2. Buddha-nature

Traditional interpretations of the Absolute conceive of it as something that is always "there," statically persisting throughout all time. We have, so to speak, two poles to our conceptualization of the world: there is God, or the Absolute, persisting throughout all time; and then there is sheer nothing, existing at no time. In between, there is man,[1] or, as Buddhism would say, there are sentient beings. One of the main presuppositions of this view is a certain conception of time—the conception that time is of such a nature that things can *persist* in it. The Buddhist idea of the instantaneity of time goes against any such persistence in time. Time is never *extended*, "there," such that anything could persist in it.

Dōgen is aware of this (mis)conception of the nature of time, and also of its implications for an understanding of permanence and impermanence.

> "Do you know," said Hui-neng, "if the Buddha-nature were permanent, what would be the need on top of that to preach about all dharmas good and bad? Even in the elapse of an entire kalpa there would not be a single person who would ever raise the mind in quest of enlightenment. Therefore I preach impermanence, and just that is the way of true permanence preached by the Buddha. On the other hand, iff all dharmas were impermanent, then each and every thing would merely have a selfhood and would take part in birth and death, and there would be areas to which true permanency did not reach. Therefore I preach permanence, and it is just the same as the meaning of true impermanence preached by the Buddha. Because of the unenlightened non-Buddhists' attachment to illusory permanence and the calculations of followers of the Two Vehicles that take permanence and impermanence, which together make up the Eight Topsy-turvy views, the Buddha refutes these distorted, one-sided views in his complete and perfect teaching of nirvana, while making explicit the teaching of true permanence, true pleasure, true self,

> and true purity. By relying only on words, you now go against their inner meaning. By mistaking the perfect and subtle words the Buddha spoke just prior to his demise as indicating nihilistic impermanence or lifeless permanence, even though you read the *Nirvana Sutra* a thousand times over, what benefit could you get from it?"[2]

This is a truly dialectical passage, dialectical not in the sense of nineteenth-century Hegelian or Marxian dialectic that strives for and culminates in a synthesis of opposites, but in a Heraclitian sense: one opposite is or becomes the other. But the matter is even more intricate than that. We are dealing not only with opposite views of the world (the world or all dharmas or Buddha-nature is permanent or impermanent), but also with the opposition between what is being preached and what is the case. Not only that. Even the subject of these statements, what it is that is being talked about, turns into its opposite in the course of the passage. Initially, the subject is Buddha-nature, which then becomes all dharmas (things).

In quoting Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch of Zen, Dōgen is pointing to the absolutely fundamental Buddhist tenet that the extremes of nihilism (impermanence, *uccheda*) and eternalism (permanence, *śāśvata*) are to be avoided at all costs. By bearing this relatively simple and familiar idea in mind, we can more easily penetrate the intricacies of Dōgen's extremely subtle handling of this issue. Thus, one must *not* say:

1. The Buddha-nature is permanent.
2. All dharmas are impermanent.

(1) If one says the Buddha-nature is permanent, no one would bother to seek enlightenment; it would not be necessary and nothing would ever change. To counteract this view, Hui-neng teaches impermanence, whereby it is not made explicit whether he means the impermanence of all dharmas, which would certainly weaken his point, or the impermanence of Buddha-nature, which is more

likely. Hui-neng only states that he teaches impermanence, and in this teaching of impermanence lies the way of true permanence.

(2) If one says that all dharmas are impermanent, then all things would merely (simply?) have a selfhood. What has selfhood, is born, begins in time and must therefore die. What has a selfhood necessarily partakes of birth and death and is thus excluded from true permanency. Therefore Hui-neng teaches permanence, and this is the meaning of true impermanence.

To sum up: to counteract the statement that the Buddha-nature is permanent, Hui-neng preaches impermanence; and this is the meaning of true permanence. To counteract the statement that all dharmas are impermanent, Hui-neng preaches permanence; and this is the meaning of true impermanence.

Hui-neng (or Dōgen) is not just being "pragmatic," trying to see which statement is most efficacious in the given situation. The traditional, logical alternatives of permanence/impermanence simply do not reach into the dimension from which he is speaking. He has to rethink the meaning of these terms, and we have to try to follow him as best we can.

Impermanence (nihilistic impermanence, nihilism) and permanence (lifeless permanence, eternalism) represent the two extremes to be avoided at all costs. The "middle way" lies somewhere between these two extremes, a realm that cannot be fully captured in language, and yet we "cannot go without making an utterance."[3] In contrast to the "topsy-turvy views," Dōgen speaks of true permanence, true pleasure, true self and true purity. The unenlightened cling to a permanence that does not exist; they fabricate an idea of permanence. This supposed permanence is a mere mental construct. Equally unenlightened Buddhists take what for Dōgen is true permanence to be mere impermanence. They see only the aspect of time that is flying away, passing by; they fail to experience the "situational" aspect of time *(jūhōi)*. In either case, true permanence is lost.

Our conceptual thinking somehow inevitably gravitates toward the two inappropriate poles of nihilistic impermanence and lifeless

permanence. Either there is something or there is nothing—alternatives epitomized by Leibniz's famous question, why is there something rather than nothing? A third possibility is inconceivable. Inconceivable, certainly, but perhaps not inexperienceable.

We must try to explore that third possibility, the middle way between eternalism and nihilism. Dōgen tells us that Buddha-nature is neither something that we always possess, nor something that first appears upon enlightenment. "It is not that sentient beings are from the first endowed with the Buddha-nature. Here, the essential point is: even though you seek the Buddha-nature hoping to endue yourself with it, Buddha-nature is not something to appear now for the first time."[4]

If sentient beings were from the outset endowed with the Buddha-nature, there would be no need for practice or any kind of sustained exertion; there would, so to speak, be nothing for us to "do." The passage just quoted continues: "If sentient beings had the Buddha-nature originally, they would not be sentient beings. Since they are sentient beings, they are, after all, not Buddha-nature."[5]

This was Dōgen's own *kōan,* the question that spurred him on in his quest for a resolution: if we already possess the Buddha-nature, what need is there to practice? Part of the "answer" to this question is that we do not originally possess the Buddha-nature. The Buddha-nature is not the kind of thing that we can possess at all. Viewed temporally, this means that the Buddha-nature is not something that admits of being possessed in the mode of durational persistence. It does not persist; it has no duration.

On the other hand, the Buddha-nature is not something previously unmanifested that appears for the first time upon enlightenment. As Dōgen repeatedly emphasizes, the Buddha-nature is not something potential that can be actualized, akin to the growth in time of a seed. Here again, this is not possible due to the fact that there is no "time" *in which* this could occur. There is no persisting, durational temporal substratum that could underlie such a development from potentiality to actuality.

To understand how we have or do not have Buddha-nature, we must study the nature of movement. "Even though you may study enlightenment, enlightenment is not the wind and fire movement of the conscious mind. Even though you study movement, it is not what you think it is. If you can understand movement in its truth, then you can also understand true enlightenment and awakening."[6]

The movement we are to study is not the "wind and fire" movement of the conscious mind. The wind and fire movement of the conscious mind belongs to the mind that figures in "body and mind drop off." It is to be studied only to be cast off—"to learn the self is to forget the self."

Interpreting a sutra passage, Dōgen concludes: "By way of illustration, *if you wish to know the Buddha-nature's meaning* might be read, you are directly knowing the Buddha-nature's meaning. *You should watch for temporal conditions* means you are directly knowing temporal conditions. If you wish to know the Buddha-nature, you should know that it is precisely temporal conditions themselves."[7]

The Buddha-nature is precisely temporal conditions themselves. By temporal conditions, Dōgen is referring to the question of how something occurs, happens, takes place. This is something most of us take for granted and never think to question. Only rarely do we do this; and most likely when we do, it is to question *when* or *why* something specific occurred, but not how it is that anything *can* occur. For example, if I find out that I have a serious disease, I am certainly going to ask myself *why* this happened and approximately *when* it started to bother me. Or when a close relationship goes sour, I am bound to ask the same sort of questions.

But, interesting and important as these kinds of questions are, they are not what we are asking about. We are not asking why or when something occurred, but how anything can occur—change—at all. Given the common view of static, persisting entities, be they things or living beings, it is difficult to see how anything can happen. The solution to this difficulty lies in getting rid of the obstinate belief in persistence, duration and substance. A general

trend in this direction can be found in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Western thinkers such as Nietzsche, Whitehead, Alexander, Bergson, Husserl and, most notably, Heidegger.

A relatively simple, and by no means profound or exhaustive, answer to Dōgen's existential *kōan* of why must we practice if we already inherently possess the Buddha-nature might run as follows: most people would agree that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a prodigious musical genius who possessed a great musical gift. But even though he possessed such genius (whatever that may mean), had he spent his youth in other pursuits and perhaps become a merchant or a businessman, the "genius" would have been of no use whatsoever. The gift would have lain dormant, undeveloped. Here Sartre would quip: if he didn't develop that so-called gift, then there is no sense in speaking of a gift. *He did not do it.*

The main difficulty with this example is that it stresses the notion of development, and Dōgen would never say that the Buddha-nature is something to be developed. However, if we downplay the idea of development and instead emphasize *practice,* the example may still retain some validity. No practice, no pianist; no composing, no Mozart; no practice, no Buddha-nature.