

AN ANALYSIS OF RHETORIC AND TOTAL EXERTION IN DOGEN:

A CRITIQUE OF “THE REASON OF WORDS AND LETTERS”

A THESIS

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## Introduction

Penetrating the depth of Dogen's genius and the implications of his thought remains an open issue with many avenues for investigation. Hee-Jin Kim was one of the first to take on this task in English with his book *Dogen Kigen: Mystical Realist*, which fleshed out the life and philosophy of Dogen with more accuracy and nuance than any previous attempts. His next publication, "The Reason of Words and Letters: Dogen and Koan Language," went back to the first step in any investigation of Dogen's life and philosophy: the way he used language. This is important because all we have left of Dogen today are his writings. Therefore it is imperative to understand what the value of words were to Dogen, and how he may have intended to use them. Kim dives into this issue with brilliant subtlety while still retaining a vision for the place of language in Dogen's wider philosophy. He sees an immediate value in Dogen's words which other interpreters and scholars have failed to notice; for Dogen, *words as ends in themselves* could be realized as the way.<sup>1</sup> Kim calls this view the "realizational view" of language. Despite this important insight into Dogen's thought and writing, Kim still claims that Dogen heavily favored a rational way of using language rather than a rhetorical approach.<sup>2</sup>

Rhetorical approaches for Kim seem to be ones that do not directly employ a logical progression to try to convey some meaning. Instead these approaches seek to move one toward enlightenment by breaking them out of their ordinary experience through abnormal means. Some examples of this type of rhetoric include strategies like "Lin-chi's thundering shout", "Huang-po's training stick" and other shock tactics. In addition, Kim points to a quote from Dogen in which he says, "Talks such as 'the east mountain walks over the water', nan-ch'uan's sickle, and

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<sup>1</sup> Hee-Jin Kim, "The Reason of Words and Letters: Dogen and Koan Language," *Studies in East Asian Buddhism* No. 2 (1985): 58. "The way" referring to enlightenment.

<sup>2</sup> Kim, "Words and Letters," 56.

the like (koans)...are incomprehensible only to (fools)".<sup>3</sup> Through quotes like these, Kim points out Dogen's belief that some Buddhist koans that are traditionally interpreted as having purely rhetorical aims should instead be interpreted as having a rational message. He claims that Dogen's belief in the rationality of his own words, even when they become almost incomprehensible, pervades his writing. As a result, Kim does not explore the more "irrational" rhetorical side of Dogen's writing.

I will briefly outline Dogen's "realizational" view of language and then demonstrate how it can be understood not only as a philosophical basis behind his writing, but also as a platform for an intentional rhetorical technique. I will equate this rhetorical technique with Dale Wright's conception of "rhetoric of direct pointing". Direct pointing is a prominent rhetorical method in the Zen tradition that makes use of esoteric actions to express the inexpressible.<sup>4</sup> However, it took on a new role with Dogen: where it had previously been a silent technique articulated through actions, Dogen expressed the method through words. In the second half of the paper, I will show that "direct pointing" rests on Dogen's important principle of total exertion. I will explore how total exertion can be used as a lens for better understanding his koan interpretations- which are themselves often koans- and poetic imagery. Kim acknowledges the importance of total exertion in Dogen's philosophy, but does not elaborate enough on its specific role in texts. Focusing on total exertion in Dogen's writing will not only provide new meaning to previously esoteric passages, but will also reveal new ways to understand the term itself.

Scholars seem to shy away from further exploration into the main topics of "The Reason of Words and Letters". Little criticism of the article exists and Kim's ideas are widely accepted

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<sup>3</sup> Kim, "Reason of Words and Letters," 56-57.

<sup>4</sup> Dale S. Wright, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91-94.

in the field of Dogen studies.<sup>5</sup> The only real opposition to Kim's conception of Dogen's koan philosophy is from Heine, but he does not find Kim's arguments to be false, just "misleading".<sup>6</sup> Heine argues that Kim neglects some important rhetorical aspects of Dogen's writing. However, Heine's arguments revolve around forays into the wider societal factors that impacted Dogen, specifically the psychology of the monastic community.<sup>7</sup> Although he does show that Dogen's writing efforts were certainly more rhetorical than Kim lets on, I will only be focusing on rhetoric as it relates to Dogen's realizational view of language.

### **The Realizational View**

A brief summary of Kim's outline of the realizational view begins with the statement "words as ends in themselves could be realized as the way" in juxtaposition to a commonly held view among scholars that Kim and Dale Wright call the "instrumentalist view". In *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism* Wright says, "According to this understanding, language is an instrument or tool available for our use in achieving certain specific communicative goals...The success of this theory...turns on the capacity to maintain strict separation between goals and means".<sup>8</sup> In effect, this view assumes that there is intangible meaning that exists outside of language, which must then be translated into words. This attitude underlies the belief that the 'meaning' of Zen is something beyond words and cannot be found in language itself. The instrumentalist view manifests itself among scholars in a tendency to interpret Zen koans as designed to confound the intellect completely until the subject transcends language and thought altogether. Language is used only as a tool to attain some greater meaning and is then left

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Heine, "Koans in the Dogen Tradition: How and Why Dogen Does What He Does With Koans," *Philosophy East and West* 54, no. 1 (2004); <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1399859>.

<sup>6</sup> Heine, "Koans in the Dogen Tradition," 2.

<sup>7</sup> Heine, "Koans in the Dogen Tradition," 4.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Meditations*, 65.

behind. Some scholars such as Matsumoto Shiro even take the stance that Dogen was “anti-learning or anti-intellect”.<sup>9</sup>

Kim argues for a view of Dogen’s language in which words are not used in an attempt to eradicate their own usefulness. With that view dismissed, it would seem the only remaining path for the instrumentalist would be to interpret Dogen’s writing and koan at face value, and accept that a pure intellectual understanding of them was their intended purpose; however, this option would also force the instrumentalist to face the uncomfortable fact that many Zen texts directly warn against an abstract comprehension of Zen principles. For example, Dogen says, “The ‘bonds of Buddha’ means to understand enlightenment abstractly and hence to be bound by intellectual views and theoretical understanding... This is likened to binding oneself without a rope”.<sup>10</sup> This illustrates a point of contention among Zen practitioners and scholars: whether or not discriminating thought runs counter to attaining enlightenment.

Fortunately Kim illuminates a third option: the realizational view. He argues that Dogen was aware of the discriminating nature of words, but still experienced them as a part of a nondualistic reality; intellectual thought had its place within Dogen’s enlightenment. Kim says “Dogen views language itself as realization”.<sup>11</sup> Language was “alive” and “not different from things, events, or beings”.<sup>12</sup> It could be experienced in its immediate unfolding just as other things could be experienced in theirs. Dogen says, “If it [enlightenment] is not speech, you cannot realize the Buddha's progress.... Therefore, when speech is manifested, that itself is the

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<sup>9</sup> David Putney, “Some Problems in Interpretation,” *Philosophy East and West* 46, no. 4 (1996): 508, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1399494>.

<sup>10</sup> Hee-Jin Kim, *Dogen Kigen: Mystical Realist* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Kim, “Words and Letters,” 67.

<sup>12</sup> Kim, “Words and Letters,” 58.

Buddha's progress".<sup>13</sup> Dogen sought to debunk the common belief that language and speech were only distractions when searching for the way. He expresses this in the statement "discriminating thought *is* words and phrases, and... words and phrases *liberate* discriminating thought".<sup>14</sup> In other words, for Dogen, language properly realized could liberate itself back into the even flow of reality that he saw as enlightenment and his writing, therefore, warrants our close attention and exploration.

Kim claims that Dogen did not completely leave behind the notion of instrumentalism with language;<sup>15</sup> he still *used* language as a means to help others attain enlightenment. Herein lies the tension in "The Reason of Words and Letters" and in Kim's proposed view of the thought of Dogen. While he argues that Dogen was aware that the raw experiencing and noticing of words could itself be realization, he was also aware that others did not see language in this way. Still, being called as a Buddhist to help others attain enlightenment, Dogen had to be instrumental with language; that is, to use it as a means to an end, while realizing that this end was itself apparent in every word he spoke.

In this way, Dogen's words can be seen to take on a duplicitous nature. They are at once *both* instrumental *and* opportunities for direct realization in their own essence. This is complicated by the fact that the end goal of the instrumentality is the realization of the nature of the instrument. In other words, the means are the end, making Dogen's 'instrumentalism' unique.

### **Direct Pointing in Dogen**

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<sup>13</sup> Dirck Vorenkamp, "B-Series Temporal Order in Dōgen's Theory of Time." *Philosophy East and West* 45, no. 3 (1995): 390, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1399395>.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, "Words and Letters," 58.

<sup>15</sup> Heine, "Koans in the Dogen Tradition," 2.

With this unique “realizational” view of language in mind, we will begin by examining the “rhetoric of direct pointing” and how it might apply to Dogen. Wright describes the approach of direct pointing as “actions” that are “meant to point ‘directly’ to the ‘great matter of Zen’”.<sup>16</sup>

For example, Wright uses a passage from *The Transmission of the Lamp*:

“The master Hsiang-yen asked a traveling monk where he had come from. He replied that he had come from the monastery on Mount Kuei. The master asked: What sorts of things has the Ch'an master Kuei-shan been saying lately? The monk replied that someone had asked him what it meant that the patriarch of Ch'an had come from the West, in response to which the master Kuei-shan had simply held up his *fu-tzu* (a whisk symbolic of the station of Ch'an master or abbot). Hsiang-yen then asked what Kuei-shan's disciples had understood by this gesture. He said it meant that mind is awakened through the concrete; reality is revealed within situations. Hsiang-yen said: ‘Not bad in some sense, but why are they so intent on theory?’ The monk then asked him how he would have explained the gesture. The master held up his *fui-tzu*.”<sup>17</sup>

In answer to the monk’s question, the master uses the *fui-tzu* to ‘directly point’ to the immediate truth “because that to which it points is not manifest otherwise”. The master’s action “‘speaks’ more directly toward this referent (experience itself) than any conventional speaking could.”<sup>18</sup> Even the monk’s insightful verbal answer “mind is awakened through the concrete; reality is revealed within situations” is not as potent as concrete reality manifesting itself through action. Or is it? Within a realizational view of language, speech and thought are themselves

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<sup>16</sup> Wright, *Meditations*, 92.

<sup>17</sup> Wright, *Meditations*, 91.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Meditations*, 92.

concrete reality manifesting itself; they are opportunities for realization as well. As a result the monk's verbal answer was just as adequate as the master's action, he just wasn't awakened to realize it. Thus the direct pointing by the master was needed as a rhetorical device to awaken the monk to the 'thusness' of action, to reality's completion in and of itself.

Where is direct pointing to be found in Dogen? His view of language, Kim and Wright agree,<sup>19</sup> was that it was itself a function of the way. Thus, as I mentioned before, Dogen was aware that the lesson he was trying to teach about the nature of reality was manifest in every word he spoke and wrote. Through emphasizing the immediacy of his words and their stark experience in reality, Dogen could use words themselves to "directly point" in the hope that they would impart realization. Kim delves very little into how Dogen may have used language as a kind of 'direct pointing', or even in a rhetorical way at all. Rather, after explaining Dogen's view of language, he moves on to how Dogen manipulated language technically for different logical understandings. Perhaps his thought was that Dogen realized that direct pointing remained too hidden within the medium of language to be effective; it was too difficult for students to awaken to language first.

And yet there are still examples in Dogen's writing where he is clearly using direct pointing with words as a rhetorical method. How was this rhetorically effective? Wright illuminates the initial problem that direct pointing seeks to fix: "When we experience something or even talk about it, we focus exclusively on the thing and not on the language that mediates it to us...ironically, this is even true when we are talking about language as we are now. We don't notice the medium of our talk as we focus on its object".<sup>20</sup> In the context of enlightenment,

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<sup>19</sup> Wright, *Meditations*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, *Meditations*, 73.



without awareness of what our experience is like in each moment, how are we to become fully awakened to reality as it is? When language's visual and aural components are emphasized, it is jarred loose from its normally predominant medium of *thought*. Language's less noticed mediums such as vibrations in the body, sounds in the air, and ink on paper become more apparent. In *Dogen Kigen: Mystical Realist*, Kim says: "As Dogen untiringly emphasizes: the Way is realized in and through the body. Non-thinking has its roots firmly fixed in the most concrete physical matrix".<sup>21</sup> This seems to suggest that by being more engaged with the senses, one can break out of his regular conditioning of thinking past the present moment and awaken to what is happening now in a profound sense. This is the primary objective that direct pointing through language aims to achieve.

Kim explores only one of the instances where direct pointing is used. He notices a linguistic tactic of Dogen's where he takes a sentence with, for example, four characters and mixes those characters in many different ways to form alternate sentences. "Mind itself is Buddha" becomes "Itself mind Buddha is" becomes "Itself Buddha is mind" etc.<sup>22</sup> Kim makes a suggestion about how to interpret this creative technique:

"As often happens in the *Shobogenzo*, some such modulated expressions cannot be easily rendered in intelligible statements; perhaps Dogen did not wish them to be reduced to conventional locutions, but rather to be appreciated visually and aurally, as they are, like the images of a dream... far from being nonsensical

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<sup>21</sup> Kim, *Mystical Realist*, 60.

<sup>22</sup> Kim, "Words and Letters," 61.

constructs, such linguistic modulations stand for the infinite versatility of a seamless reality”.<sup>23</sup>

Kim suggests that Dogen uses the modulated expressions to demonstrate the *sensorial quality* of the words that are manifest in speech. This calls attention to the words themselves, not the ideas of the sentence; however, at the end of his explanation Kim suggests that they “stand for” something. This is either a departure from the view that the words are directly pointing to themselves, or an observation of the duplicitous nature of Dogen’s words, in which they can simultaneously directly point and ‘mean’ something. Either way, this is the only example Kim examines that brushes on direct pointing.

With this in mind, we turn to one of Dogen’s memoirs from China in which he uses language as a way of direct pointing:

“The tenzo said, ‘To study words you must know the origin of words. To endeavor in practice you must know the origin of practice.’ I asked, ‘What are words?’ The tenzo said, ‘One, two, three, four, five.’ I asked again, ‘What is practice?’ ‘Nothing in the entire universe is hidden.’”<sup>24</sup>

In the tenzo’s first response, it is clear that he is directly displaying the immediate and obvious nature of words to Dogen. He holds them up for him to experience in their aural capacity without abstract ideas about their nature: “One, two, three, four, five.” Their origin is in this moment; the tenzo is calling attention to the experience of the words *now*. The second response the tenzo gives is a testament to the first: that the naked display of reality (the words of the

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<sup>23</sup> Kim, “Words and Letters,” 62.

<sup>24</sup> Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 60.

moment) is directly available to Dogen and unhidden from his perception. It urges Dogen/the reader to understand the importance of the direct pointing of the words in the first statement. The phrase “Nothing in the entire universe is hidden” is an abstraction of what direct pointing teaches experientially: that the Buddha-dharma is available in every moment everywhere.

But why does such a phrase as “Nothing in the entire universe is hidden” capture the essence of practice for Dogen? In his main practice, just sitting (zazen), one could observe all that there was to observe in conscious experience. Thus zazen was a practice of realizing ‘nothing is hidden’. The same practice of realization could occur while observing words and language as well, and thus direct pointing was a powerful tool for this end.

Dogen further confirms that direct pointing occurred in this passage when he afterward responds to a poem by Xuedou (which does not need to be quoted here):

“What the tenzo had told me corresponded with Xuedou’s poem. So I knew all the more that the tenzo was truly a person of the way. By studying this poem we know that the words we saw before were one, two, three, four, five; the words we see now are six, seven, eight, nine, ten...”<sup>25</sup>

Dogen’s wording in this last line emphasizes the words’ momentary, sensorial, and fleeting nature. He could have said, ‘By studying this poem we know these words mean (some abstract meaning)’. By simply restating that “the words we saw before were...the words we see now are” Dogen confirms that it was experiencing the words from the tenzo in their immediate sensorial nature that was significant, rather than what they ‘meant’. As a result, he does not offer

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<sup>25</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 60-61.

any abstract understanding of the answer to his original question, ‘what are words?’ The words were directly pointing to themselves.

Dogen offers another example of direct pointing: “An ancient buddha said, ‘Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.’ These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains.”<sup>26</sup> Tanahashi takes an abstract route of interpretation for this quote. He says that it operates in a tri-partite structure: there is an affirmative statement, then a negation, then he negates the negative. For him the passage means “the first step is discrimination, the second is denial of discrimination, and the third is beyond discrimination and denial of it...this is the meaning of nonduality.”<sup>27</sup> Tanahashi interprets this with traditional Buddhist logic; however Dogen was always one for breaking with and revamping tradition.<sup>28</sup> He took this opportunity to target a common Buddhist train of thought (affirmative-negative-double-negative) and remind the reader where the real Buddha-dharma lies: in experience itself. He does this by ‘directly pointing’ with his commentary “These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains.” While Tanahashi emphasizes the “meaning of nonduality” in his analysis, Dogen’s commentary actually encourages the *experience* of nonduality through the words. He utilizes similar tactics employed in the example with the tenzo; the line “These words do not mean mountains are mountains; they mean mountains are mountains” echoes the immediate and impermanent quality of words found in “the words we saw before were one, two, three, four, five; the words we see now are six, seven, eight, nine, ten”. They seem to say ‘here is something’, ‘here is the next moment’s something’ or ‘here is this moment’s truth, here is the next moment’s truth’. Before abstract meaning comes into play, the

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<sup>26</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 16.

<sup>27</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Heine, “Koans in the Dogen Tradition,” 4.

sentences draw attention to themselves in the stark simplicity of their nature and their element of repetition. The rhetoric is geared toward the awareness that the words unfold in the moment.

In one of Dogen's more poetic pieces, he writes: "Mind itself is buddha./Practice is difficult. Explanation is not difficult./Not-mind. Not-buddha./Explanation is difficult. Practice is not difficult."<sup>29</sup> For Dogen, with the phrase "mind itself is buddha", explanation is not difficult. This is true because he himself (and probably most other Buddhist monks) could give an intelligible explanation of the phrase to anyone; it just required an abstract understanding of the saying. He says as much in *On the Endurance of the Way*: "If the understanding of '(mind) itself is buddha' were the attaining of the way, Shakyamuni Buddha would not have taken the trouble to explain the way."<sup>30</sup> In this statement he is implying that understanding the way is not as easy as understanding the explanation of "mind itself is buddha". In fact you should pursue practice "without leaving a half-understanding in your mind", implying that 'practice is difficult' when such notions as "mind itself is buddha" cloud the head.<sup>31</sup> However, the direct pointing in this poem is in the "Not-mind. Not-buddha." These words stand on their own with no verbs to connect them or move them into action. They draw attention to themselves in their stark and immediate nature and are also unusual in that they are negations. 'Practice is not difficult' in this case because the words are reality presenting itself as it is. 'Nothing is hidden' in the uttering of "Not-mind. Not-buddha." On the other hand, explanation is difficult; if the words "Not-mind. Not-buddha" are a direct expression of the way, how does one evoke the same experience of nonduality through abstract explanation? How does one even *explain* nonduality in an easy way?

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<sup>29</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 158.

This was the ongoing task of Dogen, to present his followers with what was already right in front of them; to string them along to where they already were.

Direct pointing as a rhetorical approach has one interesting complication: when it fails in its primary purpose of getting the listener to realize the direct unfolding of reality in the moment, does it still have rhetorical power? Zen masters like Dogen must have realized that the majority of their attempts at direct pointing would not result in the immediate enlightenment of any disciples. And yet, even when it ‘fails’, the technique can still be seen to *prepare* practitioners for awakening in other ways. Direct pointing with language, even if not fully realized, could still serve to open the minds of individuals through re-sensitizing them to the physical matrix of reality, specifically the sense-qualities of words. The re-focusing of attention on the present moment along with contemplation of how words could be “ultimate truth” were still very legitimate Buddhist practices. Thus direct pointing could still be effective in a “conventional” sense; however, understanding the qualities of the words alone was not the end goal of Dogen’s rhetoric, as is evident when he says, “If the Buddha’s speech is shallow, turning the flower must also be shallow. If the Buddha’s speech is only letters and sounds, that is not the words of learning the Buddha Dharma”.<sup>32</sup> Yet the *shift in attention* toward these qualities could still cultivate good habits on the path to enlightenment, and perhaps it is useful to understand these shifts as “exaggerations in the direction of truth”.<sup>33</sup>

### **Total Exertion as a Lens for Dogen’s Writing**

The success of the technique of direct pointing rests on Dogen’s notion of total exertion.

Direct pointing is a rhetorical method in which an action ‘points’ back upon itself in an attempt

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<sup>32</sup> Vorenkamp, “Dogen’s Theory of Time,” 390.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1978), 308.

to convey absolute truth. While there is a kind of intentionality ascribed to the person enacting the approach, the principle is that the action ‘totally exerts’ itself. The idea of total exertion is that only an action (or ‘thing’) itself can complete itself. It also simultaneously completes, and is completed by, all other actions because it occurs in an interdependently co-arising, nondual world. Direct pointing aims at the realization of experience itself, which is the realization of the total exertion of all dharmas. Kim says, “One dharma is said to ‘leap out’ of itself, and ‘leap into’ itself” and “at once transcends and embraces all dharmas”.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to understand how one action (or dharma) is the exclusive cause for its own completion, but is still interdependent with all other actions in existence.

Perhaps it is easier to first look at the claim in its most particular sense. Kim gives a concrete example of this: “water liberates itself through water”.<sup>35</sup> The implication is that water is not liberated (realized) by anything other than itself: not through understanding, not through not-water, not even through the Buddha. Water is liberated through water. It completes itself, and by doing so completes all other things. This was the realization of total exertion and this realization was also the goal of direct pointing. Although Kim only explores Dogen’s illustration of this principle through the water example, there are many other ways in which the notion of total exertion can be applied to Dogen’s writings; both for a better understanding of the deeper meaning of strange passages and of the term itself.

In *Going Beyond Buddha* Dogen writes:

“Master Dongshan once taught the assembly, ‘Concerning realization-through-the-body (zazen) of going beyond buddha, I would like to talk a little.’ A monk

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<sup>34</sup> Kim, “Words and Letters,” 59.

<sup>35</sup> Kim, “Words and Letters,” 60.

said, ‘What is this talk?’ The master said, ‘When I talk you don’t hear it.’ The monk said, ‘Do you hear it sir?’ The master said ‘Wait till I don’t talk, then you hear it.’”<sup>36</sup>

Where is full exertion to be found in this passage? Dogen makes a commentary on it, but the commentary itself is koan-like in nature and makes no direct mention of full exertion. In usual Dogen fashion, his logic often jumps around and doesn’t make a lot of chronological sense. As a result, we are left having to piece together what he means. To begin, “going beyond buddha” in the first line refers to continued enlightenment.<sup>37</sup> It entails continuous realization of the absolute nature of reality. The monk asks “What is this talk?”, in other words, ‘how will you talk about realization/enlightenment?’ The master says, “When I talk you don’t hear it” and then, “Wait till I don’t talk, then you hear it.” Dogen claims that the master is not referring to a temporal misalignment between talking and hearing that is postponing the monk’s understanding; it is not that when the master ceases to speak that the monk will hear what he is talking about. Rather, Dogen shows that the key to understanding this passage is through a new experience of the self. More specifically, the implication is that talking and hearing have to be understood as fully exerted entities, with no self to be found interfering with them. He says: “You (have no notion of self) within talking.” Talking is just talking: “it is not stained by either hearing or non-hearing”. He then extends the same principle to hearing. The conclusion is that there is no ‘you’ present in either talking or hearing.<sup>38</sup>

With that established, we then need to combine two sentences to make sense of the next logical step. The first is, “When (realization) is actualized you do not hear.” Dogen then equates

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<sup>36</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 203.

<sup>37</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 288.

<sup>38</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 204.



“you do not hear” with ‘not-hearing’: “the meaning of not-hearing is that you are not hindered by the tongue, you are not hindered by the ears, you are not drilled by the eyes, you are not shielded by body and mind.” We then have to insert the definition of ‘not-hearing’ back into the first sentence to know that “when realization is actualized” one is “not hindered” by the tongue, ears, eyes, body and mind. Thus when hearing and talking are fully realized, they are not hindered by the tongue, ears, etc. Of specific importance is that they are not “shielded by body and mind” and thus talking and hearing are only realized when there is no ‘you’ to be found. They are totally exerted in their own right.

If we were to rewrite the original dialogue with these re-defined terms it would go something like,

“A monk said, ‘What is this talk?’ The master said, ‘When talking is totally exerted there is not-hearing (no hindrance by tongue, body, mind etc.)’ The monk said, ‘Do you hear it sir?’ The master said ‘Wait till there is not-talking (no hindrance by ears, body, mind etc.), then hearing is totally exerted.’”

So in reality, talking and hearing can occur at the same time and not obstruct the message of realization that the master was trying to get across. The master was just saying that hearing and talking only become totally exerted when they are not hindered by body and mind (a self). The term “realization-through-the-body” makes more sense in this light; if it were “realization-with-the-body”, it would imply that there was a ‘you’ using the body as an instrument. But with “realization-through-the-body” everything is exerted *through* itself. It is not that there is a lack of body and mind, it is just that these things do not “shield” anything else.

In *Ocean-Reflection Samadhi*, Dogen's principle of total exertion, through metaphor, is used to explain another dialogue between a monk and a great teacher:

“Once a monk asked Great Teacher Ts’ao shan Yuan-cheng: ‘It is taught that the great ocean never keeps a corpse, but what is this ocean like?’ The master replied: ‘It embraces all beings.’ The monk asked: ‘Why doesn’t it keep a corpse?’ The master replied: ‘It does not retain the one who has stopped breathing.’ The monk asked: ‘Since it embraces all beings, why doesn’t it retain the one who has stopped breathing?’ The master replied: ‘All beings, free of their accomplishments, stop breathing.’”<sup>39</sup>

To demonstrate the principle of this passage (ocean-reflection Samadhi) Dogen turns a conventional saying on its head. Usually the phrase ‘the blind leading the blind’ is applied to people that have no idea what they are doing. However Dogen says,

“(Ocean-reflection Samadhi) is like a blind person leading the blind; furthermore, the principle of a blind person leading the blind here it such that a blind person leads a blind person, and a multitude of the blind leads a multitude of the blind”.<sup>40</sup>

Understood as a metaphor for total exertion, this passage makes perfect sense. Only a blind person truly leads a blind person; it is the same principle as “water liberates itself through water”. Only when it is understood that a blind person leads a blind person, and a multitude of the blind leads a multitude of the blind, does realization occur; the blind person is totally exerted through the blind person.

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<sup>39</sup> Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness*, 169.

<sup>40</sup> Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness*, 171.

To begin to tie this idea back to the dialogue between monk and teacher, Dogen shows that “a multitude of the blind (leading) a multitude of the blind” is like equating the original term “embracing” to “itself all beings”. In other words, the teacher was painting a picture of the “great ocean” as ‘all beings embracing all beings’.<sup>41</sup> Yet at the same time “all beings, free of their accomplishments, stop breathing” and thus are not retained by “all beings embracing all beings”. So despite the fact that all beings embrace all beings, no beings are retained; there is nothing left over. Embracing without remainder is another way in which to understand total exertion. The concept of total exertion in this example was integral to understanding the teachings about ocean-reflection Samadhi.

Total exertion is also found in Dogen’s poetic imagery. His poem, “Bowing Formally”, reads: “A snowy heron/on the snowfield/where winter grass is unseen/hides itself/in its own figure”.<sup>42</sup> The snowy heron perfectly occupies itself in this poem. Total exertion can be seen in the heron’s completion of an action through its passivity: “A snowy heron...*hides* itself/in its own figure”. All it has to do is abide perfectly in itself to complete its action of hiding. This is a metaphor for total exertion and realization. Nothing has to happen to ‘complete’ realization except perfect abiding. When the heron is perfectly itself, there is no remainder. Even if it were active in a literal sense (walking, flying, etc.), the heron could still be understood to perfectly abide in itself with no remainder. In this way, the heron represents *action without remainder* (hence ‘total exertion’). It is the same principle as embracing without remainder. Action can be seen as passive in this way; there is no force *enacting* it beside itself. And yet action still happens. This is what it means to hear and talk without being hindered; they actively happen, but

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<sup>41</sup> Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness*, 169-170.

<sup>42</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 214.

they are also passive, there is no outside enactor. They are self-completing and there is no remainder; no 'you'.

This line of thought is apparent in the title of the poem, "Bowing Formally", as well. Doing something "formally" implies that one is conforming to a socially established standard and not necessarily enacting one's own individual truth. However, seen through the lens of total exertion, when bowing formally, is there anything other than bowing formally? Is there any remainder, any self outside of bowing?

Dogen writes:

"Daowu asked, 'What is the fundamental meaning of buddha-dharma?'" Shitou said, 'Not to attain, not to know.' Daowu said, 'Is there some turning point in going beyond ('going beyond' again referring to continuous realization), or not?' Shitou said, 'The vast sky does not hinder white clouds from flying.'"<sup>43</sup>

This passage can also be understood in terms of total exertion. In the same manner as the hearing and talking example, Dogen turns "Not to attain, not to know" into "not-attaining, not-knowing". As we saw with not-hearing, "The meaning of not-hearing is that you are not hindered by the tongue, you are not hindered by the ears, you are not drilled by the eyes, you are not shielded by body and mind." The principle is the same with "not-attaining" and "not-knowing". They entail an experience of not being hindered by 'attaining' or 'knowing', or by anything else for that matter. These contents of experience still occur: "It is not that there is no aspiration for enlightenment, no practice, or no enlightenment. But simply, not-attaining."<sup>44</sup> Aspiration for enlightenment, practice, and enlightenment still happen, they just aren't "the fundamental

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<sup>43</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 208.

<sup>44</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 208.

meaning of the buddha-dharma” if they aren’t totally exerted, i.e not hindered by the tongue, ears... body and mind. The only way for ‘aspiration for enlightenment’ to be fully realized is *through itself*, the only way for ‘practice’ to be fully realized is *through itself*. In this way the fundamental meaning of buddha-dharma is understood once again in terms of non-hindrane being a necessary condition of total exertion.

In regard to Daowu’s second question, Dogen says, “when the turning point is actualized, going beyond is actualized”.<sup>45</sup> By this he means that when ‘the turning point’ is totally exerted, or even when ‘the turning point’ as a “provisional expression” is totally exerted, continuous realization is manifested. Therefore, there is no ‘turning point’ in the generally understood sense that Daowu is asking: that is, there is no specific place, time, or occurrence on which realization hinges or changes. Rather, the idea of the turning point is itself just another among a universe of points at which realization can occur. Total exertion penetrates past merely focusing on the ideas of the sentence in this example.

Dogen continues: “The vast sky does not hinder the vast sky. Just as the vast sky does not hinder the vast sky from flying, white clouds do not hinder white clouds. White clouds fly with no hindrance. White cloud’s flying does not hinder the vast sky’s flying.”<sup>46</sup> Dogen makes very clear here that Shitou’s final answer was referring to total exertion. There is no hindrance at all by anything. The question is: how exactly did Shitou wish his answer to be applied to the previous sentence? Was he just trying to elucidate the notion of total exertion in general, or was he more specifically saying that ‘a turning point’ does not hinder “going beyond”? Or did he mean that there is no ‘turning point not attained’ in which a turning point could hinder itself?

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<sup>45</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 209.

<sup>46</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 209.

There are many possible layers of meaning and avenues for different rhetorical intentions, but in the end total exertion is the core principle that penetrates them all.

It is important not to get caught up on the ‘particular’ end of the spectrum with total exertion. That is, we must remember that Dogen did not believe in the inherent existence of ‘things’ or separate entities (*svabhava*).<sup>47</sup> Despite saying things like “water liberates itself through water,” there was no permanent essence that was ‘water’ in his view. Trends or dharmas greater than particular ‘things’ could be realized as totally exerted as well.<sup>48</sup> For example, Dogen writes:

“The fish and the bird have never left their elements. When their activity is large their field is large. When their need is small their field is small...If the bird leaves the air it will die at once. If the fish leaves the water it will die at once. Know that water is life and the air is life. The bird is life and the fish is life.”<sup>49</sup>

Once again the idea of action without remainder is illustrated: when “activity is large...field is large.” It is not that when more space becomes available that activity is invited; it is that activity itself actualizes space, and space simultaneously actualizes activity. In this way the fish and the water, or the bird and the air, can be seen as “life” *together*. One totally exerted as ‘separate’ also relies on the total exertion of the other. Despite having particularity, fish and birds, water and air can be totally exerted ‘together’ in greater ‘dharmas’ (“life”) and ultimately in the Buddha-dharma.

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<sup>47</sup> Spackman, John, "The Tiantai Roots of Dōgen's Philosophy of Language and Thought," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 3 (July 2006): 428-50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4488036>. Spackman shows that Dogen's philosophical thought is rooted in the thought of Zhiyi's teaching, which rejected any kind of permanent *svabhava*.

<sup>48</sup> “Trends and dharmas” are also ‘things’, I am just using them in this instance to break down the belief in the smaller ‘particulars’ that I have used as examples so far.

<sup>49</sup> Tanahashi, *Dewdrop*, 72.

## Conclusion

While Kim outlined total exertion as a philosophical principle well in “The Reason of Words and Letters,” he did not explore it through many concrete examples, and thus some of its rich applications never came to light. Through a more thorough analysis of how it interacted with Dogen’s koan interpretations and poetic imagery, we have seen that different approaches to the notion are both possible and useful. Total exertion can be understood from different angles such as “activity without remainder” and as a complete absence of “hindrance”. Its paradoxical emphasis on both the uniqueness of individual actions and their simultaneous completion in a universal sense can be better understood through examples of imagery such as the interaction between birds and sky, and fish and water. Finally, it has become more apparent how total exertion underlies the concept of direct pointing, and thus interacts with Dogen’s realizational view of language.

While Kim shed a new and important light on Dogen’s view of the realizational potential of language, he did not adequately explore this view’s rhetorical possibilities. Previously, direct pointing as a rhetorical technique existed mainly in the realm of unspoken esoteric actions in the Zen tradition. In Dogen’s worldview, where language itself was part of enlightenment, direct pointing found expression through words. Although it wasn’t his main form of rhetoric and instances of its implementation are not widespread, acknowledging and exploring this facet of Dogen still adds a new dimension of possibilities to his conception of language. His view of language as an opportunity for direct realization was not just a passive philosophical stance; he actively flaunted words in their most immediate form at times to encourage a new experience in others. “The Reason of Words and Letters” was certainly revolutionary in the field of Dogen studies, but endeavors into the rich and complex world of Dogen’s thought and language can

ever yield new results. These new lenses and findings can serve to further elucidate who Dogen was as a person, scholar, and monk, and what the wider character and beliefs of Japanese Zen were at the time of his life.



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