CHAPTER 6

Enlightened Authorship: The Case of Dōgen Kigen

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Dōgen as Author: Modern and Medieval Conditions

This chapter is concerned with questions of authorship in texts related to Dōgen 道元, a Japanese monk who lived between 1200 and 1253, at the dawn of the Japanese Medieval period. The Japanese Sōtō School of Zen Buddhism reveres Dōgen as its founder. This has secured him a place in the intellectual and religious history of Japan. Furthermore, his extensive doctrinal writings in the then new scriptural format of wakan konkōbun 和漢混淆文, a form of writing that combines Chinese characters and lexemes with indigenous syllabic script and grammar, by their rhetorical and poetical force make him a classic of Japanese literature.

Scholarly research on Dōgen and his works originated in the eighteenth century as part of a reform movement within the Sōtō School.¹ In the early 1920s, Dōgen became part of a broader agenda: The influential philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō liberated him from the confines of sectarian concern and treated him as a source of universally valid philosophical insight.² Ever since, philosophical discussions on Dōgen have partly been spurred by a demand for the self-assertion of the Japanese spirit, as in Tanabe Hajime’s A Personal Philosophical View of the Shōbō genzō.³ The agenda was to find, or construct, a philosophical author who lived well before the advent of the Western imperialist powers, and even before those authors who formulated the groundwork of a modernity that was perceived, in Japan as much as in Europe, in the 1920s and 1930s, as intrinsically “Western.” One may see some parallels here to the process of

³ As apparent in the following quote: “I feel exalted by the depth and precision of Dōgen’s speculative thought, and this encourages me to believe more strongly in the powers of thought of the Japanese.” (originally Japanese, Tanabe Hajime 田邊元, Shōbō genzō no tetsugaku shikan 正法眼蔵の哲学私観, Tokyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1939: 11).
appropriating the “Kongmudoha-ka” for the sake of creating an early origin of Korean literature that is described in detail by Marion Eggert in this volume.

However, there has also, especially since the post-war era, been a more demure, historiographical and philological approach to Dōgen,⁴ which took some twenty to thirty years to take its roots in the Western academy.⁵ While their perspectives, methodological and ideological outlook may differ widely, the work of numerous clerics, academics and cleric-academics has firmly established Dōgen as a canonical author—an author that is present in both the literary and philosophical canons.⁶ As part of this process, the “Dōgen Canon” itself, as one of the leading western Dōgen scholars called it, has also come under scrutiny⁷ and various editions of his “Collected works” have been published; the most recent one is still under way. And even the waves of post-structuralist critique have reached the Dōgen discourse. Since the late 1980s, scholars highlighted issues such as divergences between Dōgen’s own ideas and practices and those established within the Sōtō School or the relative obscurity of Dōgen during the later middle ages. Moreover, they increasingly questioned the ideology behind the almost exclusive focus on Dōgen and other founder figures that was, and to a large extent still is, typical of much of the history of Japanese religion.⁸

In a way, the ground thus seems well prepared for reflections on the concept and reality of authorship in Dōgen. One might even say it is high time that we question the basis of our counting him among the canonical figures

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⁶ As evidenced by two volumes dedicated to his writings in the “Canon of Japanese Thought” (Terada Tōru 寺田透 and Mizuno Yaoko 水野弥穂子 [eds.], Dōgen Jō 道元上, Nihon shisō taikei 12, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1970; Terada Tōru 寺田透 and Mizuno Yaoko 水野弥穂子 [eds.], Dōgen Ge 道元下, Nihon shisō taikei 13, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1972) and one volume in the “Canon of Japanese Classical Literature” (Nishio Minoru 西尾實, Shōbō genzō 正法眼蔵, Nihon koten bungaku taikei 日本古典文学大系 81, Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 1965).

⁷ Steven Heine, “The Dōgen Canon. Dōgen’s Pre-Shōbōgenzō Writings and the Question of Change in His Later Works,” in: Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 24.1 (1997): 39–85, is the source of this term and sums up the most important issues concerning this subject.