

## Article

# Dōgen on Language and Experience

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**Abstract:** Understanding Zen views on language and experience from a philosophical hermeneutical point of view means conceiving such an understanding as a merging of horizons. We have to explicate both the modern Western secular horizon and the medieval Japanese Zen horizon. This article first describes how Charles Taylor's notion of the immanent frame has shaped Western modernist understanding of Zen language and experience in the twentieth century. Zen language was approached as an instrumental tool, and Zen enlightenment experience was imagined as an ineffable "pure experience." More recent postmodernist approaches to Zen language and experience have stressed the interrelatedness of language and experience, and the importance of embodied approaches to experience. Such new understandings of language and experience offer not only new perspectives on Dōgen's "Zen within words and letters" and his embodied approach to enlightened experience, but also an expanded view on what it means to understand Dōgen.

**Keywords:** Dōgen; zazen; language; experience; philosophical hermeneutics; immanent frame; embodiment

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## 1. Introduction

In the philosophical reception of Zen in the West over the past century, various imaginings of the complex relationship between the use of language and the experience of enlightenment have been put forward. In this article I want to reflect on how to make sense of Zen views on language and experience, and apply these reflections to understanding the work of Dōgen. I will be following the approach of philosophical hermeneutics from the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002). According to Gadamer, understanding is possible through a merging of the horizon of that which one aims to understand with one's own horizon. In my own case, this comes down to a merging of the medieval Japanese Zen horizon with my own modern secular Western horizon.

Central in Gadamer's approach to understanding is the impossibility of understanding Dōgen "as he really is" or understanding what he wrote "as he really meant it" (gaining access to his authorial intention). We do not have immediate access to Dōgen. Making sense of Dōgen is always imagining Dōgen, according to our subconscious pre-understandings (*Vorverstehen*): understanding him *as* a philosopher, *as* a religious thinker, *as* a prophet, and *as* a miracle worker.

In order to understand Dōgen's philosophical and religious views on language and experience, I will first, in Section 2, elucidate the modern Western secular horizon: what do *we*, contemporary Western philosophers, mean by "philosophy," "religion," "language," and "experience"? Additionally, how does such a horizon differ from Dōgen's medieval Japanese Zen horizon? In Section 3, I will briefly sketch the Western encounter with Zen along the lines of the Traditional Zen Narrative. In Sections 4 and 5, I will address modern and postmodern approaches to language and experience. In Sections 6 and 7, I will present Dōgen's "Zen within words and letters" and his embodied approach to experience. Section 8 will present a brief conclusion.

Many of the considerations in this article have been argued more extensively in my recent book *Reimagining Zen in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor and Zen Buddhism in the West* (van der Braak 2020), although some of them have been extended and enhanced further here.

## 2. The Immanent Frame

Charles Taylor's work *A Secular Age* is a history of the causes and conditions that have determined the development of Western thought over the past five hundred years, especially with regard to what he calls "fullness" (the experience of the ultimate meaning of life). Taylor's main claim in this work is that our thinking on life and fullness today largely takes place within the contours of an unseen pre-understanding that he calls "the immanent frame." In this pre-understanding, a particular ontological and anthropological picture is assumed. Ontologically, a separation is made between an immanent natural order and a transcendent supernatural order.

Anthropologically, the self is considered to be a bounded entity that is separated from its environment. Such a "buffered self" differs markedly from the medieval "porous self" that was continually vulnerable to invasions from benign and malign outer forces. Significantly, Taylor stresses that such a development from a porous self to a buffered self has not taken place in many non-Western contexts.

Epistemologically, the consequence is that knowledge is considered to be representational in nature. The buffered self (*res cogitans*) forms representations from outer reality (*res extensa*) which yield various forms of knowledge. Experience is also representational in nature. This differs strongly from medieval notions of experience. As Taylor notes, our Western notions of experience have a distinctly Cartesian flavor. We think of "experience as something subjective, distinct from the object experienced; as something to do with our feelings, distinct from changes in our being: dispositions, orientations, the bent of our lives, etc. [...] This notion of experience, as distinct both from the object and the continuing nature of the subject (experiencer), is quintessentially modern, and springs from the modern philosophy of mind and knowledge which comes down to us from Descartes and other writers of the seventeenth century" (Taylor 2007, p. 730).

Such modern mediated experience is very different from medieval experience. In the Middle Ages, Taylor argues, people spoke about their experience as immediate without making a distinction between their experience and their construal of it. To them, it appeared that they simply experienced reality as it is. Taylor mentions contemporary African thought as another example. For Africans, the spirit world is not a possible interpretation of their experience: the spirits that surround them are simply there, as an immediate certainty. In the immanent frame, such forms of immediate certainty have largely eroded.

The medieval Japanese Zen horizon, as illuminated by many expert scholars through their research over the past years (see Heine 2008, 2013, 2018 for an overview of the various "waves" of Chan/Zen research) differs from the modern Western immanent frame in several important respects. First, from an ontological perspective, there is no strict separation between an immanent natural order and a transcendent supernatural order. There is no higher "true" world hiding out behind the phenomenological world. Second, from an anthropological perspective, the collective sense of self is not that of a Cartesian, buffered self, but that of a porous self that is directly interrelated to "the ten thousand things." Additionally, third, "experience" is not conceived of as a mental representation of an external world, and not as mediated in a Cartesian way (see van der Braak 2020).

Therefore, the two horizons are incommensurate (but not per se incommensurable). In order to understand Zen in a Western context, it is important to realize that the immanent frame is not a stable, monolithic framework that holds us all captive. Within the immanent frame, various cracks have always remained visible. Taylor calls attention to the existence of various cross pressures within the immanent frame. With regard to the interpretation of Zen in the West, I want to discuss two such types of cross pressures around language and experience:

- (1) What is language and how does it function? Does language refer to an external reality independent of it, does it function as a tool or instrument, or are there many different modes of language? Should we understand Zen as a mysticism that aims at realizing a nondual ineffable enlightenment experience “beyond words and letters,” that lies forever beyond the boundaries of language? Or should we conceive of Zen, as Dōgen does, as being “within words and letters,” aiming at the continuous explication and clarification of duality, within the boundaries of language?
- (2) What is experience and how does it function? Is the Zen enlightenment experience prior to linguistic description, or is linguistic description always already a part of such experience? Is Zen enlightenment even about experience at all, or does it refer to the acquisition of ritual competence as religion scholar Robert Sharf has controversially claimed? (Sharf 1995a, 1998). Does experience take place exclusively in the mind (Taylor calls this “excarnation”) or does the body also play a role?

### 3. The Encounter of Zen with the West

The encounter of Japanese Zen with Western modernity has taken place in the context of this immanent frame. Zen has often been presented (or “repackaged”) to the West, in dialogue with Western Romantic and Protestant discourses, as a form of mysticism aimed at an ineffable religious experience (McMahan 2002, 2008; van der Braak 2020). In the early twentieth century, in the Western comparative study of religion, the focus shifted from the propositional truth of religious doctrines to the felt immediacy of religious experience. According to religion scholar Stephen Bush, in such approaches to religion it is assumed that religion centers around ineffable “religious experience,” a special type of experience that differs from ordinary experience, and which is cross-culturally universal (Bush 2014, p. 25). As religion scholar Wayne Proudfoot has argued, such a notion of religious experience can be traced back to the German theologian Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who located the essence of religion in subjective feelings, as opposed to doctrines, creeds and institutions (Proudfoot 1985). The German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) defined the essence of religion as the pre-rational feeling of the “numinous” that humans experience in the presence of the *mysterium tremendum*, the transcendent source experienced as the “Wholly Other” (Otto [1923] 1958).

According to perennialist thinkers, such a transcendent source served as the fountainhead of the different world religions, on whose foundation all religious knowledge and doctrine has grown (e.g., Huxley 1945; Guénon 1945; Schuon 1975; Otto [1932] 2016). The great founders and mystics throughout the ages were seen to have rediscovered this timeless fountainhead. Afterwards, their followers and admirers let their original insights decay into fixed dogmas and formulas, and let religions and institutions arise. Within this context, the Zen masters were presented as examples of such universal mystics, who again and again shook up the fixed dogmas and formulas of established Buddhist institutions.

The encounter with such perennialist notions led to the construction of what Steven Heine has called the Traditional Zen Narrative (Heine 2008), which focused on ineffability and nonduality as the defining characteristics of the Zen enlightenment experience. D.T. Suzuki and other Zen advocates connected such perennialist notions with the Mahāyāna Buddhist hermeneutic of two truths, which distinguishes between conventional or relative truth claims (which can still be expressed in language) and ultimate or absolute truth (the ineffable religious experience that can no longer be expressed in language). Since all truth claims are necessarily couched in language and thought, they are unavoidably part of conventional truth. All Buddhist doctrines are only conventionally true. Therefore, ultimate truth is realized not by seeking out conventional doctrines, but by letting go of all conventional truths, out of the realization that they are all merely conventional, and not ultimately true (see, e.g., Garfield 2002; The Cowherds 2011).

In such a Traditional Zen Narrative, the self-description of the Japanese Zen tradition (especially the Rinzai school) as being dedicated to the direct realization of the ineffable “without relying on words and letters” was translated into a Western idiom. Now it was

claimed that the Zen enlightenment experience referred to a direct, unmediated experience of reality beyond the realm of conditioning. Such an experience precludes all kinds of mediating objects such as images, symbols, or representations of deities. The Japanese Zen philosopher Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) borrowed the term “pure experience” from William James in order to describe enlightenment as a mode of experiencing beyond the subject–object distinction, in which reality is seen as it really is, undistorted by disturbing emotions, preconceptions and attachments (James 1912, p. 74; see also Sharf 1998). Additionally, although Nishida dropped his notion of pure experience in his later work (or at least renamed it), D.T. Suzuki adapted it as the central hermeneutical principle in his presentation of Zen to the West (Nishida [1911] 1990; Suzuki 1934).

As Zen scholar Dale Wright notes, the notion of pure experience considers language to be either an obstruction (a filter, a veil, a screen, a distortion) or an instrument (the finger that points to the moon). Through dedicated Zen practice, a sudden breakthrough beyond language in consciousness can occur, where the ultimately Real (the original source, the ground of being) can reveal itself. In such an altered state of consciousness, all conceptual and categorizing activity of the mind is bracketed, so that reality can be perceived in its natural fullness, undistorted by the mind and by language (Wright 1992, 1998).

#### 4. Language

The role of language in Zen soteriology has been strongly debated in contemporary scholarship. In the Traditional Zen Narrative, enlightenment is conceived as an exit from language. The true matter of Zen cannot be grasped by way of words and letters. The true dharma is the dharma that cannot be spoken. This is why the sacred texts of the Buddhist tradition are called worthless dust. Enlightened non-thinking is imagined as a direct pointing without employing concepts (Chang 1971, p. 63), free from linguistic conventions, discriminations and valuations. For Dōgen scholar Hee-Jin Kim, however, enlightenment refers to “clarifying and penetrating one’s muddled discriminative thought in and through our language to attain clarity, depth, and precision in the discriminative thought itself”. (Kim 2007, p. 63). What both these approaches seem to agree upon, is that the representational mode of language (words as pointers that correspond to an external reality) falls short when it comes to making sense of Zen enlightenment. However, what is the alternative?

Wright has discussed the use by various modernist Zen scholars (he focuses on John Blofeld) of an instrumental theory of language: “language is an instrument or tool available for our use in achieving certain specific communicative goals” (Wright 1998, p. 65). Such an approach to language implies maintaining a strict separation between means and ends. As Wright comments, “On this theory, although the enlightened mind has transcended language unconditionally, nevertheless, language remains necessary and useful.” (Wright 1998, p. 65).

This approach fits well with the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of language as *upāya*, aimed at facilitating a transformation in the consciousness of the listener or reader. According to the traditional Mahāyāna Buddhist view, the Buddha spoke out of compassion and skillful means, not in order to merely convey information. Additionally, however useful language may be, the best skillful means is silence, as demonstrated by Vimalakirti’s thunderous silence and Kasyapa’s smile at being shown a flower by the Buddha. Therefore, language should be seen as a temporary “inadequate, regrettable, but nevertheless essential tool of the Zen tradition” (Wright 1998, p. 66). Language is such an imperfect tool because the enlightenment experience is ineffable: it is impossible to communicate it in words.

This theory of language matches famous metaphors of the Daoist master Zhuangzi (having obtained the fish, forget the fish trap), the Buddha’s raft that needs to be left behind once having crossed the river, and Wittgenstein’s ladder that can be left behind once

it has served its purpose. However, Wright critically discusses its Romanticist assumptions:

(1) It presupposes a separation between language (which is culture-specific) and experience (which is individual). As Wright puts it, in this view “language is a tool separate from the reality on which it may be used. We use it when we must say what we already know pre-linguistically” (Wright 1998, p. 68). It is assumed that the enlightenment experience is the same for individuals around the world, not specific to any culture or language, not linguistically and culturally mediated. Therefore, there is no special “otherness” about it. Anyone that has passed beyond cultural and linguistic conditioning will have access to it (by non-linguistic means). As Wright notes, “The instrumental, secondary status of language makes this “universalist” theory of religious experience natural and obvious.” (Wright 1998, p. 68).

(2) It smuggles the concept of representation back in. First, we experience something, and then we use language to stick a label on it (to represent it) in order to communicate the experience to others. Those who have experienced enlightenment directly can use language productively. However, for those who have not had the experience, language can act as a filter or a veil obscuring the purity of experience.

Wright clarifies this notion of representation by using a clothing metaphor. To the adherents of the instrumentalist view of language, experience and language are related in the same way as people and their clothing. We can decide what clothing to put on at various social occasions. However, in the privacy of our home, we can decide to be naked. Without any clothing that covers us, we can see ourselves directly, as we really are. Similarly, we can decide to let go of language and have independent access to our own unclothed experience. We can then select the appropriate linguistic representation that works best to communicate this experience to others. (Wright 1998, p. 69).

However, Wright argues, there is no such thing as naked experience. Experience always comes already dressed. Language constitutes a dimension, however minimally, of any experience. Additionally, although we sometimes may have to struggle to find words to convey our experience, most of the time we just say what we experience: “the words adequate to the experience are already there in association with the experience itself. We make decisions about how to put things only when they are not already in place themselves, that is, when ambiguity is a fundamental part of the experience itself.” (Wright 1998, p. 69). In such cases, there may be a “limited wardrobe selection” available, but sheer nakedness is impossible. (Wright 1998, p. 69).

Therefore, it is not a matter of finding more and more appropriate representations for what we perceive. We do not consider the experience first and then try out various concepts to describe it. We experience “it” *as* such and such.

(3) In describing the enlightenment experience as ineffable, it presupposes a boundary between what lies within the bounds of language and what lies beyond them. Proudfoot (1985) has described how the notion of ineffable religious experience, as lying beyond thought and language, has been developed since Schleiermacher in order to insulate religion from the attacks of positivistic science, and push back against the belief that the advancement of modern science would render metaphysical views and explanations obsolete. This notion assumes that there are some kind of experiences that cannot be represented in language, and that are therefore uncommunicable to others. However, Wright sketches an alternative account of the experience of the inadequacy of language:

“When we speak of experience that is beyond description, we have already described it. Its distinguishing feature or characteristic is this negative dimension, its being “beyond.” This feature is nevertheless constituted and structured by language. [...] Rather than being a limit that can be seen from the other side in “experience,” language establishes this limit and holds the limit within it” (Wright 1998, p. 70).

The postmodern alternative to modern instrumentalist views of language is that “language is already embedded in the content of our experience. [...] Language is present even in the “direct” perception of an object. Language and perception co-arise. [...] Awareness of what it is that we perceive is linguistically structured, and comes to us directly in the perception itself. We perceive “this” directly *as* what it is—a book, a sound, a strange situation. [...] Anything not experienced *as* something in particular is simply not experienced.” (Wright 1998, p. 71f).

The linguistic turn in philosophy has led to an alternative interpretation of Zen practice and enlightenment that focuses on the various ways in which “the Zen experience” is shaped and made possible by language games, and by various linguistically articulated social practices. Such a poststructuralist approach to experience and language requires new and more appropriate metaphors. Wright reviews a few of those from Gadamer:

In his terms, language is not a barrier, obstructing access; it is a “reservoir” of possibilities which it holds open to those who participate in it. Language is not a “clothing” which hides the truth; it is a “medium” through which truth becomes manifest. Language is not a “veil” preventing vision; it is a “window” which opens vision (Wright 1992, p. 125).

The perspective on language as a reservoir of possibilities also makes room for many different modes of language. The modern approach to language implicitly assumes that there are only two modes of language, the literal and the figurative (or metaphorical), each with their own relationship to experience. In the literal mode, language is seen as a representation of experience; in the figurative or metaphorical mode, language is seen as evocative.

The philosopher of religion Mikel Burley has discussed a third mode of language: “a language in which to think of the world” (Burley 2020, pp. 163–89). This third mode of language, which especially applies to religious language, was first suggested by philosopher of religion D.Z. Phillips, based on his interpretation of Wittgenstein’s aphorisms on language (Phillips 2001, p. 157f). A “language in which to think of the world” refers for example to shamanistic and animistic language that attributes the power of speech to trees and rocks, and ascribes emotions to the “spirit of the land.” As Burley notes, such a mode of language “can provide a means of accessing perspectives on the world that diverge from those with which modern Western readers may be most familiar” (Burley 2020, p. 164). In terms of our present discussion, it can provide a means to go beyond the immanent frame that hinders our understanding of Zen language and experience.

In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes about language used “in a secondary sense” (Wittgenstein 1958, p. 216e). As Burley notes, such “figurative forms of language [...] are neither straightforwardly translatable into nonfigurative terms nor nonsensical. They derive their meanings from their use in lived activities: “*Practice* gives the words their sense” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 97e).” (Burley 2020, p. 178).

## 5. Experience

The imagining of Zen enlightenment as a pure, ineffable experience has been strongly criticized. Wright argues that the notion of pure experience presupposes a separation between experience and language: an essential dichotomy between an initial experiential moment of unmediated contact through the senses, and a subsequent “filtering” through linguistic categories. This dichotomy is often expressed in conceptual terms as between the “raw data” of experience versus the “meaning” that linguistic interpretation bestows upon it, as between “pure experience” and a subsequent “conceptual overlay,” as between “original image” versus “blurring through conceptual filters,” as “prereflective awareness” versus “reflective categories,” as “primordial given” versus “linguistic construct,” etc. (Wright 1992, p. 117). However, Wright argues, such a foundational dichotomy between original experience and subsequent linguistic interpretation is untenable. Human

perception is always already linguistically shaped. There is no direct access possible to a pre-linguistic, objective “given.”

The Cartesian assumption of an external world (*res extensa*) in opposition to the human mind (*res cogitans*) has been criticized as “the myth of the given” (the phrase was coined by philosopher Wilfred Sellars). In his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, American philosopher Richard Rorty (1980) argues that Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein have each in their own way destroyed this modern myth in their philosophy. The human mind is no “glassy essence” that can accurately reflect what is out there. Our minds are context-dependent, our knowing is always perspectival. Any form of understanding is always situated in particular cultural and historical settings. It is impossible for us to assume a “God’s eye view” on reality.

As we have seen in the previous section, Wright draws on poststructuralist theories of language that have been developed in the wake of the insights of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, and that have constituted a linguistic turn in contemporary Western thought. According to such theories, language is embedded in all human experience, even at the primitive level of perception. Wright stresses that this does not mean that everything *is* language, but that we experience everything that is through the medium of language. It also does not mean that there is no such thing as nontheoretical experience: some experiences, such as burning your hand on a hot stove, are so immediate that they do not need to be expressed in conceptual language. However, perception, language and thinking are all interdependent (Wright 1992, p. 122). Wright argues that it is precisely language and social practice that make Zen experience possible. The dichotomy between the given and the subsequent attribution of meaning is untenable, since perception is always already constituted by language.

Whereas Wright has criticized the language-independent nature of experience, religion scholar Robert Sharf has presented an even more fundamental critique of the very notion of “religious experience.” As Sharf points out, investigators of religious or mystical experience usually focus on the qualifiers “religious” or “mystical,” whereas the term “experience” is taken as self-evident. However, he argues, “the notion that the referent of the term ‘experience’ is self-evident betrays a set of specifically Cartesian assumptions, according to which experience is held to be immediately present to consciousness.” (Sharf 1995a, p. 229).

Sharf has argued that the fascination with and yearning for religious experience may be more a reflection of modern Western preoccupations than an inherent quality of Zen Buddhism. He claims that the role of “experience” may have been exaggerated in contemporary scholarship on Zen. He points out that the “rhetoric of experience” in Japanese Buddhism has been ideological through and through.

According to Sharf, historical and ethnographic evidence suggests that the privileging of experience may well be traced to twentieth-century Zen reform movements that urged a return to Zen meditation (especially the Sanbōkyōdan movement), and that these reforms were profoundly influenced by religious developments in the West (Sharf 1995b). Sharf claims that “Zen monastic training in contemporary Japan continues to emphasize physical discipline and ritual competence, while little if any attention is paid to inner experience.” (Sharf 1995a, p. 249). He argues that Zen practice was not leading up to enlightenment experiences, but to the ritual embodiment of Buddhahood.

In a rebuttal article, however, Victor Sōgen Hori shows that Sharf is incorrect in claiming that enlightenment experiences were absent from the classical Zen tradition. Using the CEBA database searches, he shows that the Chinese term *wu* (Japanese: *satori*) was used in classical Chinese Chan texts to imagine enlightenment as an event in consciousness, rather than as a gradual process of acquiring ritual competence (Hori 2019, p. 78).

However, it remains an open question how such premodern descriptions of enlightenment experiences are to be imagined. A modernist Cartesian imagining of experience is not adequate, as we have seen Taylor arguing, because its representational nature assumes a buffered self rather than a porous self. In such a representational understanding of experience, meaning is located firmly in the mind, as part of the *res cogitans*, and clearly distinguished from the *res extensa* (including the body). Such an understanding assumes a strict separation between mind and body. Taylor calls this the “excarnation” of experience. Perhaps it is time for a re-incarnation of experience: an understanding of it that does not exclude the body and the social context.

It is exactly because language can be reimagined as a communal or social practice that meaning-making is more than a private and internal affair. Meaning and experience are not only grounded in the private sphere of the individual subject. Wright argues that the shared language of the Zen Buddhist monastic world is for a large part constitutive of Zen experience (Wright 1992, p. 123). Zen monks are raised and educated in Zen monasteries. Enlightenment occurs not in the absence of language, but through language, through very complex Zen language games that include liberating “live words,” stultifying “dead words,” pointing, shouting, silence, and anti-language rhetoric. Westerners take such anti-language rhetoric language literally, but it is a form of language. Rather than speak about awakening *from* language, Wright argues, we should speak about awakening *to* language, by becoming proficient at the Zen language game, and learning how to use live words (Wright 1992, p. 123).

Rather than Zen enlightenment being an ineffable experience beyond language, it is now imagined as a skill that results from mastering social practices, and becoming skillful at the Zen language game. Being proficient at the Zen language game means knowing how to use “live words”: words that facilitate the kind of ongoing performance of enlightenment that Buddhist philosopher Peter Hershock has termed “improvisational virtuosity”: the capacity to freely and spontaneously respond appropriately to a wide variety of situations, perfectly in tune with all persons and circumstances involved (Hershock 2005).

In this understanding of Zen, the experience of enlightenment is indeed ineffable and beyond conceptualization, not however because it refers to a mystical intuition of an unseen realm that is “Wholly Other,” but rather in the same pedestrian way as the experience of riding a bicycle is beyond conceptualization: we are not able to give a non-ambiguous theoretical explanation of how to ride a bike. Enlightenment is not something to be experienced but something to be continually performed. In order to cultivate and practice such a performance, one needs to become proficient in the language game of Zen, mastering a reservoir of skills and practices. One needs to immerse oneself in “words and letters.”

## 6. Dōgen’s “Zen within Words and Letters”

Whereas the Zen traditions that were initially transmitted to the West in the twentieth century, the Japanese Rinzai tradition and the Sanbōkyōdan reform movement, presented an iconoclastic attitude toward language and thought and considered Zen “a special transmission outside the scriptures,” Dōgen advocates continuing hermeneutical reflection on scripture. Therefore, his Zen is sometimes referred to as the “oneness of Zen and the scriptures” (*kyōzen itchi*). As Kim notes, both scriptural tradition and a special tradition were legitimate parts of Dōgen’s “rightly transmitted Buddhism” (Kim 2004, p. 53). Dōgen admonished his disciples to study the *sūtras*:

An enlightened teacher is always thoroughly versed in the *sūtras* .... The *sūtras* are made the instruments for liberating others and are turned into sitting, resting and walking in meditation. Being thoroughly versed changes the *sūtras* into parents, children, and grandchildren. As an enlightened teacher understands the *sūtras* through practice, he/she penetrates them deeply (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Bukkyō* (The Buddha’s Teaching), quoted in Kim 2004, p. 78).



For Dōgen, the specific revelation of the Buddhist *sūtras* in their conventional sense was only a small portion of the *sūtras* in their cosmic context. Life is “an incessant round of hermeneutical activities aimed at trying to understand such cosmic *sūtras*.” (Kim 2004, p. 79).

In his essay *Kattō* (Entangling Vines), Dōgen argues that, although language can entangle practitioners, it can also liberate. The Buddha himself had used the entanglements of words to liberate:

Generally, although all Buddhist sages in their training study how to cut off entanglements at their root, they do not study how to cut off entanglements by using entanglements. They do not realize that entanglements entangle entanglements. How little do they know what it is to transmit entanglements in terms of entanglements. How rarely do they realize that the transmission of the Dharma is itself an entanglement (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Kattō* [Entangling Vines], quoted in Heine 1994, p. 6).

Such a different understanding of language is also connected with a different understanding of enlightenment. For Dōgen, rather than transcending duality through an unmediated, nonlinguistic awareness of things as they really are, enlightenment means fully realizing duality and embodying it. Zen is aimed at practicing and embodying such an ongoing realization which takes place in the midst of language and thinking, rather than by rising above them (Kim 2004).

Hori elucidates such an understanding of enlightenment by using the analogy of mastering gravity. Rather than desiring to transcend gravity (which would leave us completely incapacitated, floating helplessly and out of control, as is evident from the experience of astronauts in zero gravity), we should strive to master gravity, which allows us to move about with grace and beauty. Without the dualism of mobility and immobility, we lack the freedom to move our body effortlessly. Just as there is no such thing as free flight beyond the pull of gravity, there is no Zen enlightenment beyond thought and language in a realm of pure consciousness (Hori 2000, p. 309).

According to Kim, Dōgen’s view of Zen is a far cry from apophatic mysticism, where reality is considered ineffable and unnamable. As Kim interprets Dōgen, ineffable religious experience is not beyond language, but is on the contrary constantly in need of affirmation through language and thought:

The *ineffable*, however self-evident it may be, does not imply the absence of linguistic mediations; to the contrary, it is *affirmed* as such precisely because of linguistic mediations. Without the latter, the affirmation of the ineffable is unthinkable and impossible to experience in the first place (Kim 2007, p. 97).

Gadamer would argue that when we say that enlightenment is ineffable and that we cannot describe it, we are already describing it: “all thinking about language is already once again drawn back into language.” (Gadamer 1976, p. 62).

For Dōgen, enlightenment constitutes an awakening to the truth that is always already “presencing.” One of his main essays, the *Genjōkōan*, has been translated by Bret Davis as “the presencing of truth.” As Davis puts it:

The *kōan* that Dōgen’s text ultimately presents us with for verification is that the presencing of truth is always fully realizable—without ever being closed off and self-satisfied—in each singular moment of our being unceasingly under way (Davis 2009, p. 256).

For Dōgen, Zen *kōans* were not nonsensical attempts to frustrate the intellect in order to facilitate a breakthrough to awakening but “parables, allegories, and mysteries that unfolded the horizons of existence before us.” (Kim 2004, p. 81). The *kōan* does not aim at an exit from language but to enter more deeply into the universal and non-anthropocentric language of mountains and rivers, bushes and trees. For Dōgen, “The sutras are the entire world of the ten directions. There is no moment of place that is not sutras. [...] The sutras

are written in letters of heavenly beings, human beings, animals, fighting spirits, one hundred grasses, or then thousand trees.” (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Bukkyō* (Buddha Sutras), Tanahashi 2012, p. 538). Such language of grasses and trees is neither representational nor instrumental. It constitutes “a language to think of the world.”

## 7. Dōgen’s Embodied Approach to Experience

In Dōgen’s work, references to social embeddedness and ritual embodiment are found everywhere. Dōgen gave detailed instructions for a ritualized performance of daily activities up until the minutest details. Even the Zen meditation practice should, according to some of Dōgen’s writings, be understood as part of a collective ritual practice (Leighton 2008).

As I have more extensively discussed in earlier publications (van der Braak 2009, 2020), Japanese notions of body and mind differ in several respects from Cartesian dualism. Firstly, although mind and body may be conceptually distinguishable from some perspectives, they are not seen as ontologically distinct (Kasulis 1987, p. 1). Secondly, Japanese thought, and Eastern philosophies generally, treat mind–body unity as an achievement, attained by a disciplined practice, rather than as an essential relation. This undercuts the Western dichotomy between theory and praxis (Kasulis 1987, p. 2). In Japanese thought, the notion of *shinjin-ichinyō* (oneness of body and mind) has been developed in order to overcome a dualistic approach to body and mind. Such a unity between body and mind is also expressed in Dōgen’s work: “Because the body necessarily fills the mind and the mind necessarily fills the body, we call this the permeation of body and mind.” (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Juki* (On Predicting Buddhahood), quoted in Kim 2004, p. 101).

For Dōgen, realizing enlightenment is about increasing the body’s ability to process and ruminate, to “digest” our ordinary experience, to incorporate the world. In this way, it reverses the way we understand the world in ordinary experience. Dōgen maintains that, in Zen practice, the body plays the most important role:

The human body, in Dōgen’s view, was not a hindrance to the realization of enlightenment, but the very vehicle through which enlightenment was realized (...) Dōgen claimed that we search with the body, practice with the body, attain enlightenment with the body, and understand with the body (Kim 2004, p. 101).

Dōgen speaks about the realization of enlightenment in terms of a radically transformed new relationship to the world. It is possible to transcend our ordinary ways of experiencing the world through “casting off body and mind” (*shinjin datsuraku*), leaving behind the sense of a separate self and becoming available for the larger dimension of reality that is called the Buddha:

When you cast off and forget your body and mind and plunge into the abode of the Buddha, so that the Buddha may act upon you and you may devote yourself completely to him, you become a buddha, liberated from the suffering of birth-and-death, without effort and anxiety (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Shōji* (Birth and Death), quoted in Kim 2007, p. 110).

According to the Japanese philosopher Nagatomo, the phrase “casting off body and mind” should not be interpreted as any kind of Zen enlightenment experience, in the sense of a Unio Mystica, an emancipation from delusion or an epistemic state of seeing things as they are, but as a switching of perspectives: body and mind are suddenly no longer dualistically experienced as two separate entities, but body-mind is experienced as a non-dual unity. What is cast off, is the Cartesian perspective on body and mind (Nagatomo 1992, p. 131). Although from the everyday perspective, body and mind are experienced as two separate things, a higher perspective is possible where body-mind is experienced as a continually changing configuration of dharmas, that does not contain any “I”. Such a higher perspective is called “samadhic awareness” by Dōgen. It is incomprehensible from the Cartesian point of view:

The “oneness of the body-mind” cannot be understood from the perspective of our everyday existence. Epistemologically, this means that the function of external perception as it is directed towards the natural world, is incapable of experiencing, much less understanding, the oneness of the body-mind, and hence is useless in articulating the meaning of the oneness of the body-mind. [...] There must necessarily be an epistemological apparatus that operates in samadhic awareness quite distinct and different from the order that is operative in the everyday perceptual consciousness (Nagatomo 1992, p. 125).

The notion of *samādhi* usually refers to a concentrated state of awareness, but Dōgen uses it to refer to a state of mind that effortlessly navigates the world of duality. This does not mean that oppositions or dualities are obliterated or transcended, but that they are fully realized. Such a freedom realizes itself in duality, not apart from it (Kim 2004, p. 55). “For playing joyfully in such a *samādhi*,” Dōgen writes, “the upright sitting position in meditation is the right gate.” (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Bendōwa* (Negotiating the Way), quoted in: Kim 2004, p. 55).

For Dōgen, *zazen* is not a psychological practice but the ongoing ritual expression, embodiment and enactment of buddhahood. In his *Fukanzazengi* (Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen), Dōgen stresses that the *zazen* that he speaks of is not meditation practice, and admonishes the practitioner to not try to become a Buddha. *Zazen* practice is not about attaining an ineffable experience of enlightenment, but about an ongoing transformation that is as much physiological as it is psychological, in which one “realizes” one’s own Buddhahood, in the sense of fully participating in it.

The epistemic shift from a relative, provisional mind-body dualism that operates in our everyday existence, to the nondual unity of mind and body that operates in samadhic awareness, is not primarily the result of some psychological breakthrough, but is connected to a transformation of the body-mind unity. “Casting off body and mind” can be seen as the realization of what Dōgen calls a “true human body” (*shinjitsu nintai*): the body-mind that has been transformed through self-cultivation. The true body is a practical, experiential consequence of “casting off body and mind.” For Dōgen, this notion of “true human body” has cosmic connotations. The Japanese philosopher Kōgaku Arifuku notes that, for Dōgen, body and mind are not only interwoven with each other, they are also united with the world as a whole, and quotes the following passage:

The whole earth is the true body of the Buddha, the whole earth is the gateway to liberation, the whole earth is the eye of Vairocana Buddha, and the whole earth is the dharmakaya of the Buddhist self (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Yuibutsu Yobutsu* (Only a Buddha and a Buddha), quoted in Arifuku 1991, p. 223).

The individual psycho-physical constitution is extended to a cosmic dimension. Dōgen uses phrases as “the body-mind of Dharma,” “the body-mind of the Buddhas and ancestors.” Therefore, understanding is only possible when we participate in this totality. Then, what Dōgen calls “the true human body” functions freely and authentically in harmony with the entire universe (Kim 2004, p. 104):

“Everything which comes forth from the study of the way is the true human body. The entire world of the ten directions is nothing but the true human body. The coming and going of birth and death is the true human body.” (Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, *Shinjingakudō* (Body-Soul-Practice), Tanahashi 2012, p. 426).

## 8. Conclusions

In this article I have critically engaged the Traditional Zen Narrative that presents Zen as centering around the realization of decontextualized enlightenment, imagined as an ineffable religious experience that transcends “words and letters.” I have discussed how imaginings of Zen enlightenment as an ineffable pure experience beyond language have clashed with the linguistic turn in academic circles that stresses the inevitable embeddedness of experience in language. I have presented Dōgen’s “Zen within words and

letters” as a Zen that is primarily about ongoing contextualized practice-realization. This means that language is important, that embodiment and enchantment are important, that practice, ritual and liturgy are important, and, most of all, that the tradition of Buddhism is important. Buddhist scriptures, rituals and liturgies are not cultural ballast but an integral part of the Zen path. I view Zen as a collection of individual and collective practices that are always mediated by their Mahāyāna Buddhist cultural and historical context.

The two Zen imaginings of being “beyond words or letters” or “within words and letters” go back to tenth century China (see Welter 2008). The followers of Linji stressed that Zen was beyond words and letters, and the followers of Fayen stressed that Chan was a Buddhist tradition, and that Buddhist scriptures and doctrines could be used as a form of *upāya*. Zen modernism has so far followed the Linji faction. I think it is time to return to Fayen.

I have also argued that, for Dōgen, Zen practice and enlightenment do not take place in the mind (imagined in a Cartesian way as separate from the body), but in the body-mind, which is ultimately also connected to the cosmic body. In this way, Cartesian mind-body dualism is superseded in Dōgen’s view. Zen enlightenment is reimagined from a pure experience to an endlessly unfolding embodied nondual seeing beyond both a body-mind dualism and a mind-world dualism. Awakening is awakening to the nondual person (“body-mind”) or even nonperson (the cosmic body). We move into a new world that was always there: the original interconnectedness of self-and-others-and-world.

For Dōgen, the way we construct our experience in thinking and language is not excluded from his faith in universal Buddhahood. The latter should not be imagined as a metaphysical notion of some transcendent supreme Being, but rather as an ongoing activity that is intrinsic to the temporality of all phenomena. Kim notes that, although Dōgen could be described as a mystical realist, his mysticism is a far cry from Western and Eastern forms of apophatic mysticism where God, Dao, and Brahman are said to be ineffable, only to be known by systematically negating language and thought. For Dōgen, the embodiment of universal Buddhahood takes place precisely through language and thought (Kim 2007, p. 90).

Universal Buddhahood also differs from Western notions of immanence, for example, the notion of an immanent order in nature that can be understood and explained on its own terms, regardless of the existence of a transcendent, supernatural creator beyond it. As Buddhist scholar Aldo Tollini demonstrates, Dōgen’s conception of nature as the locus of enlightenment differs substantially from our modern Western understanding of nature (Tollini 2017). Additionally, as the Japanese philosopher Ōkōchi notes, the Japanese notion of *shizen* (nature) does not refer to anything objective or objectified that takes place in front of or outside of human beings but is rather an expression of the spontaneous way of being of all things. It was originally used in an adjectival or adverbial form—comparable to the Western notions of “naturally” or “by nature.” (Ōkōchi 1991, p. 2004).

In this article, I have considered elements from Dōgen’s approach to Zen that suggest that a non-instrumental approach to language and an embodied approach to experience can be fruitful elements in a contemporary understanding of Zen based on a more inclusive non-Cartesian notion of Zen enlightenment. Such a new understanding of Zen can perhaps also be supported by an enlarged understanding of what understanding actually is. As John Maraldo observes, even though Gadamer’s theory of understanding aims to go beyond merely textual understanding, his actual hermeneutical practice is still predisposed towards textual understanding (Maraldo 2010). Maraldo suggests an alternative complementary approach to understanding, understanding via shared bodily engagement in ritual practice. Perhaps sitting in *zazen* together will enable a new philosophical access to Dōgen beyond textual access.

Such a new understanding can help us to go beyond the immanent frame, with its rigid separation between an immanent natural order and a transcendent supernatural order, and its separation between theory and practice. Rather than present a new version of “the Zen experience” as a new attempt at radical transcendence, or a new conception of

religious experience, Dōgen's thought can serve to overcome the implicit dichotomies in Western modes of thought between inner and outer, mind and body, individual and the world, immanence and transcendence, and theory and practice.

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