



The Zen Buddhist spirituality

A espiritualidade zen budista

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Abstract

The studies on comparative mystique and inter-religious spirituality have gained an increasingly singular space in the universities and research centers, which proliferate everywhere. They're researches also involving the Eastern religions, in their peculiar mystical trait. Within the context of Buddhism, one may also speak of spirituality, understood as a pathway in search of liberation. This paper aims at presenting the theme of Zen Buddhist spirituality, having the reflection by Eihei Dôgen Zenji (1200-1253) as a basis, one of the most important and prominent masters of the Soto Zen tradition. The purpose is showing the richness of this spirituality and its peculiar adherence to the everyday life reality. For promoting an understanding of the key issue presented, one aimed at situating the theme within the historical context of the birth of Zen Buddhism and the inclusion of Dôgen in its field of action. The theme of Zen spirituality has been evidenced in the approach to the problems of searching for the Dharma in Dôgen and in his attention to the small signs of everyday life.

Keywords: Spirituality. Buddhism. Zen. Everyday life. Religions.

Resumo

Os estudos de mística comparada e de espiritualidade inter-religiosa têm ganhado espaço cada vez mais singular nas universidades e núcleos de pesquisa, que se proliferam por toda parte. São pesquisas que envolvem também as religiões orientais, em seu traço místico peculiar. No âmbito do budismo, também se pode falar em espiritualidade, entendida como um caminho de busca da libertação. Este artigo visa a apresentar o tema da espiritualidade zen budista, com base na reflexão de Eihei Dôgen Zenji (1200-1253), um dos mais importantes e destacados mestres da tradição Soto Zen. O objetivo é mostrar a riqueza dessa espiritualidade e sua peculiar adesão à realidade cotidiana. Para favorecer a compreensão da questão central apresentada, visou-se a situar a temática no contexto histórico do nascimento do zen budismo e da inserção de Dôgen em seu campo de ação. A temática da espiritualidade zen tem-se evidenciando na abordagem da problemática da busca do Dharma em Dôgen e em sua atenção aos pequenos sinais do cotidiano.

Palavras-chave: Espiritualidade. Budismo. Zen. Cotidiano. Religiões.

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Introduction

In the introduction to a book on Buddhist spirituality, the team responsible for the work – connected to the Nazan Institute of Religion and Culture (Nagoya, Japan) – indicates that Buddhism, among the various religions, is that which focuses with more emphasis on the domain of spirituality. There's no other religion which:

[...] Attributed a greater value to states of awareness and spiritual liberation, and no other described, so methodically and with such a wealth of critical reflections, the various pathways and disciplines through which these states are reached, or the ontological and psychological foundations which make these states so important and these pathways so effective (YOSHINORI, 2007, p. IX).

Among the various Buddhism forms, Zen Buddhism translates this spirituality into a perspective which is deeply practical and bonded to everyday life. Its major aim is “capturing the key fact of life” (SUZUKI, 1999, p. 73) at the very course of its materialization, in a direct and vital manner. More than a philosophical-theoretic system, Zen translates an “existential plot” (FORZANI, 2007, p. 69, our translation), involving religious, philosophical, and experiential aspects, always inter-related. In this “background attitude” with regard to the life dynamics, Zen will attribute a crucial emphasis to practice, which is no longer a simple particular aspect, establishing itself as an essential key to access the intimate unit of existence, which escapes the superficial perception. Through it, the subject's, his/her body-mind, concentration and purification process is revealed, favoring the capture of every moment's intensity and the possibility of exercising communion with the surrounding world. Through the resource of a “systematic training”, Zen instrumentalizes thought to exercise a new look at things: “It opens man's eyes to the great mystery which is daily represented. It enlarges the heart so that this embraces eternity in time and infinity of space in each palpitation” (SUZUKI, 1999, p. 66).

1 The steps of a story

In one of the classic books of *Shôbôgenzô*¹ by Eihei Dôgen Zenji (1200-1253), the “Bendôwa” – written in 1231 –, there’s an interesting account on the remote origin of Zen Buddhism (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001a). This is the classic silent teaching by Shakyamuni Buddha on the Vulture Peak. There, in that historic place, he turned the Udumbara flower, being corresponded by the smile of his disciple Mahakassapa (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2005b). Without needing any verbal resource, the great master uses the simple gesture of turning a flower to convey his teaching. This symbolic event takes place at the onset of the transmission of the school, which was named Ch’an in China and Zen in Japan. This teaching (Dharma) was transmitted, as Dôgen stresses, from patriarch to patriarch until coming to Bodhidharma (470-532), regarded as the founder of the Ch’an tradition in China². Then, it was transmitted to the second patriarch, Hui-ko (487-593), and so on, afterwards involving the five major schools of the Zen tradition: Hogen, Igyo, Unmon, Soto, and Rinzai. Out of these five schools, only that of the Rinzai tradition gained an important diffusion in China. Two of them had a good penetration into Japan, the Rinzai – introduced by Eisai (1141-1215)³ –, and the Soto, introduced by Dôgen.

It’s interesting to identify this turning flower and smile traits in the origin of Zen Buddhism. The Udumbara flower is a metaphor for the extremely rare awakening in the historic dynamics. Dôgen talks about this symbolism in another book of *Shôbôgenzô*, “*Udonge*”, which addressed the Udumbara flower. And, as the Buddhist canon says, “a flower blooms and the world rises up” (DÔGEN ZENJI,

¹ This is the most important work by Dôgen, which became a classic of the Japanese Buddhist tradition. *Shôbôgenzô* (*The treasure of the true Dharma eye*) was written between 1231 and 1253, covering various periods of Dôgen’s life. It’s a work divided into several books or booklets, with varied lengths.

² To know the transmission tree of Zen in China and Japan, see Dôgen Zenji and Ejo (2011).

³ It has in the origin of its transmission line the important presence of Lin Chi (d. 867). It was with him that a new worldview established in the Zen tradition, with attention to the phenomenal world. Fully live in the present, that was his motto. In one of his speeches, he highlights this idea: “Oh, brothers of walk, you must know that in the reality of Buddhism there’s nothing extraordinary you should fulfill. Simply live as usual without ever intending to do something especial, meet your natural needs, wear clothes, eat food, and lie down when feeling tired” (IZUTSU, 2009, p. 17).

2005b, p. 187-189, our translation)⁴. Here, Dôgen refers to the theme of “resonance”. As Yoko Orimo (2005a, p. 18, our translation) highlights, in the introduction to one of the *Shôbôgenzô* volumes, given the “emergence of a single flower, the whole world changes, because this is a world of the resonance, where existing beings echo each other, since this echo of the universe can be listened to through our concrete listening”. In the process of the

[...] development of its petals, the flower opens its heart to listen to the wind, to receive water and light, to have fun with the butterflies, and give itself to the world. It's in this universe of resonance that all things echo to all things, giving themselves to each other, that the awakening's Way must materialize as a presence (ORIMO, 2005b, p. 222, our translation).

In the Zen tradition, the relationship between master and disciple, so well expressed in this Udumbara flower episode, situates itself on a great importance plan. Direct experience, from heart to heart, is affirmed as a substantive value, which doesn't mean the relativization or contempt of the sacred texts' letters (TOLLINI, 2001). In a particular manner, the spirituality of a master such as Dôgen has always been rooted in the Lotus Sutra (NHAT HANH, 2008), as well as in other sacred texts, which also forcefully conveyed the Buddha's spirit.

Buddhism had a good reception in China because of its resemblance to the doctrine of the philosopher Lao-Tzu, who also, like Buddha, signaled the centrality of emptiness and impermanence. But it was an essentially theoretical Buddhism, and against it the Bodhidharma positioned himself,

who wanted to establish in China the genuine Gautama's Buddhism, which was entirely experience and action. As he recommended the practice of *dhyana* (Ch'an in Chinese, Zen in Japanese) meditation as a method for developing *prajna*, intuitive knowledge, his followers started being known as adepts of a Zen school, although Bodhidharma didn't think of founding any sect or school, but conveying the true Buddhism's spirit (GONÇALVES, 1976, p. 24).

⁴ This was an expression coined by Hannyatara (Prajnâtara), the 27th Indian patriarch and master of the first Chinese patriarch, Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma was also an “ascetic of *zazen*”⁵, the sitting meditation. When he settled in the Shaolin Temple, on Mount Sung, spent most of his time sitting in meditation, with his eyes turned the wall (*pi-kuan*). And so it was for nine years. It was the great emphasis which gave the silent meditation, instead of reading or sutra meditation or other written comments (KASULIS, 2007).

The first Zen monasteries emerged at the time of the fifth patriarch, Hung-Jen (601-674). Two distinctive traits of the spirituality which then was been established may be identified from that period on: the monastic community and the harmony with nature. With the sixth patriarch, Hui-Neng (638-713), the main branch of Zen Buddhism, the Zen south, consolidates itself, and, then, it was subdivided into several schools, as it has already been noted. It’s to the sixth patriarch that “all the current Zen tradition refers its origin” (YAMPOLSKY, 2007a, p. 3).

Among the great masters of the Ch’an tradition there was the monk Ma-tsu Tao-i (Baso Doitsu – 709-788), from the T’ang dynasty, and the Hung-chou school was associated to him. With him, takes place a major change in the meditation practice focus. Its value wasn’t displaced, but allowed a “return” from the contemplative experience to everyday reality. The great maxim becomes: “This very mind is Buddha”. This means, in other words, that “the most remote and transcendental goal is, paradoxically, what is closest to us” (WRIGHT, 2007, p. 35). Lighting, understood as the pursuit of Buddha’s nature, is seen, then, as resumption or meeting with the subject’s deepest nature, its original nature. The practitioner is, thus, advised to tune her/himself in to the current time, with what is already here, the commonplace, which, from the previous perspective, was an object of overcoming. What the Hung-chou school emphasizes is that “reorientation of attention to the ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday life’” (WRIGHT, 2007, p. 36). The everyday life, or everyday life’s mind, stands as the pathway⁶. This way,

⁵ The Japanese word *zazen* is derived from the Chinese word *tso-ch’an* and it indicates sitting in meditation.

⁶ In the classic text “Wou-men”, *Passe sans porte* (Wou-men-kouan), composed in 1229, there’s a rule which just follows this line: “The everyday life’s heart is the Way”. This is the rule 19.

“meditation doesn’t need to be a special activity which wants its own time, environment, and attitude. Every life moment, whether ‘sitting, standing, or lying down’, should be seen as a manifestation of Buddha’s nature” (WRIGHT, 2007, p. 36).

When entering Japan, by the 20th century (the Kamakura period)⁷, Zen Buddhism acquires some characteristics. Its introduction occurred through two rival schools, from China: the Rinzai and Soto schools. As familiar names in the Rinzai tradition, one may mention Eisai (1141-1215) and Myosen (1184-1225). In the Soto tradition stands out the name of Dôgen (1200-1253), who introduced this school in Japan. While the Rinzai tradition focused on the *koans*’ practice, where dynamic mental activity was required, the Soto tradition focused on the practice of *zazen*, aimed at a “gradual enlightenment” process (IZUTSU, 2009, p. 139-144, our translation)⁸.

2 Dôgen’s presence

Dôgen stands out as one of the most important creative figures of humanity. He was a great reformer and revitalizer of the Japanese Buddhist tradition in the turn of the 13th century. He was the introducer of the Soto Zen tradition in Japan. It was, above all, from the 1930s on that took place a wider reception of his thought, when he began to be perceived as a “spiritual guide of humanity”⁹. His lively insertion within the Buddhist studies is grounded on the postwar period, i.e. from 1945 on, when there were intensified efforts to incorporate Dôgen “in the historical,

⁷ One speaks, here, of Zen Buddhism, since the Buddhist tradition had already entered Japan in the mid-6th century B.C., with nearly 1,000 years of tradition and varied presence in almost the whole Asia.

⁸ As Hee-Jin Kim highlights, the Rinzai Zen is marked by the dynamics of “introspection through *koans*”, while the Soto Zen is marked by the “silent illumination” through “Soto *zazen*” (*shikantaza*) (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 79, our translation). From the perspective of the Zen school literature, *koan* is “a written or oral text with hermetic content or even illogical or absurd, used as an instrument, or ‘skillful means’ to guide the practitioner to understand reality” (TOLLINI, 2001, p. 177, our translation).

⁹ As Hee-Jin Kim highlighted, Dôgen’s studies turned confined to scholars of the Soto Order for about seven hundred years, and they only gained a wider projection from 1926 on, when a new awakening phase of the reflections around their works took place (JIN KIM, 2010).

social, and cultural context where its thought was formed” (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 21-23, our translation).

Much of the works resuming Dôgen’s thought, particularly those addressing his major work, *Shôbôgenzô*, were conducted in the East. Not only important studies aimed at understanding this work, but also those addressing other writings by the Soto tradition’s master. There were investigations not only in the philosophical and religious domains, but also linguistic, textual, and literary. There was, unfortunately, a similar reflective monitoring on Dôgen’s work of in the West. The works promoting Zen Buddhism in the West were favored by the reflection of D. T. Suzuki, based, above all, in Rinzai Zen (JIN KIM, 2010).

Many are the difficulties for accessing the complex thought of Dôgen. Both his reflection and his language “are extremely difficult and subtle, and, however, irresistibly intriguing” (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 24, our translation). The contact with his work opens unexpected horizons for reflection and an innovative view aimed at the effective and deepen understanding of Zen Buddhism. That’s the reason for choosing his itinerary as a starting point for our reflection.

Dôgen was born in January 1200, in an aristocratic family. His life was marked by the early experience of impermanence, as he lost his father in 1202 and his mother a little later, when he was only 7 years old. Despite the difficulties arising from these losses, he could have a refined cultural and linguistic training, and this may be observed in his poetic excellence. He wasn’t affected by pessimism, which also haunted his time, but strengthened the dynamics of his pathway with substantive vitality. He said: “With a life like this, transitory, there should be no other commitment, but the Way” (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 40, our translation)¹⁰.

After losing his parents, Dôgen was grown by his mother’s younger brother, Fujiwara Moroie, who forecasted a brilliant aristocratic career for the boy. Fate,

¹⁰ In a comment on the work by Dôgen entitled *Instructions to a Zen cook*, Uchiyama Roshi highlights how the spirit of joy always wrapped the great Zen master. The author underlines a thought by Dôgen which exemplifies this: “The cheerful mind is that of gratitude and optimism” (DÔGEN; ROSHI, 1986, p. 98, our translation).

however, reserved him a different fortune, and he chose the monastic pathway. He enters the novitiate in 1213, at the age of 13 years, in an office directed by Kôen, then abbot of the Enryakuji temple, on Mount Hiei. There started his systematic study of the Buddhist sutras. In the course of his studies, he came across a question which would accompany him for many years: “If all human beings are endowed with the Buddha’s nature from birth, why do the Buddhists of all time incessantly seek enlightenment, by engaging in spiritual practice?”. This is a question to which no one on Mount Hiei was able to provide a satisfactory answer (JIN KIM, 2010).

He follows his path with this delicate question in the luggage. He passes through the Onjôji temple, in the province of Omi, under the care of master Koin (1145-1216). The latter sends him to the Kenninji temple, in Kyoto, and he becomes, then, a student of Myozen (1184-1225), a disciple of Eisai, who had introduced the Rinzai Zen in Japan. Dôgen (2001a, p. 125, our translation) reports this meeting in “Bendôwa”:

After awakening the wish for enlightenment and pursuit of the Way, I wandered through this country seeking knowledge. Then, that was the moment when I found master Myozen at the Kenninji temple. Nine years rapidly passed and, being along with the master within this period, I learned many things about the Rinzai tradition. Myozen was the main disciple of the founder (of Rinzai) Eisai and he was the only one who received the correct transmission of supreme Buddhism (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001a, p. 125, our translation).

It’s in the meeting with Myozen that Dôgen becomes aware of the Zen Buddhism, and he recognized that no other master could be compared to him with regard to dynamics of the correct transmission of Buddhism. However, even the presence of this master didn’t respond to the dissatisfaction feeling which accompanied him since the time of his stay on Mount Hiei. He identified limits in the Japanese masters’ teaching, which, according to his view, couldn’t penetrate an “intellectual understanding of the doctrine”. They were able to transmit to their disciples nothing but “words and letters”, or “names and sounds”. Dôgen longed for

something even deeper. Then, he decided to undertake a new adventure traveling to China, in order to seek knowledge among the great founding masters. He understood that the “best of Buddhism” could be found there. He indicated that it would be better not to study Buddhism in the absence of a true master (JIN KIM, 2010).

In 1223, Dôgen leaves for China, in a difficult sea voyage. Along with him, master Myozen. His intention was deepening the studies in monasteries following the Zen tradition. In an anchoring point of the ship took place one of the famous episodes of Dôgen’s meeting with a Chinese cook monk, aged 61 years, who came into the ship in search of Japanese *shitake*, provided by the merchants on board. The unique dialogue between them is reported in the book by Dôgen entitled *Instructions to a Zen cook (Tenzo kyokun)*, published in 1237 (DÔGEN; RÔSHI, 1986). Thinking this is a strange task for a monk in his late career, Dôgen asks the cook if it wouldn’t be more pertinent to devote his time to the practice of *zazen* or the study of *koans*, rather than a hard work such as that of *tenzo*. As a response, the old monk burst into laughter and made the following observation: “My good foreigner friend! You haven’t understood, yet, what the practice is, and you also haven’t known the meaning of characters”. It was a true lesson for Dôgen, as a light lit in his conscience, triggering a distinct and novelty-like understanding of Zen¹¹. He could see that in the simple and everyday like work in the kitchen, as *tenzo*, someone can fully live the authentic Zen experience, the Bodhidharma. In the work cited, *Tenzo Kyokun*, written more than a decade after that meeting, Dôgen acknowledges that working as a cook in the Zen tradition is practiced only by “stable masters on the Way”, or by masters who awakened the *bodhisattva* spirit in themselves. Over the centuries, this noble task was performed by great masters and patriarchs, Dôgen recalls. It’s a work which touches one of the most crucial themes of the Zen tradition, i.e. the spirit of care and attention. Nothing more important,

¹¹ The two monks will meet again in China, during the 7th month of Dôgen’s presence there, when he had been admitted to the Ching-tê-ssu temple. The old *tenzo* was to withdraw from his task in the A-iu-wang monastery. They resumed their old discussion. These two meetings were decisive with regard to Dôgen’s life and thought, as Hee-Jin Kim accurately recalled. It was from them on that he could understand the “relationship between practice and language, between actions and words, between activity and expression”, as well as the power of language and the symbols it had to open for understanding reality (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 48, our translation).

Dôgen reports, than carefully preparing food and being personally involved in every detail of the preparation of meals. He says: “Let, day and night, all things enter and remain in your mind. Ensure your mind and everything can act together as a whole” (DÔGEN; RÔSHI, 1986, p. 19, our translation). Nothing is more sacred than this harmonization between life and work. He also says: “Handle a single vegetable leaf so that it expresses the Buddha’s body” (DÔGEN; RÔSHI, 1986, p. 21, our translation).

In China, Dôgen visited many monasteries along with master Myozen. At that time, the Chinese Buddhism lived a hardship and decline situation. There were multiple causes for this situation, including moral degeneration of the monastic community due to the sale by the government of monastic certificates and honorific titles to tackle the financial crisis. Within this unfavorable context, Zen masters started getting involved in politics and the monasteries of this tradition became social and political life centers. Dôgen expresses his dissatisfaction with all this and reacts against the impoverishment of those who claim to be Buddha’s descendants and the weakening of teaching on the Way (JIN KIM, 2010). Dôgen’s criticism were aimed not only at the general situation of Buddhism, but also at the Rinzai order, very popular at that time.

The trips undertaken by Dôgen through China provided him with a good knowledge on the Chinese Buddhism, but didn’t allow him access to a true master. Marked by certain disillusionment, he decided coming back to Japan. He decides to make a last visit to Mount T’ien-t’ung, where his master Myozen was ill. In the Chiug-shan Wan-shoussu temple, Dôgen meets an old monk, who sheds a new light on his way by speaking of a famous master, Ju-Ching (1163-1228)¹², who took the role of abbot at the Ching-te-ssu monastery on Mount T’ien-t’ung. It was the password needed for a meeting which decisively marked his life. The contact with Ju-Ching took place in the 5th month of 1225. The embracement was warm, and the unveiling of Dharma’s mystery occurred between them.

¹² Ju-Ching (or Nyojo), although being in a monastery connected to the Rinzai order, belonged to the Soto Zen tradition. He was an ardent and regular practitioner of *zazen*.

Master Ju-ching reacted to the sectarian divisions of Buddhism and aspired to an open and universalizing Buddhism. He disliked even naming his practice as being Zen. The crucial goal of his work was deepening the Dharma. When addressing the personality of this master, Dôgen marks its dynamic and charismatic trait and its uncompromising defense of Soto *zazen*, understood as an essential pathway of Buddhism. According to Ju-Ching, following the description about him woven by Dôgen, Buddhism “shouldn’t revere nothing signaling glory and worldly powers; it should, rather, be satisfied with the virtue of poverty and living in the deep peace of the mountains. The Dharma should be sought for the Dharma’s sake” (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 56, our translation).

A decisive moment in Dôgen’s learning experience under the guidance of Ju-Ching occurred in 1225. During a practice of *zazen*, in the first morning of an intensive retreat (*Geango*), a monk by his side was asleep. In a warning to such an unexpected event, Ju-Ching firmly cried in his direction: “In *zazen* it’s imperative abandoning the body and mind. How can you give in to sleep?”. Ju-Ching’s admonishment ended up having an effect on Dôgen, who felt his whole being tremble, leading to the experience of a great joy in his heart. That same morning, in Ju-Ching’s chamber, Dôgen offered him incense and bowed in front of the image of Buddha. Admired by Dôgen’s attitude, master Ju-Ching asked him about the reason for such a procedure. As a response, he had a revealing sentence: “My body and my mind were abandoned!”. An expression which became famous in the book “*Genjo koan*” from *Shôbôgenzô: shinjin datsuraku* (let the body and mind drop) (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001d; 2001e). Given the exuberant response of Dôgen, and his unerring perception, Ju-Ching acknowledged the authenticity of his enlightenment. In the 9th month of 1225, he gave to Dôgen, a Japanese monk, the official certificate of patriarchal succession of the Chen-hsieh line from the Tsao-tung Order, a novelty in the Chinese Buddhism history (JIN KIM, 2010).

Dôgen, at last, obtained an answer to the question which distressed him for many years, since the time of his presence on Mount Hiei. In the unerring perception of this “letting body and mind drop” was the key for accessing the

understanding of Buddha's nature. Through the practice of Soto *zazen*, i.e. just sitting (*shikantaza*), he finally can access the perspective of a non-dualistic existence. And this "body and mind abandonment" didn't made null, under any circumstances, the historic and social existence, but put it into action from a new and different perspective, in order to grant a "self-creative and self-expressive incarnation of Buddha's nature" (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 59, our translation).

For two intense years, between 1225 and 1227, the two masters lived a rich experience of usual practice and teaching in pursuit of the true understanding of the Dharma. In 1227, Dôgen expressed to his master the wish for coming back to Japan, receiving at the time the priestly habit, which is the genealogical document of patriarchal succession.

Master Dôgen came back to Japan with his "hands emptied" of sutras, images, or documents. He brought only his body, his mind, and his existence to his countrymen, now freed from the bonds of ego and radically transformed. This return probably occurred in the Fall of 1227. He soon assumes the direction of the Kenninji temple, after years of absence. In this same year, he writes the short text "*Fukan zazengi*", with practical advices on *zazen*. It's a book which isn't included in *Shôbôgenzô*, but it expresses an important trait of Dôgen's teaching, being the first description of *zazen* undertaken by a Japanese author (TOLLINI, 2001).

Dôgen's residence time in Kenninji was three years. Then, he went to the An'yoin temple in Fukakusa, where he wrote one of the classic books of *Shôbôgenzô*, the "*Bendôwa*", which is, actually, a discourse on the practice of the Way. This is a work revealing the key traits of Dôgen's teaching. With these two early writings, Dôgen lays the foundations of his religious and philosophical conception.

With the growth in the number of his disciples, Dôgen moved to the Kosho-horinji temple – an extension of the original Kannon-dorin –, where he stayed for ten years (1233-1243). Perhaps, it was the most creative period for him, composing just 44 chapters of *Shôbôgenzô*, including some of great importance, such as

“*Genjo-koan*” and “*Bussho*”. It was also there that he embraced Koun Ejo (1198-1280) as his disciple. A strong friendship grew between them, which kept them bound for nearly twenty years, until Dôgen’s death¹³. They worked together for the affirmation of Soto Zen in Japan.

The Kosho-horinji temple was an open space to the community, translating a Dôgen’s ever-present concern, i.e. making Buddhism a “religion of the people”. In one of his short and beautiful books, “*Shôji*”, which addresses births and deaths, Dôgen expresses his idea of the limitless compassion. He highlights that the road leading to the awakening necessarily entails a “deep compassion for all beings” (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2007b, p. 353). For this to happen, one needs a heart freed from the selfish little self, so that she/he can embrace and resonate all beings in the universe.

Dôgen’s roaming continued through the Kippoji and Daibutsuji temples, where he settled in the 7th month of 1244. In June 1246, he changed the temple’s name to Eiheiji, which means eternal peace. Then, he was able to fulfill his dream of “founding an ideal monastic community according to the dictates of Po-chang Huai-hai (720-814), in the heart of the mountains and watercourses” (JIN KIM, 2010, p. 71, our translation). In this temple, he wrote eight chapters of *Shôbôgenzô*, but mainly devoted himself to the preparation of precepts and rules for consolidating the monastic life. The Eiheiji monastery became an important reference point as an educational and religious community.

Dôgen’s health began to deteriorate from 1250 on, limiting his monastic activities. He also writes a final chapter of *Shôbôgenzô*, in 1253 – the “*Hachidainingaku*” –, expressing a final message to his disciples, forecasting the closeness of his death. He nominated Ejo as his successor in 1253, and in the 8th month of the same year he died, along with his disciples, in a *zazen* posture.

¹³ Besides being a faithful disciple, Ejo also took the role of chief monk (*shuso*) in Kosho-horinji. He was later on nominated by Dôgen, in 1253, as his successor and head of the Eiheiji monastery. As Yampolsky (2007b) indicates, he also helped Dôgen to compile *Shôbôgenzô*, and it’s possible that he also extended the text after his master’s death.

3 Dôgen and the Dharma's pathways

One of the key traits of Dôgen's teaching is related to *jijuyu zanmai*, i.e. the human being's intrinsic capacity to enlightenment. According to the Japanese master's view, the Dharma is present within each person, but its coming to light depends on exercising the practice. He notes in "*Bendôwa*" that a "mysterious method" was transmitted from Buddha to Buddha, which is that of sitting in *zazen*. There isn't a more favorable "gateway" to enlightenment: this is "the true Way to reach enlightenment" (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001a, p. 123-124, our translation)¹⁴.

According to Dôgen's view, there's no way to separate practice from enlightenment. Access to enlightenment doesn't happen through a speculative way, but above all through an action which unfolds from oneself's bottom. There're, in fact, a unit of practice and enlightenment (*shusho ichinyo*)¹⁵. The pathway of this practice, when advised by a good master, leads to the enlightenment's horizon. Simply sitting, rightly guided, favors the perception of "Buddha's seal", and the look comes off to capture in all things in the universe an enlightened presence (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001a, p. 127, our translation).

Traces of the practice of *zazen* were particularly developed in three works by Dôgen: "*Zazengi*", "*Fukan zazengi*", and "*Zazenshin*". In the first work, "*Zazengi*", Dôgen notes that "the practice of Zen is *zazen*". In this book, Dôgen approaches the favorable conditions for conducting this practice: the place conditions and the state of mind wished for its exercise. There's a need for letting oneself be inhabited by the "with no thought"¹⁶, breaking all ties or bonds which compromise the practitioner's concentration. There should be no goals, neither that of becoming Buddha. *Zazen* must be held in "high regard" (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001b, p. 43-44, our

¹⁴ In his book "*Zazengi*", Dôgen notes that *zazen* constitutes "simply entering the great peace Dharma" (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001b, p. 45, our translation).

¹⁵ From Dôgen's perspective, the words "*shu*" (practice) and "*sho*" (enlightenment) are indicated with a single word, and just to indicate that they can't be understood separately.

¹⁶ According to Dôgen, what differs no thought from with no thought is the fact that the first still involves the presence of a selfish self, whereas the latter is deprived of the presence of a self, which allowed her/himself to leave or drop. With the absence of this I, one can no longer speak of ropes or attachment bonds (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001c).

translation). There's a need for leaving the body and mind "drop", getting rid of all conditionings and "just sit", expecting nothing. In "*Fukan zazengi*", which was the first text written by Dôgen (1227), he approaches the principles of *zazen*. He suggests that the practitioner turn into inside, through the practice of *zazen*, seeking the foremost foundation of the pathway, or the Way. This foundation, unlike the contemporary opinion in a certain Buddhist tradition, permeates all things. *Samsara* and *nirvana* aren't separate dimensions, but interpenetrated ones. The *nirvana* happens in the very *samsara* process¹⁷. And this "foremost face" of Dharma doesn't emerge but when the body and mind are allowed to drop, and this occurs in a natural manner, with the unfolding of practice. The formal and physical aspects of *zazen* are developed by Dôgen in his work "*Zasenshin*". There, he resumes the essential theme of exercising "no thought" in the practice of *zazen*: the challenge of "thinking through the no thought". In the very practice of *zazen* takes place the enlightenment dynamics, and the practitioner shouldn't let her/himself be taken away by any wish, not even that of becoming Buddha¹⁸. This is something as impossible as turning a tile into a mirror by polishing it with a stone. According to Dôgen, there's a need for overcoming the "immediate fact" which is presented to the eyes and know how to seek deeper, aiming to capture the mystery of things. That is, for him, the wider meaning of the study of Buddhism. Following the track opened by master Nangaku Daie (677-744), Dôgen signals the importance of exercising gratuity in *zazen*. There's no reason to worry about the "sitting ways", one needs only to turn to its "principle". For this, the key provision is "letting the body and mind drop" (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001d, p. 60-70).

This expression "letting one's body/mind drop" (*shinjin datsuraku*), so frequently quoted by Dôgen, has become very famous, translating in a clear and

¹⁷ This is a sharp perspective of the Mahayana Buddhism, especially in the *Prajna paramita* sutra. What is indicated there, as Okumura (2012, p. 43, our translation) recalls, is that "*samsara* and *nirvana* are an only thing. If we don't find *nirvana* within *samsara*, there's nowhere to find it".

¹⁸ Dôgen Zenji (2001d, p. 69) mentions a quote from master Nangaku Daie (or Nangaku Ejo – 677-744): "If you play the Buddha sitting, then you kill the Buddha". There's a need, therefore, for getting rid of the *zazen* from the very conception of Buddhahood (a fixed conception of Buddha), i.e. free oneself from Buddha to incorporate him into life.

concise manner the essence of his reflection on Buddhism. Its most accurate form in the author's work is observed in the "*Genjo Koan*":

Learning Buddhism is learning oneself; learning oneself and forgetting about oneself. Forgetting about oneself is being awakened for reality. Being awakened for reality is letting one's own body/mind and the others' body/mind drop (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2001e, p. 180, our translation)¹⁹.

The dynamics of this precious learning involves the presence of a good master, who enables opening the pathway for correct transmission. It's a "learning to unlearn", as Fernando Pessoa so well showed in his *Keeper of sheep*. There's a need to break the perception of reality which is based on the prospect of a "permanent self". There's nothing to do with the idea of a "permanent self". As outlined by Dôgen Zenji (2001e, p. 180), "reality isn't based on our self". The exercise of *zazen* provides the emergence of a self which is born through the death of a self-centered individual. This individual "let itself drop" to bring out the actual self (*jiko*). This is the actual or universal self, inhabited by the reality of life. The essential step of the practice of *zazen* is promoting the emergence of this "self" which includes the whole thing (UCHIYAMA, 2006)²⁰.

Taisen Deshimaru is right when he notes that *zazen* favors an "enlargement of consciousness and the development of intuition". It isn't a practice which takes the subject out of life and history, but rather causes a natural penetration in its concreteness. It's a technique which enables continued attention, a lively concentration "on every moment of life" (DESHIMARU, 1981, p. 30, our translation).

There's a need for stressing, following the tracks open by Dôgen, that it's also possible to go through the Way by unusual pathways, which aren't restricted to the specific practice of *zazen*. It's an achievement which extends to the whole

¹⁹ See also Jin Kim (2010) Okumura (2012).

²⁰ As Uchiyama (2006) showed, the *jiko* is identified with a "self living the whole truth". It doesn't refer to a selfish individual, but to a self which goes beyond the idea of a "personal consciousness". The true self, the total self, is wrapped by a "strength or quality of life" (UCHIYAMA, 2006, p. 48-51, our translation).

universe, because its light emanates from everywhere. It's observed in the strike and hiss of the wind and in the mysterious sound of a bell. According to Dôgen Zenji (2001a), every phenomenon bears the possibility of enlightenment²¹.

4 An everyday life spirituality

The Zen spirituality as a whole strongly increases the value and meaning of life experience. Even recognizing the indispensable relevance of the practice of *zazen*, the essential basis where dwells the function of Dharma is life itself, in its entire texture. In a rich reflection by Uchiyama Roshi, *How to cook your life*, he addresses the theme of “falling in love with life”. He recognizes that in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition life is the “most essential” thing (DÔGEN; ROSHI, 1986, p. 67).

Dôgen underlines all the time the importance of care, kindness, and attention to the current times in each of its moments. There's, for him, a close relation between nature and awakening. The various chapters or fascicles of *Shôbôgenzô*, as well as the poems collected in *Sanshodoi*²², express this “deep love” of the Zen master to nature. Some titles in the great work by Dôgen express this presence: *Tsuki* (Moon), *Shunju* (Spring and Fall), *Katto* (vine), *Hakujushi* (cypress), *baika* (peach blossom), *udonge* (the udumbara flower), *keisei sanshokoku* (the voice of valleys, the forms/colors of mountains), *sansuikyo* (mountains and rivers as sutra).

There's a whole rich learning favored in the Zen tradition of unveiling the presence of invisible, or mystery, within the very visible and being able to capture the essential resonance of the universe. However, when, for instance, Dôgen speaks of nature, his perception is different from that usual in the West. The term is full of

²¹ Aldo Tollini (2001), in a comment on the passage of Bendowa, underlines that this possibility of enlightenment outside the practice of *zazen*, too, is recognized by several canonical texts of the Zen tradition.

²² Dôgen Zenji and Ejo (2011). This is the book which collects the poems by Dôgen, composed between 1245 and 1253.

a clear religious connotation. There's no way to separate the understanding of nature from the awakening experience. The term nature is unveiled as "the concrete reality realized through the awakening, the very awakening's world" (FAURE, 1987, p. 23, our translation). From this perspective, Dôgen can sing in one of his poems from *Sanshodoei*: "The echo of valleys and the cry of simians on the heights do nothing but endlessly reciting the Scriptures" (FAURE, 1987, p. 25, our translation)²³. In fact, the whole natural reality, involving the mountains, rivers, and the entire hugeness of land constitute "the ocean of Buddha's nature". Or, as noted in the book *Hotsumujôshin*, in every dust "there're thousands of holy scriptures and a countless number of awakenings" (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2005a, p. 173, our translation).

This deep awareness of natural reality, however, presupposes an interiority work, an exercise of perfecting the look. Not everyone can capture the resonance of the universe, but those who went through an inner transformation, breaking with the selfish and possessive perspective, allowing her/himself to be wrapped by "direct experience", which precedes any distinction between subject and object (FAURE, 1987, p. 26, our translation).

In a clarifying work on the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, Toshihiko Izutsu addresses this issue of "Seeing" in the Zen tradition. By means of ordinary vision, which is limited to the immediate fact, it's not always possible to capture the "other side" of things, or their implicit mystery. It's when the look is lost in things without, however, recognizing them. Not always the vision of what is in front of the eyes favors the perception of its depth. As Izutsu (2009, p. 20-21, our translation) notes,

in order to see in an only flower a manifestation of the metaphysical unity of all things, not only of all named objects, but also the observing subject, the empirical ego must have undergone a total transformation, a complete annulment of himself – the death of his own "I" and his rebirth in a completely distinct consciousness dimension.

²³ Or, also, in another poem from *Sanshodoei*: "The outline of summits, the murmur of valleys, are nothing but the voice and spirit of our Shakyamuni Buddha" (FAURE, 1987, p. 25, our translation).

One finds out that in the Zen tradition there's nothing but the reality of the phenomenal world. It isn't spoken, there, of a transcendental order of things, which stands out of space and time. What exists is this sensitive and specific world, in its vital thickness. Dôgen's thought reflects this dedicated attention to the flow of everyday life existence, though without an accent in a specific transcendence. There's something "uniquely unholy" and "absolutely routine" in the Zen he presents. It's reported that Bodhidharma, when asked by Emperor Wu on the sanctity trait observed in the teaching of Buddhism, calmly answered: "An immense emptiness, and nothing to do with sanctity" (COOK, 1981, p. 59, our translation). In an illustrative chapter of *Shôbôgenzô*, dedicated to the theme of everyday life (*Kajo*), Dôgen points out that the great masters and patriarchs of Zen simply "eat rice and drink tea". There's nothing very "noble" in the lives of these great men: "The ordinary tea and frugal meals of his daily life constitute the thoughts of those who have awakened and the patriarchs' words" (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2007a, p. 306, our translation).

What Zen, however, punctuates is that the phenomenal world isn't reduced to the plot of sensible things which present themselves to the ordinary empirical ego. It may be vitalized by a particular species of dynamic power able to resize the look (IZUTSU, 2009). While the ordinary look, essentialist, can only see the mountain as mountain and the river as a river, the Zen look went through the "Nothingness abyss" experience, the crucial experience of detachment. Beyond the phenomenal surface, now he can, streamlined by a distinct experience, catch the same mountain from a new perspective: "The mountain is mountain again", or also: "The mountain is simply mountain". The look is refreshed through its "rebirth from the very Nothingness abyss", signaling the presence of an individual who was completely transformed with regard to her/his internal structure. This is, according to Dôgen, a look which underwent a specific activity (*gyoji*), punctuated by a way of conceiving and living everyday life itself according to the Zen spirituality.

A traditional saying by the Zen master Ma-tsu (709-788), often repeated by Suzuki (1993), indicates that “Zen is everyday life consciousness”. All things “sing the truth”, also signals Dôgen. Therefore, there’s no need for leaving the world to enjoy the spiritual experience. If someone wants, in fact, to penetrate the truth of Zen, Suzuki (1993) indicates, having Pen-hsien as a basis, she/he should do it when standing or walking, sleeping or sitting, by word or silence, and amid the everyday life work affairs.

Embracing the everyday life in its elementary wonder is among the most important challenges presented by the Zen tradition, and particularly by Dôgen (TOLLINI, 2012). The perception of the novelty of things in each singular moment or instant is favored by the look which went through a dynamic change process. It’s a look able to catch the essential gratuity (*mushotoku*) of things. Master Kodo Sawaki (1880-1965) said: “Men accumulate knowledge, but I think the ultimate goal is being able to feel the sound of the valleys and look at the colors of the mountain” (FAZION, 2003, p. 101, our translation). Authentic meditation doesn’t happen in the distancing of the current moment, but in the penetration of its thickness. It involves a vigilant attention to the small details of everyday life, with an open and clear mind. *Zazen* doesn’t happen only at a specific time and in a privileged place, but it occurs at every moment, starting by opening the eyes in the morning and ending with their closure at night, so that all activities performed in that day constitute a living translation of a practice (COOK, 1981).

In another fascicle of his *Shôbôgenzô*, “*Zenki*”, Dôgen addresses the precious theme of the instant. According to him “every instant is a fullness instant”. In this work, he severely questions those who teach that achieving the *nirvana* happens with the output from the ordinary world. He emphatically underlines that the two worlds, the *nirvana* and *samsara*, mutually need each other. In fact, he notes that *nirvana* operates in *samsara* (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2011). In Dôgen’s view, “the event par excellence is life”, the life which is lived in each of its instants and through which everyone can celebrate the joy of being there. The spiritual awakening, notes

the Zen master, is nothing more than the taking of living consciousness of this current moment in its mysterious meshes of puzzle, surprise, and gratitude. There's full consciousness only, Dôgen (2011) warns, when consciousness is able to embrace all things at every moment.

The privileged body for embracing this life pulsation which accommodates in every instant of everyday life is, according to Dôgen, the heart (*shin – kokoro*). However, for being able to “resonate with the multitude of beings in the universe”, it needs emptying, detachment of traits of the “small self” which impede the universal hug of embracement and compassion. It's the freed heart which turns the human being available to listen with joy to the “singing of things”, or, in a Dôgen's expression, the “feeling and emotion of flowers” (DÔGEN ZENJI, 2007b, p. 348).

Conclusion

In his introductory work to Zen Buddhism, Suzuki (1999) addresses the issue of whether Zen Buddhism is a kind of mysticism. With the typical humor of the great masters, he indicates that Zen “is a mysticism in its own way”. He signals that it “is mystic in the sense that the sun shines” or “in the sense that a flower blooms”. He recognizes that the religiosity trait inhabits the presence of a camellia in bloom, in the same proportion that its evidence in an explicitly religious act of prostrating in front of the gods or other ritual activities (SUZUKI, 1999). This is, in fact, a spirituality grounded on the simplest everyday life experience. There's a lot of human, all too human, the Zen spirituality. That's what this paper aimed to underlie in various ways. The Zen Buddhist tradition lives spirituality in time, without moving the experience of enlightenment to an unknowable beyond, or an impalpable *nirvana*. It's in this “troubled” world of *samsara* which takes place the enlightenment opportunity. That's why, as so well shown by Francis Cook (1981), Buddhism calls everyone to an attitude of life observation, with delicacy, clarity, and attention, aiming to find a unique freedom and a shared well-being, always in

this given space and in the precise conditions which constitute the human life building.

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