

**EXCERPTS FROM DŌGEN'S HOW TO PRACTICE BUDDHISM (BENDŌWA)**

**Introduction**

Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), the founder of the Sōtō Zen sect in Kamakura Japan, is often referred to as the leading classical philosopher in Japanese history. His essays on numerous Buddhist topics included in his main text, the *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the True Dharma-Eye), reflect an approach to religious experience based on a more philosophical analysis than in the writings of Zen. (Zen is known as a “special transmission outside the scriptures, without reliance on words and letters.”) The single main element in Dōgen’s approach is his emphasis on the meaning of impermanence or the transiency of all aspects of human and natural existence.

**Selected Document Excerpts with Questions**

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***Excerpts from Dōgen’s How to Practice Buddhism (Bendōwa)***

Because the Fully Awakened Ones [Buddhas] provide mysterious assistance, when you practice sitting Zen, you will definitely slough off body-mind, eliminate habitually defiled thought patterns, and realize divinely genuine Buddha dharma. You will aid all Buddha activity in all Buddha wayfaring sites as infinite as atoms. You will encourage the aptitude for practicing beyond Buddha and promote the dharma beyond Buddha. At that moment all lands, plants, fences, and roof tiles throughout the dharma realms of the ten directions also engage in Buddha activity, causing everyone to obtain the Buddha’s inconceivable mysterious assistance in attaining awakening as easily as they receive natural blessings like wind and water. Just as everyone makes use of water and fire, so too you will circulate the innate realization of Buddha deliverance so that everyone living or talking with you will all embody inexhaustible Buddha-virtue. As it unfolds and widens without end, without break, the inconceivable, infinite Buddha dharma will flow throughout the entire cosmos and beyond. The fact that the one who practices sitting Zen is unaware of the Buddha’s mysterious assistance is because it is direct realization of nondeliberative quiescence. If, as ordinary people suppose, cultivation and realization are two separate processes, then it could be possible to be aware of each in isolation. But what interacts with our awareness cannot be fundamental realization because fundamental realization is beyond deluded human thoughts.

... Know that Buddhists must not engage in debates over the superiority or inferiority of the teachings and must not choose between profound and shallow doctrines. Just know

whether the practice is authentic or not. Grass, flowers, the landscape itself, have brought some people into the Buddha Way. Merely grasping earth or sand has caused others to receive and preserve the Buddha-mind Seal. This means that the greatest words are the ones whose abundant meanings overflow from every existing thing. The Great Dharma Wheel of preaching turns in every speck of dust. In light of this, a phrase like “this very mind is Buddha” is just the moon reflected in water. “This very sitting becomes Buddha” is just a reflection in a mirror. Do not be misled by clever slogans. I now recommend the practice of direct realization of *bodhi* because I teach the marvelous Way directly transmitted by the Buddhas and Zen ancestors and because I want you to become a true man of the Way.

[Nishio, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 1, pp. 101–102; WB]

**Questions:**

1. What are the benefits of the practice of sitting Zen?
2. What does the infinite “Buddha dharma” refer to?
3. What does Dōgen mean by avoiding clever slogans?
4. What could “merely grasping earth or sand” be a metaphor for?