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Mind as Action in Zen Buddhist Thought

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ABSTRACT

Many of the most influential and prevalent answers to the mind-body problem in the contemporary Western analytic tradition have taken a materialist, monist stance. In Zen Buddhist thought, discussion of mind is so ubiquitous as to characterize Zen itself. Most frequently, Zen teaching sets forth or seems to set forth a unity of mind and matter, of subjective and objective, much in the way of contemporary philosophy of mind. However, Zen Buddhism is also known for its partiality to paradox and the ineffable, as expressed in the collection of riddle-like koans, as well as in the complex and sometimes nonsensical writings of the Japanese Zen philosopher Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253). This way of regarding the world as irreducible is diametrically opposed to the materialist reductionism of modern science and associated theories of mind. In this presentation, I will examine the stance taken on the mind-body problem in Dōgen's *Shobogenzo*, in light of major theories in contemporary philosophy of mind. In this way I intend to show that Zen teaching offers a philosophy of mind which departs from the restrictive reductionism of Western philosophy of mind without introducing "spirit" and giving up monism.

KEYWORDS

Zen, Buddhism, *Shobogenzo*, Dogen, Japan, Eastern, Mind, Free Will, Monism, Materialism

INTRODUCTION

At least since the advent of radical behaviorism, many of the most prevalent theories about the relationship of mind or the experience of subjectivity to body or matter have taken a materialist, monist position. That is, mind and body are unified in one substance, while the experience of consciousness or subjectivity is reduced to a material phenomenon or epiphenomenon.

In Zen Buddhist thought, discussion of mind is so ubiquitous as to characterize Zen itself - cf. popular phrases like "zen mind, beginner's mind". Zen teaching is most frequently characterized as setting forth or seeming to set forth a unity of mind and matter, of subjective and objective - that is, nonduality with respect to the mind-body problem. This stance being a monist one, like those of many contemporary Western philosophers, a potential starting point for examining the possible relationships between these two realms of thought thus emerges. Indeed, modern cognitive science has lent support to the Buddhist theory that selfhood is inconstant or even illusory, a crucial part of the Buddhist argument for mind-body monism.

However, Zen Buddhism is also known for its partiality to paradox and the ineffable, as expressed in the collection of riddle-like *koans* used to teach students of Zen, as well as in the complex and often counter-rational writings of the Japanese Zen monk and philosopher Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253). This way of regarding the world as irreducible is diametrically opposed to the materialist reductionism of modern science and associated theories of mind. In this presentation, I will examine the conception of mind expounded in important Zen texts, particularly the *Shobogenzo*, Dōgen's collection of philosophical essays. I will build an argument for regarding his philosophy of mind as described in the maxim "mind is action". I will then sketch the philosophical implications of this alternative in comparison to and as a response to major theories in contemporary philosophy of mind. In this way I intend to show that Zen teaching offers a philosophy of mind which departs from the restrictive reductionism of Western philosophy of mind without introducing "spirit" and giving up monism. This solution will turn out to have counterintuitive but well-supported consequences for the assumed Western notions of intentionality, mental events, and selfhood.

FEATURES OF DŌGEN'S POSITION

For our purposes, I will first cite several short passages from the first fascicle of the Shobogenzo, *Bendōwa (A Talk about Pursuing the Truth)*. The first states that: "...if we do not practice [the Dharma], it does not manifest itself, and if we do not experience it, it cannot be realized" (Nishijima and Cross 2006, 3). Here Dōgen sets our own action and experience as the necessary and sufficient basis for events in the real world, and vice versa. The two are equated, and the distinction between inner and outer worlds is done away with.

The next: "If a human being, even for a single moment, manifests the Buddha's posture... the entire world of Dharma assumes the Buddha's posture and the whole of space becomes the state of realization" (ibid. 5-6). There are two important features of this passage. One is that the human being spoken of has this effect if she "even for a single moment" achieves realization. "For a single moment", implying that the human being who has realized the state of Buddhahood may well recede from it in the next moment. There is no continual identity, but only a string of moments; one can be a particular way in one moment only to be completely different in the next. The other feature is that the experience of an individual person is again equated with all of reality. The practice of one person is mirrored by "the entire world of Dharma" and "the whole of space". There is no differentiation between the individual and the whole (or, the rest).

In this vein Dōgen also says in *Bendōwa* that "mind and external world enter together into the state of experience and pass together out of the state of realization" (ibid. 7). "The mind and external world enter together" - that is, mind and body, thought and action, manifest simultaneously. No separation shows itself to us, leaving no justification for dividing body and mind or thought and action. Dōgen's position is that there is ultimately only reflexive or non-intentional action which is inherently and inseparably embodied.

This position is indeed the standard for Zen Buddhism, and is given more succinctly in shorter Zen poems and chants. For instance, the Ten-Verse Kannon Sutra states: "This moment arises from mind, this moment itself is mind." The *Sandōkai (Identity of Relative and Absolute)* says: "The mind of the great sage of India is intimately conveyed from west to east", referring to Bodhidharma's bringing Buddhism to China. The *Xinxin Ming (Affirming Faith in Mind)* states: "If all thought-objects disappear, the thinking subject drops away / For things are things because of mind, and mind is mind because of things".

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This may be described as a conception of mind as action, and of reality as action. Gudo Nishijima, a Zen master and translator of the *Shobogenzo*, understands this, for as he says in his introduction:

[Dōgen] looks at a problem from two sides, and then tries to synthesize the two viewpoints into a middle way. This method has similarities with the dialectic method... Hegel's dialectic, however, is based on belief in spirit, and Marx's dialectic is based on belief in matter. Dōgen, through the Buddhist dialectic, wants to lead us away from thought based on belief in spirit and matter. Dōgen recognized the existence of something that is different from thought; that is, reality in action. Action is completely different from intellectual thought and completely different from the perceptions of our senses. (ibid xv)

In the fascicle *Mind Here and Now is Buddha*, Dōgen quotes a koan attributed to Chan master Guishan Lingyou:

An ancient patriarch said, "What is fine, pure, and bright mind? It is mountains, rivers, and the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars." (ibid. 62)

Dōgen's commentary reads this statement as expressing the superfluous nature of the concept of "mind":

Clearly, 'mind' is mountains, rivers, and the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars. But what these words say is, when we are moving forward, not enough, and when we are drawing back, too much.' Mind as mountains, rivers, and the earth is nothing other than mountains, rivers, and the earth. There are no additional waves or surf. (ibid. 69)

It is significant that Dogen frames his exegesis in terms of action: "*what these words say is*, when we are moving forward, not enough, and when we are drawing back, too much." In other words, Guishan's teaching doesn't just refer to the natural world, in case it wasn't clear; human activity is included in this unity without mind.

A final and very important feature of Dōgen's treatment of self, found throughout *Bendōwa* but also elsewhere, is that Dōgen also separates *intention*

from mind. Dōgen frequently refers to *jijuyū-zanmai*, samadhi of receiving and using the self, which Nishijima and Cross explain as a result of “making effort without an intentional aim” (ibid. 23).

This interpretation of Dōgen’s thought - that mind cannot be divided from the external, natural world; that intentionality is either illusory or at least to be greatly de-emphasized; that reality is only action, without aims and intentions - we will call “mind as action.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Before enthusiastically applying Dōgen’s theories to current issues in philosophy of mind, it may be necessary to clarify that his views are not easily dismissed as baselessly denying the existence of individuals or action. The sense in which Dōgen denies selfhood - namely, that of total independence from causality, *karma* - is a natural consequence of materialism. Action is likewise viewed in terms of the complex of cause and effect; being incapable of separation from causality, all actions are what could be called “karmic tics” or “karmic spasms”, and the peculiar “non-intentional action” of Dōgen indicates going along with these “spasms” without resistance motivated by the narrow view of the individual.

This theory of mind as action has a number of implications when considered in light of the major problems in Western philosophy of mind. First of all, this theory effectively dismisses the mind-body problem as based on a false premise. Mind and the external world appear and pass away together entirely seamlessly, and no phenomenological or experiential basis for the distinction between mind and body ever appears to us. This is a kind of monism, not a material or spiritual monism, but what may be termed “ineffable monism” - the *one* in question is not a substance, concept, or thing. It is not susceptible to empirical inquiry strictly speaking, but can be accessed through direct experience - as a confrontation with its reality or facticity - or thematically through discussion about it which can bring it up but does not capture it.

Nishijima and Cross understand this, as shown in their commentary on the fascicle *Mind Cannot Be Grasped*:

On the basis of our common sense, we usually think that our mind can be grasped by our intellect, and we are prone to think that our mind exists somewhere substantially. This belief also extends into the realm of philosophy; Rene Descartes... started

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his philosophical thinking with the premise 'Cogito ergo sum'... Buddhism is a philosophy of action, or a philosophy of the here and now; in that philosophy, mind cannot exist independently of the external world. In other words... all existence is the instantaneous contact between mind and the external world. (ibid. 289)

To be clear, as Dōgen says in *Bendōwa*, this contact is taking place at all times, has never not been taking place, and does not cease. It is *immanent* contact. This, again, is the justification for doing away with the mind-body problem.

Furthermore, and perhaps more controversially, if action - reality - is totally separate from thought, then this breaks theories of mind based on explaining or pointing to external events as evidence of thought or mind. Any framework based on the link between mind and action or behavior has to be thrown away under this paradigm. It would seem that this is incompatible with the supervenience of mental events on physical ones. Dōgen might endorse some kind of externalism, while rejecting type physicalism, or indeed any kind of physicalism concerning mental events.

There is thus an opening for the case to be made that a Zen perspective on philosophy of mind might fall on the side of functionalism, which is the primary alternative in contemporary Western thought to supervenience and physicalism. It may even be in some way compatible with radical behaviorism, to the extent that Skinner sought to account for actions without invoking the concept of "mind", and ultimately concluded that there was no independent agent to be found. Such an investigation would merit an exhaustive treatment of its own, and thus falls outside the scope of this presentation, but could be a fruitful subject of further study.

These parallels, however, are extremely - perhaps fatally - limited. Dōgen's non-dualism of mind and reality goes both ways, with mental events and experiences being every bit as real as - ontologically indistinguishable from - physical objects. Even though the link between thoughts and actions is broken, thoughts are not to be de-emphasized any more than actions are to be singly emphasized; thoughts are still "received and used". This theory thus does not exactly give free license to reduce human life to a set of inputs and their automatic outputs.

Aside from the question of mental events, Dōgen may also be construed as endorsing a sort of free will skepticism. If we can speak of free will skepticism in the sense that personal agency and intentionality is to be de-emphasized in

accounting for events in the chain of cause and effect, then Dōgen certainly falls under this classification. This is complicated, however, by the simultaneous presence of the *jijuyū-zanmai* principle.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Finally, I would like to attempt to sketch some consequences of mind as action for a couple of particular ethical questions, while making clear that any such consequences would be extremely speculative. First of all, the concept of *jijuyū-zanmai*, receiving and using the self, is part of the more generally Buddhist position that our subjective perception of selfhood is illusory and not reflected in ontological reality. While there has been an increase in scientific interest in mindfulness and some aspects of the Buddhist view of selfhood in recent years, I have not found there to be much movement in the direction of reading Buddhism as having relevant and serious ethical implications in this area, and while I cannot hope to make an original development towards that end I do want to raise that question here. In terms of neuroethics, this Buddhist position on selfhood has consequences for how we deal with issues such as personality-changing cognitive interventions such as psychotropic drugs and persistent vegetative states and other forms of severe brain damage. Following Dōgen's principle, our personality is already materially conditioned; changing the particular conditions does not change the fact of our embeddedness. Since the self is something "received and used", we have distance from it, and thus may be ethically justified in modifying or acting on it the same way we would any external object.

The impact of free will skepticism on issues like personal responsibility, culpable intent, and so on are well-documented, and there are not necessarily any distinguishing factors to the sort of skepticism we might derive from Dōgen.

Speaking more broadly, Dōgen seems, on the reading developed here, to hold up non-intentional, effortless conduct as a normative ideal, an ethical guideline. This bears similarity to the Daoist teaching of *wu-wei*. Instead of running against the grain of the reality of our condition, the best route is to, again, "receive and use" it, with distance. *Jijuyū-zanmai* implies an ethical component.

Perhaps the most vehement objection to this whole way of thinking, that of breaking the thought-behavior link, could be that it attempts to throw away things that we seem to very clearly experience and have always formed the basis of our ethical and psychological thought, namely identity and intentionality. But the

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idea that many of the things we believe about ourselves, our minds in particular, are in fact illusions is by no means a novel or revolutionary idea. Buddhism, of course, has been propounding this theory for 2500 years. Even in contemporary philosophy, there are plenty of thinkers who seek to challenge and undermine our faulty assumptions about mind; Daniel Dennett may be the most prominent. He has argued that "consciousness is an illusion", and that for our natural assumptions about its existence and non-physical nature to be correct, we would need access to its workings - physical workings, for Dennett - that we are incapable of gaining subjectively or introspectively. In many ways this process of debunking assumptions and developing new understandings of the basic experiences of mind, subjectivity, selfhood, etc. is the primary challenge facing philosophy of mind today. In order for this thinking to be carried out fully, it must encompass the full range of human thought; as the above discussion has shown, Zen in particular constitutes a fruitful area for consideration on these questions.

REFERENCES

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