

# The Ground of Translation

## Issues in Translating Premodern Japanese Philosophy

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But is there not something fundamental in the cultures of the East that have nurtured our ancestors for thousands of years, something beneath the surface that can see the form of the formless and hear the voice of the voiceless? I would like to attempt a philosophical grounding to the desire that drives our minds continually to seek this out. (NISHIDA 1927, 255.).

As someone who often deals with translating or evaluating English translations of Japanese philosophical texts, I think I have some ideas about how to translate the form, but how can anyone translate the formless? This is particularly troublesome since, as Nishida suggests, for Japanese philosophers like him, *that* is the most important part. In studying various Japanese philosophical texts from across the centuries, I am struck repeatedly by two points.

First, in Japanese philosophizing we find evidence of an image of reality (if indeed that is even the right way to characterize it) that is at best only obliquely expressed, but which drives the dynamic of so much Japanese thought. It lurks behind the technical vocabularies of Japan's great philosophers when they use ontological terms like *genjōkōan* 現成公案,

*jinenhōni* 自然法爾, *hongaku* 本覺, *ki* 氣, *jijimuge hokkai* 事事無礙法界, *zettaimu no basbo* 絶対無の場所, *aidagara* 間柄, *mu* 無, *yūgen* 幽玄, *shinnyo* 真如, and *kū* 空. And its shadowy presence is also sensed in experiential or phenomenological discussions of terms like *kokoro* ころ, *mushin* 無心 (in Zen), *ushin* 有心 (in *waka* poetics), *shinjin* 信心, and *junsui keiken* 純粹經驗. These words are not synonyms—they each have their own particular use in their own distinctive contexts. Yet, to put it provocatively: they may not say the same thing, but what they don't say is remarkably similar. There are like different frames around the same picture.

The second point that continually strikes me is that through the centuries, Japanese philosophers have exploited and shaped some basic characteristics of the Japanese language to make it particularly suitable for framing what is not expressed.

I hasten to add that having an unspoken background against which philosophers speak is not at all unique to Japanese philosophy. Western philosophy has its own vocabulary that draws on an unspoken but ever present image of reality: the background of the vocabulary of “things,” “facts,” “stuff,” “sensations,” “object,” “being,” “substance,” “essence,” “attribute,” “cause,” “agent,” and so forth.<sup>1</sup> Such terms frame a reality unlike that framed by Japanese philosophies. Moreover, for the dominant modern western model, what is framed and the frame are correlative, whereas in the Japanese case, the whole point is that what is framed is intrinsically *unlike* what frames it. This already suggests a problem for translating Japanese philosophy into a western idiom: what the words *do* for a typical Japanese philosopher is not what the words *do* for a typical western philosopher.

1. Derrida's method of deconstruction explicitly tries to foreground the unspoken metaphysical background of philosophical texts. Indebted in some respects to Heidegger, this hermeneutic recognition of the unspoken presupposition radically departs from the traditional methods of western philosophy. If he were Japanese, however, Derrida could probably be seen as doing what *many* other philosophers in that tradition have been doing since almost the beginning, that is, noting that there is no thing (no “presence” in Derrida's jargon) to which language refers in some simplistic manner.

## THE GENERATIVE “FIELD” IN JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY

Let us start with the Japanese ontological assumption that is at most obliquely expressed, and typically left unjustified by any rigorous argument. This assumption posits a generative ground or field that eludes direct conceptualization, but which anchors philosophy’s use of ideas and words. It is important to recognize that this ground is not a static foundation, but an energized, organic process that takes form spontaneously (freely, of itself *jinen* 自然) to adjust to its own ever-changing situations, like rainwater’s settling into indentations as puddles. It is probably futile to try to track down definitively the origins of this ontology in Asian thought, but it resonates with a wide variety of influences in Japanese intellectual culture. These include the general Buddhist emphases on impermanence, Mādhyamika Buddhism’s sometime identification of *śūnyatā* with *paramārtha*, Daoism’s unspeakable *dao* that is the “mother of all things,” the vitalism of *qi* (J. *ki* 気) in some forms of Chinese philosophy, and the ancient Japanese animistic ideas of *tama* and *kokoro*. Meaningless in itself, the Field (as we will henceforth call this unnameable way of things in this essay) is whence meaning emerges. Categories cannot be applied to it, except metaphorically, because it is the source out of which categories rise. Because even “my mind” emerges from it, I cannot say my mind can know it, or be separate from it, or even engage it. If we try to grasp this intellectually, the best we can do is generate analogies or metaphors. Let us, therefore, pause a moment to imagine an analogy.

For the sake of this analogy, let us suppose that reality is a vast field of subatomic resonances of matter-energy, fluidly in perpetual interaction with itself as its own forces repel and attract other forces in the field. Thus, “things”—whether material, energetic, spiritual, mental, or affective—are most fundamentally processes of change that coalesce for a time as stabilized subsystems of these interconnected forces. If we want to think of ourselves as “in” this field, it is only as one of the temporarily stabilized subsystems that will at some point, through a kind of entropic destabilization, dissolve back into the undifferentiated field (and then can become part of some other stabilization). The *agency* in this field while “I” exists, is in the working of the subsystem that is so named,

but in a larger sense, the only true agency is the whole field's working, including its auto-stabilization into subsystems that have their individuated functions only to eventually destabilize back into the total field. Words and ideas are in turn smaller stabilized subsystems both within the smaller subsystem of *I* and in the larger subsystem of *we*. To the extent *you* (another subsystem) hear those words or understand those ideas, there is a resonance shared between the two subsystems—the larger *we* system resonates so that the flow of ideas is unobstructed or unhindered. Yet, this, too, is no more than a blink in the eternal flux of stabilizing and destabilizing systems. If my ideas/words and your understandings are about some other subsystem (say, a sunset), the three subsystems of *I*, *you* and *sunset* all resonate within their own subsystems as well as within the larger subsystem that includes all three of those subsystems. In that case, the meaning of my words to you about the beauty of the sunset is, on the micro level from which all those macro realities are generated, a resonant *occasion* including *I*, *you*, the words, and the sunset.

If we want a fuller account of this total occasion, we would have to include many more subsystems in the description, every subsystem engaged in language: the physical sound of my words and its resonance with your eardrums, their resonances with your neural system in turn resonating with learned language patterns embedded in the brain from living in a specific linguistic culture, and so forth. Moreover, there is the resonating interaction of everything needed for there to be a sunset at all: the heat of the sun creating light, the mass of the sun pulling the earth into an orbit, the big bang creating our universe, the dust in the earth's atmosphere to refract the white light into yellows and reds, and so forth.

Because the just given description of a “field” is only an analogy of the Field with which we are concerned in this paper, it is important not to take it too literally. Still, the analogy is good enough to generate some points familiar to those of us who study Japanese philosophy. First, the whole, as a whole, precedes meaning, yet all meaning arises within its working as in Hōnen's or Shinran's “true working of no working” or “true meaning of no meaning” (*mugi no gi* 無義の義) or Dōgen's “total working” (*zenki* 全機). Second, all individuated things (including ideas) are real, but only as impermanent, temporarily stabilized substates within

the whole (*mujō* 無常 and *muga* 無我). Third, new meaning arises as a destabilization within an otherwise stabilized system, allowing its borders to be permeable instead of an obstruction to resonating with subsystems outside itself (*jijimuge* 事事無礙). Thus, new meanings do not fix, but rather open up, the reality of a person's subsystem.<sup>2</sup> Fourth, the origin of expression is in the interplay of subsystems we call "I," "audience," "things," "ideas," "affect," and "language" (what creates the *waka* is the interresponsiveness of the *kokoro* of words, the *kokoro* of the poet, and the *kokoro* of things).<sup>3</sup> Fifth and finally, meanings arise in a locus of subsystems: a different audience gives the same words a different meaning; a different situation calls for new meaning appropriate to that situation; as the situation changes, new meanings may be necessary to destabilize the old meanings so that new engagements can occur.

Having commented on the ontological nature of the Field, let us turn now to its place in the experiential or phenomenological aspect of engaging and knowing reality in its as-ness or thusness. A distinctive notion of knowledge typically accompanies the ontology of the Field: the theory that true knowledge originates in something inchoate and itself unknowable, but which serves as the authentic wellspring of profound insight. If philosophy develops without tapping that underground source, it runs the danger of being merely a construction of ego: an attachment to used-up categories, runaway rationalism, or intellectual arrogance. In other words, this theory of knowledge recognizes all ordinary forms of knowing as surface manifestations of something deep and invisible, yet dynamic and creative. In Sanskrit, a *concept* is that which "covers over" (*samvṛti*) the ground and in Japanese, a concept is merely an "approximative keeping in mind" (*gainen* 概念). Only the nonconceptual or preconceptual (*prajñā*, *ichinen* 一念, *satori* 悟<sup>h</sup>), *kaku* 覺) immediately engages the ineffable ground itself. Without that engagement, subsequent thought is assumed to be as groundless or as delusional as the "flowers in the empty sky" or "the hair of a tortoise."

2. Not surprisingly, the English word *meaning* is a gerund or present participle suggesting that meaning "participates in the present." If it were something fixed by past use, we might presumably use the past participle instead: *meant*.

3. For a brief overview of how (especially according to Motoori Norinaga) *kokoro* functions in poetic expression, see KASULIS 2008.

Now that we have tried to explain the general dynamic of the Field as the ground of thought, concepts, and language as it often seems to be presupposed in much Japanese philosophy, let us remark on how the Japanese language is especially suitable for disclosing, foreclosing, and enclosing the ontological vision at the heart of so much Japanese philosophizing. This discussion will also present an opportunity to note ways in which the English language, especially as a vehicle of philosophical expression, does not so easily lend itself to this same dynamic of expression.

#### USING THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE TO CIRCUMSCRIBE THE FIELD

Scholars of Asian thought will likely see great similarities between the Early Buddhist view of reality and the Field as we have described it.<sup>4</sup> Let us take as our point of departure the so-called “Three Marks” of Śākyamuni’s teaching: the anguish arising from our unsatisfactory views as not fitting reality (*duḥkha*), the nonsubstantiality of self and things (*anātman*), and the impermanence (*anitya*) of all things. The

4. The discussion could have gone along parallel lines were we discussing poetics instead of Buddhist philosophy. This is particularly clear in the philosophical poetics of Toyo Izutsu, where she writes:

Waka, in other words, tries to create a linguistic ‘field’, an associative network of semantic articulations, i.e. a non-temporal ‘space’ of semantic saturation, instead of a linear, temporal succession of words, a syntactic flow, the latter being utilized merely as the coagulative basis of the poetic sentence. (IZUTSU Toyo 1981, 5)

She then includes a quote from an essay she wrote with her husband Toshihiko:

The waka-poet “seems to go against the intrinsic nature of language, for, by means of words, he tries to create a synchronic ‘field’, a spatial expanse. Instead of a temporal succession of words, in which each succeeding word goes on obliterating, as it were, the foregoing word, waka aims at bringing into being a global view of a whole, in which the words used are observable all at once—which is impossible except within the framework of an extremely short poem like waka (31 syllables) and haiku (17 syllables). Such a global view of a whole constitutes what we mean by a ‘field.’ In a ‘field’ thus constituted, time may be said to be standing still or even annihilated in the sense that the meanings of all words are simultaneously present in one single sphere.” (1971, 531)

three together fit the model of the Field quite well. Starting with impermanence, we note that the Field is not a matrix of fixed realities, but a dynamic of process and flux. Things—including the *I*—do exist, but they lack intrinsic substantiality since they are merely temporally stabilized formations, existing as matter-energy subfields until they inevitably dissolve back into the Field. As a self-conscious subset of the field, “I” thirsts for the unending existence of itself and all it desires, thereby denying the reality of what itself is and how the Field functions. This produces obstructions to the fluid, harmonious resonances that would allow one to open one’s own horizons to ever new engagement with the processes in the Field.

We could say that if Śākyamuni could pick a language for explaining his vision, the syntax of Japanese would have served him particularly well. Most Indo-European languages build sentences around a subject and a predicate, whereas Japanese does not. Since our concern will be translating Japanese philosophy into English, let us just limit our discussion to those two languages. A complete English sentence must have both a noun serving as its subject and a verb either designating its action or serving as a copula connecting the noun to another noun or adjective. Put simply, a complete English sentence requires at least two words, a noun and a verb. Linguists call this the *minimal utterance*. Anything less is *elliptical*, that is, there is an explicit full sentence that is abbreviated but already implied. (“Is John going?” “Yes. [John is going.]” Given this basic form, fuller English sentences develop by adding modifiers to either the core noun or core verb. In the following more elaborate sentence, the words in parentheses modify the core noun or modify a word that itself modifies the core noun, “John,” while the words in brackets modify the core verb or a word that itself modifies a core word “is going”: “(My brother) John (who is visiting me from out-of-town) is going [with enthusiasm to the bachelor party tonight at the night club]. This sentential structure of English lends itself readily to philosophical expressions assuming that actions (verbs) have agents (nouns) and that substances (nouns) have attributes (adjectives). It is not as easily adaptable to expressing (rather than talking about) the Buddha’s vision of reality or the Field with which we are concerned. Let us contrast this with the base structure of the Japanese language.

Most linguists<sup>5</sup> of the Japanese language consider the minimal utterance to be just the verb (or verbal adjective). “Goes” (*iku* 行く) is a full sentence in Japanese, not an elliptical one. Thus, the subject of the sentence (usually marked by *ga* or *wa*) is not an independently existing word/concept/thing but instead a *modifier of the verb*. Indeed, *every word* in the Japanese sentence ultimately modifies the core verb. This has an important ramification for philosophical expression. The Japanese language talks<sup>6</sup> “processes” or “acts.” Even things, including the agents of the actions, are qualifiers within the action rather than something existing independently that “takes action” or “undergoes change.” As a projector of reality, the Japanese language is verbal not nominal. It is as if all words in Japanese sentences boil down to being either verbs or modifiers of verbs, that is, adverbs. If one is speaking about substances and attributes or agents and actions, the Japanese syntax has to be forced to do that work. But if one is speaking about a Buddhist view of reality characterized by impermanence and nonsubstantiality, Japanese syntax fits the model comfortably.

It might help to picture the Japanese sentential structure in relation to the analogy for the Field. The verb represents the subsystem in the making, all its adverbs being spinoffs of the process represented by the verb, as if they were planets breaking off from the sun and revolving around it. If I am speaking to you of the beautiful sunset, my verbalization will be the minimal necessary for my meaning to overcome obstructions so that it resonates as your understanding:: “*Kirei da nā*” (“pretty, huh?”). If you don’t get what I’m saying, a little qualifier spins off “*yūyake wa* 夕焼けは” (“the sunset”).<sup>7</sup> The *wa* is, linguists like to say, not the subject of

5. Linguists who follow Chomsky would not agree with the analysis to follow, but for a good explanation (and I think far more persuasive one) of Japanese syntax as I am describing it, see MARTIN 1972.

6. This sentence invokes Heidegger’s famous locution; “Language speaks, not man.”

7. The difference between the English and Japanese in a case such as this is easily overlooked or misunderstood. In the English “Pretty, huh?” there is a “The sunset is...” at the beginning of the sentence that has been elided. Although ungrammatical, the sentence is truncated for convenience. If the listener does not understand, the speaker fills in the missing grammatical unit: “The sunset ...” eliding this time only the “is.” By contrast, the Japanese “*kirei da nā*.” is a complete, grammatical sentence.



the sentence in this case, but its “topic.” The topic is the *topos* defining the place of the subsystem within the ontological Field as well as in the semantic field of the expression. Other ways of defining the place of the subsystem within the field include verbal suffixes of honorific and humble forms as well as special words that distinguish whether my expression is pointing to your field (your subsystem) or my field (my subsystem) as they are coming together in communication (a larger subsystem without obstruction between your subsystem and my subsystem). For example, when your subsystem overlaps with mine and I am speaking, you “*irassharu*” but I “*mairu*” and your *okusan* is at your *otaku* whereas my *kanai* is at my *uchi*.

In the model of communication dominant in the modern West, language builds bridges: the bridge between the subject and the predicate and the bridge between speaker and audience. A good communicative sentence is a bridge *anyone* can cross. Nothing *essential* is left out as the bridge is *built up* with immovable solid structures. In the model of communication based in the Japanese language, however, the purpose of language is to make borders permeable: language is supposed to *break down* borders between you and me, borders between parts of speech. The purpose of communication in Japanese is to deconstruct barriers rather than to construct bridges. The more you understand me, the less I say.<sup>8</sup>

If there is something missing, it is something communicative, but nothing grammatical. When the “*yūyake wa*” is added, it is not the case that the sentence is completed, but rather, the communication is achieved. In the English case, the added words “the sunset [is]” do not modify the words “Pretty, huh.” Rather they complete an incomplete sentence. In the Japanese case, the words “*yūyake wa*” modify the verbal “*kirei*” but there is no incomplete sentence to complete. The philosophical significance of this difference lies in the English context that assumes that where there is a characteristic, there must be a thing that has it, whereas in the Japanese case, the topic of the sentence merely modifies the *way* of being pretty. An English thought expressed as a full grammatical sentence requires both a subject (noun) and a predicate (verb), but the Japanese thought expressed as a full sentence requires only the predicate (verb).

8. Social linguists and anthropologists have noted this as an interpersonal aspect of communication: the expressive use of intimation, silence, and indirect discourse. This includes softeners at the end of sentences (*ga*, *kedo*, the probabilistic/tentative verb ending *-ō* [e.g., *darō*]) that seem to invite the listener to confirm by either completing the sentence or giving an affective particle showing agreement (*sō da na*, *hai*, *ee*, *un*, etc.).

The more we share a topos—the fewer obstructions remain in our communicative subsystem within the Field—the more our utterances default to the minimal utterance: just the verb of process without determinate agency, accompanied only by just enough adverbial modifiers to bring speaker and listener into the common place of understanding. In Japanese, understanding (*rikai* 理解) is the process of the event/verb unraveled (*kai* 解) just enough for the audience to get the point (*ri* 理).

We have not yet said much about the first of the three Buddhist marks, *duḥkha*, in relation to the Japanese language. *Duḥkha* implies both cognitive dissonance and affective unease or anguish. It is the unsettling feeling one gets when the harmonics of the Field are “obstructed” by impermeable boundaries. Such boundaries are built of the ego-field’s proclivity to establish permanence within a field that will inevitably, despite one’s efforts, destabilize. This raises an issue about affect in language and the problems of translating Japanese into English for philosophical purposes.

In our discussion of the Field, we noted that the subsystems can contain items material, energetic, spiritual, mental, or affective. As words like *kokoro* and *omou* 思ふ suggest, the affective and the intellectual are not necessarily sharply distinguished in Japanese. The affective and the intellectual can be resonances within the same Field or subsystem within the Field. Syntactically this is reinforced by the use of auxiliary particles (*joshi*). The significance of the difference from English writing on this point may be clear by examining a simple example. Consider the English sentence: “It is raining.” When I write the sentence that way, it gives little indication about how the sentence is uttered and thus almost no information at all about how the speaker feels about that event. Written English allows only three sentence-ending punctuation markers: the period, the question mark, and the exclamation point. So, even if we want to indicate the speaker’s affect, we cannot do much to show it by writing the uttered sentence itself. We can add italics and exclamation point: “It is *raining!*” but even that does not show whether the speaker is thrilled by it (as a farmer whose crops have been dying of drought) or dismayed (a bride looking out the window on the morning of her wedding day) or shocked (the meteorologist who had predicted with near certainty that it would not rain today). Of course, if we *hear* the English utterance,

its affect might be much clearer. Our concern in this essay, however, is translating philosophical *texts*. Because of this affective gap between what you can hear in the tone of my English utterance as contrasted with its written representation, it is not surprising that the translation of an ordinary written sentence into an affectless philosophical proposition seems to an English speaker to involve little loss. To a reader of Japanese who sees a written sentence sprinkled with *joshi* like *kana*, *kashira*, *na*, *nee*, *kana*, *ne*, *zo*, *ya*, *yo*, *ga*, and *wa*, however, the logical proposition may well seem like a *major* abstraction away from the affective richness of the original, everyday sentence. In addition, the Japanese honorific, humble, formal, and plain forms can embed the Japanese sentence in a social space between writer and audience—a social space that is again ripped away if the original sentence is transformed into a proposition. Risking hyperbole for the sake of intensifying the contrast, we could say the propositional statement with its lack of audience is totally lacking the attunement to audience and situation that the Buddhist technique of *hōben* 方便 requires, whereas in a some sense, almost every Japanese sentence—whether spoken or written—must be properly attuned to the situation and audience that is part of the Field. To many western philosophers of language, a technique like *hōben* is no more than figurative speech used for effect with little analytic or philosophical value. To the Japanese, however, *hōben* is at least subconsciously part of *every* statement.

We have addressed up to now syntactical and, to some extent, sociolinguistic differences between Japanese and English written expression, so let us conclude this section with one very brief comment about semantics and the Japanese writing system. The Japanese writing system has some significant ways to nuance semantic fields of meaning. First, we should always bear in mind that when an ancient Japanese wrote a native, non-Chinese derived word in Chinese characters, that was not a simple act of adding glyphs to spoken Japanese. More importantly, it was a matter of *translation*. Take the Yamato word *kokoro*. The ancient Japanese, in order to write the word, had to pick a Chinese word that seemed close in meaning. Yet, in this case (and so many others), no single Chinese word seemed to fit and so, three different Chinese words were used to render *kokoro*: 心, 意, and sometimes 情. This suggests that the semantic

field of the original Japanese word overlapped in some ways with the Chinese semantic fields of three different words, each written in a different character. Therefore, these extra subsets of the Field that were borrowed from Chinese could, depending on the situation, resonate with the semantic field of the original Japanese word. For example, 心 in Chinese (and by transference in Japanese) resonates in Buddhist texts with the semantic field of a common Sanskrit word for “mind” *citta*, an psychological category that was in many respects alien to the original Japanese *kokoro*. Furthermore, it seems that some Japanese writers felt that there was still some resonance in the original Japanese word that eluded the various Chinese semantic fields and so they kept open the option of writing *kokoro* in a non-Chinese way as ころ.

In modern Japanese philosophy, in his *The Structure of Iki*, Kuki Shūzō engages such a fluid set of semantic fields for the term *iki*, some terms using Chinese characters and others not. Along the same lines, Watsuji’s opening sections of his book *Rinrigaku* defines overlapping and shifting semantic fields for such terms as *ningen*, *hito*, *aidagara*, and, of course, *rinri* itself. I am certainly not claiming that it is *always* the case that ころ means something different from 心, for example, but only that it *could* in a certain situation suggest a different set of resonances among the subsystems in the field.

We can apply some of these points about the Japanese language and the Field by looking at a brief, but famous, passage from Dōgen, figuring out how to interpret and translate his words for an English-reading audience. Dōgen is particularly fruitful for finding provocative examples because it can be said that his *Shōbōgenzō* essays were the first systematic philosophical works to be written in the Japanese language. Therefore, it is not unlikely that Dōgen was particularly sensitive to the question of how to use the structures of the Japanese language to their maximum philosophical benefit. He wrote in Japanese instead of Chinese not because he was not fluent in Chinese; his other writings prove otherwise. Nor did he write in Japanese because he wanted to reach a broader audience; his style of writing would be (and still is) almost unintelligible to most Japanese readers. No, he wrote in Japanese because he could use the philosophically virgin language to say something he could not say in any other way. It is reminiscent of the transition in the West that

occurred when religious thinkers like Meister Eckhart started writing in the vernacular instead of in Latin. It was a rare chance to be on the ground level of inventing a new philosophical diction and idiom.

## DŌGEN AND THE SOURCE OF MEANING

For our interests in Japanese language and philosophy, there are a multitude of possible entry points among Dōgen's texts, but let us focus on the essay he seems to have believed best encapsulated his overall philosophical system, the *Genjōkōan* 現成公案 (The case of presencing) fascicle from his magnum opus, *Shōbōgenzō* (Repository of the eye for the truth). To consider this text as central to Dōgen's thought is both traditional and philosophically sound. Tradition favors it because Dōgen himself seemed to single it out. It was one of the earliest texts<sup>9</sup> he wrote in Japanese upon returning from China and, when late in life, he started assembling his essays into what would become *Shōbōgenzō*, he revised the essay, intending to put it first in the collection. Philosophically, as we will see from our analysis, the *Genjōkōan* essay also outlines a general schema that is helps us contextualize many key themes in his other essays.

The famous three opening lines, I contend, encapsulate his theory of meaning in its most pithy form. Before translating the lines, let us consider Dōgen's Japanese itself. Because Dōgen was undoubtedly aware that he was inventing a Japanese philosophical language almost from scratch, an unusual burden befalls us: more than what is usual in most cases of translation, we have no definite precedents for knowing *with certainty*, in any given sentence or even in any given word, what *exactly* Dōgen means.

Of course, the hoary buddhological principle of scholars is to track

9. The only two earlier texts in Japanese are *Bendōwa* 辨道話 and *Maka hannya haramitsu* 摩訶般若波羅蜜. The latter is basically a word-by-word rendering of the *Heart Sutra* with slight alterations and comments. Dōgen's slight additions and rewordings emphasize *prajñā* as outside linguistic distinctions and as the state of mind in *zazen*. For our interest in Dōgen's use of Japanese as a philosophical language, however, it has little bearing since the essay is heavily Chinese, with just snippets of Japanese.

down every phrase back to the Chinese “sources.” Yet, in doing so, we have to consider as well that in practically every one of his philosophical essays, when Dōgen quotes a Chinese passage, he proceeds to deconstructively interpret it in such a way that it ends up meaning something that it did not likely mean in its original Chinese context. Furthermore, if he understood himself as basically commenting on the Chinese Buddhist texts, it would have been more natural for him to do so in Chinese, as did his contemporaries like Eisai, Shinran (in his major commentarial work, *Kyōgyōshinshō*), or Nichiren. This leads us to the conclusion that the only key to unlocking Dōgen’s texts is ultimately the texts themselves. What the words mean is what meaning Dōgen gives them. So, before assuming two of his words are synonymous, for example, we have to see how he uses the words in different contexts. This is not the place for a detailed discussion of Dōgen’s philosophical language, but if we focus on just the three aforementioned lines, that should give us an example of how to read Dōgen.

諸法の佛法なる時節、すなはち迷悟あり、修行あり、生あり死あり、諸仏あり衆生あり。  
 万法ともにわれにあらざる時節、まどいなくさとりなく、諸仏なく衆生なく、生なく滅なし。  
 仏道もとより豊儉より跳出せるゆえに、生滅あり、迷悟あり、生佛あり。

When phenomena are expressed as the Buddha’s teachings, on those occasions, there is “delusion/realization” and there is “praxis;” there is “birth” and there is “death;” there are “buddhas” and there are “ordinary beings.” On occasions when there is no “I” adjoined to the totality of phenomena, there is neither delusion nor realization; there are neither buddhas nor ordinary beings; there is neither generation nor extinction. In itself, the way of the buddhas leaps clear of both the richness or lack [of categories] and so, there is birth-extinction; there is delusion-realization; and there are ordinary beings-buddhas.

The three-sentence passage seems to characterize three domains of signification. The first sentence is a list of oppositional binaries characteristic of the way Buddhist doctrine describes reality and the path to enlightenment. Translators do not usually translate these consistently as opposing binaries, even though the original syntax suggests they should be. In this sentence, it seems likely the repetition of the word あり sets off the opposing pairs of doctrinal terms. Leaving aside for a moment the first

part—迷悟あり,修行あり—those opposition are: birth あり death あり; buddhas あり ordinary beings あり.

Many interpreters and translators try to treat 迷悟 “delusion and realization” as another such opposing pair, but the rhetorical structure makes this unlikely. If Dōgen had intended us to read it that way, would he not have written: 迷あり悟あり instead of 迷悟あり? Moreover, that would leave 修行あり as lacking a contrasting partner (unless we thought we could disconnect the 修 from the 行 as we, according to this interpretation, did with 迷悟, but that seems nonsensical in this context). So, this consideration of syntactical pattern leads us to wonder whether Dōgen also considers the first two to be oppositional in the same way. Can 迷悟 and 修行 be considered opposing binaries in the way birth vs. death and buddhas vs. ordinary-beings are?

From what we know of Dōgen’s overall view of the relation between praxis and enlightenment, this seems possible. That is, from the standpoint of Buddhist doctrine, one can talk of the Buddhist goal as either starting from delusion and aiming for realization (from 迷 to 悟) in a means-end sort of way or alternatively, as Dōgen himself typically prefers in his explanations, as simply ongoing praxis without concern for goals external to that praxis. This would give us an oppositional binary of (going from) delusion/to (achieiving) realization 迷悟 vs. (B) continuous praxis 修行. Exactly what the syntax suggests, this also accords with one of Dōgen’s major concerns—the right way of viewing Buddhist practices, especially zazen, as an end in themselves instead of a means.

Staying with the first sentence, we have the problem of the polysemic word *hō* 法. Most translators consider the term to be a Sino-Japanese token interchangeable with the Sanskrit term *dharmā*,<sup>10</sup> but that is not always helpful since the term *dharmā* itself is polysemous. So, for the sake of

10. This is generally an appropriate equivalence, but the Chinese word *fā* 法 has multiple uses in Chinese, including functioning as a verb (*e.g.*, meaning “to accord with”), that do not exactly mesh with the Sanskrit *dharmā*. Because of the difficulties of translating such polysemous words, many English translators simply do not translate it or just render the Japanese 法 as the Sanskrit term *dharmā*, presumably thinking this is the “safest” and “most literal” translation. However, this is problematic on two counts. First, as just noted, the Chinese 法 has a semantic field that does not correspond precisely to the semantic field of the Sanskrit *dharmā* (see my entry on “*fā*”

the English reader (for whom the nuances of the Sanskrit word *dharma* would be as alien as they are to most Japanese), we should try to decide, whenever we can reasonably do so, *in which sense* of “dharma” the given occurrence of 法 is probably being used. Sometimes, this may be clear from the individual sentence, but at other times, it may require a broader reading of the whole paragraph or even more. In the case of the first sentence, this leads to the 法 of 諸法 as meaning “things” or “phenomena”<sup>11</sup> but the 法 of 佛法 as “teachings” or “doctrines” because the following part of the sentence seems to be naming and affirming some key Buddhist contrasts used in its teachings.

We can now consider the first sentence as a whole. The first sentence represents how Buddhism is talked about when explaining it to someone else, that is, when you are trying to explain all things (*shobō* 諸法) in terms of Buddhist doctrines. You can never convert anyone to Buddhism, not get anyone started in the praxis, without explaining such doctrines. These doctrines may not be Buddhism’s final words, but they are necessarily its first words. They are efficacious in explaining the semantic field of Buddhist discourse and verbally expressing what it means to be a Buddhist. These teachings are completely correct—*buppo*<sup>12</sup> 佛法 can never be otherwise—but their correctness is for a *specific occasion* (referenced not

in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.) Consequently, to use the Sanskrit word rather than an English one to translate the Japanese term cannot be called a concession to “precision.” Second, unlike their present-day buddhologist interpreters, premodern Japanese philosophical thinkers did not enjoy the benefits of getting a degree in Indian and Buddhist studies. Therefore, they had little idea of what their Japanese words “really mean” in Sanskrit. It is far more likely, for example, that Dōgen knew how *fa* was used in classical Chinese literary, Daoist, or Confucian texts than how *dharma* was used in Buddhist Sanskrit texts. We cannot assume that premodern Japanese Buddhist thinkers who read Chinese read only Buddhist texts in Chinese.

11. “Phenomenon” is here preferred to “thing” because “thing” in English can be subconsciously associated with the dominant western ontology suggested in the matrix of terms mentioned above: “things,” “facts,” “stuff,” “sensations,” “object,” “being,” “substance,” “essence,” “attribute,” and so forth. By contrast, “phenomenon” is more likely to be understood as part of the experiential flow of consciousness.

12. *Buppo* can, of course, also refer to the phenomena as they experienced by an enlightened being as well as “the teachings of the Buddha.” Given the whole paragraph, however, it seems the second rather than the first sentence might be closer to characterizing that experience.



only by the word *jisetsu* 時節, but also intensified with *sunawachi*).<sup>13</sup> It is crucial not to see the formulation in terms of doctrine as just “provisional” or “limited.” On the very occasion of giving the Buddha’s teachings, there is no better way to express them; it is fully true to its occasion. Are such expressions *hōben* 方便? Yes, but in saying this, we have to be careful about how we understand *hōben*.

The wrong way to understand this term is to think of it as a white lie, an untruth that is forgivable because it leads to a favorable outcome. Rather, we have to take seriously its sense of “skill-in-means.” (Literally, *hōben* is a “convenience” [*ben*] that gives us “direction” [*hō*]. In other words, *hōben* is a *heuristic*; that is, it is a pedagogical technique that is used to give the student a *way* of thinking or acting that will lead her or him *to discover* (in Greek, *heuriskein*) the truth *for oneself on one’s own*. Heuristics are neither true nor false; rather they either work or they don’t. Indeed, if we are being precise, a heuristic that does not work is an oxymoron; it is not a heuristic at all. Only in its working does it achieve its status of being a heuristic. *Hōben*, properly understood, is such a heuristic. Its *truth*, if we want to apply that term, does not reside in the statement, nor in the skill of the speaker, but in the truth that resides in the person when he or she follows the heuristic to the point of discovery. For the heuristic to be *buppō*, it has to be exactly the right teaching at the right temporal juncture (*jisetsu*).

Now let us consider the second line of the passage. The second sen-

13. Some translators translate this *jisetsu* 時節 simply as “when” because that is a common enough usage of the term in Chinese. Yet, in Japanese, it would ordinarily be more common to use *toki* (とき or 時) and in his preceding Japanese-language essay *Bendōwa*, Dōgen uses *toki* four times, and *jisetsu* but once. And even in that one case *jisetsu* is used not as “when” but as a noun in the context of saying that the earlier masters who went to China did not express the teachings Dōgen was expressing because the *time* (*jisetsu*) “had not yet come.” In *Genjōkōan*, by contrast, *toki* occurs only once, but *jisetsu* three times, twice in the two opening sentences. Moreover, that single occurrence of *toki* is not even found in every extant manuscript of the essay. Its use (*toki ni*) is at the beginning of a sentence so that it simply means “and then.” This further reinforces the interpretation that *toki* is the ordinary word and *jisetsu* seems to pick up a more technical nuance in Dōgen’s thought. Thus, it seems likely the *setsu* part of *jisetsu* is part of Dōgen’s intended nuance, that is, *jisetsu* 時節 adds to *toki* 時 the sense of juncture, hence, a crux of time. Therefore, “occasion” seems better here.

tence differs from the previous one in five important ways. First, “Buddha’s teachings” drops out. We are no longer considering the linguistic articulation of the heuristic doctrines of Buddhism. Second, the passage introduces a personal agency—the “I” of ordinary, untechnical discourse, the *ware* as written in *hiragana*. There are in Dōgen’s Japanese writings, three ways of writing “*ware*”: 吾, 我, and われ. The first character is rare in Dōgen and most often occurs when Dōgen is quoting a Chinese phrase or sentence, where it functions as the somewhat literary first person pronoun like the English “I” or “me.” As for the second two ways of writing *ware*, present-day Japanese may use 我 and われ interchangeably, but we should not necessarily assume the same for the first Japanese philosopher to try to write his ideas in his native language.

The *kana* alternative is far more common in Dōgen and probably refers to the ordinary sense of “I” in English, whereas the 我 seems a bit more specialized, perhaps picking up some of the negative sense of *ātman* in Buddhism and so best rendered “ego.” This is also, as far as I can tell, reflected in the classical Chinese use of 我 as distinguished from 吾 where the former is more like the self-reflexive subject of experience. The *ware* in Dōgen does not usually seem to involve such a reflexive sense; one is not aware of this “I” as an entity, but rather it is the process of having a personal standpoint within the experience. (For the reflexive “oneself,” by the way, Dōgen regularly uses *jiko* 自己.)

So, Dōgen’s point seems to be that on those occasions when there is no one taking a standpoint (to teach others about Buddhist doctrine, for example), the doctrines—the linguistic distinctions so fundamental to explaining Buddhism to an outsider or a novice—disappear. That is, what was *ari* (there is) now becomes *naku* (there is not). So, if one is not taking a standpoint, there is nothing to talk about, there is no need for doctrinal oppositions or categories. In light of this interpretation, the third, fourth, and fifth differences between the first and second lines become more intriguing.

The third difference is that *shobō* 諸法 is replaced by *banpō* 万法. Most translators translate these two terms the same (as “all dharmas” or some variant thereof). Yet, are we to believe Dōgen would use two different words to mean exactly the same thing in two consecutive sentences, especially when the sentences are so carefully constructed to have parallel syn-

tactic structures?<sup>14</sup> If there is a difference, what would it be? The *sho* of *shobō* is a pluralizer. It can indeed mean “all,” but most precisely in the sense of “all the various,” that is, to put it in philosophical terms, all the individual members of the set “phenomena.” The *ban* of *banpō*, if we are to make a contrast, also means “all,” but “all” in the sense of “all as a whole” with nothing excluded. Hence, I use the term “totality.” If this is correct, and the difference makes a difference for Dōgen, what is it? If there is no “I” to take a perspective, there is the whole without division or obstruction. Hence, no linguistic distinctions arise. To refer back to our hidden ontology, there is just the Field as a whole. When “I” am a subsystem, explaining the Buddha’s true teachings to someone else (another subsystem with which I am resonating), however, everything—all the things—can be explained by making crucial linguistic and conceptual distinctions.

The fourth difference between the first and second lines is the most puzzling, at least initially. What we saw as the first oppositional binary from the preceding sentence—delusion/realization *vs.* praxis—changes. Praxis (*shūgyō* 修行) disappears entirely and delusion/realization splits into a new oppositional binary (albeit one that is denied), namely delusion *vs.* realization. How are we to explain this significant change? The first two lines discuss two different “occasions,” the first being when everything is being explained in terms of the Buddha’s teachings and the second being where “there is no ‘I’ adjoined to the totality of phenomena.” But what kind of occasion is the latter? When is there no “I” as a standpoint-taking event? Presumably in Zen praxis, especially the practice of *zazen*.<sup>15</sup> When does the Field appear as a totality? It appears when the subsystem of “I” dissolves (“bodymind dropped off” *shinjindatsuraku* 心身脱落).<sup>16</sup> Since *zazen is praxis*, Dōgen cannot in this sentence say what we might otherwise

14. Without inflections and declensions, classical Chinese depends on word order for its meaning and so parallel construction in a sequence of sentences is a sign not only of high style but is also often necessary for clarity. Steeped as he was in classical Chinese, Dōgen likely would have valued parallel construction in Japanese sentences as well.

15. This interpretation is reinforced by the line later in the essay: “Yet, if she returns inward, engaging her daily tasks intimately, she will have clarified the way of things—the totality of phenomena is there without an ‘I’”

16. And Dōgen famously states several lines later: “To forget yourself is to be authenticated by the totality of phenomena. To be authenticated by the totality of

expect the parallelism to call for, “there is no praxis” (*shugyō naku* 修行なく). Moreover, in that praxis, there is neither delusion nor enlightenment because they are not mutually exclusive alternatives. As he says a little later in *Genjōkōan*: “The buddhas profoundly realize their delusions, whereas ordinary people are profoundly deluded in their enlightenment.”

The fifth difference is that “death” (*shi* 死) changes to “extinction” (*metsu* 滅). The difference is minor. Perhaps the only relevant point is that “birth and death” apply in a field with *ware*, but on occasions without an “I” (われにあらざる時節) such words would not apply and the more generalized generation/extinction process would be relevant. The point of this will be clearer when we turn to the third line. There is one other, even more minor, switch between the first and second line of the passage: for “delusion,” the term used in the second sentence is *madoi* (the *kanji* for which would be 惑) instead of *mayoi* (the *mei* in *meigo* 迷悟). Is Dōgen doing something special in this change? I am not sure. Perhaps since *meigo* is the common contrasting opposition in Buddhist terminology, it would be appropriate on the occasion when we are no longer explaining “the Buddha’s teachings,” to switch to a non-Buddhist word for confusion or delusion and to write it in *kana* instead.

Now let us turn to the third and final line of the passage under consideration. There is no longer an “occasion” being mentioned. The focus changes from the nature of phenomena (either individuated or as a totality) as they appear experientially either in explanation or in *zazen*, to the nature of the “way of the Buddhas” (*butsudō* 仏道) “in itself” (もとより). Syntactically, we see the use of *あり* has returned, but the binaries are parsed differently yet again. Unlike the first line, the contrasting terms are not separated by *ari* and unlike the second line, they are not separated by *nashi*. Instead, in each case the contrasting terms are affirmed as existing *together*. To indicate the linkage, the translation hyphenates the terms. So, the third line is framing the not-yet-differentiated Field, pregnant with the potential of taking on meanings specific to occasions as they arise within the system. Depending on the occasion, things are one way and not another, but because there is fluidity, the meaning of

phenomena is to completely drop away one’s own body-mind as well as the body-mind of others.”

the field is always in flux.<sup>17</sup> This idea is detailed in several places throughout the rest of the essay, most strikingly, in the issue of the “meaning” of ocean: it is roundness reaching the horizon for person out at sea; it is a translucent jeweled palace to a fish who can flit around in it freely; it is a glistening string of pearls when viewed by a *deva* in the heavens. The point for Dōgen is that as a fish moves about freely in its field of the sea without determining its limits or as a bird moves about in the field of the sky without determining its limits, we are in the Field in an analogous way:

Nonetheless, were there fish or birds that would try to move only after they first found the boundaries of the water or sky, they would not be able to find their way in the water or sky, nor even know their own location. If we could fully be where we are, however, in carrying out the daily routine of praxis, we would be enacting the case of presencing. Whenever we find the way, carrying out that daily routine of praxis, that itself is the case of presencing. This place, this way—neither big nor small, neither mine nor another’s, neither something from the past nor something appearing now out of nowhere—is as we have just described it. Because it is like that, when people practice-authenticate the way of the buddhas, to get one phenomenon (or teaching) is to penetrate one phenomenon (or teaching); to engage one practice is to practice one practice. *This* is the place; the way permeates everywhere. Therefore, we do not know its knowable limits because to know is a practice and a life inseparable from penetrating the truth of the buddhas.<sup>18</sup> Do not think of attaining this place as something you yourself can know perceptually or intellectually. Although we say the presenc-

17. Dōgen writes late in “*Genjōkōan*.”

The totality of phenomena is like this. Whether it is a delusion-permeated realm or something beyond, the world takes on many aspects. Yet, we see and grasp only what reaches our eyes in our praxis. If we are to inquire into the manner and style of the totality of phenomena, we should know that beyond their being visible as circularity or angularity, there is no limit to the other things the ocean or the mountains can be. We should bear in mind that there are many worlds everywhere.

18. That is, knowing—like the fish’s swimming and bird’s flying—is an activity, whereas boundaries or limits are where an activity, including knowing, stops.

ing of full authentication happens all at once, the most intimate being is not necessarily presenting. Its presence is not determined.

### SHINRAN'S EXPERIENCE OF AMIDA THROUGH SHINJIN AS THE FIELD

We might not be surprised to find such a rich framing of the Field in Dōgen's writings, but how about other premodern thinkers? Let us briefly consider Shinran. Western interpreters too often understand Shinran's philosophy to be grounded in a faith-based experience of a transcendent reality—Amida Buddha. This is due in part to the problem of reading Shinran in English translation and unconsciously projecting his texts against the assumptions of the western ontology outlined earlier in this paper, instead of against the ontology of the Field. When we look more closely at his text, suspecting that the Field may be the unspoken backdrop for his statements, we can see readily that his account of the religious experience of *shinjin* and of the ontological status of Amida are completely consistent with the image of the Field. The easiest way to see this connection is in relation to Shinran's understanding of the ontological status of Amida.

What kind of buddha-embodiment is Amida: a historical embodiment (*ōjin* 応身 [*nirmāṇakāya*]), a celestial embodiment (*hōjin* 報身 [*sambhogakāya*]), or cosmic (or reality) embodiment (*hosshin* 法身 [*dharmakāya*])? Although in most schools of Buddhism, Amida is considered a celestial embodiment, Shinran follows a Pure Land tradition in asserting that Amida is a cosmic embodiment. From that characterization, the world is Amida's buddha-field and Amida is identical with the cosmos—with all of reality—as it is. Yet, humans (as characterized in the degeneracy of *mappō* 末法) cannot entrust themselves enough to Amida in this form to lose themselves in the cosmic whole: the ego identity is too strong. So, Amida as the cosmic embodiment assumes two forms: Amida-for-us as the *hōbenhosshin* 方便法身 and Amida-in-itself as *hosshōhosshin* 法性法身. The former is the heuristic form that allows us to receive the Pure Land teachings in a way that will let us discover the truth for ourselves. By completely giving ourselves over with an entrusting

mindful heart (*shinjin* 信心) to the saving power of the vow taken by the Bodhisattva Hōzō (who becomes Amida by establishing the Pure Land), we surrender any attempt to help ourselves through our own power (*jiriki* 自力). By entrusting ourselves to the power of the other (*tariki* 他力), Amida's own power (*jiriki*) through the working of his compassionate Vow assures our rebirth in the Pure Land and our enlightenment. If we use the terminology of the Field, for Shinran the only way for my ego to dissolve into the cosmic Field as a whole is for me to dissolve or make permeable the boundaries of the subsystem that defines me until it merges into the subsystem that is Amida-for-us. Once that *shinjin* is attained, however, there is no longer any "I" and hence no "other" either. Amida—who had been "other" (Amida-for-us and the power of his Vow) using his own "self-power" (*jiriki*) to help us—must also dissolve as we dissolve. With no I-centered agency, with no other-centered agency, the self-power of Amida-for-us becomes the auto-power (the *ji* of *jiriki* now read as *onuzukara*) of Amida-in-itself, the cosmic Field as a whole. Lest the reader think I have projected an alien understanding on Shinran's texts, consider the following passages.

In *Kyōgyōshinshō* Shinran quoted Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542) on the distinct, but fundamentally inseparable, functions of the two cosmic embodiments.

All Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have cosmic bodies of two dimensions: the cosmic-embodiment-in-itself and the cosmic-embodiment-for-us. The cosmic-embodiment-for-us arises from the cosmic-embodiment-in-itself; and the cosmic-embodiment-in-itself emerges out of the cosmic-embodiment-for-us. These two dimensions of cosmic-embodiment are different but are not separable; they are one but cannot be regarded as identical. (HIROTA 1997, 2: 178)<sup>19</sup>

Since Amida has fulfilled Hōzō's twelfth vow, Amida must be the Buddha of Immeasurable Light. As the universal light of wisdom and compassion filling the entire Field, however, Amida can no longer have a form,

19. All translations of Shinran are based on HIROTA et al. 1997. I have made some minor word changes such as "cosmic body-for-us" and "cosmic body-in-itself" for "dharma-body as compassionate means," and "dharma-body as suchness."

color, or personality. From this standpoint, then, Amida is the Amida-in-itself. So, to the extent we completely entrust ourselves to Amida's vow, Amida himself disappears into the Amida-in-itself. But how does Shinran describe what happens when the entrusting mindful heart (*shinjin*) has its object (Amida-for-us) dissolve into the cosmos?

Since it is with this mindful heart all sentient beings entrust themselves to the vow of the Amida-for-us, this *shinjin* is none other than buddha-nature. This buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is the cosmic embodiment. (from HIROTA 1997 I: 461)

That is, once *shinjin* loses both its subject and its object, it becomes another name for the compassionate universe itself. At first, the cosmic embodiment is an entrusting of itself to itself, an unfolding as the world in which we can distinguish Amida from ourselves. But then, insofar as we participate in that entrusting process, both Amida and we as separate entities disappear again into the cosmic embodiment's self-expression. Explaining this in terms of the Field, in response to hardened disharmonies within it (especially the ego fixated on the impossible task of trying to preserve itself as a static subsystem), the Field responds by coalescing into a new subsystem that can be "other" to that "I" and into which the I can dissolve. Once that occurs, there is no subsystem at all—just the totality of the Field. In Shinran's words:

For this reason, Amida has two kinds of cosmic embodiment. The first is called the "Amida-in-itself" and the second the "Amida-for-us." The Amida-in-itself has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it.

From this oneness was manifested form, the Amida-for-us. Taking this form, the buddha proclaimed his name as Hōzō and established the forty-eight great inconceivable vows. Among these are the primal vow of immeasurable light and the universal vow of immeasurable life. Bodhisattva Vasubandhu entitled this form of Amida, "Buddha of Light Interpenetrating Everything...." From this, innumerable other bodies are manifested, radiating the unhindered light of wisdom throughout the countless worlds. Thus appearing in the form of light, the Buddha of Light Interpenetrating Everything is without color and without form, that is, is identical with the Amida-in-itself. . . . Know,



therefore, that Amida Buddha is light, and that light is the form taken by wisdom. (HIROTA, I: 461–2)

From such passages, we can see how Shinran's words are yet another way a Japanese philosopher linguistically and conceptually frames the Field without directly expressing it. The same Field that lies behind Dōgen's view of the emergence of meaning is the Field that lies behind Shinran's dynamic of *shinjin*.

### THE TRANSLATOR'S PREDICAMENT

English translators of Japanese philosophical texts face a host of complexities, many of which are commonly recognized. First, there is the difference in semantic range between a given Japanese word, *kokoro*, for example, and its possible translations as *heart*, *mind*, *spirit*, *heart-and-mind*, and so forth. Second, there are syntactical features in Japanese that can leave open variants that must be determined in English sentences such as “missing” subjects of sentences and the “lack” of singulars/plurals as well the “lack” of articles. For instance, does *ippansha* 一般者 in a given sentence translate as “a universal” or “universals” or “the universal” or “the Universal?” Semantic and syntactic differences between philosophical discourse plague the translators of any one language into another, but the more we work with texts in non-Indo-European languages, the more difficult the task for the English translator. In fact, this difficulty in translation may factor into why many traditionalist western philosophers ignore nonwestern philosophy. The more accurate or literalist the translation of the non-European language, the more puzzling it might be for a western philosophical reader. These points are hardly new, however, and anyone familiar with philosophical translation from Japanese into English would readily agree about such difficulties. The focus of this paper, however, was to point to a more insidious problem we translators of Japanese philosophy must face, what we characterized as the invisible presence of the unexpressed, but assumed, “Field” behind the writings of many Japanese philosophers.

In this paper, for the sake of brevity and to be in keeping with the theme of this volume, I limited the discussion to two examples from

premodern Japan: Dōgen and Shinran. I chose them because they are especially influential in modern Japanese thought and also because, despite their overlapping lifetimes, they are considered to differ sharply. Even in ordinary Japanese culture, the emphasis on discipline as an end in itself resonates particularly well with Dōgen, whereas the emphasis on self-effacement, *amae*, and skepticism about our ability to really change things for the good resonate more with Shinran. Yet, even in modern Japanese philosophy, we could easily find examples of the Field as a backdrop for philosophizing: Nishida's Kitarō's theory of *basho*, Watsuji Tetsurō's *aidagara*, Yuasa Yasuo's emphasis on *ki* to address mind-body issues, and Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's aesthetic of *mu* as the ground of creativity, for example. Perhaps the case is a bit easier in modern Japanese philosophers because so many of them have encountered a different backdrop when they studied western philosophy. So, in assuming their Japanese-based sense of Field, they sometimes stress (as did Nishida in the quote opening this paper) that theirs is *not* the backdrop assumed in western philosophy.

The problem the translator faces is that, as we have noted, there are things left unsaid in Japanese that must be explicitly stated in English, as well as things that have to be said very differently. Because the backdrop of western philosophy is an image of a network of “things,” “facts,” “stuff,” “sensations,” “objects,” beings,” “agents,” “substances,” “essences,” “causes,” and “attributes,” when an English-language philosophical sentence leaves something unsaid, there is a gap in the sentence through which the backdrop will appear. So, as English-speakers read a Japanese philosophical text in translation, they will parse their thinking while parsing the sentences. They will *look for* things and substances that have attributes or act as agents. And where there is an opening—a silence—in the text, the English reader will hear the whisper of western categories. Because the sentence is in English, the English subject-predicate structure with singulars and plurals, its verb tenses, and distinctive set of auxiliary verbs (no single Japanese syntactical word translates “must” or “ought,” for example) all reinforce the readers' assumption that what is not said but assumed is the typical western philosophical network depicted by the words listed above. As a consequence, the read-

ers may understand the English words of the translation but completely miss the drift of the Japanese text.

This presents the translator with a dilemma. The most obvious tactic would be to keep filling in what is unsaid in the Japanese sentence so there are no holes through which the western philosophical background image of reality can peek through the English text. At first glance, this seems a good idea: it protects the western readers from their own invisible assumptions. There are two problems, however. First, what verbal putty can fill in the holes? In the translator's hardware store we find two kinds of putty. One is made in Japan. This putty fills the holes in the English translation with Japanese terms or Buddhist Hybrid English. So, we get an English text peppered with an abundance of supposedly English words like *wabi*, *sabi*, *mu*, *tathagata*, *basbo*, *dharmadhatu*, and *samadhi*. Many translators know these are not yet English words but they wish they were and hope someday they will be (not realizing that if that happens, the meanings of the original words will change in the process of becoming English words). These words do plug the holes in the text, but they often replace the readers' possible misunderstanding with no understanding whatsoever. Presumably the rationale is that the less the readers think they understand, the less likely they are to misunderstand. The other choice of verbal putty in the translator's hardware store is philosophical stuff made in the West (usually imported from either Germany or, in some traditionalists' hardware stores, from ancient Greece). The idea here is to use putty to fill in the holes in the English translations with a fitting western idea rather than letting the background haphazardly show through the gaps. The rationale seems to be that if the Japanese philosopher really knew western philosophical argot, the text would have said things *this* way. The problem with this rationale, of course, is that the Japanese philosopher's point is often that what was not said is ineffable. The hole in the text is not an omission; it is what the text is *about*, what the text expresses by circumambulating it without going into it. Therefore, in covering the holes with putty made in the West, the translation makes the Japanese philosophy say what the Japanese philosopher deliberately did *not* say.

If this is right, what can we translators do? What is the solution to the dilemma? In the long run, there probably is no completely adequate

solution, but to recognize a real problem with no obvious solution is much better than pretending there is no problem at all. By being vigilant and self-aware, we can try to address and minimize difficulties in various ways. I will suggest here a few basic strategies that, although they will not always work well in every given case, should at least be considered. Doing so, if nothing else, will at least remind of us the dilemmas we face.

First, we should try to disconnect the English readers linguistically-based and historically-based tendencies to substantialize. This means we should, when reasonable, try to translate the most central ideas by using verbal-adverbial constructions over noun-adjectival constructions. Even when using noun constructions, we may find gerunds often work better for this purpose. Thus, for *genjō* 現成 it might be better to use “presencing” over “presence” or “manifesting” over “manifestation” or “attaining” over “attainment.” Even if we think of the Japanese word *genjō* as a noun (which in the construction *genjōkōan* would be problematic), the term is still written against the background of the unspoken Field.

Second, let us be cautious with the English suffix “-ness” since a philosophical English reader will almost inevitably substantialize the word. Sometimes the “-ness” is added in English because the Sanskrit suffix “-tā” seems to call for it. However, we need to bear in mind an important point about Sanskrit as the language for Buddhist philosophy: unlike the English suffix “-ness,” the Sanskrit suffix “-tā” can follow an adverb as well as an adjective. That is unlike English in which we can grammatically go from “happy” to “happiness,” but not from “happily” to “happilyness.” Therefore, Indian Buddhists are often nominalizing an adverb, thus avoiding the substantialization that nominalizing might otherwise entail. Take the example of *tatbatā* (*shinnyo* 真如 in Japanese) where the suffix -tā is added to an adverb *tatha* (thus, so, such). Very often this is translated into English as “suchness,” on the surface a perfectly straightforward rendering, but *only if the “such” is here construed as an adverb, not an adjective*. English dictionaries indicate that “such” is primarily used in English as an adjective (as in “such problems as these”) and only secondarily as an adverb, and even then most often as modifying an adjective (as in “such foolish talk”). In philosophical English, nouns, as designators of substances, are expected to have attributes: an Aristotelian can talk about

the characteristics of “happiness” as if happiness were a thing that could be explained in terms of other things designated by nouns and adjectives. If English allowed words like “happilyness,” however, the explanatory terms would more likely be verbs or adverbs. That would make a Sanskrit term *tathatā* more readily accommodated into English. Since English does not work that way, however, a word like “suchness,” read against the western philosophical background of the network of things, would likely conjure up images of things rather than happenings. For this reason, “thusness” would be preferable as a translation for *shinnyo* or *tathatā* because “thus” in English is always an adverb, not a noun. Unfortunately, it sometimes seems that the influence of the background of the western philosophical image of reality is so strong, that some English readers familiar with Buddhist Hybrid English read “thusness” but think of “suchness:” a thing that exists and does something rather than a way of happening. If that actually becomes a problem, we need to move to a new translation that will destabilize the non-Buddhist reading of the Buddhist term. For example, we could switch to “as-ness.” That would be disconcerting or alien in such a way that the readers would have to wonder exactly what that word means and in so doing, stop their the habit of reading western ontology into Buddhism.

Another practice about which we should be cautious is using western philosophical terms to translate philosophical terms in Japanese. These include “being time” for *uji* 有時 in Dōgen’s essay by that name. In the translation of parts of that essay for our forthcoming *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*,<sup>20</sup> Rein Raud has used the much better “existential moment.” That rendering has a western enough ring to it that it does not confuse the reader but, more importantly, it does not immediately conjure up the ghost of Heidegger and all the resonances with the western image of reality against which he projects his philosophy. Another bizarre, but still common, practice is to translate *ri* 理 and *ji* 事 into, respectively, “noumenon” and “phenomenon” instead of something more appropriate like “pattern” and “happenings.” The former translation is as much an offence to Kantian philosophy as it is to Huayan philosophy. A final

20. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo (eds.), *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* due out from the University of Hawai‘i Press, May 2011.

one, that certainly deserves some careful rethinking, is the use of the term “nothingness.” First of all, the ordinary English meanings of “nothingness” are quite different from those of either *mu* or *ku*.<sup>21</sup> Today’s western philosophical reader, of course, might take the term not in its ordinary sense but as a term connected with existentialism. This is not necessarily inappropriate when considering many post-Nishida Kyoto School philosophers who actually studied existentialism. Nishitani’s *Overcoming Nihilism*, for example, makes excellent use of precisely that connection. Yet, if we go back in Japanese philosophy any further than that, from Nishida back to Kūkai, the existentialist connection is not really helpful. One way to put the issue is to consider what the word translated into English as “nothingness” *does* in older Japanese philosophical texts. Basically, it punches a hole in the fabric of the sentence so that the Field can shine through. That is, the word “nothingness” does not refer to anything, but rather, it *frames* the what-cannot-be-said that is pre-meaning, but the meaningless ground out of which all meaning arises.

How then should we translate the term? I have no idea. This is a case of where my aim is to point out a problem we too often ignore, rather than to solve the problem definitively. My only consolation is that Nishida, I think, saw the same problem and struggled with it. In speaking of *zettai mu* rather than just plain *mu*, he absolutized the nothing so it would not be understood any longer as relative to an opposing binary like being”

21. The *Merrriam-Webster Dictionary of the English Language* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) has the following definitions:

1: the quality or state of being nothing: as a: absence of being: NONEXISTENCE \*the smoke... was snatched and scattered into nothingness— Gordon Webber\* b: utter insignificance, worthlessness, or futility \*would be intimidated into meek nothingness— Sinclair Lewis\* c: DEATH \*human reason cannot conceive of nothingness, yet men fear it— Time\* \*cannot believe in nothingness being the destined end of all— T. B. Cabell\* d: the state or quality of utter indistinguishableness : total absence of determination or particularity

2: something that is utterly insignificant or valueless

3: EMPTINESS, VOID \*beyond the window was only a gray nothingness— Hugh MacLennan\* \*ran behind a great green wall into nothingness— Ira Wolfert\*

4: the conceptualization or reification of the affective content in an emotional experience (as of anxiety) that is negatively colored \*nothingness is... a distinctive metaphysical entity— J. A. Franquiz\*; also : MEANINGLESSNESS \*the utter nothingness of not being—Jean Wahl\*

or “meaning.” It is a nothing that is not exclusive of coming-into-existence, a meaninglessness that is not cut off from meaning-in-the-making.

Another good translation strategy is that, whenever possible, we try to highlight the “how” of questions in Japanese philosophy instead of the “what” of questions so dominant in most western philosophy. Therefore, “what is knowledge” becomes “how does knowledge arise?” Instead of “what is reality?” we should try to help the reader think in terms of “how do events really occur?” Instead of “what is art?” we might fruitfully substitute “how does art come about?” Instead of “what caused something?” we can try to change the question to “how did conditions coalesce in the making of the event?” If we can help readers think of philosophical questions in this “how” form, the crucial Japanese ideal of *michi* 道 will never be far away. A further happy consequence might be the question of “the difference between religion and philosophy” would not even occur to the western reader’s mind when reading Japanese philosophy.

There are undoubtedly many more examples to consider, but my paper will succeed if we just start considering them. Even when no solution presents itself, just recognizing the problem is progress and will inevitably make our translations better. No matter how much we struggle with rendering the Japanese philosophical words into English philosophical words, we should never completely overlook that on which those words are written. The image of reality on which Japanese philosophy is written is as different from that on which western philosophy is written as is writing with a brush on rice paper is different from writing with a stylus on parchment. Both may be black ink on a light background, but we should follow Laozi’s advice to always consider both the black and the white.

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