

Wild Time: Commentaries on Dogen zenji's Being Time

First of a series of teisho presented by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi

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1: Now and Then

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Each and every morning,

first this spring
and now this summer,
a house wren calls out.

He calls out, "I am this *house* wren and this is my house. Stay away."

His house is a hole in the wall of the house neighbouring this building.
It is a brick wall that faces onto and adjoins the monastery garden.

The house wren sits in this hole sometimes, and there he calls out his message.
Sometimes, however, he sits amongst the branches and leaves of the sumac tree.
Sometimes he sits on the wires.

Now he is here
and now he's there.

When here, it is here, now.
When there, it is then.
But when "then" was "now,"
"there" was "here."

Whenever anything happens
it happens now
and "now" is this "happening."

Each moment, when it is this moment, is right now.

But "then" was once "now" and "right now"
tick tick tick
is now "then."

This moment is not the past moment, not the future moment
but in this moment
what happens as this moment
both shows and hides the past.

The bird was "there" and now is "here."

The future, however, seems to be utterly hidden.

We can have some very small sense of the future, in that,
for example, if we are walking up the steps towards the Dokusan room, we can know, somewhat, the future
completion of the motion of lifting, placing, and setting the foot.

But we might die before the foot makes contact with the next stair
and go tumbling down.

We don't know. We don't know.

The future is that hidden.

Because it is so hidden from us, we can engage in all manner of speculation.

We can lose ourselves in all manner of hopes and fears.

We can imagine future glories,
or complete and abject failure,
or any combination thereof...

And so it can seem to us
that time moves as past, present and future.

Each moment has a past and a future.

Each moment is this moment
and there is only this moment.

But each moment, when it is this moment, is only this moment.
And this moment contains within itself past and future.

But "past" and "future" only have meaning
when measured from this moment;
and this moment has no width.
It has no depth.

There is nothing that is this moment.

There is only this presencing,
this activity of Experiencing
that is happening everywhere
right now.

Eihei Dogen zenji says that this is something very interesting.
Something that we should look into.
Something that we should understand through our practice directly.

Our practice must take place in this moment.
When else can it take place?

Practicing the realization

which has been transmitted from Buddha to Buddha, from Awakened Ancestor to Awakened Ancestor,
must take place in this moment.

It must take place as this moment.

And when we understand that our practice realizes itself
when we practice not only in this moment,
not only as this moment,
but as the time which unfolds all moments, all times,
then we realize who we are.

And that moment of realization can only happen now,
in this moment.

Dogen's essay, his text on this matter, is called Uji: "Being-time."

Ji means "time" or "moment."

U means "Being," or even "has"; that something has something.

It is the opposite of Mu: nothing, no, don't or doesn't have.

In this text Dogen is not that concerned with addressing the issue of emptiness, sunya.
Instead, he is speaking about something further than that., something beyond Mu,
but something which is not a "something."

He is attempting to express something
to each of you
about how Aware Space embodies itself as each of you
and how each of you
unfold yourselves as each other
and as all things, as all beings, all times, all worlds.

And so "Being," in this case, is meant to express something about the radiance of Aware Space,
the knowingness of Knowing
which unfolds itself as knowns.

Being is always presenting itself as everything that is
and yet it is always absent
because Being can never be "a" being.

Each being
is the presencing of Being itself.

And yet each being is always
becoming absent.
Always vanishing.

In the very moment of its arising,
of its presenting itself,
each being is vanishing.

At the edge of each moment,
on this side the past is gone,
on this side the future has not happened,
and in the centre
is nothing at all
because this moment is utterly ungraspable,
is already
gone.

And so being-time is Being unfolding itself as beings.
Time is the unfolding of Being as beings.

Being and time are the Activity of Aware Space.
Time is Activity: the radiance of Knowing expressing itself as spaces which are active as forms, as beings, as knowns.

Dogen begins his text by raising an old story from an "Old Buddha," an Awakened Ancestor, named Yaoshan.

Now, this Zen master Yaoshan was not always a Zen master.

"Once" he was a Zen student,
"then" he was a Zen master.

Here is a story about Yaoshan when he didn't know what was going on.

Zen master Shitou said to Yaoshan, "If you say this it you've missed it. This and not this are both way off. What about you?"

Yaoshan said, " Ah...ah...ah...wha'...ah...um..."

Yaoshan didn't know what to say.

But now he knows what to say because the Old Buddha Yaoshan speaks now as this new Buddha.

But once he has spoken,
he becomes an Old Buddha.

So let's hear what he has to say.

"Being-time stands on the highest mountain peak.
Being-time moves on the floor of the deepest ocean."

Wait a minute!

This isn't what Yaoshan said. Yaoshan said, "Sometimes it stands on the highest mountain peak. Sometimes it stands on the floor of the deepest ocean."

Dogen has taken the characters that can be read as "sometimes it" and reads them as "Being-time."

The "Old" Buddha Yaoshan had something to say
but Dogen makes it new and has him saying "Being-time."

Now what does this mean?

"Being-time stands on the highest mountain peak."
It means that Being-time

looms forth.

"Being-time moves on the floor of the deepest ocean."

What does this mean?

It means beneath everything, here it is.

It also means

up is Being-time,

down is Being-time.

Every place is Being-time.

Up looks down and there is "down."

Down looks up and there is "up."

And when "down" look down,

"down" becomes "up."

Dogen also has Yaoshan say, "Being-time is three heads, eight arms."

Perhaps this speaks of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

The activity of Awakening beings presents itself everywhere as everything, in all directions, embracing everything that is and yet holding to nothing.

Sometimes Avalokiteshvara has eleven heads, a thousand arms.

And Aizen Myo-o, one of the five Vidyarajas, who represents the transformation of lustful patterns of attention into the expansiveness of compassionate activity, has three heads and eight arms.

Yaoshan or Dogen (or both) say, "Being-time is the sixteen foot body of the Awakened One."

Perhaps I'll read to you from the footnote that I have appended to the text here. And it occurs to me that when this teisho is transcribed then this quotation from my footnote to the text might be footnoted which is a very recursive textuality indeed but...

"The sixteen foot body of the Awakened One..."

The text actually says jorakku-hasshaku which can mean "sixteen feet or eight feet."

"'Body of the Awakened One' is a gloss to explicate the passage. The Buddha was ideally represented as towering above the pettiness of common views, understandings, and concerns. His body was radiant and golden. Standing, his form was sixteen feet high, seated, eight feet high."

Yaoshan and Dogen go on to say, "Being-time is a staff, a whisk."

BANG (Roshi strikes his nyoi staff on the hardwood floor)

A staff is a symbol of transmission.

A whisk, a hossu, which was originally used to chase away flies, somehow became another symbol of transmission.

Basically a Zen master would hold up his fly swatter and say, "What is this? What is this?"

I guess the fly knew.

"Being-time is a pillar, a lantern."

It is the floor. It is the wall.

Everything that presents itself within your experience right now is a moment of being, is Being-time.

And so you are Being-time.

"Being-time is Smith, is Jones."

or Zhang and Li, Taro and Jiro.

"Being-time is earth and sky."

Dogen says, "Being-time here means that time, as it is, is being and all being is all time. The Awakened one's sixteen foot high body is time. Being time, it has the golden radiance which is time. Learn that the twenty-four of the day are all the radiance of now. The three heads and eight arms are time and because they are time they are the hours of the day right now."

How is it that 8:15 in the evening is three heads and eight arms?

What presents itself in one moment presents itself in all moments.

Each moment, each form, each activity interpenetrates every other moment, every other thing, every other activity.

Everything is contained within everything else

but nothing is held onto.

Nothing is jumbled up.

Nothing is obstructed.

Enter completely into this moment

and you will enter not only into That which contains all time

and expresses itself as all times, all moments,

but you will fall into That

which has no time, no space, no dimension

because it is That in which all dimensions, all spaces, all times

arise.

Within the Total Field of All Possibilities, the Dharmadhatu, all times have already happened, are happening, are about to happen.

But the Total Field is simply the totality of modes of knowing and of knowns.

For Knowing in itself, for who you each and all truly are,

not only is there no other time than this moment,

there is not even this moment.

There is no time at all.

There is nothing other than Knowing.

And it is now 8:18.

Dogen says, "Without really ever being able to really measure twenty-four hours as long or short, swift or slow, you still call them twenty-four hours. The traces of their coming and going are so obvious that you don't need to doubt them. "

Where are the traces of the twenty-four hours?

Our whole lives seem to be littered by the traces of the twenty-four hours.

You had breakfast. You had lunch and then you had supper.

Not long after lunch you were looking “forward” to supper.

In each moment,
although the “radiance of now”
shines and blazes
as the vividness of the ungraspable presencing
of That in which everything is arising,

although this moment is the radiance of your own natures

and although each moment arises as it is, as this moment, and does not obstruct the previous moment or the following moment,

you lose yourself in speculations about the future, stories about the past.

Measuring yourself by the clock,
measuring time as a kind of passage
in which things come and go
but also extend and endure,
“you” have a sense of time “passing by”
and you are merely a by-stander.

But you are time.

You are the unfolding of all moments.

First the bird is here
and then it is there.

And then is now
and there is here.

The continual coming and going,
the rising and falling,
the presencing, the unfolding,
that is your life
is lived by you.

Time is not merely something which “passes.”

It is the utter and radical impermanence that makes life possible
so that when you breathe in
you don’t have to hold it forever and ever.
You can breathe out.
And when you breathe out there is room to breathe in.

And this impermanence is so radical that it must be understood
not as some thing which happens “to” things

but as the activity, the presencing, of Reality.

Joshu Dainen roshi once said something like, "Each moment of our lives is like the hole in a wheel that the axle passes through. The wheel of our whole lives turns around."

Well, actually... it would have sounded more like...

"Each momentu...you, me, us...living is like...You know...wheel has hole...empty hole...And something goes through, neh?"

—Someone called out, "Axle."

"Axle...Axle go through hole. Each momentu of our lives like hole. Wheel of our whole life spinning...turning around it. Momentu is nothing...nothing...gone...neh? But too, everything is there...only there...nothing...nothing...each momentu say nothing. All nothing of all momentu this momentu...neh?"

Each moment of our life
is the total expression
of the Life that lives as all lives, as all beings.

Not only can you not grasp onto it as "your" life, as "you,"
there is nothing in your life that can be held onto.
Not a single moment.
Not a single breath.

But it is this ungraspability
that presents itself to us as immeasurable richness,
as the gift of our lives,
the gift of this breath,
the gift of bird song.

No matter what the bird might be saying about territory,
about ownership, about breeding, about hunger, about fear,
the bird also sings.

The bird flies,
dips and turns and rolls in the air
and plays.

We understand nothing about time
because we understand nothing about this moment.

Dogen says, "The traces of their coming and going are so obvious that you don't need to doubt them, Yet just not wondering about them is not the same as truly understanding them. When sentient beings have doubts about what they don't understand this doubt is usually vague and undefined and so cannot be the doubt which penetrates through questioning right now."

Our usual kinds of doubts are all entangled with struggles against and are dependent upon our beliefs, our faith in this or that, our assumptions, our presumptions.

But when doubt becomes questioning
then questioning opens as wonder.

When you realize that you don't know what anything is
and yet it is still presenting itself,
still shining there:

—a drop of sweat running down the side of your face,
the flick of a bird's wing,
the unfolding of a bud into a blossom,
the rising and falling of this moment, this moment, this moment—

then, knowing that you don't know what anything is
becomes such an open ended questioning
that it opens into wonder.

And when this wonder is unfolded in each moment of your life,
not just your "practice" but your life,

when you understand that "practice" is your life,
when you are practising your life,

then the doubt which became questioning,
which became wonder,
becomes understanding.

This is not merely understanding some thing.

You become understanding.

Dogen says, " In any case, these doubts were always nothing other than time."

Throughout the Total field
all times are here and now.

In each region and range of the Field,
each presencing arises where it does
and when it does
as a here and now.

But we don't understand.

We think that time moves like an arrow
from the past, through the present, to the future:
You are born. You live. You die.

But we also live time backwards
as if time moves from the future through the present
sweeping everything around us into the past.

Which is it?

In the morning, in the evening,
in the spring, the summer, autumn and winter,
in each moment of your lives
there is only the radiance of now,
the radiance of who you are.

Not at some future point,
not at some point in which you finally get the point and understand and realize it.

But even now,
even now,
right now,
with all of your moments of confusion and your moments of clarity
you are this moment
of Being-time.