*. Thus Dōgen sees right moral action as properly proceeding from seeing things as they really are, which is manifest to us in moments of without-thinking.

The "Zazenshin" passage above, in conjunction with others, evidences the fact that the primary locus for the unfolding of this without-thinking is *zazen*. So *zazen* is the primary form of moral self-cultivation. But *kōans* are also employed in the Zen tradition as an efficacious method for developing and testing without-thinking. When a Master tests a student on a *kōan*, it is a test of the quality of the state of without-thinking, not the truth of the proposition or the content of the statement. Nan-ch'üan's *kōan* was delivered as a test, and Dōgen is favorably assessing Chao-chou's expression of without-thinking. This is the same

thing as saying that Dōgen acknowledges the act as expressive of Chao-Chou's enlightenment, since this without-thinking is none other than "seeing things as they really are" and the "intuitive wisdom/compassion" of the Buddha. Thus the discussion of this *kōan* is brought around to the same theme underlying the *kōan* of Hyakujō's fox, namely the character of enlightenment.

Turning again to the text, we can also make sense of Dōgen's further comments on the cat-killing *kōan*. Dōgen seeks to improve on the challenge issued by Nan-ch'üan:

If I had been Nan-ch'üan, I would have said: "Even if you can speak, I will cut the cat, and even if you cannot speak, I will still cut it. Who is arguing about the cat? Who can save the cat?"

"Even if you cannot speak, I will cut the cat" indicates that Dōgen will not accept any answer evolving from the process of "thinking," wherein we may, for example, conceptualize the cat as an object that we can take a stand about and either help or not help. "Even if you cannot speak, I will still cut the cat" indicates that he will also not accept an answer from "not-thinking," that is, a negating attitude toward the process of thinking itself. In other words, the disciples cannot simply ignore—and thus "answer"—Dōgen's challenge by not-thinking. "Who is arguing about the cat?" can be read as a rhetorical question pointing out the real concern here—not the cat, but enlightenment—while also serving to chastise the monks for wasting time over the cat. "Who can save the cat?" echoes Nan-ch'üan's challenge to demonstrate without-thinking/enlightenment.

Dōgen further notes how he would have answered for the assembly standing before Nan-ch'üan: "We cannot say, Master. Please cut the cat." This would be an acknowledgment and concession of an (unenlightened) assembly that recognizes the invalidity of responding on a thinking or not-thinking level while still unable to respond from without-thinking. But Dōgen then proceeds to say: "Then again I might have said: 'You know how to cut the cat in two with one sword, but you don't know how to cut the cat in one with one sword.'"

In the statement above, Dōgen indicates that he might have offered a counter-challenge to Nan-ch'üan. Zen tradition records several instances of Dharma combat wherein one Master seeks to test and spur the enlightenment of another Master. In this instance, Dōgen maintains that he might have turned the tables on Nan-ch'üan. The sword in this passage pulls double-duty as a metaphor: in the first clause, it refers to the thinking and not-thinking mental functions, and in the second clause it refers to without-thinking. So the counter-challenge translates roughly as: "You know how to 'cut the cat in two' [i.e., objectify the cat, make it an object for discrimination and conceptualization separate from you] with think-

Douglas K. Mikkelson

ing and/or not thinking, but can you 'cut the cat in one' [i.e., see the cat prior to discrimination and conceptualization and the dualistic rise of self and other] by means of without-thinking?"

Seeking further clarification, Ejō asks: "What is cutting the cat in one with one sword?" In other words, what *is* the cat, viewed from without-thinking, that is, prior to discrimination, conceptualization, and the separation of self and other? Dōgen's reply is simple: "The cat itself." Quite simply, before the operations of thinking and not-thinking, we experience, via the operations of without-thinking, "the cat itself," that is, "the cat as it really is."

As we have seen, Dōgen indicates how he himself would have presented the challenge to the assembly were he in Nan-ch'üan's place. He also indicates how he would have reacted to Nan-ch'üan's challenge were he a member of the assembly. What follows next in the text is an account of how he himself would have reacted to the assembly's failure to respond, were he the challenger: "When the assembly could not respond and if I had been Nan-ch'üan, I would have released the cat, since the assemblage had already said they could not answer. An old Master has said: 'In expressing full function, there are no fixed methods.'" Dōgen's commentary on the Nan-ch'üan story indicates that he thinks it would have been better *not* to kill the cat under these circumstances. Why Dōgen thinks so is easier to discern after we understand his explanation of the nature of the Master's action, an explanation he will soon offer. Therefore, I will set aside an interpretation of this passage until then.

At this point we can return again to the text, where we find Dōgen expanding on his explanation of his proposed counter-challenge to Nan-ch'üan, namely "to cut the cat in one with one sword." Dōgen proceeds to explain that "This 'cutting of the cat' is an expression of full function in Buddhism." Dōgen is resuming his discussion by reiterating the point that "to cut the cat in one with one sword" expresses the perspective of the cat from the without-thinking response. "It is a pivot word [i.e., a phrase leading to enlightenment]," he immediately adds. Thus we can say that "the cutting of the cat in one with one sword" not only metaphorically *expresses* the perspective of without-thinking, but indeed is a phrase that seeks to lead one to *manifest* without-thinking.

Dōgen proceeds to elaborate on these two points separately. Following the order of presentation, he begins with a discussion of this cutting of the cat as expressing full function. He proceeds to advance his argument by bringing out a hypothetical point: "If it were not, mountains, rivers, and the great sea could not be said to be mind, unexcelled, pure, and clear." We can follow this point if we read in light of a passage in the *Shōbōgenzō*, taken from the chapter titled "Sokushin zebutsu":

Philosophy East & West

This correctly transmitted mind (of *sokushin zebutsu*) is all things, and vice versa. Therefore, an ancient Zen Master said, "If one realizes the Buddha-mind, there is no other inch of the earth."

Between two ancient high monks there was this dialogue: "What is the wondrous, clear and bright Mind? It is mountains, rivers and earth or the sun, moon and stars." It is now clear the Mind is mountains or stars. But when we try to add something to Mind, it runs short; when we try to detract something from it, it becomes too much.¹²

In the moment of without-thinking, everything before oneself is present to the mind—in fact, in this moment prior to conceptualization of self and other, everything *is* the mind. The entire mind is taken up with the mountains, river, sea, and so forth. Indeed, the mind presents mountains, rivers, and the great sea with such brightness and clarity because, in this moment, the mind is none other than mountains, rivers, the great sea, and so forth. There is "no other inch of earth" in this moment; add to or subtract from the what-is-before-me of this prereflective experience, and one will no longer be realizing/actualizing this mind, this without-thinking.

Indeed, says Dōgen, all things are expressed via without-thinking. This is as true of such relatively small and mundane moments as experiencing the cutting of the cat as it is true of the grand moments of pre-reflectively experiencing mountains, rivers, and the great sea. If this cutting of the cat were not able to reflect—that is, be—the entire mind without remainder in the moment of the act, then neither could the mountains, rivers, and the great sea do/be so, and thus be said to be mind, unexcelled, pure, and clear.

Furthermore, Dōgen adds, if this were so, "Nor could one then say: 'This very mind is Buddha.'" What this statement means is directly answered in the very same chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*:

Sokushin zebutsu [this very mind is Buddha] means the Buddhas who have awakened to the bodhi-mind, trained themselves, and realized enlightenment. . . . The Buddha Shakyamuni is nothing other than the fact that the mind itself is Buddha.¹³

Dōgen's *sokushin zebutsu* is the functional equivalent of Kūkai's *sokushin jōbutsu* (this very body is Buddha). The latter phrase refers to the Shingon belief that practitioners could obtain Buddhahood "in this body," a phrase found in the title of Kūkai's most important work (*Sokushin jōbutsu gi*).¹⁴ In one interpretation of this phrase, it refers to "manifest realization" (*kentoku*), that is, the complete, manifest realization/actualization of Buddhahood. Kūkai (like Dōgen) viewed the phenomenal world of mountains, rivers, and so forth as the very realm wherein practitioners realize enlightenment. "Body" in this context does not refer to the physical body but rather to "body-mind-being."¹⁵ The

Douglas K. Mikkelsen

ultimate nonduality of body-mind in both Kūkai's and Dōgen's thought thus renders *sokushin zebutsu* and *sokushin jōbutsu* as functional equivalents. But what Dōgen means specifically by the former phrase proceeds from his particular conception of enlightenment.

According to Dōgen, it is "this very mind" of without-thinking that is the bodhi-mind. That is to say, the mind of the Shakyamuni Buddha in his enlightenment is this very mind of without-thinking. Indeed, since the word "Buddha" is not literally a proper name, but literally translates as "the awakened one," this very mind *is* the Buddha. Being the Buddha is none other than awakening/realizing/actualizing this "without-thinking" mind.

Having clarified how this cutting of the cat is an expression of full function, Dōgen then elaborates on how the phrase functions as a pivot word: "Immediately upon hearing this pivot word, see the cat itself as the Buddha-body. Upon hearing this word, students should suddenly gain enlightenment." A full explanation of this passage would require an exposition of Dōgen's theory of the Buddha-body (*Buddha-kāya*),¹⁶ but we can adequately understand this passage if we hold in mind what Dōgen meant by "this very mind is Buddha." What made Buddha the Buddha, we recall, is his enlightenment, this actualizing/realizing of the Bodhi-mind. Thus the "Buddha-body," in Dōgen's view, is in one sense a term coextensive with the "Buddha-mind." So the passage in this context can be read as "see the cat itself as the Buddha-mind."

Dōgen is therefore explaining that when one hears this "cutting of the cat in one with one sword" pivot word, it should bring forth the realization/actualization of without-thinking from the listener. In that moment, the mind is fully taken up, and, indeed, is none other than this prereflective experiencing of "the cat itself," that is, "the cat as it really is [in this moment]"—no more and no less. So when one hears the pivot word, students should realize/actualize without-thinking and thus see the cat as it really is.

Up until this point, Dōgen has altered and appropriated the Nan-ch'üan story for the purpose of articulating the character of without-thinking. He now proceeds to address the character of the act Nan-ch'üan actually performed before the assembly—namely, the killing of the cat: "Cutting the cat is an action of a Buddha." Dōgen affirms that Nan-ch'üan's act is an action of the Buddha, that it is indeed an action proceeding from the realization/actualization of the Bodhi-mind, the without-thinking mind. In the exchange to follow, Ejō and Dōgen explore the nature of Nan-ch'üan's action in terms of both (1) its moral contexts and (2) its efficacy as a means of bringing the assembly to enlightenment:

Ejō asked: "What should we call this action?"

Dōgen said: "Call it cutting the cat."

Philosophy East & West

Ejō asked: "Would this act be a crime?"

Dōgen said: "It would."

Ejō asked: "Then how can we escape this crime?"

Dōgen said: "The action of the Buddha and the crime are separate, but they occur at once in one action."

To understand fully the nature of this exchange, we must recognize that Dōgen employs the Nan-ch'üan story in a fashion that is parallel to his unique appropriation of the famous "Shoakumakusa" passage, which is traditionally rendered as follows:

Do no evil (*shoakumakusa*)

Do good

Purify the mind

This is the teaching of the Buddha.¹⁷

Dōgen affirms the precepts of the "Shoakumakusa" as the teaching of the Buddha. But when learning a phrase like *shoakumakusa*,

[o]rdinary people at first construe this as "do no evil," but it is not what they make it out to be. One hears it thus when one is taught about enlightenment as suited for exposition. So heard, it is an expression in which unexcelled enlightenment is verbal. Since it is already the word of enlightenment, it is the stating of enlightenment. In hearing the unexcelled enlightenment be expounded, things are turned around: the resolve to do no evil continues as the act of not producing evil. When it comes to be that evils are no longer produced, the efficacy of one's cultivation is immediately presencing [*genjōsu*].¹⁸

In other words, from the perspective of one receiving initial instruction, "do no evil" is *prescriptive*: it serves as a precept that the practitioner is to follow. But from the perspective of enlightenment, "do no evil" is *descriptive*: it describes the moral conduct of someone realizing/actualizing the Buddha nature. When one no longer produces evil, it is because one's actions are a function of without-thinking, or "seeing things as they really are" (*genjōkōan*).

Thus while Dōgen's first answer to Ejō ("call it cutting the cat") sounds evasive, in fact it is crucial to understanding Dōgen's fundamental response to the Nan-ch'üan story. Ejō's questions indicate he is looking to place a moral value judgment on this action. Dōgen, however, guides Ejō toward seeing the act "as it really is," prior to the introduction of placing it in a moral context. This is none other than Dōgen's application of his doctrine of *genjōkōan* to the situation, of "recognizing the presence of things as they really are." Prior to the rise of self and other and any conceptualization or contextualization of what the act is—a crime, a messy affair, an act spurring others to enlightenment, and so forth—is the simple experiencing of the cutting of the cat.

Fundamental to our experience-of-the-cutting-of-the-cat is its impermanence. Indeed, for Dōgen impermanence expresses our direct-

Douglas K. Mikkelson

experience-of-things-as-they-really-are. Dōgen points out that we do not “experience” a permanent, changing, objective reality. Rather, our experience is a ceaseless process, an ever-changing ebb and flow of space-time events. (This fact holds whether or not there is indeed any essence or enduring substance behind or beyond our experience, a point of metaphysics on which Dōgen suspends judgment.)

Dōgen, therefore, seeks to aid Ejō in seeing the cat-killing action as it really is. But he is not thereby trying to evade Ejō’s concern about the morality of the act. Dōgen acknowledges that the act would be a crime, thus affirming the Buddhist precept “do not kill.” But he seeks to point out that attachment to this moral precept (or any other, for that matter) is unwarranted. If we cannot provide an ontology of permanency and immutability behind the flux of our experiencing, then we cannot regard even moral principles or precepts as absolute and immutable. Dōgen’s question/answer exchange seeks to point out that moral judgments have no static ultimate ontological status, that they are temporary configurations arising and falling with all the various circumstances (*jisetsu*) coalescing in any given situation. Thus good, evil, and neither good nor evil are understood in the Mādhyamika sense of *asvabhāva* (Skt: “no own-self nature”).

Ejō’s subsequent question “Then how can we escape this crime?” reintroduces the theme of moral causation introduced at the beginning of section 1.6. As now applied to the Nan-ch’üan story, Ejō’s question now means: given that cause and effect are immovable, how can one escape the bad karmic effects of killing the cat? Dōgen replies: “The action of the Buddha and the crime are separate, but they both occur at once in one action.”

Dōgen’s answer is none other than the application of the point Dōgen made that led to his recital of the Nan-ch’üan story in the first place: cause and effect emerge clearly at the same time. The act “as it really is” is only one act, the killing of a cat. Addressed in its moral contexts, however, this realization/actualization of the Nan-ch’üan story is both “a Buddha act” and “a crime,” which are *separate*. That is to say, there is not a cause (the cat-killing Buddha act) and subsequent effect (a crime) linked together in a linear, sequential spatiotemporal relationship. Rather, the Buddha act and the crime are discrete events, discontinuous from each other, which arise at the same time.

So how, then, does one actually “escape” the bad karmic effects of killing the cat? Dōgen’s answer is that he does not, and cannot, escape it. Rather, he experiences the karmic effects of the act in the very moment of his “immediately presencing” (as the “Shoakumakusa” puts it) the killing of the cat. Furthermore, the karmic debt incurred in this act is immediately paid without remainder. As the “Shoakumakusa” chapter expresses it: “This presence exhaustively presences all places, worlds,

times and phenomena [dharmas] as its domain, the domain which takes for itself nonproduction."¹⁹

Because the karmic debt is paid without remainder, in the very completion of the act no subsequent effect can result from it. Thus there is no subsequent production of evil from the killing of the cat that continues on to give rise to a new cause-effect relationship. Thus the act of killing the cat can be an act of bringing others to enlightenment when performed from the standpoint of enlightenment.

But even though Dōgen affirms the cat-killing act as an act of a Buddha, there are clear indications he is ambivalent about it. The concluding exchange between Dōgen and Ejō on this matter is as follows:

Ejō asked: "Is this what is meant by the *prātimokṣa* precepts [i.e., the precepts that lead to emancipation from the evil actions of body, word, and mind]?"

Dōgen said: "Yes, but while such a view [i.e., the killing of the cat as a means of bringing enlightenment to others] is all right, it would be better not to hold it."

Understanding this ambivalence about the cat-cutting act requires an appreciation of Dōgen's view of the Buddhist precepts. On the one hand, one finds numerous admonitions throughout the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* to uphold the precepts. Indeed, immediately upon concluding their discussion on the Nan-ch'üan story, Ejō and Dōgen launch into a detailed conversation about the nature of violating the precepts and the actions required to rectify such violations. Dōgen stresses the need for repentance of one's sins and for taking the precepts again, thereby enabling the sinner to regain purity. The very last exchange in section 1.6 demonstrates Dōgen's emphasis on the precepts:

Ejō asked: "If repentance of the seven grave sins is allowed, is it permissible to receive the precepts afterward?"

Dōgen answered: "Yes. . . . Once a person's repentance has been accepted, he must receive the precepts again. Even in the case of the grave sins, anyone who repents should be permitted to receive the precepts again if he so desires. Should even a Bodhisattva himself violate the precepts, he must be given the precepts again, since he has done this for the sake of others."

Dōgen holds up before the monk the bodhisattva ideal as exemplary for one's conduct: taking up the precepts for the sake of all sentient beings.

On the other hand, Dōgen's instructional exchanges with Ejō indicate that he is not attached to the precepts in matters of morality. For Dōgen, right moral action varies according to the circumstances, which include not only the situation encountered but the capacity of the individual to respond. In the Nan-ch'üan story, the circumstances concern the killing, or not killing, of the cat *from the perspective of the enlightened mind*. The exchange above more explicitly addresses whether or

Douglas K. Mikkelson

not, from this perspective, an evil act like cutting the cat can be a means of bringing enlightenment to others. Without denying that this act violates the Buddhist precept against killing, Dōgen acknowledges the validity of this possibility.

Yet even as he affirms the validity of this view, Dōgen remarks that “it would be better not to hold it.” Though perhaps this appears as a somewhat puzzling qualification in light of all that has preceded it, Dōgen’s remark is understandable on at least two levels. First of all, Dōgen can be seen as cautioning Ejō not to allow this view to become yet one more obstacle to seeing the situation as it really is and thereby hindering the ability to respond to a similar situation in an open and enlightened fashion. To hold onto the view could very well lead one to fixate on this method in similar circumstances—or worse, to employ this method in a totally inappropriate situation.

Furthermore, Dōgen’s response indicates that he does not look at the cat-killing act as it has been cast by Ejō. “Such a view”—the killing of the cat as a means of bringing enlightenment to others—is all right, but it is not his frame of reference for looking at the cat-killing act. In other words, *prima facie* it may appear that Dōgen is primarily concerned with, and indeed addressing, the morality of employing a violation of the precepts for the sake of enlightening others. Dōgen does not deny the validity of this perspective; indeed, he affirms the cat-killing act as a Buddha act. But he is in fact transcending this perspective, and in commenting to Ejō that it would be better not to hold it, he is suggesting that he do the same. Dōgen, as we have seen, is rather concerned with the cat-killing act as evocative of “without-thinking.”

We noted earlier how Dōgen momentarily digresses from his exposition about without-thinking in order to critique Nan-ch’üan’s performance as recounted in the traditional story. We now turn to an analysis of how Dōgen said he would have acted if he were in Nan-ch’üan’s place, facing the uncomprehending assembly. Recall again Dōgen’s remark:

When the assembly could not reply and if I had been Nan-ch’üan, I would have released the cat, since the assemblage had already said they could not answer. An old Master has said: “In expressing full function, there are no fixed methods.”

Dōgen concedes that Nan-ch’üan’s act is an expression of manifesting Nan-ch’üan’s enlightenment. Yet Dōgen rarely contented himself with merely reciting familiar Buddhist stories and offering up the subsequent traditional interpretations. So even as Dōgen explains the nature of Nan-ch’üan’s action, he seeks to transcend it. Understanding how he does so requires us to return again to a consideration of the circumstances of the cat-killing action.

Remember how the story unfolds: Nan-ch'üan holds up the cat and tells the assembly that if they can give the proper response, he will save the cat; if not, he will kill it. Perhaps it would seem too obvious a point to observe that when the assembly could not answer, Nan-ch'üan did precisely what he said he would do: he cut the cat. Yet we might ponder for a moment precisely why he did so. After all, was Nan-ch'üan bound to carry out the act, just because he said he would do so? Could he not have acted otherwise?

Dōgen's own proposed response helps us to see the point he is trying to make via the words of the old Master: "In expressing full function, there are no fixed methods." In other words, there is no fixed formula for expressing and eliciting without-thinking. Nan-ch'üan, in Dōgen's view, betrayed an attachment to only two positions—to kill or not kill the cat. He was "fixated," we might say, by these two possibilities. This is evidenced by the fact that he does indeed carry out one of them precisely as he said he would.

Dōgen's own suggested course of action, on the other hand, is a classic expression of Buddhist detachment applied to the situation. At first glance, his proposed response may not seem like a transcending of Nan-ch'üan's position, because it sounds like the other position to which Nan-ch'üan was attached—namely, to not kill the cat. Yet it actually does transcend Nan-ch'üan's position when the situational context is taken into account. Nan-ch'üan carries out the cat-killing act because the assembly could not answer, just as he said he would. This suggests that if the assembly had managed to answer, then he would have released the cat. Yet Dōgen indicates an option beyond that of Nan-ch'üan, that is, the releasing of the cat when the assembly could *not* answer.

So Dōgen affirms Nan-ch'üan's act as an act of the Buddha, as expressive of enlightenment. However, even as he acknowledges this enlightenment, he challenges its depth of attainment. In Dōgen's mind, releasing the cat would have revealed a spiritual progress superior to Nan-ch'üan's. But why does he think so?

First of all, we must remember that for Dōgen even the first moment of *zazen* unfolds enlightenment. But if one is to pursue the Dharma, one's practice must continue so that one's enlightenment can deepen. No one, not even an accomplished Zen Master such as Nan-ch'üan, has reached the point where practice is unnecessary.

Recall our earlier observation about the role the precepts play for the Zen practitioner: they are prescriptive from the perspective of initial instruction, and descriptive from the perspective of enlightenment. Thus one's continuing practice, one's deepening enlightenment, results in a concomitant advance in one's moral cultivation. So we may say that the more one practices and thus actualizes enlightenment, the more perfect the precepts become in describing the person acting from enlightenment.

Douglas K. Mikkelson

To some extent, “do no evil” (*shoakumakusa*) does describe Nan-ch’üan’s act because, as we saw, the evil of the cat-killing act was exhausted in the very moment of the act, and no subsequent evil was produced, according to Dōgen. (This, we recall, is possible because from the standpoint of enlightenment, cause and effect can be seen as discontinuous.) Thus Nan-ch’üan “does/produces no evil” that could continue along the karmic chain of causation. Yet “do no evil” is even more apropos of Dōgen’s act, because, of course, no evil act transpires (the cat is not killed), and no subsequent qualifier need be appended to the precept describing it. Furthermore, the important Buddhist precept against killing is descriptive of the former, and not the latter, act. Thus, the course of action proposed by Dōgen is more perfectly described by the precepts and reflects a superior depth of cultivation.

We find here an echo of a point Dōgen makes elsewhere in the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*: “In both benefiting others and practicing yourself, to discard the inferior and adopt the superior comprises the good action of the Bodhisattva.”²⁰ Dōgen tirelessly admonishes his disciples to practice unceasingly and strive further and further toward an unending moral and spiritual excellence. In Dōgen’s view, a rigorous adherence to the precepts is descriptive of the moral character of the advanced Zen practitioner. Thus, any breaking of the precepts usually suggests a lesser spiritual attainment—though it may indeed proceed from enlightenment.

Dōgen can allow for a precept-breaking action to be “right,” in some ultimate sense, if it serves to manifest and evoke enlightenment. But compared with some of the colorfully violent actions performed by certain Masters that have been handed down in the Zen tradition, Dōgen’s allowance for the occasional breaking of the precepts is fairly conservative. Furthermore, even a Bodhisattva in such circumstances “must be given the precepts again, since he had done this [i.e. violated the precepts] for the sake of others.”

A holistic view of Dōgen’s thought is difficult to achieve given the number and complexity of Dōgen’s teachings. Yet I believe that the passage above provides a good opportunity to see the moral character of Dōgen’s religious vision in action. About this aspect of his thought much more can be explicated. But I think we can readily see that Dōgen’s brand of Zen Buddhism is far from being an immoral or amoral one.

NOTES

- 1 – Reihō Masunaga, *A Primer of Sōtō Zen: A Translation of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawai’i, 1978), pp. 8–9.

- 2 – Katsuki Sekida, *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku* (New York: Weatherhill, 1977), p. 58.
- 3 – *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 4 – *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 5 – Cf. “Daishugyō,” trans. in Yūhō Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō* (Tokyo: Sankibo Buddhist Bookstore, 1988), pp. 745–756.
- 6 – “Shoakumakusa,” in Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō*, p. 390.
- 7 – Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen Kigen —Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), p. 285.
- 8 – “Zazenshin,” in Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō*, pp. 133–134. I have substituted Thomas Kasulis’ translation of the key terms *shiryō* (“thinking”), *fushiryō* (“not-thinking”), and *hishiryō* (“without-thinking”) in this passage; Kasulis is cited in the next note.
- 9 – See especially Thomas Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawai’i, 1981), pp. 71–77.
- 10 – Kim renders *genjōkōan* as “*kōan* realized in life,” and indexes the term under the general heading of *kōan*, which perhaps is a reflection of his own stated support of this view. For an opposing view see Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, “Shōbōgenzō Genjōkōan,” *The Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., 5 (2) (1972): 130.
- 11 – *Shōbōgenzō*, “Genjōkōan,” in Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō*, p. 2.
- 12 – *Shōbōgenzō*, “Sokushin zebutsu,” in Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō*, p. 78.
- 13 – *Ibid.*, p. 387.
- 14 – Yoshito Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 225.
- 15 – For a helpful analysis of this point, see Hakeda, *Kūkai*, pp. 77–78.
- 16 – For a helpful analysis, see Kim, *Dōgen Kigen*, p. 86.
- 17 – Dōgen’s own rendering of this passage, and his subsequent commentary, is found in the “Shoakumakusa” chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*. Cf. Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō*, pp. 385–394.
- 18 – Dōgen, “Shoakumakusa.” I have opted to use the translation offered by Thomas Kasulis, in *Zen Action, Zen Person*, pp. 94–95, which is taken from Dōgen Kigen, *Dōgen Zenji zenshū* (Complete works of Zen Master Dōgen), ed. Ōkubo Dōshū, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1969–1970), p. 278. Compare Yokoi, *The Shōbōgenzō*, pp. 385–386.
- 19 – *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 20 – *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, p. 88.

Douglas K. Mikkelsen