

Negotiating the Divide of Death in Japanese Buddhism

Dōgen's Difference

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When you die, you want to die a beautiful death. But what makes for a beautiful death is not always clear. To die without suffering, to die without causing trouble to others, to die leaving behind a beautiful corpse, to die looking good—it's not clear what is meant by a beautiful death. Does a beautiful death refer to the way you die or the condition of your corpse after death? This distinction is not clear. And when you start to stretch the image of death to the method of how to dispose of your corpse as befitting your image of death, everything grows completely out of hand. (a Buddhist mortician, AOKI 2002)

Many of us consider Dōgen (1200–1253) to be the most profound of philosophically-minded Japanese Buddhist teachers in the classical period. But what, if anything, does Dōgen have to teach us about the meaning of a “beautiful death”? Can he take this matter that so easily gets completely out of hand, and place it within our grasp?

When it comes to the topic of death in Japanese Buddhism, it seems we encounter two disparate Buddhisms that rarely if ever meet. On the one hand we find the Buddhism of the philosophers, including the Kyoto School and the Buddhist thinkers they quote, and on the other

hand we encounter the Buddhism of the populace and of the scholars who study it.¹ The sense and significance of death differ so profoundly in these two approaches to Buddhist teachings and practices that one wonders whether death is a univocal phenomenon at all.

Philosophical Japanese Buddhism deals with the “great matter” of birth-and-death (生死, *samsara*) and focuses on liberation through either rebirth in a Pure Land, or the realization of one’s birthless and deathless buddha-nature, or the transformation of one’s own body-mind. In the esoteric tradition, Kūkai taught that we attain buddhahood with our present body, and emphasized embodying to the (near) exclusion of dying. In the Zen tradition, Dōgen writes that seeking buddha outside of birth-and-death is as futile as trying to travel south by heading north,² and other philosophers cite his words frequently when they explain the non-separation of *samsara* and *nirvana*. Hakuin wrote of the Great Death, the death of the illusions that sink one into the cycle of birth-and-death, and the Great Joy experienced at the awakening that frees one from this cycle.³ The twentieth-century Zen teacher Hisamatsu Shin’ichi exclaimed “I do not die” to proclaim his awakening from the delusion of being a self subject to birth and death.⁴ In the Pure Land tradition, philosophers speak of birth and death or life and death together, on the same side, as opposed to the other side and the power of the Other to liberate the devotee. Hōnen wrote that “The path to liberation from the cycle of birth-and-death at the present time is none other than birth in

1. A distinction in terms of philosophical Buddhism and the Buddhism of the populace is a tentative suggestion. Scholars have contrasted doctrinal with popular or folk Buddhism, and the Buddhism of the elites with that of non-elites, but these sets of distinctions pose historical problems of their own. See FORMANEK and LAFLEUR 2004, 24–5, and 34. Whatever the terms, the point is to contrast a major difference in two ways that Buddhists and scholars both have presented Japanese Buddhism, while recognizing that monk elites and illiterate laity shared many beliefs, and the keepers of doctrine also performed rites for common folk.

2. In his *Shobōgenzō Shōji*. See DŌGEN 2002, 106.

3. In his *Orategama Zokushū*. See HAKUIN 1971, 145.

4. Learning of the death of Hisamatsu, Sally Merrill recalled: “Speaking in an interview, Hisamatsu Sensei once said, ‘I tell my family I do not die. I say that I am the formless Self. Therefore I do not die. In fact, death never even crosses my mind. I have some work to do?’” MERRILL 1981, 129.

the Pure Land of Amida Buddha.”⁵ Shinran, contesting the view of the earlier Pure Land thinker Genshin, wrote:

There is no need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida’s coming. At the time true entrusting becomes settled, birth [in the Pure Land] too becomes settled; there is no need for the deathbed rites that prepare one for Amida’s coming.⁶

In the twentieth century, Kiyozawa Manshi wrote that “Life, that is not only who we are. Death is also who we are. We have life and death, side by side. But we do not have to be affected by life and death. We are a spiritual existence outside life and death.”⁷ Philosophical Buddhism places birth and death (or life and death) together on one side of a divide that distinguishes both from nirvana, even where nirvana is considered nothing but awakening within birth-and-death.

The Buddhism of the populace, on the other hand, concerns itself with a death that divides the departed from the living, and focuses on the care of the corpse and of the spirit of the departed who often is thought to care for or to curse the survivors. This Buddhism recognizes the fear and the pain of death and offers rites of passage and of mourning. The depiction early in the *Tale of Genji* of the treatment of the death of Yūgao, Genji’s lover, may be fictive but it is not far from the longstanding truth about this Buddhism: Outside the room where the body was laid out for the wake,

two or three monks chatted between spells of silently calling Amida’s Name.... A venerable monk, the nun’s own son, was chanting scripture in such tones as to arouse holy awe. Genji felt as though he would weep until his tears ran dry.

Though the cause of his ailment is kept secret, the court has “rites, litanies, and purifications... in numbers beyond counting” performed for the grief-stricken Genji; and later Genji has “images made every seven days for [Yūgao’s] memorial services.” The translator, Royall Tyler, notes

5. Hōnen 2011, 243.

6. SHINRAN 1997, 523; cited in ŌMINE 1992, 26.

7. KIYOZAWA 2011, 270.

that these images depicting Buddhist divinities were newly painted for each memorial service, “held every seven days during the first forty-nine days after death and at widening intervals thereafter,” “to guide the soul toward a fortunate rebirth.”⁸ The Buddhism of the people sees death as the departure of one who is born: it places the body of the departed in the care of clergy and family, and imagines the spirit of the departed somehow, somewhere, on the other side of life.

Far from being merely one topic among others in the complex known as Japanese Buddhism, the topic of death forms the core of what, for a great many scholars, actually defines Buddhism, what Buddhism is really about. If we may speak of two Buddhisms in Japan (and elsewhere), then the divide between the two over the sense of death marks a significant difference in interpretations of the nature of Buddhism. On the one hand, philosophically inclined Japanese Buddhists have criticized the fact that their religion became “funeral Buddhism” and a religion of rituals at the expense of the true teaching of liberation and the core practices of morality (*śīla*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) to attain liberation. Some lament the “decline” of Japanese Buddhism to the extent of deeming predominant practices not true Buddhism at all.⁹ On the other hand, scholars who would abstain from normative judgments argue that the practice of rituals for the dying and the dead, even if not confined to Japanese Buddhism, historically defines its most important social role.¹⁰ Some find concern with death, the death opposed to life and the living, at its very core.

8. MURASAKI Shikibu 2001, 72, 73, 75.

9. Watanabe Shōkō is an example of a scholar who documents but harshly criticizes the “decline” of Buddhism in Japan into formalized religious ritual, and the loss of its true mission: the “seeking of *bodhi*-mind above (*jōgu-bodai*) and the saving of beings below (*geke shujō*).” The religion that lacks these aspirations “is not [truly] Buddhism” (上求菩提、下化衆生というのでなければ仏教ではない). See WATANABE 1968, 207; 1970, 125.

10. WATANABE considers rituals on behalf of the dead as a defining characteristic of what happened to Buddhism particularly in Japan (1970, 41). STONE and WALTER stress that services for the dead represent “the major social role of Buddhist priests and temples in Japan today” (2008, 1), and other scholars would extend that characterization to most of the history of Japanese Buddhism. SCHOPEN (1977) has given evidence of the central role of rituals and concern for the dead in Indian Buddhism

The eminent Buddhist scholar Sueki Fumihiko recently published a book that re-examines the history of Buddhism by focusing on death. He contends that arguments about the existence of the dead are irrelevant to what we can know about how the living relate to the dead, and what we know is that “the Japanese worldview allows for an ambiguous conceptual realm with an uncertain existence.” The realm of the dead in this worldview includes deceased persons, Japanese and Buddhist deities, and even ghosts and spirits, to whom the living inevitably relate. For those living in the medieval period, this “other world” (他界) was dream-like, not in the sense of being illusory but in its inherently ambiguous nature. Sueki argues that the relationship of the living to the dead defines the entire history of Buddhism, beginning with the passing of the Buddha and the consternation of his disciples over his absence. Practices of enshrining his relics were a way of keeping him present, as were practices of composing sutras. Pure Land sutras presented an Amida Buddha ever living in a realm into which one could be reborn, and the second half of the *Lotus Sutra* described how a relationship with the dead Shakyamuni Buddha was possible. Buddhism preeminently is a religion of dealing with the dead.¹¹

Whatever differences there are among traditions of Buddhism in Japan, practices of dealing with the dead seem to run through all of them like a common thread. Jacqueline Stone states that, despite differences in the understanding of postmortem liberation, “the notion that a person’s last hours should be ritually managed, as well as the basic techniques for so doing, cut across all divisions of ‘old’ and ‘new,’ ‘exoteric’ and esoteric,” in which we are accustomed to thinking of medieval Japanese Buddhism.¹² For the most part, the great founders of various sects who did engage in philosophical reflection also paid special attention to the dying person and to deathbed rites. In general, they taught that what the dying person did, and what was done for him or her, was crucial to liberation. Genshin exhorted the dying person to concentrate on Amida Buddha as his last

from its very beginning. For evidence of the centrality of death in all Buddhism (see CUEVAS and STONE 2007).

11. See SUEKI 2009A AND 2009B.

12. STONE 2008, 71.

thought (念), to avoid rebirth in samsara. Kakuban encouraged the dying to focus on union with the Buddha to realize, on the deathbed, buddhahood in this very body, which he considered synonymous with birth in a pure land. Saichō's Lotus Samādhi, although not confined to the time of death, eventually came to define a rite for the dying. Nichiren taught followers to recite, once again on their deathbed, the name of the *Lotus Sutra* as a bridge to reach the pure land (of Sacred Eagle Peak).¹³ Their concern with the dying represents the norm, the ordinary practice.

The extraordinary philosophical position of Kūkai, Shinran, and Dōgen is apparent in their attitudes toward their own passing and their disregard for rites for the dead. Some legends depict Kūkai as never having died at all, as having simply entered *samādhi* in the Inner Shrine on Mt Kōya where he still sits.¹⁴ Although Shinran was probably cremated,¹⁵ he is reputed to have told his congregation, "When my eyes close for the last time, place my body in the Kamo River, so the fish can feed on it."¹⁶ Dōgen told his monks that the "body, hair, and skin are the products of the union of our parents. When the breathing stops, the body is scattered amid mountains and fields and finally turns to earth and mud. Why then do you attach to this body?"¹⁷ The utter disregard on the part of Kūkai, Shinran, Dōgen and later Zen philosophers were the exception, and a sign of a great divide between them and the teachers more representative of the Buddhism of the people. The messy matters of the

13. On the practices of Genshin and Kakuban see STONE 2008, 61 and 70; on those of Saichō and Nichiren, see WALTER 2008, 252 and 259.

14. George TANABE 1999, 358–9. According to WALTER, Kūkai did compose and recite a text at the death of a close disciple, his sister's son (2008, 253). As far as I know, however, his writings pay no attention to such practices.

15. Teachers on both sides of the divide were evidently cremated. *Emaki* depict Hōnen's and Shinran's cremations, as well as Nichiren's, to name only a few figures; see the colored plates in GERHART 2009.

16. As translated by Wayne Yokoyama, in SHINMON 2002, 45. In an unpublished manuscript, Yokoyama provides a more literal translation: "When the eyes of this fellow (*soregashi*) [Shinran] close, let [his body] be committed to the Kamo river to be given over to the fishes." The source of this statement is the Kakunyō's *Gaijashō* of 1337 in SHINRAN 1969, 4: 159; in SHINRAN 2003, 937.

17. Dōgen 1971B, 62. Dōgen makes it clear in other talks in the *Zuimonki*, as well as in the *Bendōwa*, that he is not opposing the mortal body to some supposedly eternal mind or spirit; body and mind 身心 are undivided in practice.

deceased's body and the survivors' emotions are not taken into account in the Buddhism of the philosophers.

Several divides are discernible in this synopsis. The divide between Kūkai, Shinran, and Dōgen on the one hand and other Japanese Buddhist teachers on the other hand parallels the more general divide between the Buddhism of the philosophers and the Buddhism of the populace. The former side attends to liberation from birth-and-death, and the latter to death as a departure from life. Accordingly, the former divides birth-and-death from something beyond birth-and death, even if found within it; and the latter divides death from life.¹⁸ But these divides are made visible by yet another, less studied division that throws them into relief. This is the more complicated divide of interests: the interests of historical scholars as distinct from those of philosophers past and present, and both these sets of interests as opposed to the interest of practitioner-devotees in their own death or the death of others close to them. Historical scholars are interested in explaining predominant patterns of practice and in documenting their details; philosophers' interests turn to doctrinal interpretation that, for many of them, entails a universal soteriology; and practitioner-devotees are concerned with what happens to them and those close to them when they die. While these three groups of people may at times overlap in the focus of their attention, we can, without undue exaggeration, distinguish three points of view on the sense and significance of death. If "death" means something different for these three groups, then death in Japanese Buddhism is a polysemous phenomenon.

POINTS OF VIEW

One heuristic for clarifying the different senses of death emerges from a grammatical distinction that is usually evident in English, the lan-

18. The divide between these two Buddhisms in Japan is not repeated throughout Asian Buddhism. The divides between life and death on the one hand, and samsara and nirvana on the other, intersect in the *parinirvāṇa* of Shakyamuni depicted for example in early Indian Buddhist literature, since *parinirvāṇa* refers both to the final, definitive liberation of the Buddha and to his death as a departure from this world.

guage in which I write, but is often obscure in Japanese, the language of the people I am writing about. I am writing now and you are reading; were we together we might discuss what they, the others, talked about. “I,” “you,” “we,” “they” (and “she” or “he” etc.) name the “grammatical person.” The category of grammatical person indicates the speaker, the addressee, or the other participants in an event. As a “deictic” reference, grammatical person requires a listener or reader to know the context of the situation in order to determine the referent. You the reader know that John Maraldo is the referent to “I” in the sentence above (although what sort of self “John Maraldo” refers to may be a matter of philosophical debate). In English, grammatical person is often coded in personal pronouns like “I,” “you,” “we,” “they”; and other Indo-European languages may code grammatical person in the form of verbal endings. As you may know, however, indicators of grammatical person are more complicated in Japanese. Personal pronoun equivalents are much less often used than in English and are derived from words indicating location. Such words indicate social status in a relationship as much as they identify a speaker or addressee. In the written language of the Buddhist teachers I have referred to, and in the *Tale of Genji*, such words are all but absent. When rendering Japanese into English, translators must interpret the context to generate the appropriate personal pronouns.

If grammatical person is so obscure in the language of Japanese Buddhists, why try to employ this category to clarify the senses of death? The reason is that death allows description from the perspectives of at least three grammatical persons—first-person, second-person, and third-person—and the distinctions and interplay among these three bring clarity to the meanings of death in its various divides. I shall return to the question whether yet another perspective is at work in some Buddhist philosophical accounts.

The *first-person perspective* presents the meaning and significance of death (and possibly liberation) for oneself. First-person perspectives on death are both a perennial concern of philosophical reflection and a matter of everyday anxiety for countless individuals. First-person perspectives imply some sense of self, of being oneself, that may be left ambiguous for the time being. We may note one remarkable parallel, however: the way that translators generate pronouns seems to mirror the way that a per-

son's sense of self is generated to allow that person to refer to himself or herself. Although it is not a specific external agent like a translator that generates one's sense of self, that sense is discovered and (re)constructed out of a context wherein it did not previously exist as an experienced identity. Once that a person's own point of view comes into being, it defines that person over against other individuals, and comes to articulate her own distinctive view of things. This is the point of view so central to phenomenological analysis, which seeks to clarify matters as experienced from a first-person perspective.¹⁹ It is also crucial to any reflection on death, insofar as death poses a limit to personal experience and existence. What death is for *me*, what *my* death means to me, and just how *my own death* defines a divide in my own existence—these are matters articulated in the first-person, whether or not a grammatical indicator is evident. Since the “I”, the “me” and the “my” refer to any and all of us in this case, we may shift to a more anonymous but less contextual formulation: what *one's own death* means *to oneself* and *for oneself*. The more anonymous formulation in terms of “oneself” is sometimes considered a third-person perspective, but I will define the third-person perspective on death as the viewpoint of commentators and observers who are more or less detached from what they describe or see.

One may of course imagine another person's first-person perspective on death, what death is to or for that person herself. A passage from Ōe Kenzaburō's novel *A Personal Matter* (個人的な体験) provides an example both of a third-person perspective and of an imagined first-person perspective. The protagonist nicknamed “Bird” ruminates on the pending death of his infant child, who he is told was born with a brain

19. Philosophers of many persuasions have reflected on the meaning of death from the first-person, but probably none more thoroughly than phenomenologists. One of the most systematic and enlightening investigations is HART 2009, vol. 1, chapters VII and VIII, and vol. 2, chapters I and II. Heidegger's *Being and Time* defines the authentic self as the self resolutely open to its own death. Paul Ricoeur considers death and birth as the limits of personal experience: as important as our birth and death may be to others, especially our family and friends, we do not experience them ourselves; for each of us birth is an “already happened” event and death a “not-yet occurred” event. “If ‘learning finally how to live’ is to learn to die, to take into account absolute mortality without salvation, resurrection, or redemption, I share all the negatives here.” RICOEUR 2009, 85.

hernia that renders it (in the words of the doctor) a “vegetable,” unable to respond like a normal human being:

Bird shuddered... and began thinking about the baby...the death of a vegetable baby—Bird examined his son’s calamity from the angle that stabbed deepest. The death of a vegetable baby with only vegetable functions was not [according to the doctor] accompanied by suffering. Fine, but what did death mean to a baby like that? Or, for that matter, life? The bud of an existence appeared on a plain of nothingness that stretched for zillions of years and there it grew for nine months. Of course, there was no consciousness in a fetus, it simply curled in a ball and existed, filling utterly a warm, dark, mucous world. Then, perilously, into the external world. It was cold there, and hard, scratchy, dry and fiercely bright. The outside world was not so confined that the baby could fill it by himself: he must live with countless strangers. But, for a baby like a vegetable, that stay in the external world would be nothing more than a few hours of occult suffering he couldn’t account for. Then the suffocating instant, and once again, on that plain of nothingness zillions of years long, the fine sand of nothingness itself.²⁰

In this passage the novelist Ōe depicts “Bird” in the third person, from the perspective of a more or less detached observer, albeit an “omniscient” observer that can read the mind of the protagonist. Bird’s own mind tries to imagine the experience of a severely disabled infant, to imagine what birth, life, and death might be like for his infant son. Bird tries to imagine the infant’s first-person perspective on life and death. The difficulties involved in doing so are staggering, and the novelist Ōe has deliberately piled one difficulty on top of another. Ōe implicitly acknowledges the general difficulty of imagining *another person’s* experience: he has Bird asking himself questions and examining this “personal matter” from a particular angle. But Ōe adds to this general difficulty two more limitations: any person’s own limitation in imagining her own death, and the limitations of an infant, a brain-damaged infant at that, to imagine or experience anything at all. The omniscience of

20. ŌE 1969, 30.

the novelist runs up against an utterly unknowable personal matter, which he describes as a “plain of nothingness zillions of years long.” This unknowability breaches the first-person perspective and necessitates an interplay with a third-person view of “the bud of an existence that appeared on the plain of nothingness.”

If the first-person perspective commands the attention of all us mortals, philosophers or not, *the third-person perspective* presents things from the standpoint of an observer who is disengaged from the world that is described. It is the perspective Murasaki Shikibu takes in *The Tale of Genji*, and it defines the narrative stance of many works of fiction. It also represents the practice of most historical scholars who aim to be objective, disinterested, and purely descriptive as opposed to normative or ideological (despite postmodernist challenges to this aim). The scholarship on death and the afterlife in Japanese Buddhism generally employs the third-person perspective. The historical scholar usually assumes the viewpoint of a detached observer. Yet the scholar often links her research with more or less universal human interests, to show that the research has broader relevance, or to identify herself as one of us who have a shared interest in the matter of life and death. Karen Gerhart, for example, writes her enormously informative book, *The Material Culture of Death in Medieval Japan*, from the third-person perspective for the most part, but in her opening passage she makes the link to this sense of shared identity and uses the first person plural grammatical form: “Death is an event of cataclysmic separation,” and for this reason “we use ritual and ritual objects to help bridge the gulf, suture the wound to the collective body of family and of community, and overcome a sense of powerlessness in the face of death.”²¹ Gerhart is commenting here about people of all cultures, to introduce her specialized study of medieval Japanese death rituals. Her study is an example of the kind of detailed historical research on Japan that is not found prior to the Meiji era, on a topic, death, that in earlier Japan was rarely if ever presented from the disinterested, third-person stance of the scholar. But she too initially speaks of the separation that death means in a manner that connects this third-person perspective with concerns all of us have: “we use rituals and ritual objects to help

21. GERHART 2009, 1.

bridge the gulf...” The third-person perspective on death gains relevance from its interplay with first-person experience, a point of view that historical scholars must recognize if they are to describe the meanings of matters like death for others.

In many languages the grammatical first person also comes in a plural form—as in the English words *we* and *us* and *our*. The plural form may indicate an extension of the singular first person perspective to a community of people who share similar experiences or viewpoints; or it may define an “in group” as opposed to outsiders. In the matter of death, however, “our death” can only refer to the death of each of us, individually, whether that death means a departure from life or an entrance into nirvana. The philosophers who divide birth-and-death from something beyond it (yet possibly within it) often imply a first-person plural perspective insofar as liberation is conceived as universal, for all of us, but even there liberation comes by way of the work of, or on behalf of, the individual practitioner, each of us. When it comes to death, the first-person plural perspective derives from the first-person singular.

The *second-person* invokes the perspective of someone who can address me, hear me, respond to me, challenge me or engage me. The engagement with me can occur even when you are not at the moment speaking or writing; it may occur simply by your presence, or by the signs of your presence in your artifacts or your remains. The convention in English grammar of calling this perspective the “second” person may conceal a bias toward self-centered consciousness, but need not imply that the “second-person” is less important than the “first.” As James G. Hart writes, this ‘you’ is “the second first person.”²² The imperative grammatical form implies the second-person: “[you should or must] do this!” The person so addressed may be a general “anyone”; indeed in contemporary English, “you” often substitutes for the generic “one,” meaning anyone. Here, however, I will confine the second-person to the forms of speech and speech-acts that are directed at specific persons known to the speaker, rather than at anonymous others. My use of the term differs from so-called “second-person narratives,” a form of literary fiction

22. “The ‘you’ is a ‘second first-person’ made present by analogizing first-person experience.” HART 2009, vol. 1, 213.

and non-fiction that also occurs in advertisements and musical lyrics, where second-person personal pronouns or other grammatical indicators are employed to address an anonymous reader. The novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*, by the Italian writer Italo Calvino, is an example of a (rather complex) second-person narrative. Invoking an anonymous, imagined reader, the book begins, “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought.”²³

The three major perspectives according to grammatical person may be summarized as follows:

- The first-person refers to “my” (one’s own) perspective on matters, including my own experience and what is at the limit of my own experience: my own death. Japanese Buddhist philosophers often, though not always, take this perspective in reflecting about matters such as life and death. So do practitioner-devotees.
- The second-person refers to others known to and addressed by the writer or speaker. Buddhist teachers often invoke this form in performing rites and giving instruction to others they know, even if without explicit mention of the addressee (such as the mention of “you” in English).
- The third-person intends to give someone’s perspective on others, their experiences, their activities, their practices, or on anything at all, from a detached and often unidentified viewpoint. Contemporary scholars of Buddhism usually use this perspective in presenting their work.

It is important to keep two points in mind when applying the heuristic of the perspectives of grammatical person to clarify notions of death. First, although the use of personal pronouns in English explicates these perspectives, they are not limited to a language like English that requires personal pronouns for clear communication. First-person, second-person and third-person perspectives are present—are ways of presenting

23. CALVINO 1981, 3. In the original Italian, the second person is indicated by verb endings and the imperative form as well as by personal pronouns. “Stai per cominciare a leggere il nuovo romanzo *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* di Italo Calvino. Rilassati. Raccogliti. Allontana da te ogni altro pensiero” (CALVINO 1979, 3).

things—for speakers and writers of Japanese as well, and probably of most languages.

Dōgen's Japanese is a case in point. His writing is rarely marked by pronouns, referential nouns, or honorifics that might indicate the status of the speaker or the addressee. In autobiographical remarks, he uses the word *yo* 予 to refer to himself as the present speaker or writer or as the protagonist of stories he tells about himself.²⁴ Dōgen also uses the word *ware*, sometimes as a personal pronoun, sometimes in the sense of the general noun “the I” or “das Ich.”²⁵ He also uses grammatical terms that translate as imperatives and imply the grammatical second-person, such as *shirubeshi* (you should know) and *nakare* (do not...). Moreover, Dōgen uses *ware* and the imperative forms in writings and talks concerned with death, in some sense of the word. The meaning of death for Dōgen will become clearer when the perspectives implied in his writing emerge more clearly. The second point to keep in mind is that the explicit or implicit use of grammatical person does not necessarily entail any particular philosophical concept of self. Dōgen's philosophy, for example, articulates a very specific notion of self and non-self, but he does not appeal to this notion every time he uses the word *自己*, much less when he uses an imperative grammatical form that implies a “you,” that is, the monks he is addressing. Perspectives according to grammatical person remain open-ended with regard to concepts of self.

With these grammatical perspectives in mind, it is possible to differentiate, at least tentatively, three senses of death.²⁶

24. In the *Zuimonki* and the *Bendōwa*, for example.

25. In the *Shōbōgenzō Zenki*, Dōgen uses *ware* as a personal pronoun, e.g.: “われふねにのりて…riding a boat, I [or ‘we’]...” Most translations of the *Genjōkōan* interpret *ware* as 我 *atman*, a substantial, self-subsisting self which has its own independent nature (自性)—an entity that Dōgen explicitly negates in expressions like *warehi* にあらざる, *warehi* にあらぬ, 自心自性は常住なるかとあやまる. A few translations render *ware* more ambiguously, simply as “an I,” which can refer to this kind of objectified, substantial self, or to a subject that can characterize or examine phenomena. In the free interpretation that follows, I prefer the more ambiguous reading. In contrast, the word *自己* in the *Genjōkōan* and other texts can refer simply to oneself as a self-consciousness subject, as in the famous phrases *自己をならふといふは、自己をわするるなり* (“to study the self...to forget the self.”)

26. For a similar distinction among three perspectives regarding death, see the

Autobiographical death is my death, in each case one's own death. It means death as the ending of my life, my departure or passing from life. It is independent of whatever beliefs I and others may have regarding an afterlife, a world beyond (他界), or a life before this present life, a repeated or re-incarnated life in a great cycle (輪廻). I may imagine my death as the end of an interim, but this interim is still going on. Others may experience my death, but I myself cannot imagine or conceive this ending, for an end would stop the very act of imagining or conceiving. I may imagine myself continuing on in some form in an afterlife, but I cannot imagine or conceive my own death. Autobiographical death poses a limit to my experience. It is death in—and perhaps death of—a first-person perspective. This is the sense of death that the divide between birth-and-death 生死 and liberation seems to entail, at least initially.

Biographical death refers to the death of an individual as perceived and conceived by other people in general. The dates on a gravestone mark one's biographical birth and death. Biographical death signifies the end to an interim that began with the individual's birth. It is the demise of persons that anonymous observers can witness and scholars can describe; it is death in the third-person. When we divide life from death, literally or metaphorically, we appeal to this sense of death.

Your death, death of the second-person, is the biographical death of someone personally known, someone in one's family, congregation, or community. It is death for those left behind, the survivors (遺族, 遺弟). Two features characterize this sense of death: your death means your absence from the others who knew you, and it leaves your body for others to take care or dispose of. This is the death that is of central concern to the Buddhism of the people, to the priests who perform rites for the dying and the dead and the survivors. This in particular is the death of no concern to Kūkai, Shinran, Dōgen, and the philosophical Japanese Buddhist teachers. As we saw, they seemed to have little if any regard for death in the third person as well. (Dōgen for example frequently cites the patriarchs of old as models for the monks of his day; it is of no concern that they are no longer living. For Dōgen the patriarchs are still present

section “La mort en troisième, en seconde, en première personne,” in Jankélévitch 1966, 21–32.

insofar as their words and admonitions live.) The divide between “us survivors” and the death of “one of us” evokes the notion of the death of the second person.

In a crucial sense, the death of the second-person makes possible the sense of speaking of my death. I come to an awareness of death for me when I experience the death of others I know. My death approaches me—even if it never becomes accessible to me—via your death; the death of someone I personally know evokes in me the prospect of my own death. Death in its autobiographical sense, distinct as it is, derives from the death of the second-person. In this sense, the death of the second-person always comes first.

These distinctions are crucial if we are to understand the disparate ways that the matter of death is treated in Japanese Buddhism. Yet something, some aspect, still seems missing when we try to understand what death means in the matter of birth-and-death (生死), as the Buddhist philosophers think of it. Birth-and-death, life-and-death, touches on the matter of *my* death and the liberation of (or from) *me*, and thus has to do with autobiographical death more than with biographical death or with death for the second person. The Buddhist philosophers, however, might be speaking of the death *of* a first-person perspective. Not only that: it is as if their utter disregard were directed at all three perspectives, as if these perspectives were more or less equivalent. Insofar as they function equivalently, I will refer to all three perspectives as *personal death*.

THE DEATH OF DŌGEN

Biographically, Dōgen was born in 1200 and died in 1253. In his early twenties he went to China and experienced an awakening under the direction of the Zen master Rujing. After his return to Japan he taught monks that single-minded zazen (which could include sitting with a kōan) was the only practice that could lead to the realization of buddhahood. But Dōgen also led lay-worship ceremonies, which are reputed often to have been accompanied by miraculous events such as the appearance of flowers over altar statuary, and he performed rituals of popular appeal such as precept recitation and worship of the sixteen arhats who

protect Buddhism.²⁷ Whether or not his and his monks' performance of lay rituals was an increasing concession to gather financial support by patrons, it is evident that he continually used and adapted Chinese monastic rules and regulations for the monastic communities he led; in other words, that Buddhist practice for him meant a meticulously regulated and ritualized lifestyle that facilitates *zazen*. In the final period of his life, Dōgen devoted his writing to commentaries in Chinese on Chan monastic codes compiled as the *Eihei Shingji*. Although these writings do stress proper attitude more than the outward form of rules and rituals,²⁸ there is no question that ritual was part and parcel of Dōgen's Zen.

Given all this attention to ritual, it is surprising that Dōgen left no record of performing services for the dead.²⁹ His recorded sayings in Chinese include no funeral sermons;³⁰ his monastic codes give no guidance for the treatment of deceased monks or laity, and his Japanese *Shōbōgenzō* and other writings never deal with what I have called the death of the second person, marked by the dead body and the absence of the person, much less biographical death. He apparently was not concerned with the treatment of the deceased, and in any case would have rejected rites

27. BODIFORD 1993, 14, xii, 32.

28. BODIFORD 1993, 31. For a translation of the *Eihei Shingji* see DŌGEN 1996. The translator Daniel Leighton emphasizes Dōgen's intent to convey the proper attitude to benefit community practice (p. 21).

29. BODIFORD 1993, 192. HEINE (2006, 2) lists as Dōgen's first writing a text of 1226, shortly after he returned from China, called *Shari sōdenki*, on his teacher Myōzen's relics, but I wonder if that too referred to a dedicatory verse rather than a comment on relics (*shari*). WATANABE (1970, 73) quotes a passage in the *Zuimonki*:

The masses on mourning days and the good deeds done during *Chūin* (the seven weeks' mourning) are all employed by laymen. Zen priests must truly be aware of their deep gratitude to their parents. All my deeds should be like this. Do you suppose it is the Buddha's idea to practice prayer just on a special day to special people?

The original text is:

忌目の追善、中陰の作善などは、皆在家に用ふる所ろなり、
 衲子は父母の恩の、深きことをば、實の如くするべし、
 餘の一切も、亦かくの如しと知るべし、
 別して一日を占てことに善を修し、別して一人を分て廻向するは、佛意にあらざるか

DŌGEN 1932, 732.

30. BODIFORD, 191.

to transfer merit and ensure one's fortune in an afterlife.³¹ Dōgen left it to his disciples to deal with his death when he died in Kyoto at the age of 54. He had been ill for nearly a year, and had already appointed his main disciple, Ejō, as abbot of Eihei-ji, but we can imagine that the community was both distraught and at a loss as to its future direction. William Bodiford notes how little we know about the treatment of Dōgen's body. The body was cremated, and Ejō recited the *Shari raimon*, a verse on attaining all perfections through the power of the Buddha.³² Otherwise the records are silent about the topic.

Dōgen's lack of concern with personal death is all the more surprising when we recall stories of his childhood experience with death that motivated him to study the Buddha Way in the first place. His mother died when he was only seven. It is said that a profound sense of impermanence overcame the young Dōgen as he watched the smoke of incense rise during her funeral.³³ Dōgen never abandoned his concern with impermanence, even after identifying it as the place of awakening, and he frequently exhorted his monks to practice while they had the chance

31. Dōgen was an exception in the history of Japanese Zen with regard to funeral rites and spirit cults. WILLIAMS notes that the first Sōtō Zen funeral did not occur until the third generation after Dōgen, at the death of Gikai in 1309 (2008, 213). Contrary to the myth of "traditional Zen," BODIFORD characterizes Zen practices as mingled with spirit cults and rituals, notes the widespread performance of Zen funeral rites, and claims that these rites were the major source of all Japanese Buddhist funeral rituals (1993, 1–2). Using Bodiford's research, GERHART summarizes the nine special rites typically used at a funeral for a Zen abbot:

First the body was carefully bathed and dressed and then placed in the coffin (*nyūgan*). It was then transferred (*igan*) from the room where the priest had died to the Lecture Hall, and three rites were performed while the body lay in state in the hall: the coffin lid was closed (*sogan*), the deceased's portrait was hung above the altar (*kaishin*), and a wake in the form of a priest's consultation with the deceased was held (*tairyō shōsan*). The coffin was then moved to the cremation grounds (*kigan*), where libations of tea (*tencha*) and hot water (*tentō*) were offered. The final rite was the lighting of the funeral pyre (*ako, hinko*). (2009, 17)

32. BODIFORD 1993, 192. Bodiford surmises that the "death of Dōgen presented the Eihei-ji community with a loss from which it could not easily recover. Dōgen had been the community's source of spiritual authority. After Dōgen's death, his disciples faced the new task of directing their communal life without the external support of their master's supervision and guidance" (35).

33. KIM 2004, 19.

in this short life of ours, to practice as if their hair were on fire, casting aside body and mind.³⁴ Yet his own awakening had left personal death in the dust, had cast it into the realm of distractive and illusory concerns. The comment in the *Zuimonki* quoted earlier, about attaching to one's body-mind, reflects his seeming indifference toward the significance of personal death in his own case as well. If we take this stance as a sign of his own liberation from birth-and-death, then it does seem to pertain to his own death, death for the first person. But it is notable that this liberation took place during his lifetime, not at the end of it; that he had, so to speak, already died to personal death.

What precisely do Dōgen's teachings about life-and-death (生死) have to do with death in the first person? Dōgen's directives and sermons to his followers make it abundantly clear that each must practice and manifest realization for himself, that the Buddha Way is a "personal matter," a matter of one's own life-and-death. Dōgen's teaching must pertain to autobiographical death, death in the first person, in some way. An examination of some passages in the *Shōbōgenzō* reveals some possible connections.

The fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō* that treat of birth(or life)-and-death, composed over a decade,³⁵ display a remarkable consistency. We may begin with the earliest of these, the profound study of perspectives known as the *Genjōkōan*. Whether the perspectives in Dōgen's various studies coincide with those in the category of grammatical person, that is, whether they are perspectives on personal death, remains an open question at this point.

The *Genjōkōan* begins by stating three doctrinal perspectives and then returning them to an ordinary, everyday stance.

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、諸佛あり。万法ともに

34. DŌGEN 1971B, 49, 93 and passim.

35. The *Genjōkōan* dates from 1233, but was revised as late as 1252; the *Zenki* dates from 1242. Scholars have found no colophon for the piece titled *Shōji* 生死; it is not included in the 75-fascicle version of the *Shōbōgenzō*, but I accept the Sōtō School's treatment of it as authentic. Ejō recorded Dōgen's talks collected in the *Zuimonki* between 1235 and 1237. In examining Dōgen's statements about death, we should keep in mind that they were made relatively early in his teaching career, probably before he would have had to deal with the deaths of disciple monks or lay patrons.

われにあらざる時節、まどひなくさとりなく、諸佛なく衆生なく、生なし滅なし。佛道もとより豊儉より跳出せるゆゑに、生滅あり、迷悟あり。しかもかうのごとくなりといへども、華は愛惜にちり、草は棄嫌におふるのみなり。³⁶

I extract from this passage and interpret freely:

A common Buddhist perspective on things posits birth and death—samsara—along with delusion and enlightenment. A contrasting perspective on things as selfless discovers neither birth/ life nor death/ cessation. These two perspectives converge in the Way that speaks of birth and death, delusion and enlightenment, at all. Be that as it may, the flowers we cherish will perish and the weeds we despise will arise.

The grammar of the original Japanese does not clearly indicate the perspective of grammatical person from which Dōgen's statements are expressed, but the three at the beginning seem closest to the third-person point of view. These three statements seem to be made by an anonymous authority taking up a kind of detached, meta-viewpoint on three perspectives. Yet a hint of a category other than grammatical person appears in the way Dōgen has phrased the matter, explicitly in the first two statements and by extension in the third: the three perspectives are taken up at different junctures in time (時節); they are perspectives held temporarily. Birth-and-death, and the enlightenment that liberates them, appear as temporal perspectives. Dōgen presents perspectives as temporal rather than spatial.

The fourth statement of the everyday stance reflects the temporal, transitory occasions of our (yours and my) cherishing and despising transitory things. This concluding statement, even without the interpolated “we,” suggests that the doctrinal temporal perspectives must connect to one's personal being in a deep sense. The attachments of cherishing flowers while despising weeds arise as personal matters, like one's own preference for life over death. Yet even there (or then) too they are temporal, transitory matters: Dōgen's language suggests that lovely flowers

36. DŌGEN 1971A, 7. My interpretations draw upon several excellent translations of the *Genjōkōan* and other chapters of the *Shōbōgenzō*, without adhering to any one translation.

fall and despised weeds flourish “only” in our loving the one and hating the other.³⁷

A latter passage makes more explicit Dōgen’s view of the divide of life and death. An analogy with firewood and ashes recapitulates the temporal perspective.

たき木ははいとなる、さらにかへりてたき木となるべきにあらず。しかあるを、灰はのち薪はさきと見取すべからず。しべし、薪は薪の法位に住して、さきありのちあり、前後ありといへども、前後際断せり。灰は灰の法位にあり、のちありさきあり。かのたき木、はひととなりぬるのち、さらに薪とならざるがごとく、人のしぬるのち、さらに生とならず。しかあるを、生の死になるといはずは、佛法のさだまれるならひなり、このゆゑに不生といふ。死の生に成らざる、法輪のさだまれる佛転なり、このゆゑに不滅といふ。生も一時のくらみなり、死も一時のくらみなり。³⁸

I interpret freely:

We speak of firewood turning to ashes, and not returning again to firewood. But it is not quite right to say something is first firewood and afterwards ashes. There is a before the firewood and an after. What is before is not firewood and what is after is not firewood. Firewood takes up its own temporal position, has its own phenomenal status. (Like every other phenomenon, firewood is an existential moment, 有 有時.) While we speak of there being a “before” and an “after,” for the time being “before” and “after” are divided. The same is true

37. In a note to their translation of the *Genjōkōan* (DŌGEN 2002, 40), Norman Waddell and Masao Abe point out that Dōgen elsewhere wrote that “flowers fall *because of* our longing, weeds flourish *because of* our hatred” (my italics; chapter one of the *Eihei kōroku*).

38. Dōgen 1971A, 8. A more literal translation would read:

Firewood cannot return to being firewood once it turns into ash. Be that as it may, we cannot take ashes as after and firewood as before. Firewood resides in its own phenomenal position, and while we speak of there being a “before” and an “after,” a prior and a subsequent, for the time being “before” and “after” are divided. Ashes are in the phenomenal state of ashes and have an after and a before, [yet for the time being “before” and “after” are divided.] Just as this firewood, turning to ash, does not become firewood again, a person after dying does not live again. That being so, it is an established teaching of Buddhism that life cannot be said to turn into death, and for this reason it is called non-born, non-arising. It is an established teaching that death does not become life, and for this reason it is called non-perishing. Life is one stage of time, and death too is one stage of time.

of ashes. Analogously, after a person dies she does not return to life. But it is not quite right to put it this way. A person's life is just that, a person's life. It is not followed by the person's death. There is no such thing as a person who undergoes birth/life and then death, and then life again. The right way is not to say that life becomes death, that something that was alive is now dead. The right way is to say "all is arising"; there is nothing but arising, being born, living. Hence there is nothing to which to contrast birth or life; there is "no birth or life, no arising." (And no life after death.) Life is its own existential moment, its own stage of time. The right way is to say that death does not become life, that something that was dead is not alive again. So we say "all is perishing"; there is nothing but perishing, dying. There is nothing to which to contrast death or perishing; there is "no perishing." (And no death after life.) Death is its own existential moment, its own stage of time.

Consider again the question of grammatical person, the perspective from which these statements are made. Mention of "after a person dies" is made from the external third-person perspective of those who remain in this world talking about others who do not. But what perspective allows the view that there is no perduring person who undergoes birth and life? If no person perdures, it cannot be the perspective of an anonymous third-person who perdures throughout the lives and deaths of others. The view seems to be from a first-person perspective, my perspective of myself, in which (my own) conscious life is not something that can be extinguished, in which I can speak of my own not-being-born and not-perishing. Others experience someone dying (or being born); I cannot experience my own birth or death.³⁹ Yet a statement that immediately precedes this passage challenges the first-person perspective:

もし行李をしたくして箇裏に歸すれば、萬法のわれにあらぬ道理あきらけし。

If fully engaged in daily activities we come back to this right here and now, it will be evident why all things are without an "I."

39. Note that if this I is not extinguished, then Dōgen's position on perishing is not nihilist, advocating the annihilation of the self. Similarly, "non-arising" does not entail an eternalist position, an eternal self. Dōgen makes no pronouncements about the survival of a self.

Evidently it is a conditional perspective that allows us to see life and death as independent temporal positions that are not states of a per-during self; and the necessary condition is a return of consciousness to the situation at hand, this right here (箇裏 = このところ), leaving self-consciousness behind.

Since this passage refers to the established teachings of Buddhism (佛法の定まれる習い, 法輪の定まれる佛転), Dōgen’s words 不生 and 不滅 here most likely allude to the Indian Buddhist doctrine of the non-arising (*anutpanna*) and non-perishing (*aniruddha*) of all things, due to their fundamental emptiness, as stated in the *Heart Sutra*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, and other scriptures.⁴⁰ But there is a twist in Dōgen’s interpretation. The negations 不生 (unborn) and 不滅 (unperishing) traditionally describe buddha-nature, the body of the Tathāgata, nirvana, or other names for unconditioned reality; in some texts 不生 serves as a synonym for emptiness or for nirvana. The *Heart Sutra* applies the negative descriptions to proclaim the emptiness of the five skandhas and of all phenomena (all dharmas) (是諸法空); all are non-arising and non-perishing (不生不滅). Likewise there is no aging and no death (無老死), and no extinction of aging and death (and suffering) (亦無老死尽).⁴¹ The *Nirvana Sutra* proclaims that “non-arising and non-ceasing are precisely what liberation is” (不生不滅即是解脱).⁴² But Dōgen turns around the sense of this

40. We know that Dōgen was familiar with the *Nirvana Sutra* from his *Shōbōgenzō Busshō*, where he transforms the sutra’s statement, “All beings have Buddha-nature” to “All beings are Buddha-nature.” The sutra states that “All sentient beings universally possess Buddha-nature without exception” (一切衆生悉皆佛性, usually read in Japanese as *Issai shujō wa kotogotoku busshō o yusu*). Dōgen reads this as “All sentient beings, all existence, Buddha-nature” (*Issai shujō shitsuu busshō*). Thanks to Victor Sōgen Hori for this translation. Dōgen also transforms the sense of 法位: in the *Lotus Sutra* and other scriptures it refers to the incomparable, necessary truth of the Dharma, according to Nakamura Hajime’s Buddhist dictionary (NAKAMURA 1973, 1218). In the passage of the *Genjōkōan*, it means the transitory status that defines a particular dharma or phenomenon.

41. Similarly, the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* speaks of the patient “recognition that nothing really arises or perishes” (無生忍, *anutpattika-dharma-ksanti*).

42. Mark Blum’s translation of the phrase in the Chinese version of *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, *Taiśhō* 12.396A.18. BLUM notes that the *Nirvana Sutra* not only negates the view that things arise and perish; it also complements this negation with an affirmation of “the permanence, joy, self, and purity” of “buddha, nirvāṇa,

statement. For him the unborn and the unperishing do not refer one-sidedly to unconditioned nirvana apart from arising and perishing (or to an unborn mind or buddha-nature as we find later in Bankei). In taking life and death as separate stages in time, and thus severing the link between them, Dōgen may be playing off of Nāgārjuna’s teaching that since all phenomena are empty of self-nature, causal links between them are undermined. More concretely, Dōgen applies the words 不生 and 不滅 to conditioned dharmas, temporal phenomena like firewood and ashes, and like our life and death. It is not that nothing truly arises or perishes, but that when we see all things as arising, then arising exhausts the being of all things; and when we see all things as perishing, then perishing exhausts the being of all things. When it comes to our life and death, in other words, life is completely life, and death is completely death. Life does not become death; thus we speak of absolute life.⁴³ And death does not become life; thus we speak of absolute death. When we face the divide between life and death, Dōgen offers no passage.

The pronoun “we” and the temporal-conditional “when” in this re-statement are not present in the original Japanese, of course, but reflect the conditional perspective introduced by the statement that immediately precedes the passage, “if... we come back to this right here and now... all things are without an ‘I.’” This statement suggests that absorption in the “here and now,” merges the first-person, the subject of the sentences (“When we face” and “when we see”) with the object (“all things as arising” or “all things as perishing”). The grammar as well as the content of Dōgen’s statements suggest that in this temporal condition the

and by extension the buddha-nature within everyone.” “Despite our experience, there is thus another ‘great self’ [大我] within us and the sutra even uses the term *true ātman*” (2004, 606).

43. This interpretation of 不生, literally “non-arising,” may be controversial, but it is supported by the passage from the fascicle called *Shōji* cited in the following paragraph in this article. It is also supported by the entries for 不生 and 不滅 in NAKAMURA which give “absolute” (絶対) for the meaning of 不 in these words in the *Genjōkōan*. According to these entries, 不生 does not mean “unborn” or “non-arising” but rather “absolutely everything is arising” (全体は生であること), and 不滅 means “absolutely everything is perishing” (全体滅ばかりで、生に対するものがないこと), with precedents in the *Lankavatara Sutra* (1973, 1163 and 1173).

person who views her own life is absolved, liberated, into that life, into living. (The phrase “もし箇裏に歸すれば” could also be read as 若しここにまかせば… “if one yields to the present situation…”) This perspective on life is “absolute” (絶対) in the sense that it absolves, or frees us from, any contrast or opposition (対を絶する), not only between life and death, but between the person living and that person’s life. Yet how is it possible to say that the person who “views” her own death is absolved or freed into that death, into dying? What meaning of death or dying here?

The fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō* called *Shōji* 生死 approximates an answer. Dōgen begins by saying that seeking buddha apart from life-and-death is like facing south to see north, and this only intensifies the idea of samsara (生死) and loses sight of the way of liberation. When we take to heart that our very life-and-death (生死) itself is nirvana, and neither detest one as samsara nor desire the other as nirvana, then, for the first time, it is clear how to detach from life-and-death (and presumably from nirvana well):

このときはじめて、生死をはなる分あり。

Only at the time that you detach from life-and-death...⁴⁴

Then, echoing a statement in the *Genjōkōan*, Dōgen says,

生より死にうつると心うるは、これあやまり也。生はひとときのくらみにて、すでにさきあり、のちあり。故、佛法の中には、生すなはち不生といふ。滅もひとときのくらみにて、又さきあり、のちあり。これによりて、滅すなはち不滅といふ。生とふときには、生よりほかにものなく、滅といふとき、滅のほかにもなし。かるがゆゑに、生きたらばただこれ生、滅来らばこれ滅にむかひてつかふべし。いとふことなかれ、ねがふことなかれ。

I interpret freely:

To imagine there is a passage from life to death is a mistake. Be aware that, as its own stage of time, life has a before and an after. (What is before is not one’s life and what is after is not one’s life.) So the right way is to say: in the time that is life there is nothing but living, and there is no (contrast to) living. Similarly, as its own stage of time,

44. DŌGEN 1971A, 778. Many translations have “are free *from* life and death”; KIM has “free *in* birth-and-death,” which seems more appropriate (2004, 166). Thomas Cleary has “some measure of detachment (はなる分) from birth and death” (DŌGEN 1986, 122).

death has a before and an after. Accordingly, we say: in the time that is death there is nothing but death, and there is no (contrast to) death. When it comes to living, just give yourself to life; when it comes to dying, just give yourself to death. Do not detest, do not desire.

In this passage Dōgen invokes the authority of the teachings of Buddhism (佛法) and implicitly includes himself as an authority, shifting grammatically from a third-person description of how things are, to a kind of first-person perspective indicated in my free interpretation by the word “we.” He speaks to his followers, and at the end implicitly addresses them in the second-person: “[you should] not detest or desire.” Although the Japanese text contains no words that translate as “I,” “we,” or “you,” the imperative verbal form that Dōgen uses (いとふことなかれ、ねがふことなかれ) clearly implies a directive issuing from a first-person voice and addressed to some “you.”

The category of grammatical person, however, is hermeneutically insufficient without the grammar and references related to time. Grammatically, Dōgen writes his words in the present tense; and now that they are written, a common hermeneutical practice is to interpret them as released from the particular time or occasion of their being written.⁴⁵ Contrary to this common practice, we may place Dōgen’s writing in the present that he invokes both in the tense of his statements and in his ref-

45. The European practice of romanticist hermeneutics in the nineteenth century was to try to re-live the original occasion of the writing. In the twentieth century philosophers criticized this attempt as misguided, and the practice turned to liberating the text from any surmised intention of the author in his time. RICŒUR writes, “Writing tears itself free of the limits of face-to-face dialogue and becomes the condition for discourse itself *becoming-text*. It is to hermeneutics that falls the task of exploring the implications of this becoming-text for the work of interpretation” (1983, 191). A hermeneutics related to the romanticist practice is at work in current homilies by Zen teachers, when they quote Zen masters like Dōgen as if the master’s words were timeless, immediately applicable to the present audience. Scholars of Zen criticize this hermeneutics as part of a naïve “rhetoric of immediacy,” a fabricated sense of spontaneity and immediacy found both in the original text and in its current use. While I too want to hear what Dōgen has to say to us here and now, in this day and age, concerning death, I appeal not to timeless words but rather to the temporal grammar of Dōgen’s text that indicates an occurrence taking place within a present: the mutual presence to one another of the quoted speaker/actor and his audience. In Dōgen’s writing that occurrence hardly seems fabricated.

erences to time. There are two modes of referring to time in the passages I have quoted. One kind of reference here is to time (or temporal position 時のくらい) for the first person, for me and each of us, even as each of us is to give ourselves over completely to the occasion of one time. In the last mentioned passage, for example, Dōgen is telling whoever his audience is, to be aware (心える), now, of life or of death, each as its own time (生はひとときのくらゐ, 生とふとき; 滅もひとときのくらゐ, 滅といふとき). Borrowing a word from the *Shōbogenzō Uji*, we may interpret this part of Dōgen's message by restating: "this living moment (*nikon*) of being-time is all there ever is to life, and to death."⁴⁶ Another kind of reference is the conditional formulation: "when, at the time that you..." The phrase "Only at the time that you detach from life-and-death..." (このときはじめて 生死をはなるる分...) occurs near both the beginning and the end of the *Shōji* fascicle. The dimension of time, or better: the presencing of time, is necessary to understand the perspective from which Dōgen makes his pronouncements.

The *Zenki* fascicle offers some final clues that intimate the meaning of death for Dōgen and the perspective from which he speaks. Similar to the *Genjōkōan* and the *Shōji*, the *Zenki* often interprets the samsaric compound birth/life-and-death (生死) by treating the lexical elements 生 life and 死 death separately but equally. What is said of one is also asserted of the other. To summarize some points: life completely liberates life and death completely liberates death; life is the presencing of the whole works (全機) and so is death.⁴⁷ Life does not get in the way of death and death does not get in the way of life. All reality (the entire earth and the whole empty sky) is contained in life but is likewise contained in death. Life and death, like earth and sky, are not one but not different, not different but not the same, not the same but not many.⁴⁸ How then do they relate?

46. This is the restatement of DAVIS (2009, 255).

47. I use here Thomas Cleary's innovative translation of the word 全機, the dynamic and interdependent activity of all phenomena (DŌGEN 1986, 43).

48. 一にあらざれども異にあらざれども即にあらず、即にあらざれども多にあらず. The order of contrasts here differs from the usual sequence: not one and not many, not different and not same. Kyoto School philosopher Tanabe Hajime (2011, 686) interprets this sentence as an example of a unity of opposites.

Scholars often claim that Japanese Buddhism emphasizes and values death equally with life, contrary to a western emphasis on life.⁴⁹ According to this view of Japanese Buddhism, life and death entail one another so completely that in speaking of life, we may as well say death; in speaking of death, we may as well say life. There is life, if and only if there is death; there is death, if and only if there is life. Thus, to live in accord with the teachings of Buddhism, we should, while living, always keep death in mind as well. Dōgen seems to reflect this view at one point, when his equivalence of the terms *life* and *death* implies that in speaking of life, we may as well say death; in speaking of death, we may as well say life. But I think this view as a whole is the view of ordinary Buddhism, in contrast to Dōgen's relatively extraordinary perspective on life and death. Dōgen clearly implies that life and death are each complete in themselves—not that they are of equal value and entail one another.⁵⁰ Life and death interchangeably are samsara and are the occasion of nirvana.

I think of myself as alive, not yet dead (how could one think of oneself as dead?). Dōgen encourages me to give myself over completely to being one existential moment (有時) of living at a time. In the *Zenki* he encourages me to investigate a time like this very one (この正當恁麼時を功夫參學すべし), and he writes of the “I that is life, the life that is I” (生なるわれ、われなる生).⁵¹ He does not follow this with a parallel comment concerning death, as if he could speak of “the I that is death” (how could he?), but he does follow it with a quotation from Song-era Zen master Yuanwu, to the effect that life is the presencing of the whole works and so is death.⁵² Dōgen's formulation implies that there is no self separate from birth/life

49. SUEKI writes that in the modern (post-Christian) western worldview that determined the conventional understanding of Buddhism, “only ‘life’ was considered of value and with death all value is lost” (2009, 3).

50. KIM interprets the *Zenki* as saying that birth/life is all-inclusive, totally independent and self-sufficient. Presumably the same holds true for death as well (1985, 245 note 7).

51. DŌGEN 1971A, 203. Buddhist dictionaries say 正當恁麼時 means 正如此時: “just like this time,” or “truly like this very moment.”

52. Dōgen quotes the line 生也全機現、死也全機現 from a poem by Yuanwu (Taishō 47:1997, 793). See DŌGEN 2006, 183 note 138; and DŌGEN 1972, 71.

and no self separate from death. It is not that *I* am born, live, and die, as if there were some person undergoing these events separate from them. Rather this *I* is the being-born, living, dying—yet even that manner of speaking spreads the self over time. In practice I am to give myself over completely to each and every moment right now. (In some texts *nikon* 而今, a common Chinese expression for *now*, is the word Dōgen uses).

A FOREGONE CONCLUSION

What then does Dōgen have to say about personal death? Nothing directly about biographical death, the death of others described by a detached, anonymous observer. Little about the death of the second person, the others he personally knows, save for a few words of admonition and encouragement, such as “do not detest death, do not desire life.” These two perspectives already imply some divide between life and death, but Dōgen places between life and death an even deeper divide. As for autobiographical death, this death of oneself becomes for Dōgen the death *of* the first person and *of* a first-person perspective. The sense of death that Dōgen defines absolves or liberates oneself into the moment. The divide between birth-and-death (生死) and liberation that initially characterizes autobiographical death in much of philosophical Buddhism is healed; there is no divide here. Several Mahayana traditions already identify samsara with nirvana; but Dōgen adds a difference: constantly practicing the perspective of the all-engulfing moment.⁵³

Philosophically, what we may gain from this perspective is the insight

53. Dōgen’s concentration on the all-engulfing moment at any time thus differs from what was once the focus in much of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism on the moment of death as the particularly momentous time of liberation, when one should die with a fervent hope for birth in the pure land. We noted how Genshin exhorted the dying person to concentrate on Amida Buddha as his last thought (念). Carl Becker (1990, 547) notes that this thought has precedents in many sutras, which stress the importance of wholesome thoughts at the moment of death. “Buddha declared that the crucial variable governing rebirth was the nature of the consciousness at the moment of death.” Becker refers to texts from the Pali canon: the *Petavatthu* and the *Vimānavatthu* (“Stories of the Departed”), and to *Majjhima* II, 91; III, 258; and *Samyutta Nikāya* v, 408.

that the meaning of personal death, that is to say, one's intentionality directed to death, is inevitably directed to another time, not this time, not now. When I speak of the death of anonymous others I mean a time past; when I speak of your death, I think of a future time; when I think of my own death, I intend a future time too, perhaps about to come, but not right now. Dōgen shifts these meanings, this intentionality, to a different sense of death, death in the right now. *Death, more clearly than anything else, makes present the element of time.* Practically, the practice of absorption into a momentary right now gives rise to serious ethical problems that would need to be addressed elsewhere. When it comes to a beautiful death, however, attention to the moment at hand, in whatever degree possible, may be the only way to go.

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