

The Practice of Time

Time and Practice in Deleuze and Dōgen

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Several philosophers have been interested in the essential temporality of the human being and how it tends to degenerate into a non-authentic form of being like the “superficial self” of BERGSON (1960, 128–39) or the *Man-Selbst* of HEIDEGGER (1996, 107–122). But little is said about how the authentic temporal being can be regained in practice.

In the following, we propose that this may be achieved by the “practice of time.” We investigate this proposal from the perspective of both practice and time. First, we review the analysis of time made by Deleuze in his “Difference and Repetition” (DR, 70–91). He presents three “syntheses” of time, each of which has two forms—passive (the original synthesis) and active (a derivative synthesis). To illustrate the third and final synthesis of time, Deleuze gives the example of certain literary and “tragic” figures like Hamlet and Oedipus. He describes their relationship with action in three stages. He shows how they gain the ability to act and how this action shatters the ego. It therefore seems that a particular practice is the essence of time itself. In our view, this is merely the active or derivative form of the third aspect of time; the passive or original version is missing. We propose that the “practice of time” could perform this function. To understand what this means, we refer to Dōgen’s concept of “practice” (*shūgyō* 修行).

We analyze Dōgen’s account of the practice of *zazen* (or, more precisely, *shikantaza*) in terms of three characteristics, which are analogous to Deleuze’s three aspects of time. Granted the arbitrariness of applying such hermeneutics to Dōgen, our purpose has not been to reveal a hidden and heretofore undiscovered thought structure. Indeed, his texts are polymorphous to the extent that it is impossible to apply a “system,” *à la* Hegel. Our aim is rather to propose *one* hermeneutics, which we hope will be illuminating though certainly not exhaustive. Examining the temporal aspect of Dōgen’s account of practice in the light of Deleuze’s analysis of time, we hope to show how time may be said to constitute the essence of practice itself.

TIME

The First Aspect: Contemplation and Contraction

In our experience of time, the present is not an ideal, vanishing point between the past and the future. Rather, it possesses a certain “volume,” a quantity of implicit content that has been condensed or “contracted” in its interior (MM, 69–71, 137–9, 205–8). Bergson gives the example of the perception of light, where billions of light waves are concentrated to produce a single perceptual act (MM, 205). For us, the act is an indivisible whole, but of itself it contains a myriad light waves which we contract and construct. Thus the quality (for example, the perception of the color red) is essentially the result of the contraction of a certain quantity (light waves of 405–80 THz). In order to contract those light-waves, we must have a kind of automatic “memory” that “remembers” huge quantities of elementary oscillations and accumulates them, so that before we perceive light, we have already amassed an enormous number of small events (light-wave oscillations or photon impacts). The first oscillations have vanished, but for us, they have been preserved; they are “remembered” and combine to produce the perception.

Deleuze calls the place of this process of accumulation or contraction the “contemplative soul” (DR, 74) or “larval subject” (DR, 78). The function of the contemplative soul is to contract events to suit its capacities. We may say that for every kind of event there is a particular self:

an acoustic self for contracting auditory signals, a visual self for ocular stimuli (or perhaps various visual selves for different aspects of vision, such as shape, color, movement, faces, and so forth.). These are perceptual examples, but Deleuze goes on to say that our bodies themselves are collections of contractions: every cell and every organ is the result of contractions of nutrition, energy, and forces (cf. DR, 73). Before light can be perceived by the eye, the eye itself has to be created. Those bodily contractions give birth to our “living presents,” and time as duration is generated. In the living present, previous contractions are retained and subsequent ones are anticipated, and in this way, habits from the past and predilections for the future are formed (and the stronger the habit, the greater the predilection). However, they are both “dimensions of the present itself” (DR, 71).

Contraction and contemplation is the first aspect of time. Deleuze calls it a “passive synthesis” which is not yet subject to the requirements of action. This is pure presence—the experience of itself and its surroundings—before it is divided into action (motor system) and perception (sensory system). After this division, we enter “active synthesis,” the dynamic counterpart of the first aspect of time, which entails the reconstruction of time, no longer as duration, but rather as a succession of equal moments in an intellectualized “space of time.” At this point, we distinguish and organize moments that were previously contracted and fused together in passive synthesis (DR, 71). According to this spatial concept of time, moments are made exterior to each other and become homogeneous and equal¹ (BERGSON 1960, 124–5). This is abstract or intellectual time, where future, past, and present are reified as sections of an ideal “timeline.”

1. According to Bergson, “homogeneous” means that the nature of the object is not affected by division: we can divide matter into smaller units and discover *more* entities, but not something essentially different—this is the “difference of degree,” related to space. (Today we would say that this is valid up to a certain point of magnitude where the quantum effects become more visible, introducing an aspect that is *by nature* different from the macroscopic level.) “Heterogeneous” means that the nature of the object changes in the course of division: if I pay attention to my psychological state of mind, the attention itself changes the state of mind—this is the “difference of nature,” related to duration.

The Second Aspect: Pure Past

It is obvious that the living present has existed from the very beginning, and that its flow has remained uninterrupted. In principle, all the events that have ever been contracted combine to produce the present. In similar fashion, music is created when I “remember” all the previous notes in addition to the present one, so that together they form an ever-changing whole. The difference is that a musical composition usually has a definite beginning and end, whereas the two ends of the “music” of our lives vanish into darkness. This darkness does not imply that there was not, nor ever will be, any contemplation and contraction, but simply that a certain type of duration has not yet been established (at birth) or has disappeared (at death). It is also evident that if the conscious self has been suspended during sleep, or due to illness or injury, contemplation and contraction has still been occurring at a certain level (which is why we can regain consciousness after sleeping or fainting, and return to a “higher level”).

But if it is true that there has been no radical break in contemplation and contraction, and that the entire past is retained in the present, then in principle we should remember everything we have experienced. Why is it not so? Why is our capacity to recall our memories so limited? Bergson argues that it is due to embodiment: every creature’s imperative is to adjust its behavior to its surroundings in order adequately to respond to particular situations. In other words, the body (the result of contractions) is designed to act, and must therefore be receptive to the future (that which awaits us) and closed to the past (the active influence of which has ended). It uses memory to formulate behavior in its environment, drawing on past experience to provide clues to present action. Only that which is useful is remembered; everything else is blocked. This is “primal repression.” Bergson calls this dominance of action “attention to life” (MM, 173).² In principle, our experience has been uninterrupted from the beginning, and everything has been accumulated and

2. This theory could also explain the phenomenon of “life review” in near-death experiences: because death seems inevitable and attention to life is suddenly diverted, the filtering aspect of memory is removed, and all of the past suddenly becomes accessible, *for us* as it is *in itself*.

preserved, but in fact, only a minuscule part is accessible. Of course, our personalities are the condensation and interpenetration of all our past experiences (they are our “life-song”), but normally, only useful memories are explicitly accessible from this interwoven whole.

This is the second aspect of time. The former aspect was characterized by contemplation and contraction combining to form the living present. But insofar as it has always existed, all of the past is retained, forming an ever-changing whole, or “life-melody” as we called it. *De jure*, the entire past can be accessible to us (as in a “life review”), but *de facto*, present access is most often limited to a very small portion. In a word, we have contracted the whole of the past into a very brief span of time, in such a way that its different components are completely indistinguishable, even though the distinctions implicitly remain (because it is their totality that comprises our “personality”). We can retrieve discrete past experiences, especially those that relate to the present situation and help to illuminate it. As was the case with the first synthesis of time, the second aspect also includes a primary passive synthesis (the whole of memory), and a secondary active version (the capacity to explicitly recall certain memories from that whole, or more precisely, the capacity to block most memories).

In its second aspect we enter the past as the “in-itself” of time—the virtual interpenetration of the totality of its moments. This “pure past” is not a dimension of the present, but rather the necessary additional dimension through which the passing of the present is made possible:

It is futile to try to reconstitute the past from the presents between which it is trapped, either the present which it was or the one in relation to which it is now past. In effect, we cannot believe that the past is constituted after it has been present, or because a new present appears. If a new present were required for the past to be constituted as past, then the former present would never pass and the new one would never arrive. No present would ever pass were it not past “at the same time” as it is present; no past would ever be constituted unless it were first constituted “at the same time” as it was present. This is the first paradox: the contemporaneity of the past with the present that it was....

A second paradox emerges: the paradox of coexistence. If each past is contemporaneous with the present that it was, then all of the past coexists with the new present in relation to which it is now past. The past is no more “in” this second present than it is “after” the first—whence the Bergsonian idea that each actual present is only the entire past in its most contracted state.... [T]he past, far from being a dimension of time, is the synthesis of all time of which the present and the future are only dimensions. We cannot say that it was. It no longer exists, it does not exist, but it insists, it consists, it is.... It is the in-itself of time as the final ground of the passage of time. In this sense it forms a pure, general, a priori element of all time.... The paradox of pre-existence thus completes the other two: each past is contemporaneous with the present it was, the whole past coexists with the present in relation to which it is past, but the pure element of the past in general pre-exists the passing present. (DR, 81–2, translation slightly modified)³

Bergson, the inspiration for this Deleuzian idea, represents this pure past schematically by means of his well-known cone of memory:

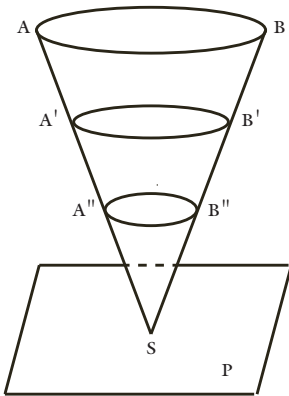


Figure 1. The cone of memory by Bergson (MM: 162). AB is the pure past, the ontological dimension; it is the basis of changing which does not change itself (the virtuality). S is the body as the locus of sensation, or sensorimotor activity, as an ever-changing point of the cone. A' B' and A'' b'' represent intermediary levels of contraction of the whole of the past between the pure past and the sensorimotor present. P is the plane of perception, or matter as pure perception (the actuality). Matter is a state of vanishing memory, the maximum relaxation of contraction, so that the moments and parts fall apart and become exterior to each other. Real perception always entails some degree of contraction.

3. This is Deleuze's favorite topic of analysis, which he repeats over three decades, beginning with an essay in 1956, “Bergson's Conception of Difference” (DELEUZE 1999), and extending to a 1985 essay entitled “Cinema 2” (DELEUZE 1989). It is one of very few motifs that recur frequently in his thinking and writing.

But the idea of the pure past requires further development. The whole of the past is not limited to one being, but extends to all of being. We may think back in time and ask, When does contemplation begin? Let us suppose that my first memories are from my third birthday party. But the fact that I remember this shows that at the time I was already a subject of contemplation. Did this contemplative system begin with the acquisition of language? Language seems to be related to the capacity to recall memories at will, but it clearly did not create my momentary duration, my living present, out of nothing. I already existed, and language only transformed my way of existing, my particular “melody.”

This concept may be applied to all prior phases of ontogenesis. Neither birth nor the moment of conception may be considered the point at which contemplation is created; they merely transform previous forms of contemplation. In the case of conception, the oocyte and the spermatozoon that come together are themselves contemplations and contractions, so that conception may be described as a mere transformation of the mode of contemplation, not its creation.⁴ I am composed of parts of my parents’ bodies, from their “subconscious.” In this sense, individuality is not absolute and all living beings, from the very beginning of life, are engaged in a web of interconnections (as shown, for example, by RUYER 1946, I).

The pure pasts that enable the duration of different subjects cannot be separated from each other; otherwise, contact with them would be impossible. They must be identical, forming the basis of an immense cosmic memory (DR, 83; B, 100). But in fact, every individual actualizes only a certain level of contraction or relaxation of this virtual memory-cone (B, 101), which itself actualizes only a small part of its own virtual memory (namely, that which is related to its present behavior). Therefore forgetting is an essential characteristic of human being. It is not something that “happens” to us as a matter of chance, but is a foundational act that distinguishes our mode of being from others. We forget because we have to pay attention to life, as Bergson says, we have to act in our surround-

4. In other words, *parts of interpenetration* cannot be composed of *juxtaposed elements*; it is impossible to reconstitute an impression of Paris from sketches if one has never seen Paris (BERGSON 1946: 200).

ings. For Bergson, therefore, the brain is more an organ for forgetting than remembering: it holds most of the past at bay and allows only certain memories to pass through its filter, by adopting an attitude which in some respects resembles (by similarity or contiguity) the memory that we recall. “Such is the brain’s part in the work of memory: it does not serve to preserve the past, but primarily to mask it, then to allow only what is practically useful to emerge through the mask” (BERGSON 1920, 71).

The Third Aspect: The Pure Form of Time

The first and second aspects of time define a mechanism for novel creation. Through contemplation and contraction we produce a certain type of duration, which is connected to our bodies and perceptions. The pure past enables the present to recede and duration to continue, by maintaining the whole of the past contemporaneous with the present and by furnishing an extra dimension (“perpendicular” to duration) where the present can be reflected and parts of the past useful for determining future action can be extracted. As we have stated, the necessity for imminent action or “attention to life” is the tool with which the virtual past is contracted into the actual present, thus creating a difference between them. The need for attention to life and for action in our surroundings requires us to differentiate between the first and second aspects of time.

Clearly novel creation, or the renewal of time, is dependent on the utilitarian need for acting in a given environment. This means that the pure past, as the condition for the possibility of the present, remains anchored in the present, “the shortcoming of the ground is to remain relative to that which it grounds” (DR, 88). The transcendental condition remains subject to empirical conditioning. This is why individuals tend to lag behind their surroundings in direct proportion to the complexity of their bodies. The forms and modalities of action are already more or less in place, leaving too little time for the individual to search its memory and prepare for a new situation. It remains essentially reactive in its responses to external stimuli, which in its turn occasions a gap in reaction time. Thus, the problem is how to exist in time, and how to become fully active. This implies that individuals, by suspending their partial and

insignificant interests toward action, are able to devote more attention to the whole of life.

All of this works to enhance the energy or intensity of duration, and at the same time, engage the whole of the past. Our potential capacity for creation is limited because we use only a small part of our past. Bergson defines free action not as the ability to choose between two possible actions, but rather as the extent to which we invest ourselves in the action, that is, how effective we are in integrating all the nuances and details of our past (see BERGSON 1960, 165–7). Action that is not free is automatic, a customary response to a standard situation in which we select and act on the basis of a portion of our past. A mundane choice (for example between coffee and tea) is characteristic of this superficial self.

Free action makes use of the whole rather than merely of selected splinters of the past. In free action, the individual has both maximum capacity to differentiate itself from itself (by avoiding mechanical and unvarying repetition), and the complementary power of integrating itself (by making use of the whole of the past). Differentiation and integration are the two complementary aspects of novel creation, or the pure form of time, which is free from events and temporal conditions. The pure form of time “itself unfolds [...] instead of things unfolding in it” (DR, 88). According to Deleuze, this synthesis is necessarily “static, since time is no longer subordinated to movement; time is the most radical form of change, but the form of change does not change” (DR, 89). This would be neither the living present nor the pure past, but rather the pure form of being towards the future. The riddle to be solved is whether and how a finite being is able to reduce or overcome its limitations and respond to being as such.

In his discussion of the third synthesis, Deleuze first presents the passive version of the synthesis, the empty form of time. He explains that for Kant the Cartesian *cogito* was not sufficient because it does not account for how the determination *I think* can bear directly on the undetermined existence of *I am*, for “in order to think, one must exist.” Kant therefore adds a third logical value—the determinable, or pure form of determination. In so doing, he discovers a Difference that is no longer an empirical difference between two determinations (to do this rather than that), but a transcendental Difference between Difference as such and its determi-

nation, “no longer in the form of an external difference which separates, but in the form of an internal Difference which establishes an *a priori* relation between thought and being” (DR, 86).

The dimension in which undetermined existence is determinable by the *I think* is time, the pure form of time, which fractures the self. It is a passive synthesis:

[M]y undetermined existence can be determined only within time as the existence of a phenomenon, of a passive, receptive phenomenal subject appearing within time. As a result, the spontaneity of which I am conscious in the ‘I think’ cannot be understood as the attribute of a substantial and spontaneous being, but only as the affection of a passive self which experiences its own thought—its own intelligence, that by virtue of which it can say I—being exercised in it and upon it but not by it. [...] To “I think” and “I am” must be added the self—that is, the passive position. (DR, 86)

But it would seem there is an inconsistency in Deleuze’s theory. When he discusses the three series of time in relation to the third synthesis, he seems to be referring to the active version. The form of time is ordered around a caesura and

[T]he caesura, of whatever kind, must be determined in the image of a unique and tremendous event, an act which is adequate to time as a whole. [...] It must be called a symbol by virtue of the unequal parts which it subsumes and draws together, but draws together as unequal parts. Such a symbol adequate to the totality of time may be expressed in many ways: to throw the time out of joint, to make the sun explode, to throw oneself into the volcano, to kill God or the father.“ This symbol articulates the pure form of time in three moments: the past where the action is “too big for me,” then the present of transformation or becoming-equal to the act; and finally the future where the self that has become equal is smashed into pieces and thrown away, or where the self has become equal to the unequal in itself. (DR, 89–90)

The reader is given the impression that the third and final synthesis of time is exhaustively covered by those tragic images of action. We would argue that they are merely examples of the active, secondary version of the synthesis, and that the “practice of time” is the passive, primary ver-

sion. In order to consider this missing element, we may now turn to Dōgen and his practice of *shikantaza*.

THE TIME OF PRACTICE

The First Aspect: A Mountain Always Practices

Let us begin by examining some passages in Dōgen’s writing that correspond to the first synthesis of time from the perspective of the practice of *shikantaza*. Dōgen often refers to four great elements (四大), which, as they unfold, constantly form different entities and sensations that are part of our practice, but also “practice us”:

When you practice *shugyō* by garnering your own body-and-mind, and when you practice by garnering the body-and-mind of anyone, the power of practicing with the four elements and the five aggregates is realized at once; but the four elements and five aggregates do not taint the self. [All things,] even the four elements and five aggregates of today, carry on being practiced and the power which the four elements and five aggregates have as practice in the present moment (如今) makes the four elements and five aggregates, as described above, into practice. (SG I, 357, trans. NISHIJIMA and CROSS 1994, 100)

The teaching of the four original elements (*mahābhūta*) was developed by different schools of thought in India to describe the basic constituents of the world in relationship to the corresponding sense organs, which are thought to be formed by their interaction with the elements. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the elements describe different attributes: earth is solidity, water is fluidity, fire is warmth, and wind is motion manifesting itself in change and expansion. The constituent elements resist or “move against” something (*prathighāta*) and cannot exist independently. Every material object is comprised of equal amounts of these four elements, and the nature of an object is therefore not defined by the quantity but rather by the intensity of the dominant element. These constituents are invisible but manifest themselves in a way that differs from their actual nature (LYSENKO 2009, 513). In the *Abhidharmakośa*, these four elements (solidity, fluidity, warmth, and motion) are seen to be the key con-

stituents of the *rūpa-dharma* (material *dharma*s) that refer to the senses and corresponding sense objects (MATSUNAGA 1992, 31).

This concept of the elements also influenced the Chan tradition. A well-known example of this teaching is found in the “Harmony of Difference and Sameness” by Shitou Xiqian (700–790), which is still recited as part of the practice of different schools of Chan/Zen:

The four elements return to their natures
just as a child turns to its mother.
Fire heats, wind moves,
water wets, earth is solid.
Eye and sight, ear and sound,
Nose and smell, tongue and taste
Thus for each and every thing,
depending on these roots, the leaves spread forth.
(SUZUKI 1999, 20)

According to Dōgen’s understanding of the four elements and five *skandhas*, matter itself constantly practices⁵. We constitute a certain resistance of matter—a solidity in the unfolding of matter—and our senses are continuously formed as contractions and contemplations of the elements. These “unseen movements” form a field of passive syntheses, which have a particular intensity and duration. This would be “practice” on the level of the constituent elements themselves. Practice is an intensity of movement that maintains itself at all levels of existence. Dōgen therefore says in “Maintaining the Practice” (*Gyōji* 行持):

In maintaining the practice there is sun, moon and stars, in maintaining the practice there is great earth and limitless sky, in maintaining the practice there are various conditioned bodies and minds, in maintaining the practice there are four great elements and five skandhas. Maintaining of the practice leads to a place not loved by the worldly people, but it is the true returning point for all human beings. Different Buddhas of the past, present and future are actualized (現成) as

5. The Chinese teaching of the five elements—*wuxing* (五行) did not regard the formation of the senses and sense-objects in exactly the same vein and depth as the Buddhist tradition. We would nevertheless like to point out that because the element “moves” (行), it may be said to “practice.”

the different Buddhas of the past, present and future in maintaining the practice. (SG I, 156)

The meaning of the term *gyōji* is to eternally maintain the path of the Buddha's ancestors (ZD, 221). But it is significant that there is no one "individual" who upholds the practice, as if carrying the weight of the whole world on his shoulders. Practice upholds itself; it is the constant movement, the constant unfolding of the "leaves" of practice that maintains the world in its ten directions. From this perspective, we can also take Dōgen quite literally when he states in the *Sansuikyō*:

[A] mountain always practices in every place. (MD, 98)

When your learning is immature, you are shocked by the words "flowing mountains." (MD, 99)

As Abe Masao has noted: "Dōgen broadens the meaning of *shujō*, which traditionally referred to living or sentient beings, to include non-living or non-sentient beings" (ABE 1992, 54). Contemplation and contraction are manifested even in mountains and trees. The mountain also maintains the practice, as do the sun, moon and stars, because they are all contemplations engaged in ceaseless practice. Contemplation is ubiquitous, and the contemplations of more complex beings are but the integrations and transformations of simpler contemplations. Dōgen remarks in the "Body-and-Mind Study of the Way" (*Shinjin-gakudō*):

All this is merely a moment or two of mind (一念二念). A moment or two of mind is a moment of mountains, rivers, and earth, or two moments of mountains, rivers, and earth. (SG I, 75, MD, 89)

"One moment" (一念) signifies an "extremely small movement of the mind" (ZD, 34). This appears to be the most exact equivalent of contraction and contemplation in the sense of time. By doubling the moments of contemplation (二念), duration becomes possible, because (as we have explained above) previous contractions are retained and subsequent ones are anticipated.

This concept of ceaseless practice as a passive synthesis of contemplation has given rise to a naive understanding of time, which subjects the living present to the requirements of action and "spatializes" time, mak-

ing its implicit parts explicit and unfolding them in an intellectual space of time. This image of time is actually space, because its components are treated as identical and homogeneous. It is only in the secondary “active” modality that one can conceive of different possibilities of being, such as birth and death (MD, 74–75 and elsewhere); or “for a while I was three heads and eight arms” and “for a while I was an eight- or sixteen-foot body” (MD, 77); or “there is delusion and realization, practice, and birth and death, and there are buddhas and sentient beings” (MD, 69). In other words, one conceives of birth and death, practice and realization as different points in time.

It might be argued that the spatialization of time gives us the capacity to distance ourselves from our immediate surroundings, to take a step back. We become capable of voluntarily delaying our actions. But in so doing, we lose immediate contact and interaction with our surroundings and thus lose sight of the essence of time, the temporal whole.

The Second Aspect: Ground and Occasion

In his analysis of Dōgen, Abe focuses on the aspect of Dōgen’s thinking that is parallel to the “pure past,” namely, the second aspect of time discussed above. Interestingly enough, Abe draws cone shapes similar to Bergson’s. Deleuze enlarged Bergson’s cone to comprise the whole of being, and Abe does likewise, adding new details. Like Bergson, Abe constructs his scheme step by step. The starting point is a paradox that had confounded Dōgen as a young Tendai monk. He writes:

Both exoteric and esoteric Buddhism teach the primal buddha-nature [...] and the original self-awakening of all sentient beings. If this is the case, why have the buddhas of all ages had to awaken the longing for and seek enlightenment by engaging in ascetic practice? (ABE 1992, 19)

To illustrate this, Abe draws a figure with two dimensions indicated a horizontal line and a vertical arrow. The former represents practice (acquired awakening) and the latter attainment (original awakening) (ABE 1992, 25). It is not possible to choose between the two, because they are both aspects of the same reality: practice engenders awakening and the buddha-nature is the source of awakening. An action (practice)

is required to awaken the awakening, but there must also be an awakening (buddha-nature) to be awakened.

Practice is therefore not merely a means to an end (realization), but is already realization. In Abe's thinking, every moment of practice (the emergence of the idea of enlightenment, practice and realization) is directly connected to realization (26). And just as Deleuze establishes that the pure past pre-exists the present, Abe demonstrates that the two aspects are not symmetrical: "their distinction [...] must be clearly realized; attainment (awakening) is more fundamental than practice, not the other way around" (26).

In Bergson's scheme, only the "ground" (memory) is portrayed by the cone and the "occasion" (matter) remains as a plane.⁶ Bergson acknowledged that matter is contracted to different degrees, but he did not represent them in his scheme. Abe does portray this aspect in his "cone of actuality." Our human world is only one aspect of the world, which is part of a larger circle of sentient beings, and finally encompassed by the entire universe. Abe describes four levels of expansion of the cone (illustrated in Figure 2 on the following page): oneself (the ego), human beings, sentient beings and the whole of being.

The cone of actuality intersects with a second cone, that of virtuality (to borrow the Deleuzian concept). Abe introduces the idea of virtuality by saying that original awakening is contemporaneous with acquired awakening, but more "fundamental." He then reconciles this idea with the cosmic cone of being and states that the buddha-nature encompasses all of existence (ABE 1992, 42). In other words, not only are sentient beings endowed with a buddha-nature, including trees and grasses as in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism (STONE 1999, 29–31), but *everything* that exists is endowed with a buddha-nature, which thus extends to "whole-being." As we indicated earlier, no creatures are incapable of contemplation and contraction.

If we superimpose the two cones, we obtain a final scheme, as shown in Figure 3 on the following page. Without analyzing the whole of the diagram, we would draw attention to the following three elements:

6. Some indication of an expansion of the dimension of matter or perception can be found in a previous version of the scheme, Bergson 1911: 128.

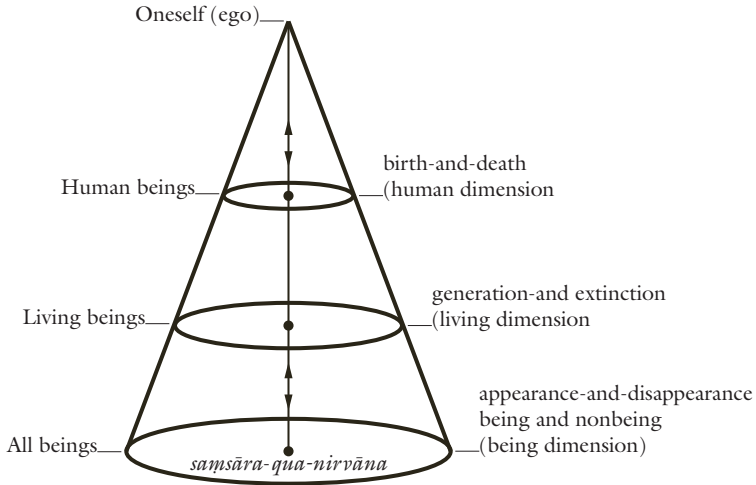


Figure 2. Degrees of contraction and expansion of the cone of actuality, as represented by ABE (1992: 44), from the maximum contraction of “oneself” at the top to the minimum contraction of “all beings” at the bottom.

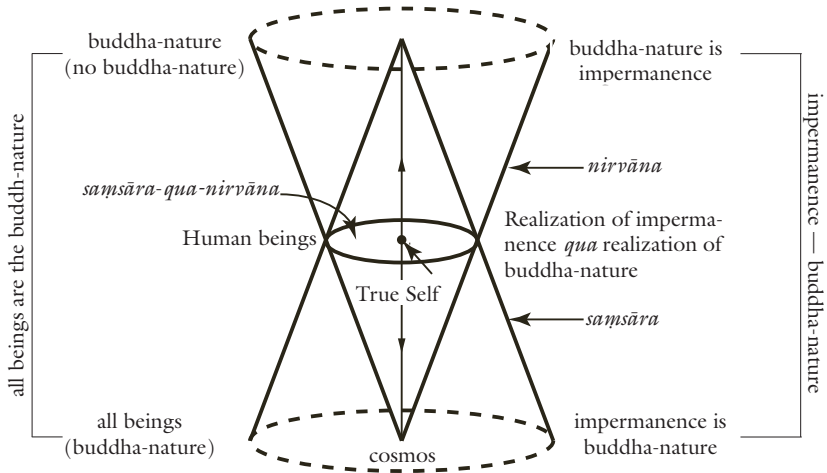


Figure 3. “The dynamic and non-dualistic structure of ‘Whole-being is the buddha-nature’ or impermanence–buddha-nature” (ABE 1992, 59).

1. The cone of actuality stands upright. The whole of being (the cosmos) is the base and the ego is the tip. This cone is *samsāra*.
2. The inverted cone of virtuality has buddha-nature as its base. This cone is *nirvāna*. Abe does not provide a label for the tip of this cone. We would like to suggest the “image or figure of Buddha,” the “intention to become Buddha,” or the “no-self” (which we will discuss later).
3. The awakened self is situated at the intersection of the two cones (on the level of human beings, in conformity with the Buddhist tradition that enlightenment is accessible only at the human level and not at higher or lower levels). This is *samsara qua nirvana*.

According to the logic of the scheme, the difference between an awakened and unawakened individual is that for the unawakened, the two dimensions (buddha-nature and whole-being, *nirvāna* and *samsāra*) are not distinguished but objectified in the sense that the individual reduces them to his or her own size (an intermediate section of the cone). The authentic or “true” self contracts that section to a single point (identified on the scheme), and in so doing, achieves the pure ontological distinction between buddha-nature and whole-being. The awakened individual also amplifies them and realizes their infinite nature (the bases of the cones are portrayed as dotted lines, to indicate bottomlessness). The unawakened individual inhabits a small cone whose base is “human beings” and whose tip is “ego.” The authentic self breaks through the human plane with the help of the “image or figure of Buddha,” the “intention to become the Buddha,” or the “no-self” that we have suggested as the tip of the inverted cone. This testifies to the actuality of the virtual buddha-nature and provides a guideline for breaking through the purely human circle by drawing attention to the conditions for the possibility of this circle, namely, the pure dimensions of ground and occasion.

In this way a human being is able to overcome egoism, to avoid shrinking the cones to the constrained, deluded world, and thus to live at the intersection of the cones—the one serving as a ground and the other as an occasion. Abe cites Hegel’s *Science of Logic* to argue that these dimensions are distinct but not separate or separable: “The truth is not their lack of distinction, but that they are not the same, that they are abso-

lutely distinct, and yet unseparated and inseparable.” Dōgen expresses a similar perspective when he writes that “all beings are all beings, inseparable from each other yet without losing individuality” (ABE 1992, 61 and 64).

This scheme points to the third aspect, the true self. What does this really mean? How is it possible to dwell on that bottomless level?

The Third Aspect: The Decentered Circle

The Passive Aspect: Non-doing

Dōgen’s model has parallels to the three series of time in Deleuze’s third synthesis of time (definitive action, becoming-equal, equalizing the unequal). We would argue that these aspects of action are preceded by *zazen*—primordial non-action. Tragic heroes like Hamlet and Oedipus hesitated before performing their “definitive actions.” But they were unaware that this very hesitation, or non-action, constituted a deeper level, the passive synthesis of the empty form of time.

Dōgen describes *zazen* as an act of “non-doing” in which the “true form of self (自己の正躰) is realized” (SZ, 171). This can be achieved not by moving forward, but rather by “taking a step back”:

Take the backward step of turning the light and shining it back. Of themselves body and mind drop away and your original face will appear. (BIELEFELDT 1988, 176)

By taking a step back⁷ and turning the light inwards, one goes beyond thinking (*shiryō*) and not-thinking (*fushiryō*), and moves toward without-thinking (*hishiryō*). The thinking “I” is not eradicated, but made transparent—in the mode of without-thinking, it becomes an organ of the “true self,” which constantly generates as well as negates thoughts. Ordinary thinking revolves around intentions and plans; without-thinking is free from intentionality:

Without-thinking is distinct from thinking and not thinking precisely in not assuming any intentional activity whatsoever: it neither affirms

7. The “step back” has also been a recurrent theme in the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato to Heidegger (cf. HEIDEGGER 2002).

nor denies, accepts nor rejects, believes nor disbelieves. In fact, it does not objectify implicitly or explicitly. (KASULIS 1985, 72–3)

During everyday activities, we sometimes experience breaks where without-thinking suspends our usual state of mind. Kasulis gives the example of a man taking a short rest while mowing his lawn. The man “simply is as he is without any intentional activity at all” (73). For a moment, he is not doing anything, yet he is completely present. Kasulis tells us that without-thinking is a pre-reflective state of mind that “supplies the raw material out of which the later reflective thinking act develops” (74). The “full and self-contained” present moment is the time when the raw data of experience is collected:

Consequently, the present moment of experience is always full and self-contained. Only when we engage in thinking or not-thinking and objectify the experience of a past moment does that experience seem limited and capable of being fully analyzed. (KASULIS 1985, 76)

For Kasulis, without-thinking occurs at the moment when we are detached from immediate action and volition. During this moment a “receptive intuition” behind the thinking self emerges and enables one to fully experience time in its “suchness.” (The present moment in this context means the suchness of time or the “empty form of time” in Deleuze’s terms.)

In Kasulis’s example, the thinking self is suspended and resumed when the pure experience of suchness is replaced by intellectual understanding. In the context of *zazen*, it makes more sense not to separate these processes in time but to affirm their contemporaneity in the experiencing self. In *zazen* one experiences the “true form of self” in the without-thinking mode. The thinking “I” is experienced in the without-thinking mode as the self’s Other. Dōgen states that: “There is someone in non-thinking and this someone maintains us” (BIELEFELDT 1988, 189). In this statement, we can detect a fracture similar to the one that Deleuze discusses in the third synthesis of time.

Dōgen tells us that buddhas do not necessarily know that they are enlightened beings (MD, 69), because if such a thought appeared in their consciousness, it would immediately drop away. Enlightenment is an unopposed movement of difference itself. It is the constant process of

dropping away, which leaves only traces, the empty shells of something that has already moved beyond:

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, the body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly. (MD, 70)

We are compelled to ask, Who is it that thus comes? In this “dropping away,” the non-doing of the “true self” could be misunderstood as merely doing nothing. The limited self’s conditioned way of thinking appears inside without-thinking as a particular mode of being within the all-encompassing contemplation of enlightened beings:

Only buddhas know the true self. People outside the way regard what is not the self as the self. But what buddhas call the self is the entire universe. Therefore, there is never an entire universe that is not the self, with or without knowing it. (MD, 164)

I am not only the “thinking I” who is a being in time, and the self who is the “receptive intuition” (DR, 86) behind the thinking, but I am also a contemplation of the buddhas themselves. The receptive intuition of the passive self connects my being with the contemplation of the *dharma* body of the self.

Thus the “whole of time” is present in the experience of sitting still, and in the fracture of the self as the self confronts the Other within itself. What makes *zazen* the activity of the “true self” is that it does not try to overcome this fracture by filling it with a new identity, (as did Kant, according to Deleuze, see DR, 87). The fracture is not seen as a “fault,” but rather as the source of non-dual activity. The fracture itself is the “true form of self,” and the separation created by the fracture is exposed as an illusion when the true form of difference is understood.

The Active Aspect: “Figuring” to Become a Buddha

Zazen cannot have a direct goal, and progress along the path cannot be envisioned as movement from point A to point B, since in the reality of practice-authentication, every moment of practice is directly linked

to realization, as ABE demonstrated (1992, 26). In realization, A and B interpenetrate. AB is constantly repositioning or decentering itself as an “emerging trace of enlightenment.” The direct contact and constant decentering of AB is illustrated in Dōgen’s discussion of the famous *kōan* “Nanyue polishes a tile,” which is presented in *Zazenshin*:

When the Chan master Daji of Jiangxi⁸ was studying with the Chan master Dahui of Nanyue⁹, after intimately receiving the mind seal, he always sat in meditation. Once Nanyue went to Daji and said, “Worthy one, what are you figuring to do, sitting there in meditation?” Jiangxi said, “I’m figuring to make a Buddha.” At this point, Nanyue took up a tile and began to rub it on a stone. At length, Daji asked, “Master what are you doing?” Nanyue said, “I’m polishing this to make a mirror.” Daji said, “How can you produce a mirror by polishing a tile?” (BIELEFELDT 1988, 191–3, names changed to pinyin)

In the classical understanding of this *kōan*, Mazu was assumed to be “struggling to gain enlightenment” (HEINE 2004, 5). Huairang was demonstrating to Mazu that *zazen* has no goal whatsoever and that sitting still in order to become a Buddha is pointless. Dōgen completely overturns that common interpretation. For him, “figuring” (圖) is the process of sitting and polishing:

[S]eated meditation is always figuring to make a Buddha, is always the figuring of making a Buddha. This figuring must be prior to making a Buddha; it must be subsequent to making a Buddha; and it must be at the very moment of making a Buddha. (BIELEFELDT 1988, 192)

Creating a buddha is an event happening in the suchness of the present moment (正当恁麼時). Figuring to become a buddha constitutes the figure of buddha-production (圖作仏). This figure is a two-sided symbolon: “before,” where enlightenment is perceived as “not yet,” and “after,” in which one has already become a buddha. The intention to become a Buddha brings the totality of time into the present moment of prac-

8. Daji (Great Tranquillity) is the posthumous name of Mazu Daoyi (709–788), who taught in Jiangxi province.

9. Dahui (Great Wisdom) is the posthumous name of Nanyue Huairang (677–744) from Nanyue province.

tice and the not-yet-enlightened self becomes identical with the already-enlightened self in the “present of metamorphosis,” to borrow Deleuze’s term (DR, 89). The entire event is thus described later as “killing Buddha”:

At the very moment that we are seated Buddha we are killing Buddha [...]. Although the word “kill” here is identical with that used by ordinary people, [...] its meaning is not the same. Moreover we must investigate in what form it is that a seated Buddha is killing Buddha. Taking up the fact that it is itself a virtue of the Buddha to kill a Buddha (殺仏), we should study whether we are killers (殺人) or not. (BIELEFELDT, 32; SG I, 133)

As soon as the small self becomes buddha, it turns against the self (see DR, 89) and erases both sides of the symbolon—the image of the self and the image of the Buddha. Killing is an event that takes place in the without-thinking mode of practice, and it eradicates both sides of the symbolon, the ego as well as the figure of Buddha (in Abe’s scheme). These sides are figured in the process of buddha-production.

Could “figuring” be considered an activity of “without-thinking”? In figuring to become a buddha, we do not really intend to become a buddha, but we are making both the goal and its negation visible; we are making the conditionality of such “maps” or “figures” transparent by introducing the empty form of time into the practice.

The division of the self disappears as soon as the practitioner takes a step back. In stepping back, both sides of the symbolon of the self become visible and are immediately discarded as empty shells. In this act of stepping back and dropping away, the repetition of the difference itself is affirmed: all acts are seen as non-acts in the non-doing of *zazen*.

As we have seen, in the Chan/Zen tradition there are some similarities to the “enormous act” (killing Buddha) on the rhetorical level, but the practice of seated meditation itself constitutes the “figuring” of the Buddha in the mode of without-thinking and non-doing, where the fracture of I and Self is continuously reenacted in its numerous manifestations. The faces constantly return, the images are formed again and again, but as soon as they appear, they drop away. It is this incessant process of stepping back and dropping away that enables the “true return” of the

practitioner to the pure past, which in turn enables the eternal return of the old buddhas:

Although all forty Buddhist patriarchs are old buddhas—they have a mind, they have a body, they have a state of brightness and a national land, they have passed away some time ago and they have not yet passed away. Both the “already passed away” and “not yet passed away” should be seen as the virtue of old buddhas. Studying the path of old buddhas is authenticating the path of old buddhas. From one generation to the next the old buddhas [emerge]. Although the “old” in old buddha appears to be same as “old” in the expression “new and old” it completely overcomes the past and present by directly connecting them [...].

The self that does not abide in the old buddhas would not know whence the old buddhas emerge. The one who knows where the old buddhas abide is the old buddha. (SG, 123)

Dōgen hereby circumvents the historical past of the Buddhist patriarchs and the buddhas of the “present of metamorphosis” by claiming that all buddhas and patriarchs appear in the time of the “authentication of the path.” Therefore, enlightenment is the convergence of two sources: practicing *zazen* and transmitting the teaching from the direct lineage of Shakyamuni Buddha. Only by sitting still can you actually “know” the old buddhas, and you will become at home in the place from which the buddhas emerge. This is the place where the passive self becomes the active self of the Buddha who constantly generates buddhas. But, paradoxically, since this place is only accessible through the practice of dropping away, one can only abide in the presence of the old buddhas through the dropping away of the mind of the old buddhas:

Standing before the different buddhas, the mind of the old buddhas blossoms, standing behind the different buddhas the mind of the old Buddhas forms its fruits, standing before the mind of the old buddhas the mind of the old buddhas will drop away (古仏心脱落). (SG, 117)

Dōgen admonishes us against attaching ourselves to the present moment, since this would create a fixed center and suspend the eternal return of the Buddhas. In practicing *zazen*, we disengage time and liberate its pure empty form, so that time becomes the essence of practice.

PRACTICING TIME

This brings us back to our original subject, the “practice of time.” Temporal life¹⁰ is a continuous process of contraction and contemplation, which in daily life is subordinated to the goals and requirements of worldly activities. Time or temporality is implicitly the horizon of all activities, and temporal phenomena such as goals, ideals and wishes are made explicit. In order to “practice” time, it is necessary first to put aside the direct aims of one’s activity and to relax one’s fixation on temporal phenomena (ideas, desired objects, recollections, etc.). The only “aim” must be observation or contemplation itself.

According to Bergson, the requirements, aims, and tools of action restrict the use of our “memory-cone”: we recall only that which is related to our present activity. If we discard the goals of our activity, then the “filter” of memory becomes more porous, more memories become relevant to our present activity, and our vision of objects and ideas becomes more nuanced. But just as outer goals or fixations constrain or filter the mind, so can the inner search for nuance become a limiting factor that impairs pure temporality.

The mirror of the past must become the mirror of the pure past in order to adequately reflect the present. In this “third stage,” one returns in a certain sense to the first stage, which is characterized by contemplation and finding joy in contemplation. When we implicitly have the whole of memory at our disposal, however, we are not as dependent on contracted events. The first and second passive syntheses are also passive in the sense that they lack volition and are determined by empirical circumstances. It is through the pure past that the self becomes more autonomous, and it is through passivity toward habitual and ordinary actions that one becomes active in a higher sense, more fully and thoroughly responsive to the world.

We may therefore distinguish three steps in the practice:

- I. One contemplates, sets aside action-oriented goals, approaches pure contemplation as “passive synthesis,” and contracts the present in

10. This is a pleonasm, but one cannot overemphasize the sense in which the temporality of life calls us back us from the “eternal” world of ideas.

pure contemplation. One becomes suffused with contentment during this contemplation.¹¹

2. At the same time, one relaxes the filter to the past, allowing more and more memories to surface, without holding onto them. One collects the whole of past, which has always been the basis of and condition for empirical duration, but this is now “taken upon oneself.” In this way, one transcends the empirical self and approaches one’s condition or ground.
3. In order to persevere in the practice of time, one must ultimately discard even the idea of practice, go beyond the ground, which also liberates the ground, and become different without enslaving oneself to the Different.

There is a point at which the “active” version of Deleuze’s tragic heroes and the “passive” version of Dōgen’s *shikantaza* intersect. The tragic hero becomes equal to the unequal, leaving behind the actor (the empirical self, formed by contemplation) and the ground of action (memory). This is free action, which has at its disposal unlimited potential for change and metamorphosis; it is the unfettered play of ground and occasion. At the same time, the antihero of a zen-monk not only lets go of all temporal phenomena or *dharmas*, but at a certain point breaks free from the ground of their appearing (“kills the Buddha”), forever going “beyond Buddha.”

Approaching the same situation from entirely different directions, the actor and non-actor achieve a similar result: the practice of time or enlightened becoming. The actor makes use of “definitive action” (to kill God or the father, in Deleuze’s terms) and the non-actor, “definitive non-action” (sitting still and figuring to become a buddha). The scope and impossibility of action paralyzes the actor and forces him into passivity, which is an indirect result of his striving. This passivity is approached directly by the non-actor, but in both cases the actors transcend their form of practice (either “doing” or “non-doing”) and achieve the pure practice of time.

11. Spinoza (*Ethics*, III, prop. 53) states that when the mind contemplates itself and its power of activity, it is affected by joy (*Cum Mens se ipsam, suamque agendi potentiam contemplatur, laetatur*, SPINOZA 1999: 286).

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