

# Cognition Embodied in Buddhist Philosophy—A Comparative Reflection of Dōgen and Heidegger

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Contrary to occidental philosophy, oriented to grasping and solidifying the principles of essential being (*ontos on*), Buddhism seeks to understand the aspect of our existence that experiences suffering in life. In the East Asian languages Human beings are described as Inter-Beings in that they are enveloped by the *topos* of life and death. From breath to breath, our life is bound to the moments of emerging and vanishing, being and non-being in an essential unity. Dōgen's philosophical thinking integrated this conception with the embodied cognition of both thinking and acting self. In the phenomenological point of view, Heidegger (1927; 1993) emphasizes Being as bound to fundamental substantiality, which borders at the *Ab-grund*, falling into nothingness. With Dōgen, the unity-within-contrast of life and death is exemplified in our breathing, because it achieves the unity of body and cognition which can be called "*corpus*." In perfect contrast, the essential reflection for Heidegger is that of grasping the fundament of Being in the world, which represents the actualization of a Thinking-Being-Unity. The goal of this comparison is to fundamentally grasp what is the essentiality of being, life, and recognition (in Japanese *jikaku* 自覚) bound to embodied cognition in our globalized world.

*Keywords:* embodied cognition, Dōgen, Heidegger, comparative reflection, philosophy in life

## 1. Phenomenology and Buddhist Philosophy—the Main Focus of this Article

Buddhism and Phenomenology present several similar basic ideas of thinking. One of these similarities is their basic on phenomena. In contrast to the transcendental philosophy of Kant, they question primarily what "*quid facti*" is but not what "*quid juris*" is.<sup>1</sup> Cognition in Buddhist philosophy is never separated from the phenomena of real things in the empirical world. This point of view enables us to compare Dōgen and Heidegger. Heidegger (1927; 1993) postulates that phenomenology is a method for investigating which shows itself openly, and which is obvious in itself. His phenomenology expresses a maxim, pointing "*to the things themselves!*"<sup>2</sup>

Instead of a speculative deduction of categories, his thought in Phenomeno-Logos goes on to reflect what is the essential Being hidden in the background of the phenomena. For Dōgen, reflection leads primarily to a transparent cognition transcending our self and the limit of our knowledge (in the term of Dōgen: *tōdatsu* 透脱) in which we see the fundamental causality of our suffering, and the confusion or the problems of our tangible

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life.<sup>3</sup> For Dōgen, the ultimate purpose of thinking is to use it as a means of transcending our reliance on thinking in order to more fully harmonize with the eternal truth (*dharma*).<sup>4</sup> Independent from speculation, the Buddhist law of eternal truth, *dharma*, is to grasp the phenomenon of tangible life. Sensory perception is not secondary, attached to cognition, because knowledge—as cognition integrated into bodily existence—is the primary source in *Buddhist Philosophy of thinking-recognizing-acting-system of dharma*—an eternal truth viewed from an extended spectrum of historical and contemporary thought in critical and self-critical reflections.

Heidegger (1927; 1993) said, “To the things themselves!” Here the reviewer approaches things, grasps and construes the basic way of Being in Phenomeno-Logos. The method is oriented to collecting things from phenomena and exhibiting them in the language of logos (*legein*).<sup>5</sup> The viewer is primarily the thinking one who is able to state what the fundamental principle of being throughout all phenomena is.

With Dōgen, a viewer is a thinking and acting person in daily life. Life is a phenomenon where we seek to grasp what truth is. Let us reflect on the fundamental ideas of Heidegger and Dōgen by comparing their essential works, *Sein und Zeit* and *shōbō genzō*.

## 2. The Relation of “Life and Death” by Heidegger—“Being and Time”

With Heidegger, the key concept of the *Being there for death* is the focal point of his discourse. He states that after the end of our lives there will be a dimension of death. There is a linear, finite development inherent to life necessary for us to reach the totality of our existence in the world. The terminal point is death. Death appears as the loss of being. Even if the focus on the “Ab-grund” or “Nothingness”<sup>6</sup> in the recognition of passing time seems to be similar to the Buddhist cognition of *anitya*,<sup>7</sup> it is made clear by Heidegger (1927; 1993) that time, Being, and self are bound to the substantial existence associated with eternal cognitions.

Is, as Heidegger asserts, our existence in the world a constant journey towards death in a finite series of “not yet” moments? Is death a termination of existence, and is Being in life something incomplete? Heidegger discusses these problems and shows that our existence is a “not-yet” to death. For Heidegger, death is still beyond all phenomena; it has not yet been integrated into the problem of being. Heidegger (1927; 1993) indicates a successive coming-into-being to arrive at the end; the impending death of our being. The problem of death (for Heidegger) is integrated into existence. The Being thrown into the field of imminent death causes fear. Fear of death is integrated into *Being-in-the-World*. Since the subject of fear is present even in our Being-in-the-World, we might say: “*Angst ängstet sich*”/“*Fear is afraid*”.<sup>8</sup>

Heidegger is concerned with the question of to what extent this nameless fear can be overcome. In his early works as “Being and Time,” he arrives at the conclusion that through encountering the *void-ness* of the existential *Ab-grund*, one tries to overcome existential “fear” and create the possibility of finally becoming oneself, primarily through “*an impassioned freedom towards death*”<sup>9</sup> having finally broken away from the illusions of self, factuality, whereas the fear and anxiety could not be completely eliminated. He emphasizes the recognition of our Being in a decisive view that this life is not necessarily independent of “anxiety.” This position shows a confrontation with the dichotomy of life and death and a resolve to further that confrontation, in that one is to savor the depths of being, in contrast to its end and in the opening up of existence.

## 3. Dōgen’s Approach to the Problem of “Life and Death”—“Shōbō Genzō”

With Dōgen, *shōbō genzō* (正法眼藏), for example in his secret records, Vol. *shōji* (生死)/“The Unity of Life-Death,” a different vision of the same problem is evident. Dōgen (1990; 2005).<sup>10</sup>

The idea, generally held worldwide, that death is another dimension after the end of life, is erroneous. Life-death is an entity present in our bodily life from our birth onwards. It is wrong to think and act as if we negated one half of this pair of opposites, life-death, being and non-being, clinging only to the moment of being. (23; 195)

What is being asserted above is the Zen analysis that these opposites must be perceived not only in life-death, being, and non-being, but also, through our every action, through every act of *retaining and releasing*, *hajō-hōgyō/hajū-hōgyō*.<sup>11</sup>

Paramount is the notion that Dōgen does not see the phenomenon of life and death as a duality. Life-Death (as a word-for-word translation of the Zen Buddhist term *shōji* 生死) is the collective phenomenon of existential wholeness. This is based on the recognition of the principle of Being generally followed in Buddhism: *anitya*. That is, all phenomena are impermanent; nothing persists and is eternal except for the universal truth, *dharma*, which also includes the vanishing of phenomena within the totality of reality. The substratum of being, as such, in Mahayana Buddhism is *held empty and open* with the concept of “*śūnyatā*.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the substratum of being is not manifested because thinking, regarding, reflecting, and acting are present in the midst of real, empirical life, rather, the totality of the phenomenon is *anitya*, one aspect of the dynamic change between all things. No divine creator is established or necessary. The historical Buddha is understood by many to be one of the most important guides to help overcome suffering and conflict, but conceptually, he is not *God* in the monotheistic “absolute creator of all beings” sense of the word. Because the Buddha’s practice of *dharma* is often conceived of as nearing perfection, it is often understood to be an expression of the Absolute. In his limited lifespan, he formulated a number of irrefutable ways to understand and manifest (*dharma*) and lived up to them. He helped relieve the suffering of mankind by teaching the causes of suffering and the necessary insights to overcome it. However, the Buddha could not alter the universal principle of *anitya*; the instability of all things, their occurrence, development, maturation, and vanishing.

Dōgen (1980; 1993; 2005) says that there is an absolute, irrefutable truth in the real, empirical being of our lives, and the conditions of the world. In his lectures, he points out that our present life, with the two aspects, of appearing and disappearing/dying present each of us with a unique, decisive opportunity for experiencing and grasping our “Buddha nature.” This is the hidden potential in each individual to find peace within the experiences of one’s own life and to become a nascent Buddha, i.e., a *bodhisattva*. Dōgen explains that *nirvāṇa*, the guiding principle of Buddhism, is not associated with higher transcendence beyond life.<sup>13</sup> On the contrary, *nirvāṇa* is here and now, to be realized both by intellectual and real, empirical actions: We must learn to hold on to our living life and, at the same time, to let it loose. The inverse is also true, we must learn to unflinchingly embrace dying/death and also learn to let it loose, i.e., to allow ourselves to be reborn into each moment.

Thus life is *not life-life*, but a given *so-be-it*; it is *life-death*. Death is *no longer dying-death*, but in reality *death-life*. In this way *nirvāṇa* is realized, as the undisturbed-yet-never-fixated silence, clearness-and-coolness -in-awareness of the eternal truth, *dharma*.

#### **4. An Elaboration of the Problem of “Life and Death” by Heidegger and by Dōgen—Giving Rise to a New Understanding via Comparative Philosophy**

Both Heidegger and Dōgen elaborate on the same topics: the relationship between life and death, our existence that carries the potential of death, and the confrontation with, and the solution of, the problems arising in this connection. The results of some comparative reflections may be summarized as follows: The marked difference between Dōgen and Heidegger becomes obvious in Heidegger’s positing of death as the end of being

in time, i.e., as the absolute opposite to being. Even though death at any time will be immanent with regard to being, there is a *dual split* between being and death. Even though in Heidegger's late work "Zeit und Sein" (and in the proceedings of the Zollikon Seminar) where "*Lichtung und Verbergung/clearing and hiding*"<sup>14</sup> are mentioned, the discourse is based nevertheless on existing time, in connection with original being; and therefore *clearing and hiding* remain in ever present subsistence.

With Dōgen, this is different because of the paramount principle of the Buddhist dynamic of being: *anitya*. What remains ever present is not being, neither non-being nor nothingness, but *anitya*, the constant appearing, lingering, and vanishing of this moment (*kshana bhangha*)<sup>15</sup> and all distinctions within it, which exist in space, in their dynamic change from *being to non-being*. The "Man" (one) is the term Heidegger uses to suggest a persistent being destined for death. Its being in itself implies the inevitable loss of being; and out of this arises the problem of abstract fear. In contrast to this, Dōgen's conception of life-death, as encompassing being and non-being, is integrated as an indivisible pair opposites, where even our clearest example of life, in actuality expresses a full dimension of life-death. Holding/retaining (*hajū* 把住 or *hajō* 把定) in Zen recognition is constantly accompanied by the opposite, i.e., releasing/letting go (*hōgyō* 放行).

### 5. Cognition as "Veritas Transcendens" or Cognition as "Corpus?"—Toward the Embodied Cognition in Dialogue of Philosophy

Per the above philosophical comparisons, an important question is raised: Do we hold, as does Heidegger, the problem of death to be a prelude to the abyss of nothingness or do we accept as Dōgen's view of a dynamic principle of humanity and all beings within the transparency and tranquility of what can be construed as a single, great action, a single great mind? The problem of "*Zeitigung/Temporalizing*" is important for visualizing the moment of *Being-in-the-World* by Heidegger.<sup>16</sup> With Dōgen, "*uji*" (有時)<sup>17</sup> refers to an opposite interpretation, that time is in us and that it passes and disappears from one moment to the next, reflecting our existence here and now. Yet, this moment is always there, enabling us to create and collect manifold *karman*. Both ways of thinking concentrate on the essence of time: Dōgen urges us to realize the *eternal truth to be recognized and actualized through reality, in empirical life*; Heidegger thinks in phenomenological terms: "Being is nothing but *transcendens*;" "The transcendence of being is excellent insofar as it allows for the possibility and necessity of the most radical *individuation*. Any opening up of being as *transcendens* is phenomenological truth as *veritas transcendentalis*."<sup>18</sup>

### 6. Conclusion

The following provisional balance can be struck between the views presented in this short article: Dōgen's principle is how far the real empirical self, by totally accepting and manifesting its true nature, can grasp and embody *dharma* awareness. I call this *corpus*,<sup>19</sup> a body with the unlimited capability of opening *dharma*, in other words, an insistent and conscious manifestation of our True Self in daily life. Consideration of Dōgen's Zen prompts reevaluation of Heidegger's view insofar as the opening of "Being-in-the-World" does not remain, only *transcendens*, but also it may point to a return of the *world immanence* to life in the direction of *embodied cognition*. This will produce a number of opportunities for a dialogue between Buddhist and Occidental Philosophy in our globalized world.

## Notes

1. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason), B 116-117, A 84-85. One of the results of the international symposium May 2012 in Prague, “Phenomenology and Buddhism” (“Leiberfahrung und Selbst. Phänomenologie und Buddhismus” organized by the University of Prague) was that the Buddhist approach to the phenomena of life and experience viewed and grasped as a source to clarify and embody an insight and cognition shows the specific similarity to the origin of the thinking method of Phenomenology.
2. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, § 7, Tübingen 1993, p. 27. *Being and Time*, § 7, translated by Macquarrine & Robinson, 1962, p. 50.
3. “Phenomeno-logos”: Heidegger, *ibidem*, 1993, p. 27; *Being and Time*, *ibidem*, pp.49-50. Dōgen, *shōbō genzō* in different versions: See the Reference. Of course, as the Zen Buddhist way of thinking Dōgen’s reflection is constantly based on *zazen*, the meditative practice accompanied by clear perception and consciousness which is held absolutely transparently in the unity of body and mind. Several Dōgen adherents emphasize that this way of the thought is “beyond all thinking”, for example with the citation of Dōgen’s term *hi-shiryō* 非思量. It is a *transcending thought* from a briefly logical or analytical reflection into the *transparent recognition in perceiving of all being includes also one’s own self* (without any mystification or esoteric!), as Dōgen remarked with the term of *tōdatsu* 透脱 in his *shōbō genzō*, vol. *zenki* 全機.
4. Dōgen, *shōbō genzō*, vol. 全機 *zenki* represents the “full activity” of grasping the essential truth of Buddhism (*dharma*) in daily life. The recognition of the truth shows the significance of the “*transcendence*” accompanied by the “*transparent*” view of overcoming the one’s own border of the cognition embodied in daily life. See the term of 透脱 *tōdatsu* in the above mentioned volume.
5. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 47, 1993, p. 237. Cf. Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund*, 13. Vorlesung, in: *Complete Works*, vol. 10, Frankfurt a. M. 1997, p. 91/95.
6. Heidegger: *Sein und Zeit*, § 47, 1993, p. 237. *Being and Time*, pp. 280-281. Cf. The statement of Heidegger: “Da-sein heißt: Hineingehaltenheit in das Nichts”, in: *Was ist Metaphysik?* Freiburg i.Br. 1943.
7. *Anitya* (sansk.), 無常 *mujō* (jap.). See the reference, Takasaki, Hayashima.
8. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, § 53, Tübingen 1993, p. 266.
9. Heidegger, *ibidem*, p. 266. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1962), p. 311.
10. Dōgen, *shōbō genzō*: Ed. by Nakamura S., Nagoya 1990, pp. 22-25. Ed. by Masutani, Tokyo 2005, vol. 8, pp. 189-99.
11. Term of Zen Buddhism. *hajō-hōgyō* 把定・放行/*hajū-hōgyō*. 把住・放行. See Iriya, Koga, *Lexicon of the Zen Terminology*, p.274. See Inagaki, *A Glossary of Zen Terms*.
12. *Sūnyatā*: emptiness, one of the most important principles of the Mahayana Buddhist Philosophy. Nāgārjuna, *Mūla Mādhyamaka Kārika*, see the Reference, Weber-Brosamer & Back.
13. *Shōji soku nehan* 生死即涅槃; *samsāra sive nirvāṇa*. See Dōgen, *shōbō genzō*, secret volume, *shōji* 生死, the unseparated Oneness of Life-Death. Hashi, *Die Dynamik von Sein und Nichts* (2004), Main Section II. Hashi, „Transzendenz sive Immanenz“, in: *Religionen nach der Säkularisierung*, Ed. by Hödl and Futerknecht, 2011.
14. Heidegger, “Zeit und Sein”, in: *Complete Works*, vol. 14, 2007.
15. *Kshana bhangha, setsuna-metsu* 刹那滅, Takasaki, Hayashima, 1994, 261ff.
16. Heidegger, *Das In-der-Welt-Sein*, in: *Sein und Zeit*.
17. *Uji* 有時 (Being Time, that is there), in: Dōgen, *shōbō genzō*. See the Reference.
18. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §-7, p. 38. Translated by the author of this article. Cf. *Being and Time* (1962), p. 62.
19. Corresponding to Sanskrit the *corpus* is “kāya”: body, essentiality, entity. The “corpus” here means “A self as an unseparated oneness of body and mind, which bears an entity of the essential truth”. See Hashi, 2012, p. 206. Hashi, *Philosophische Anthropologie zur globalen Welt* (2014, LIT), Main Section I. I do not mind that this comparison of Heidegger and Dōgen can be discussed completely in this short article: My further discourses are shown in my contribution, “*Ort zum Erfassen der Wahrheit—corpus zur Verkörperung der Wahrheit*”, which will be published in 2014 in the collected work, “Phenomenology and Buddhism” (Nordhausen: T. Bautz), ed. by H.R. Sepp.

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