

ENGAGING  
DŌGEN'S  
THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF PRACTICE  
AS AWAKENING ZEN

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Wisdom Publications  
199 Elm Street  
Somerville, MA 02144 USA  
wisdompubs.org

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Wirth, Jason M., 1963– editor. | Schroeder, Brian, 1959– editor. | Davis, Bret W., editor.  
Title: Engaging Dogen's Zen: the philosophy of practice as awakening / edited by Tetsuzen Jason M. Wirth, Shūdō Brian Schroeder, Kanpū Bret W. Davis.  
Description: Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2016001830 | ISBN 9781614292548 (paperback) | ISBN 161429254X (paperback)  
Subjects: LCSH: Dōgen, 1200-1253. | Zen Buddhism. | BISAC: RELIGION / Buddhism / Zen (see also PHILOSOPHY / Zen). | RELIGION / Philosophy. | RELIGION / Buddhism / Sacred Writings.  
Classification: LCC BQ9449.D657 E55 2017 | DDC 294.3/420427—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016001830>

ISBN 978-1-61429-254-8 ebook ISBN 978-1-61429-269-2

20 19 18 17 16  
5 4 3 2 1

Cover and interior design by Gopa & Ted2, Inc. Set in Minion Pro 10.7/14.9.

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Printed in the United States of America.

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Printed in the United States of America.



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# 8 *Shushōgi* Paragraphs 5–6

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STEVEN DECAROLI

The karmic consequences of good and evil occur at three different times. The first is retribution experienced in our present life; the second is retribution experienced in the life following this one; and the third is retribution experienced in subsequent lives. In practicing the way of the buddhas and ancestors, from the start we should study and clarify the principle of karmic retribution in these three times. Otherwise, we will often make mistakes and fall into false views. Not only will we fall into false views, we will fall into evil births and undergo long periods of suffering.

Understand that in this birth we have only one life, not two or three. How regrettable it is if, falling into false views, we are subject to the consequences of evil deeds. Because we think that it is not evil even as we do evil, and falsely imagine that there will be no consequences of evil, there is no way for us to avoid those consequences.

—From fascicle 85: “*Sanji no Gō [Karma in the Three Periods]*”

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The darkness of ignorance is inseparable  
from nirvana. —*Dōgen*

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One way to approach the early sections of *Shushōgi* is to see them as an attempt to draw together two concepts: karma<sup>1</sup> and repentance.<sup>2</sup> Section two of *Shushōgi* emphasizes repentance—the notion that negative karma can be eliminated through acts of contrition—which may appear to some to be a strikingly non-Buddhist idea. While the stress on repentance may in part reflect exposure to Christianity, given the growing presence of Christian ideas in Meiji Japan when *Shushōgi* was compiled, we must not conclude from this that the connotation of the term is the same. In fact, the question of what precisely *Shushōgi* means by repentance is one of the central questions of the text; but in order to appreciate the role repentance plays in *Shushōgi*, it is necessary to consider how Dōgen understands the concept of karma, which is the central theme of paragraphs five and six.

The discussion of karma in *Shushōgi* draws heavily from Dōgen's commentary on causality in the "Shinjin Inga [Profound Belief in Cause and Effect]" fascicle of *Shōbōgenzō*. At the heart of this fascicle is the Wild Fox kōan which tells the story of a former abbot who, after having taught his monks that those who are enlightened are no longer subject to cause and effect, is transformed into a fox for a duration of five hundred lifetimes. One day, seeking assistance in shaking off his wild fox's attitude of mind, the old abbot asked Hyakujō, "Is even someone who does the Great Practice subject to cause and effect?" Without hesitation Hyakujō answered, "Such a one is not blind to causality." Upon hearing this reply the old man was awakened and released from his fox body.

What is the relationship between karma and enlightenment? This is the central dilemma of the kōan. If the realization that accompanies enlightenment entails an awareness of pervasive emptiness, then it is plausible to suppose that karma too must be empty. This, of course, is the answer given by the old abbot who assumes that enlightenment is a release from cause and effect. But in his commentary on the fox kōan, Dōgen vigorously denies the emptiness of karma and makes it quite clear that no one escapes causation. "Be very clear about this," Dōgen writes, "no matter whether it is secular people or monastics who are arguing against the existence of cause and effect, they will be off the Path," for they

falsely believe there is no difference between “not being subject to” and “not being blind to.”

Like the old abbot, those who assume that enlightenment is a release from karma, and that causation is ultimately empty, fall prey to a powerful error of which they remain unaware. In believing they have achieved insight into the emptiness of things, they miss what is right in front of them—the dualism embedded in this frame of mind between a world conditioned by causation and a world unconditioned by causation, between samsara and nirvana. Those who assume that freedom means escape from causal conditioning immediately divide the world in two, and this dualism, far from offering release from karma, constitutes its source. There is a double ignorance at work here making such views particularly difficult to uproot once they take hold. It is for this reason that Dōgen, in *Shōbōgenzō*, identifies these individuals as being “most in the dark” and that *Shushōgi* expands on why such views are so resistant to corrective guidance: “Because we think that it is not evil even as we do evil, and falsely imagine that there will be no consequences of evil, there is no way for us to avoid those consequences.”

The firmness of Dōgen’s admonishment underscores the centrality of causation to the tradition of mindfulness. Unfortunately, however, the meaning of karma has often been misconstrued, especially in the West where it is used colloquially as a synonym for fate or providential justice. Within the Buddhist context, karma, which literally means volitional action or deed, has nothing to do with either reward or punishment, but is rather an expression of the ego. Dōgen tells us, “the principle of causality is obvious and impersonal,” yet in our habitual state of awareness karmic causality appears to be quite the opposite: both obscure and personal. Ordinarily we are not aware of karma. While we are certainly aware of physical cause and effect relationships, we are largely blind to the cognitive side of causality, which stems from our self-conception. In fact, it is not too much to say that the primary effect of karma is the construction of the self in all its obviousness, which in being obvious makes karma disappear from our awareness. The obviousness of the self is, therefore, inversely proportional to the obviousness of karma. The more we experience life from an ego-centered point of view—that is to

say, in a personal way—the further away we stray from grasping karmic causality—in other words, the less obvious it appears.

Being ignorant of the nature of causality, we fail to see how our own actions and perceptions form behavioral pathways, which profoundly affect our future actions. The most consequential result of these behavioral patterns is our tendency to act from a first-person perspective and explain our experiential encounters in terms of the centrality of the ego. The more we attempt to make sense of our experiences in terms of the ego, the deeper we plant the illusion of the self. This circle of intentional action, whereby the ego differentiates itself from the very world it strives to make sense of, is karma—a form of cognitive causality together with the habits of behavior and awareness it creates and perpetuates. With this in mind, it becomes clear why the old abbot's question about not being subject to causality is flawed. The question itself serves only to tighten the grip of the problem and cannot be answered without participating in an error of five hundred lifetimes. Hyakujō does, of course, provide an answer to the abbot but the reply he offers is to a different question. Keep in mind that karma never occurs outside the self.

Karma, then, is the name given to a self-generated pattern of actions that establish an inside, which manifests an outside in relation to which we are normatively related. The coemergence of inside and outside, and the dualism this manifests, is the root of karma, which is referred to in the literature as a form of ignorance because of the assumption we make regarding the independence of both domains. On the one hand, we posit a fixed external world, while on the other, we take for granted a permanent self. This cognitive structure effectively serves to generate the boundary conditions of the ego. From the Buddhist point of view, to say that the ego is empty is not to say that it does not exist, but is rather to recognize that what the ego is, is precisely this projected appearance of permanence, the causal effects of which are karma. To be enlightened, therefore, is not to end karma, but to alter our awareness so that karma and mind are no longer two things. Under these conditions we are no longer blind to karma and it begins to loosen its grip, releasing us from lingering mental states that perpetuate the cycle of rebirth and draw us from one life to the next.

When the mind wanders beyond itself, discriminating between an internal ego and an external world, it erroneously locates karma outside of itself as well, and in doing so fashions the notions of transmigration and rebirth, which are simply metaphors for the wandering mind itself. In his commentary on the Wild Fox kōan, Shibayama Rōshi skillfully invokes the subtleties of this point. “When a fox is really a fox, and not a thought of discriminating consciousness moves there, he is truly ‘a former head of a monastery.’ When an old man cannot be an old man and goes astray with his dualistic thinking, he is a fox. If the mind does not wander, there is in effect neither transmigration nor rebirth. This is awakening.”<sup>3</sup>

Strictly speaking, then, to be enlightened is to stand in no relationship whatsoever to karma. Where there is no distance there is no relation. Our impulse, of course, is to try to figure out how we are related to karma, but to pose questions about the nature of the relationship between karma and enlightenment, as the old abbot does, is to race swiftly down the wrong path. When one is a fox, Shibayama Rōshi instructs, simply be a fox. When one is an old abbot, simply be an old abbot. Life, like the kōan itself, is simply not a question. And yet, like the old abbot, all too often we are taken in by the need to find an answer. Life—what Dōgen called *genjō* or presence—is the great kōan, and literary kōans are merely instruments assisting us in paying attention to it. No more, no less.

Looking ahead to the next section, we can now say that within *Shushōgi* repentance must be understood not as an act of contrition but as the first honest glimpse of ourselves as the source of karma—the first indication of our willingness to pay attention. Everyone participates in karmic causality, but in acknowledging this, in declaring openly, bluntly, and without shame that our sense of self is entangled in karmic causation, we take the first step toward mindfulness and toward disposing ourselves to awakening.