



Mountains Hidden in Mountains: Dōgen Zenji and the Mind of Ecology

Gary Snyder

Prologue: Serving Sentient Beings

In what manner should one accommodate and serve sentient beings? To do so, one should think: "Throughout the realm-of-dharmas and the realm-of-space, in the ocean-like cosmos in the ten directions, there are infinite kinds of sentient beings; some are born of eggs, some are born of the womb, of wetness, or of metamorphosis; . . . some live by earth, some by water, fire, wind, space, trees, or flowers. . . . O countless are their kinds and infinite are their forms, shapes, bodies, faces, life-spans, races, names, dispositions, views, knowledge, desires, inclinations, manners, costumes, and diets. They abide in numerous kinds of dwellings: in towns, villages, cities, and palaces. They comprise the devas, the nagas, the heavenly musicians, the tree nymphs . . . humans, nonhumans, beings without feet, beings with two, four, or many feet; some are with form, some are without form, some with or without thoughts, or neither with nor without thoughts. To all these infinite kinds of beings, I will render my service and accommodate them in whatever way is beneficial to them."

Why should we cherish all sentient beings?

Because sentient beings are the roots of the tree-of-awakening.

The Bodhisattvas and the buddhas are the flowers and fruits.

Compassion is the water for the roots.

– Hua-yen Sūtra

I. OPENING THE MOUNTAIN

I grew up on a farm in the eastern Pacific, western North America, in the Puget Sound area of Washington State. I worked as a kid caring for the family milk cows and entering the forest, and as I grew older I explored the vast Cascade range. I became an avid backpacker, mountain climber, and amateur naturalist. I also witnessed excessive exploitation of the forests and began to do environmental politics while still in high school.

Puget Sound in the 1930s was about like Yayoi, Japan: some parts developed but much wild land left. Today it is 90 percent logged. As I studied history and literature, both occidental and oriental, I learned that Hinduism and Buddhism shared the ethical precept of *ahimsā*, nonharming, and that this was meant to embrace not just human beings but all living beings. This definitely tilted me toward Asia. This proclivity was reinforced by seeing East Asian landscape paintings, by reading Chinese and Japanese poetry in translation, and by the Daoist writings of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. I discovered Indian mythology and cosmology and yoga practice. I went on to read up on early Indian Buddhism, Mahayana sutras, and Zen. When I arrived at Zen I finally saw the connections between the insights of Mahāyāna sūtras, Daoist thought, *sumi* painting, poetry, Indian yoga, and zazen practice.

It was a few more years before I discovered Dōgen. By that time I was living in Kyōto studying at Daitoku-ji with the *sōdō-rōshi*,¹ Oda Sessō. I was introduced to Dōgen by the elderly Morirnoto-Rōshi of Nagaoka Zenjuku, with whom I occasionally visited, and who once admiringly said: "Dōgen! You should look at Dōgen. He gives Zen away, he tells everything! Dōgen is like a clam. He opens his mouth and you can see down to the bottom of his stomach. Read the *Shōbōgenzō*." There was not much Dōgen in translation then. I found an early translation of the *Zuimonki* in Kyōto. Back in the States I ran into Dr. Carl Bielefeldt's translation of "Sansuikyō" when it was still part of his M.A. draft. (Someone at Page Street, I think, smuggled it to me.)

Once I had read the "Sansuikyō" and gotten a little sense of Dōgen's approach to both practice and the phenomenal world of nature, I knew I was dealing with something far richer than just an East-Asian nature sensibility, far more than "love of nature" with its limited and chosen range of subjects, but with a great mind that played across all the realms. As a person who had worked outdoors for the Forest Service and logging companies, and as one who had lived for months in remote mountaintop fire-lookout

cabins, I also took mountains and rivers pretty literally. They were the wildest and most exciting features of the landscape, waiting to be traveled on foot or by canoe.

You cannot see the landscape with accuracy and clarity if you just drive across it in a train or car. The only way a landscape can be known is by walking across it, day after day. I realized that Dōgen knew his mountains and rivers not only from zazen but from his own walking – starting with his hike up Mount Hiei when he was nine or ten. Like everyone in those days, he was doubtless walking hundreds of miles, up hill and down, in both Japan and China, for most of his life.

II. BILLIONS OF BEINGS SEE THE MORNING STAR, AND THEY ALL BECOME BUDDHAS

There have been many Dōgens brought forward in this century: the strict monk, the big-spirited teacher, the philosopher, the aristocrat, and the poet. And maybe I should suggest the peripatetic, the walker, the hiker. These facets of the great teacher are called forth of course by different constituencies, groups with different views, who "construct" Dōgen to fit their needs. No blame for this; it happens constantly everywhere.

Now it becomes possible for contemporary environmentalists, of wide and compassionate view, also to think of Dōgen as a kind of ecologist. An *ecologist*, not just a Buddhist priest who had a deep sensibility for nature, but a proto-ecologist, a thinker who had remarkable insight deep into the way that wild nature works. At the risk of saying what's already known, I'll say a few words about ecology as a scientific discipline.

Ecology is originally based on biology. It now incorporates methods and information from physics, mathematics, and even engineering. The English word was created in the nineteenth century from the Greek root *oikos*, which means "household," plus the Greek *logos*. In this case "ecology" simply implies "thinking about the household." It's close to the word "economics," which means "the rules of the household" – from *nomos*, laws or rules. The formal Japanese word for ecology is *seitaigaku*, which has the sense of "life situation study" or "living conditions." *Ekorojii* might have more public currency these days.

Scientific ecology is a very sophisticated field. It is based on the accumulation and analysis of real-world data, involving living organisms on every scale, plus tracking the inorganic materials such as carbon and oxygen that cycle in and out of living systems. Over that, it analyzes the flow of energy through living systems, energy that takes its start from a variety of chemical and solar sources. Evolutionary ecologists look at the

interconnectedness of plants, creatures, clouds, sunshine, and so forth as it works through time, and how the whole planetary web of life-and-death is manifesting constant change, constant adaptation, and in some organisms at least an apparent self-organizing dynamic. No one would try to say, though, where it's all going. The contemporary ecological scientists are in the forefront of high-level computer use, by which they model the various possibilities of major switches and changes in processes both great and small, and they try to predict various outcomes in the real world. The degree of complexity witnessed in the workings of living systems has contributed to the emergence of chaos and complexity theorizing. All these organic and inorganic realms interacting is what we call the biosphere and would be referred to in Buddhism as "all sentient beings." It can be called a community of practice. It is a huge lineage, of which we are all members. Dōgen Zenji is one of its fruits.

This demanding science of the planetary household has precursors throughout the world in the hands-on practical proto-scientific knowledges of pastoralists, horticulturalists, agriculturalists, wild-plant gatherers, fisher-people, and hunters, for all of hominid history. Our ancient ancestors had a deep understanding of the cycles of the seasons, animal behavior, plant and animal properties, and of course they realized that human beings are also creatures and are inevitably members of the communities of nature. Today we call them ecosystems. They could see that life and death flowed on like a river, and that suffering and impermanence were sooner or later everyone's lot—the fate of cranes and foxes, of whales and mice, as well as humans.

The study of ecology is truly the study of *shōji*, of *samsāra*, "the wheel of life and death" in the *kāmadhātu*, the realm of desire, or of metabolic beings. But ecologists do not lament it or seek to flee it but to investigate and analyze it, to hope to know what goes on inside. Need I say, this does no harm to nature? If the analytic mode is spiritually problematic, it is only so for the analyst. And some scientists will marvel at it. The ecological view, like the Dharma view, can appreciate the flowers and the moon, but it also sees parasites, bacteria, cancers, and baby birds eaten by snakes with a nondiscriminating eye that grasps the many roles in the community of life-and-death.

For some time now ecological scientists have been telling us all that the way humans and their economies are treating the planet is destructive and dangerous in the extreme. This is known. But scientific information in itself does not move governments, world leaders, or masses of people. To transform public policy in regard to the oceans and air,

forests, and population questions, and to move toward saving endangered species, both require reaching the very hearts of whole societies.

This is not a work for the scientists. Their research is essential to us, but to change the way contemporary human beings live on earth is a kind of Dharma work, a work for dedicated followers of the Way who because of their practice and insight can hope to balance wisdom and compassion and help open the eyes of others. I think that Buddhism, and especially old Shamon Dōgen, has something to show us in the matter of how to go about this.

In "Mountains and Waters Sūtra," Dōgen says, "although mountains belong to the nation, they really belong to the people who love them." This is weirdly cogent for us as we debate about land-use policies with the governments and corporations of the world. In a sense it can be read as a permission to engage with, intervene in, the behavior of governments and corporations alike when they abuse the resources entrusted to them.

But that's not what I really want to say right now. I want to get back to Dōgen as a proto-ecologist whose words speak to both spiritual and secular affairs. In "Sansuikyō" he says:

Now when dragons and fish see water as a palace, it is just like human beings seeing a palace. They do not think it flows . . .

And,

You who study with buddhas should not be limited to human views when you are studying water.

And,

There is also a world of sentient beings in clouds. There is a world of sentient beings in the air. There is a world of sentient beings in fire. . . . There is a world of sentient beings in a blade of grass.

Here Dōgen causes us to look at the world in many layers, from many sides, on all scales, with both the spiritual eye and the eye of the nonhuman all-species ecological imagination—calling for a mind that can know that a rocky island in the offshore Pacific

covered with breeding sea lions, full of racket and an incredibly foul odor, is for sea lions a jeweled palace, redolent with the sweetest of perfumes.

In Buddhist psychology we speak of the "six roads," *rokudō*, which constitute the spiritual and biological inventory of possible states of being. Not only the familiar human and nonhuman sentient beings (animals) are on the "roads" – but *devas* (gods and spirits), *asuras* (angry intelligent demons), hungry ghosts (greed-obsessed spirits), and hell-dwellers as well. Each of these zones is a mythological habitat, a part of the ecology of the mind.

We of the cusp of the third millennium, puppets of Late Capitalism, might also identify with the best-known facet of Dōgen, that is, Dōgen as a teacher who helps us skillfully grasp the truth that all realms are authentic and then teaches how to overcome human-species ego, as well as personal ego.

To recapitulate, I would suggest that Dōgen's nature sensibility can be seen in his poetry, the richness of his many levels and realms of mind can be seen in texts like the "Sansuikyō," but his *Instructional Text for Forest Management* (*Ocean and Wetland Restoration*) and *Third World Crisis Intervention* would be that guide for Dharma activists and administrators, the *Tenzo Kyōkun*, *Instructions for the Cook*.

But then I am speaking as a person from a backward society that is equally far from the land of the Buddha and the Land of Plato – inhabited by self-righteously ignorant people, some of whom don't even want to hear about Darwinian evolution, let alone the Dharma.

III. DECOMPOSED

Hungry ghosts see water as raging fire or pus and blood. ...

Life in the wild is not just eating berries in the sunlight. I like to imagine a "depth ecology" that would go to the dark side of nature – the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite. Wild systems are in one elevated sense above criticism, but they can also be seen as irrational, moldy, cruel, parasitic. Jim Dodge told me how he had watched – with fascinated horror – orcas methodically batter a gray whale to death in the Chukchi Sea. Life is not just diurnal and a property of large interesting vertebrates; it is also nocturnal, anaerobic, cannibalistic, microscopic, digestive, fermentative: cooking away in the warm dark. Life is well maintained at a four-mile ocean depth, is waiting and sustained on a frozen rock wall, and is clinging and

nourished in hundred-degree desert temperatures. And there is a world of nature on the decay side, a world of beings who do rot and decay in the shade. Human beings have made much of purity and are repelled by blood, pollution, putrefaction. The other side of the "sacred" is the sight of your beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots. Coyote, Orpheus, and Izanagi cannot help but look, and they lose her. Shame, grief, embarrassment, and fear are the anaerobic fuels of the dark imagination. The less familiar energies of the wild world, and their analogs in the imagination, have given us ecologies of the imagination.

Here we encounter the peculiar habitat needs of the gods. They settle in on the summits of mountains (as on Mount Olympus), have chambers deep below the earth, or are invisibly all around us. (One major deity is rumored to be domiciled entirely off this earth.) The Yana said that Mount Lassen of northern California, "Waganupa" in Ishi's tongue—a ten-thousand-foot volcano—is a home to countless *kukini* who keep a fire going inside. (The smoke passes out through the smoke hole.) They will enjoy their magical stick-game gambling until the time that human beings reform themselves and become "real people" whom spirits might want to associate with once again.

The spirit world goes across and between species. It does not need to concern itself with reproduction, it is not afraid of death, it is not practical. But the spirits do seem to have an ambivalent, selective interest in cross-world communication. Young women in scarlet and white robes dance to call down the gods, to be possessed by them, to speak in their voices. The priests who employ them can only wait for the message. (I think it was D. H. Lawrence who said, "Eat and carouse with Bacchus, or munch dry bread with Jesus, but don't sit down without one of the gods.")

Where Dōgen and the Zen tradition would walk, chant a sūtra, or do sitting meditation, the elder vernacular artisans of soul and spirit would also play a flute, drum, dance, dream, listen for a song, go without food, and be available to communicate with birds, animals, or rocks. There is a story of Coyote watching the yellow autumn cottonwood leaves float and eddy lightly down to the ground. He said it was so lovely to watch, and he asked the cottonwood leaves if he might do it too. They warned him, "Coyote, you are too heavy and you have a body of bones and guts and muscle. We are light, we drift with the wind, but you would fall and be hurt." Coyote would hear none of it, and insisted on climbing a cottonwood, edging far out onto a branch, and launching himself off. He fell and was killed. There's a caution here: Do not be too hasty in setting out to "become one with." But, as we have heard, Coyote will roll over, reassemble his

ribs, locate his paws, make do with a pebble with a dot of pitch on it for an eye, and trot off again.

Narratives are one sort of trace that we leave in the world. All our literatures are leaving, of the same order as the myths of wilderness peoples who leave behind only stories and a few stone tools. Other orders of being have their own literatures. Narrative in the deer world is a track of scents that is passed on from deer to deer, with an art of interpretation, which is instinctive. A literature of blood stains, a bit of piss, a whiff of estrus, a hit of rut, a scrape on a sapling, and long gone. And there might be a "narrative theory" among these other beings—they might ruminate on "intersexuality" or "decomposition criticism."

I suspect that primary peoples all know that their myths are somehow "made up." They do not take them literally and at the same time they hold the stories very dear. Only upon being invaded by history and whipsawed by other and unfamiliar values do a people begin to declare that their myths are "literally true." This literalness in turn provokes skeptical questioning and the whole critical exercise. What a final refinement of confusion about the role of myth it is to declare that they are not to be believed but are nonetheless aesthetic and psychological constructs that bring order to an otherwise chaotic world, and to which we should willfully commit ourselves! Dōgen's "You should know that even though all things are liberated and not tied to anything, they abide in their own phenomenal expression" is medicine for that. The "Mountains and Waters Sūtra" is called a "sūtra" not to assert that the "mountains and rivers of this moment" are a text, a system of symbols, a referential world of mirrors but that this world in its actual existence is a complete presentation, an enactment—and that it stand for nothing.

IV. WALKING ON WATER

There's all sorts of walking—from heading out across the desert in a straight line to a sinuous weaving through undergrowth. Descending rocky ridges and talus slopes is a specialty in itself. It is an irregular dancing—always shifting—step of walking on slabs and scree. The breath and eye are always following this uneven rhythm. It is never paced or clocklike but Hexing—little jumps, sidesteps—going for the well-seen place to put a foot on a rock, hit flat, move on, zigzagging along and all deliberate. The alert eye looking ahead, picking the footholds to come, while never missing the step of the moment. The

body-mind is so at one with this rough world that it makes these moves effortlessly once it has had a bit of practice. The mountain keeps up with the mountain.

In 1225 Dōgen was in his second year in South China. That year he walked out of the mountains and passed through the capital of the Southern Sung Dynasty, Hang-chou, on his way north to the Wanshou monastery at Mount Jing. The only account of China left by Dōgen are notes on talks by the master Ju-ching.² I wonder what Dōgen would have said of city walking. Hang-chou had level, broad, straight streets paralleling canals. He must have seen the many-storied houses, clean, cobbled lanes, theaters, markets, and innumerable restaurants. It had three thousand public baths. Marco Polo (who called it Quinsai) visited it twenty-five years later and estimated that it was the largest (at least a million people) and most affluent city in the world at that time.³ Even today the people of Hang-chou remember the lofty eleventh-century poet Su Shi, who built the causeway across West Lake when he was governor. At the time of Dōgen's walk North China was under the control of the Mongols, and Hang-chou would fall to the Mongols in fifty-five more years.

The South China of that era sent landscape painting, calligraphy, teachings from both the Sōtō and Rinzai schools of Zen, and the idea of that great southern capital Hang-chou, to Japan. The ideal of Hangchou shaped both Osaka and Tōkyō in their Tokugawa-era evolution. These two positions – one the austere Zen practice with its spare, clean halls, and the other the possibility of a convivial urban life rich in festivals and theaters and restaurants – are two potent legacies of East Asia to the world. Zen stands in a way for the Far Eastern love of nature, and Hang-chou stands for a world-scale vision of the city. Both are brimming with energy and life. Because most of the cities of the world are now mired in poverty, overpopulation, gridlock, and pollution, there is all the more reason to recover the dream. To neglect the city (in our hearts and minds for starters) is deadly, as James Hillman has said.⁴

"Mountains and Waters Sūtra" goes on to say:

All waters appear at the foot of the eastern mountains. Above all waters are all mountains. Walking beyond and walking within are both done on water. All mountains walk with their toes on all waters and splash there.

Dōgen finishes his meditation on mountains and waters with this:

"When you investigate mountains thoroughly, this is the work of the mountains. Such mountains and waters of themselves become wise persons and sages" – become sidewalk vendors and noodle-cooks, become brokers and street-people, become marmots, ravens, graylings, rattlesnakes – all beings are "said" by the mountains and waters – even to the clanking tread of a Caterpillar tractor, to the gleam of the keys of a clarinet.

V. WE WASH OUR BOWLS IN THIS WATER

"The 1.5 billion cubic kilometers of water on the earth are split by photosynthesis and reconstituted by respiration once every two million years or so."

A day on the ragged North Pacific coast get soaked by whipping mist, rainsqualls tumbling, mountain mirror ponds, snowfield slush, rockwash creeks, earfuls of falls, sworls of ridge-edge snowflakes, swift gravelly rivers, tidewater crumbly glaciers, high hanging glaciers, shore-side mud pools, icebergs, streams looping through the tideflats, spume of brine, distant soft rain drooping from a cloud,

sea lion lazing under the surface of the sea –

*ga shi sempassui
nyo ten kanro mi
We wash our bowls in this water
It has the flavor of ambrosial dew –*

Beaching the raft, stagger out and shake off wetness like a bear, stand on the sandbar,
rest from the river being

upwellings, sideswirls, backswirls
curl-overs, outripples, eddies, chops and swells
wash-overs, shallows confluence turbulence wash-seam
wavelets, rimes, saying

"A hydraulic's a cross between a wave and a hole,
– you get a weir effect.

Pillow-rock's a total fold-back over a hole,
it shows spit on the top of the wave
a haystack's a series of waves at the bottom of a tight channel
there's a tongue of the rapids – the slick tongue – the 'v' –
some holes are 'keepers,' they won't let you through;
eddies, backflows, we say 'eddies are your friends.'
Current differential, it can suck you down
vertical boils are straight-up eddies spinning,
herringbone waves curl under and come back.
Well, let's get going, get back to the rafts."

Swing the big oars,
head into a storm.

Seyo kijin shu
Shitsuryo toku ho man
Om makura sai sowaka
We offer it to all demons and spirits
May all be filled and satisfied.

Om makula sai svaha!

Su Tung-po sat out one whole night by a creek on the slopes of
Mount Lu.

Next morning he showed this poem to his teacher:

The stream with its sounds is a long broad tongue
The looming mountain is a wide-awake body
Throughout the night song after song
How can I speak at dawn.

Old Master Chang-tsung approved him. Two centuries later Dōgen said,

"Sounds of stream and shapes of mountains.
The sounds never stop and the shapes never cease.
Was it Su who woke
Or was it the mountains and streams?
Billions of beings see the morning star
and all become Buddhas!
If *you*, who are valley streams and looming
mountains, can't throw some light on the nature of ridges and rivers,

who the hell can?"

Gary Snyder

Gary Snyder is best known as a poet, essayist, lecturer, and environmental activist, and he spent years in Japan studying Zen. His writing influenced the Deep Ecology movement. He served as a faculty member at the University of California, Davis, for many years.

Sections III and IV of this paper are from Gary Snyder's book of essays *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press, 1990). Section V is from Gary Snyder's book-length poem *Mountains and Rivers without End* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996). This paper was presented to the symposium "Dōgen Zen and Its Relevance for Our Time," Stanford University, October 23-24, 1999. The full proceedings of the symposium have been published as *Dōgen Zen and Its Relevance for Our Time*, ed. Shohaku Okumura (San Francisco: Soto Zen Buddhism International Center, 2003).

* * *

Snyder, Gary. 2018. "Mountains Hidden in Mountains: Dōgen Zenji and the Mind of Ecology." In Shohaku Okumura, *The Mountains and Waters Sūtra: A Practitioner's Guide to Dōgen's "Sansuikyō."* Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 237-250.

Front Image, detail from:
Streams and Mountains without End, 1100-1150
China, late Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) - Jin dynasty (1115-1234)
handscroll, ink and slight color on silk, (13 13/16 x 434 9/16 in.).
Cleveland Museum of Art

¹ Master of a Rinzai monastery.

² Takashi James Kodera, *Dōgen's Formative Years in China* (Boulder, CO: Prajna Press, 1980).

³ Jacques Gernet, *Daily Life in China: On the Eve of the Mongol Invasion* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

⁴ James Hillman, *Blue Fire* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 169.