

Sample essay

Below I have written a sample essay responding to the following essay prompt: *Interpret what Dōgen means in his paradoxical remarks in the first stanza of the Genjō Kōan.* For your reference, here is that stanza:

As all things are buddha-dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, and birth and death, and there are buddhas and sentient beings.

As the myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddha, no sentient being, no birth and death.

The buddha way is, basically, leaping clear of the many and the one; thus there are birth and death, delusion and realization, sentient beings and buddhas.

Yet in attachment blossoms fall, and in aversion weeds spread.¹

To help you understand the mechanics of this essay, I have included two copies of it: I underline all signposting in the first copy and comment extensively in the margin of the second copy.

¹ Dōgen 1985, p. 69.

In this paper, I will argue that Dōgen holds that reality is beyond the reach of conventional human concepts, but that those concepts can nevertheless help us attain enlightenment. To support my interpretation, I will focus on Dōgen's paradoxical remarks about the central tenets of Buddhism.

Dōgen begins the *Genjō Kōan* with this startling paradox:

“As all things are buddha-dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, and birth and death, and there are buddhas and sentient beings.

As the myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddha, no sentient being, no birth and death.”²

Here Dōgen apparently contradicts himself, saying that delusion, realization, buddhas, etc. simultaneously exist and do not exist. But I will argue that this contradiction is only apparent, for Dōgen qualifies his claims with, respectively, the remark that “all things are buddha-dharma” and the remark that “the myriad things are without an abiding self.” Let me examine those qualifications in order.

I interpret “buddha-dharma” as referring to the teachings of the Buddha. In particular, I suggest, Dōgen has in mind the idea that most beings are deluded and therefore suffer in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; we can break this cycle only by following the way of the Buddha (practice) which leads to enlightenment (realization). So if the teachings of the Buddha are true – if all things are buddha-dharma – then there must in fact be deluded and suffering beings who die and are reborn. And so Dōgen affirms the existence of delusion, realization, buddhas, etc.

I further interpret Dōgen's remark that “... the myriad things are without an abiding self...” as claiming that *nothing* has a persistent nature. This remark applies to delusion, realization, buddhas, etc.; none of these things have a persistent nature. In other words, delusion, realization, and buddhas are ultimately mere fictions. Hence Dōgen denies the existence of delusion, realization, buddhas, etc.

But if such things do not truly exist, why would the Buddha express his teachings in terms of them? I answer that the Buddha intends for his recommendations to help deluded creatures such as us. So they must initially work around our most central delusion, namely, our belief that we have a persistent nature or abiding self. Yet their ultimate purpose is to remove that delusion.

Thus, on my interpretation of Dōgen, we deluded creatures find it useful to understand reality in terms of the Buddha's teachings, and in this conventional sense things like delusion, realization, and buddhas exist. But ultimately nothing has a persistent nature, so in the final analysis things like delusion, realization, and buddhas do not exist. We can therefore dissolve the paradox that Dōgen introduces.

Indeed, this interpretation finds further support from Dōgen's remark that “The buddha way is, basically, leaping clear of the many and the one.”³ To attempt to divide reality into the many and the one is to attempt to conceptualize reality in terms of the persistent natures of things, and in following the teachings of the Buddha (the buddha way) we eventually learn to leap clear of this temptation.

² Dōgen 1985, p. 69.

³ Ibid.

I conclude that Dōgen sees the Buddhist conceptual framework as a useful but dispensable tool for achieving enlightenment – which requires sweeping away all conceptual frameworks.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interpretations have been heavily shaped by my discussions with participants (both faculty and students) in the spring 2014 Philosophy and Political Thought seminar at Yale-NUS College. I am grateful for their support and even more grateful for their vigorous criticisms.

REFERENCE LIST

Dōgen (R. Aitken and K. Tanahashi, trans.). (1985). *Genjō-kōan*. In K. Tanahashi (ed.), *Moon in a Dew Drop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen* (pp. 69-73). San Francisco: North Point Press.

In this paper, I will argue that Dōgen holds that reality is beyond the reach of conventional human concepts, but that those concepts can nevertheless help us attain enlightenment. To support my interpretation, I will focus on Dōgen’s paradoxical remarks about the central tenets of Buddhism.

Commented [N1]: This phrase explicitly signposts my thesis statement.

Dōgen begins the *Genjō Kōan* with this startling paradox:

Commented [N2]: Here I describe my evidence.

“As all things are buddha-dharma, there is delusion and realization, practice, and birth and death, and there are buddhas and sentient beings.

As the myriad things are without an abiding self, there is no delusion, no realization, no buddha, no sentient being, no birth and death.”⁴

Commented [N3]: Use block quotations to introduce particularly important passages. Be sparing with them, however, as they require a great deal of space; quote only the essential lines, omitting the rest.

Here Dōgen apparently contradicts himself, saying that delusion, realization, buddhas, etc. simultaneously exist and do not exist. But I will argue that this contradiction is only apparent, for Dōgen qualifies his claims with, respectively, the remark that “all things are buddha-dharma” and the remark that “the myriad things are without an abiding self.” Let me examine those qualifications in order.

Commented [N4]: You should normally incorporate short quotations into your own sentences, as I do here. I do not need to cite these short quotations because I already cited those exact quotations above. Had I not done so, each quotation would have required a separate citation.

I interpret “buddha-dharma” as referring to the teachings of the Buddha. In particular, I suggest, Dōgen has in mind the idea that most beings are deluded and therefore suffer in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; we can break this cycle only by following the way of the Buddha (practice) which leads to enlightenment (realization). So if the teachings of the Buddha are true – if all things are buddha-dharma – then there must in fact be deluded and suffering beings who die and are reborn. And so Dōgen affirms the existence of delusion, realization, buddhas, etc.

Commented [N5]: This sentence indicates the structure of the next two paragraphs.

Commented [N6]: I am not shy about using the first person to signpost.

I further interpret Dōgen’s remark that “... the myriad things are without an abiding self...” as claiming that *nothing* has a persistent nature. This remark applies to delusion, realization, buddhas, etc.; none of these things have a persistent nature. In other words, delusion, realization, and buddhas are ultimately mere fictions. Hence Dōgen denies the existence of delusion, realization, buddhas, etc.

Commented [N7]: I introduce this point first because it structures my interpretation throughout the paragraph.

Commented [N8]: I continue to refer to the passage, though I keep my quotations as short as possible. I drop the quotation marks because I have already quoted the relevant passage.

But if such things do not truly exist, why would the Buddha express his teachings in terms of them? I answer that the Buddha intends for his recommendations to help deluded creatures such as us. So they must initially work around our most central delusion, namely, our belief that we have a persistent nature or abiding self. Yet their ultimate purpose is to remove that delusion.

Commented [N9]: I do not initially attempt to interpret the passage as a whole. I instead break it into much smaller pieces and interpret them separately before arriving at my total interpretation.

Commented [N10]: This sentence has the same structure as the topic sentence of the previous paragraph, so the reader knows how these two paragraphs are related.

Thus, on my interpretation of Dōgen, we deluded creatures find it useful to understand reality in terms of the Buddha’s teachings, and *in this conventional sense* things like delusion, realization, and buddhas exist. But ultimately nothing has a persistent nature, so *in the final analysis* things like delusion, realization, and buddhas do not exist. We can therefore dissolve the paradox that Dōgen introduces.

Commented [N11]: The humble colon is a signposting device, and a very effective one at that.

Commented [N12]: This is a topic-setting question. You may use such questions, but do so sparingly.

Indeed, this interpretation finds further support from Dōgen’s remark that “The buddha way is, basically, leaping clear of the many and the one.”⁵ To attempt to divide reality into the many and the one is to attempt to conceptualize reality in terms of the persistent natures of things, and in following the teachings of the Buddha (the buddha way) we eventually learn to leap clear of this temptation.

Commented [N13]: Only once I have closely analyzed the components of the passage do I attempt to pull my entire interpretation together.

Commented [N14]: Here I connect my interpretation to the central issue I introduced in the second paragraph of the essay: how do we make sense of the paradox in the text?

Commented [N15]: To interpret even this short sentence, I divide it into very small components.

⁴ Dōgen 1985, p. 69.

⁵ Ibid.

I conclude that Dōgen sees the Buddhist conceptual framework as a useful but dispensable tool for achieving enlightenment – which requires sweeping away all conceptual frameworks.

Commented [N16]: I explicitly signpost my conclusion, and I keep the conclusion itself to a single sentence.

Commented [N17]: Excluding footnotes and references, this essay is only 540 words. If you are concise, you can pack a lot of content into a short space.

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Commented [N18]: Acknowledgments typically belong after the body of the paper but before the reference list. Do not copy this example, but use it as a guide for your own acknowledgments section.

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Commented [N19]: Your reference list typically belongs at the very end.