



**Get the Dharma out of
the treasure trove!**



**English
podcast transcript**

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The Shōbōgenzō of Dogen Zenji

English transcript

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AM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch. In this podcast, we turn our attention to an important work of Zen Buddhism, namely the Shōbōgenzō by Master Dōgen. It originated in Japan in the 13th century, and we'll learn more about it today from Raji Steineck. Raji Steineck is a professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Zurich and I, Anna Morawietz, am very much looking forward to talking to him.

It's great to have you here, Mr. Steineck.

RS: Yes, thank you very much Ms. Morawietz. I'm also happy to be here today.

AM: The term 'Zen' is quite well known in the West, even among non-Buddhists. You will find few people who don't understand anything about Zen, or who have never heard of it. Why is that?

RS: You could say it's a very successful export of Japanese modernity. Japanese Zen Buddhism reinvented itself to a certain extent in the 20th century, especially regarding the worldview and the needs of Western intellectuals. With its promise of transcendent wisdom without the baggage of traditional religiosity, and in this image of sovereign Zen masters,

who basically no longer know any problems, who can deal with all situations sovereignly, it has become very attractive. Also with regard to this unity of spontaneous impulses and supreme wisdom. And at the same time there were not really any gatekeepers or long traditions in the West. In this respect, in the West one could always pick out exactly what was attractive and trendy at the time. And that's what has happened frequently over the last hundred years, from the beat poets to the wellness Zen of today.

AM: So this unbelievable sovereignty, perhaps sometimes also virginity, this purity that I also associate with Zen, without having a personal connection to it. You just referred to a Zen tradition. Is this related to Zen Buddhism or is it an export that distinguishes itself from a more original Zen Buddhism?

RS: I think it's simply a selective choice of elements that can be found in the tradition. You take, for example, these spontaneous, sovereign Zen masters, and leave aside the diligently practicing monks, who are in a strict schedule of monastic everyday life. One takes the unconventional and leaves aside the strict rituals. Depending on what interests you in Zen, you have this freedom, in the absence of binding traditions in the West.

AM: And are there different schools of Zen Buddhism? We just spoke about "the" Zen Buddhism; does "the" Zen Buddhism exist?

RS: There is "the" Zen Buddhism as an overarching tradition. There's also the term 'the Zen school' in Japanese. And then there are different schools in Zen Buddhism. The best known are the Rinzai school and the Sōtō school. And Dōgen, who we'll talk about later, is known in Japan as the founder of the Sōtō school.

AM: So let's move on to Master Dōgen. Who was Master Dōgen and what was his role in this context of Zen Buddhism and Shōbōgenzō?

RS: Yes, as I just said, Dōgen is known as one of the first to establish an independent Zen institution in Japan, which later evolved into the Sōtō School. He lived in the 13th century, an

era in which various new schools were founded in Japan. He belongs to the circle of these founding figures.

AM: So he was one of the founding figures of Zen Buddhism?

RS: Of Zen Buddhism and also of other Buddhist schools that founded new institutions in Japan at that time.

AM: And in what kind of religious and theoretical environment did Master Dōgen work?

RS: There are three influences. He grew up, like many of these founding figures, within the framework of the dominant school at that time, the so-called Tendai school. And this influence can be seen in his work in the background and in the underground, so to speak; even if he never quotes anything directly from this school. But there is an esoteric denomination, which says that if one brings his behavior, his posture, his words and his ideas in rituals in accordance with those of a salvation figure, a Buddha or bodhisattva, then this salvation figure will, in a way, stand by your side. And he also takes this idea into Zen meditation. I think we'll talk about that in more detail later.

AM: May I ask what esoteric means? Or what does esoteric Buddhism mean?

RS: Esoteric means, first of all, that there is this core with this ritual technique that I have just described, where it is about creating unity or an addition of a healing figure to oneself. And this is called 'secret' or 'esoteric' in Japanese, because one can learn these rituals, so to speak, only in a very clearly defined framework from appointed masters. It's not something that in the past would have somehow reached the broader public. That is the first influence, the first school. And then the influence of Zen Buddhism: Dōgen left the Tendai school and went to a monastery where certain Zen practices were already practiced and had a teacher there, with whom he then traveled to China in order to become acquainted with the original, so to speak, onsite, where Zen Buddhism was already very widespread. And what he saw there, he then brought back to Japan and established two monasteries.

AM: So the trip to China seems to have been very important for Master Dōgen. What did he learn there? In what context did he go there?

RS: Exactly. As I said, there was a community that was already practicing some Zen Buddhist practices in Japan, but not the full program yet, so to speak. And he went to China to first study the related literature, to see how monasteries, in which Zen practice is central, actually function. And that is what he brought back from China, and then could also credibly represent. There are several passages in his writings where he says: I was there. I have seen that. This is how it happens. And with this authority he was able to establish his monastery.

AM: Was there a particular trigger for Master Dōgen's visit to China? It seems like he wasn't quite satisfied with what he found in Japan.

RS: Yes. So two things: one was within the framework of the Tendai school, which was a very established institution, as I said. Dōgen came from the high nobility, and was put in the respective section at the Tendai school, focusing on a career as a cleric; in the Catholic Church you would say becoming a bishop-cardinal, something like that. And that's what his environment advised him to do. And he obviously didn't want that. He was looking for something else. And that was also the reason why he left the Tendai school and then turned to this first Zen community; because he had the feeling that something was obviously happening there, that they were more interested in the religious content than in advancing within the framework of this institution. And the new thing that he found there was still fragmentary, so to speak. And so it was, I think, for him – and also for his master, with whom he then went to China – to get to know the whole thing at the source and to see how it works in an institution where Zen practice is fully established. The point of these trips to China was to get to know the latest writing, the latest sources, and then to bring them back with him. There was no Internet. Nor were there printed works of the new scriptures. There was printed Buddhist literature already at this time, but these were the old, canonical scriptures that were printed. It was a matter of getting access to the latest manuscripts, transcribing them and then taking them back to Japan.

AM: So on the one hand, we have a spiritual interest, or a spiritual need, which apparently had not been picked up in the very worldly-oriented, institutional environment of the Tendai school. But on the other hand, also a scholarly interest in source texts or in new material that one could work with.

RS: Yes, perhaps scholarship is a better word. But it's certainly a matter of having access to the sources in which the whole thing is articulated, of knowing the canonical literature of this school and also the latest discussions, and then being able to show: I have that. I can access that. And we will perhaps talk about the literary forms in Zen Buddhism later on, where it is very important that you know certain texts, that you can access them and then work with them.

AM: So this scholarship was of course also oriented towards a spiritual goal.

RS: Yes, definitely.

AM: Then let's move on to Master Dōgen's relationship to language and writing. This is perhaps a bit of an odd example – just to get a sense of this relationship – using the example of Aristotle, Avicenna, Spinoza, where conceptual analysis is used to describe the world. How does Master Dōgen work in his writings? Is it comparable, or does it go in a completely different direction?

RS: I think when you approach Dōgen's writings after reading Aristotle or Kant, you will be quite irritated at first. Because Dōgen just doesn't have that kind of systematic discussion. And that's also generally true of Zen Buddhism, they don't do that. It does exist in the Buddhist tradition – think of people like Vasubandhu or Nagarjuna – but Zen Buddhism has a different goal with its writing. It's based on the idea, which is broadly rooted in the Buddhist tradition, that successful Buddhist teaching is always attuned to the person to whom it's addressed, or to the community to whom you're speaking. And that's already somewhat individualized, in a sense, in Zen Buddhism or in Chinese Chan. And the idea is that you don't proclaim general truths, but when someone comes and asks for instruction, you try to respond to this person in exactly this situation in such a way that something

happens, somehow insight is generated. And the Chan literature in China appears as if it would simply record such conversations. Accordingly, colloquial language is used. However, this literature was often written only two or three hundred years after the death of the masters it is about. Consequently, it is a fictitious record, where one notices that language forms are used that did not exist during the lifetime of these masters.

AM: Did I understand correctly that the masters themselves did not write?

RS: Yes, exactly.

AM: And is that also true of Master Dōgen?

RS: Dōgen also wrote himself. There are also written works by different Zen masters. But this Zen literature that we know, with these dialogues, it's usually written by third persons and often recorded a few centuries later. That is, it's a bit of a false immediacy. And for Dōgen, there was also the problem of how to transport this to Japan. Japanese is a completely different language than Chinese. And his most famous work, the *Shōbōgenzō*, is in a way an attempt to respond to this situation.

AM: And by writing the Shōbōgenzō, does Master Dōgen occupy a special role in Buddhist literature?

RS: Yes, it is, in a sense, the first Zen Buddhist work formulated in the Japanese written language. And in this respect, one can say that it is an attempt to bring this style of Chan literature from Chinese into Japanese, but also to make something of its own.

AM: Very briefly on the terms 'Chan' and 'Zen' – are they more or less synonymous?

RS: It's the Chinese and Japanese pronunciation: 'Chan' is Chinese and 'Zen' is Japanese. That's why it would be a bit strange to call the Chinese school a Zen school.

AM: But in terms of content, are there similarities?

RS: It's a tradition that has interacted with each other. So, for example, Dōgen's writings were also taken to China. And there's a Chinese edition of several of his sayings.

AM: You just mentioned that Master Dōgen sought a way of dealing with writing, with language, but then also with the translation from Chinese into Japanese. How did he deal with these difficulties? Or what difficulties did he face at all?

RS: Well, one thing was that he wanted to show that he knew these sayings of the old masters, and that what he formulated also came out of the confrontation with them. On the other hand, he had to translate things. And he often chose a middle way where he quoted literally, in Chinese, via a reading technique in Japanese to make it understandable, and then paraphrased it again with his own words. And then he adds his own interpretation, so to speak, or something like prompts, how one should read this now, how one should understand this – and often also how one should not understand it. In other words, he often reads things against the grain. And that's what makes the reading so different from the reading of Kant and Aristotle because you're presented, for example, with an authoritative saying from an enlightened master. On the surface of the text, it reads in a certain direction, and then Dōgen twists it around. He then says: No, no, exactly the opposite is meant. And that's something you have to learn to deal with first. They are just not the type of statements that are explained, arguments that are built. That's rare.

AM: What does Shōbōgenzō actually mean? Can that be translated?

RS: It can be translated, yes. It means: "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye". 'Dharma' being the Buddhist teaching.

AM: So clearly a Buddhist name, or a work that claims to contain a Buddhist insight.

RS: Absolutely. Dōgen's self-designation, which he uses often, is 'The monk, Dōgen, who traveled to China and brought the Buddha's teaching to Japan.' That's what he wants. And that's just a little bit different from what is generally understood as philosophy these days.

AM: So what are the central themes or the central problems in the Shōbōgenzō?

RS: Yes, if I may take up the problem he had, the reason why he left the Tendai school in the first place and then went to China: The problem, which he himself addresses again and again, is that from his point of view there are many people in the Japanese monasteries who are concerned with something completely different. They want to have offices, they want to be known, they want to have good friends, things like that. And for him, the core of Buddhist teaching is based on the assumption that everything is impermanent, and the question is, if everything is impermanent, what does real life actually look like? And the right life, according to Buddhist teaching, is one that assumes that man is connected to his environment. And accordingly, the suffering that he inflicts on other people is also suffering that falls back on him - perhaps not immediately, but then in later existences. And the answer to that, accordingly, Dōgen would say, is to pattern one's life after that of the enlightened ones. That's what he tries to implement in everyday monastic life.

AM: To reiterate: the criticism is that the Tendai school wants to summon this holy figure and Master Dōgen says, no, we have to live according to this figure. Can you summarize it that way, or does it not quite hit the mark?

RS: I think the problem for him is that these rituals at the Tendai school were often done with the promise that there would be some kind of healing effects, and people sort of bought into that. And the monks who performed these rituals did so in order to generate income for themselves, or in order to become known for doing such great rituals. And in this way – at least from Dōgen's point of view – the core, which is what it is actually about, was covered up, so to speak. And that's what he wants to put in the center. A second point was that at that time the teaching was popular that all beings actually already have 'Buddha-nature'. Buddha-nature was imagined as something like an enlightened being. That would mean that everything is already enlightened. And then, of course, the question arises: If everything is already enlightened, why should one still make an effort, why should one go to a monastery, why should one laboriously meditate? You have to sit still for hours; it is also physically very exhausting. Why should one do all this at all? And a big theme of the

Shōbōgenzō is: why should we do this? And Dōgen's basic thesis there is that enlightenment is only realized when life is modeled on the enlightened – and that means in religious practice.

AM: So, these are the two themes that you spoke about: The conduct of life and the question of Buddha-nature. What does its presence mean and how am I supposed to behave.

RS: Exactly. He says once that in a sense, all beings are endowed with Buddha-nature from the beginning, but it only realizes itself when they practice. And you can't rely on it, so to speak; I am it already, I have it already. Then it doesn't appear, then you don't get anything out of it.

AM: We've now touched on Buddha-nature. Can you perhaps describe it a little bit more concretely, or describe what Buddha-nature is? Or in what contexts it appears?

RS: For Dōgen, the question of what it is, is one of the central themes. And he criticizes people who interpret it as something like a stable, substantial enlightenment nature that everybody has no matter what they do. And he says that Buddha-nature is impermanent, and only appears or realizes itself in religious practice. But then it does so reliably. That is, in every religious practice, Buddha-nature is there, is real. And that means the practice is, in a sense, one with enlightenment.

AM: And is that something that is perceived from the inside or the outside?

RS: Well, he says at one point: It doesn't really matter whether you perceive it or not, what matters is that you prove it. That is, one must act in such a way that one shows that one does not think only of oneself, that one realizes this connection between oneself and the whole world. And in this respect, it also has a strong ethical component.

AM: Yes, I just noticed that. On the one hand, it's the practice itself; sounds like a very individual project, because I have to sit quietly or meditate, but then what are the ethical implications? Or how can I prove that I have realized the Buddha-nature?

RS: Let me give you a practical example from everyday monastic life. Dōgen wrote an instruction for the chef at his monastery, where it says that if someone donates rice to the monastery so that the monks can have a meal or donates money so that rice can be bought to make a meal for the monks in the monastery, then the chef – especially if it's money – must buy the rice and use it immediately for said meal. He must not, for example, buy rice cheaply and wait until the price of rice goes up and then sell it again. That would be economic behavior, so to speak, that is aimed at profit-making, at the expense of other beings, and that is not allowed.

AM: I was just thinking: You could also say that the monastic community benefits from it.

RS: Yes, and this way of thinking was obviously quite present in the monasteries. And he rejects that, because he says: The monastery gets a donation, and the donation must be used for the purpose for which it was intended. And if people then go there and do something else with their own objectives, then they have become unfaithful to this donation and have not used it for its intended purpose. And that should not be the case. And in general, the people who live in the monastery should not strive for the increase of wealth or such but should concentrate on the religious practice.

AM: And what does the religious practice include?

RS: At the core is sitting meditation, in the community, not individually, but the members of the community come together in the monks' hall and sit there in silent meditation for a total of about eight hours a day. There are four sessions each, lasting between one and a half and three hours. So, eight to twelve hours a day is meditating. And the rest is grouped around that.

AM: And this practice is decisive for how one can behave ethically?

RS: The practice, even in Dōgen's understanding, is already the best thing you can do for the world, because he says in his very first scripture, when people sit in meditation, all the

Buddhas and enlightened beings join them. And that leads to them radiating enlightenment into their entire environment; and thus, creating the conditions for other people to find enlightenment as well. If that sounds very religious now, I think it's something you just have to accept – even if it doesn't align with what you often hear about Zen Buddhism. But it is, I think, at its core a very religious conception of salvation, which also counts on the fact that there are such healing forces, which then become effective. That's the reason why for Dōgen sitting meditation itself is already the crucial, ethical practice. And then there are discussions. For example, someone comes to him and says: “I have a sick and old mother. If I become a monk now, she won't be able to take care of herself and will die. What should I do?” Then he replies: “That's a difficult problem, but remember, if you become a monk, you're producing much more salvation for her than if you just take care of her.” This goes very much against our idea of morality but is just consistent thinking on his behalf.

AM: Yes, but that's interesting. Because that means that this ethical act – which is related, because sitting seems to lead to that act – is something that mainly demonstrates that you're in a certain spiritual place but is not the actual goal. Or is that not true?

RS: I don't think you can say that, because in meditation itself, according to Dōgen, the unity with enlightenment already exists. And to that extent it is one with the goal.

AM: Ah, and is also one with the other everyday actions that are related to it.

RS: Exactly, yes. And the idea is certainly that by meditating, one is able to perform everyday actions with the appropriate mind.

AM: Yet the training on everyday actions is not a practice, but rather something that follows from sitting meditation?

RS: Yes, there is that, too. There is also the training in everyday actions. That's quite an interesting aspect; just take the *Shōbōgenzō* – that there are instructions there, for example, on how to act in personal hygiene. There are also – not in the *Shōbōgenzō*, but in other scriptures – instructions on how one should act when eating. And there it's always a

matter of following models from the canonical literature on how this has been done. And with that, these actions are all ritualized, and a kind of supra-temporal synchronization is practiced, where one acts as all enlightened people have always acted, when they washed their face, when they brushed their teeth. This is then also connected with quotations from literature, e.g. one brushes one's teeth for the good of all beings, to be able to bite off bad urges. Such images are used there, thus drawing everyday actions into this whole religious project.

AM: Let's revisit or home in on the Shōbōgenzō and its textual form. How is the Shōbōgenzō structured?

RS: Well, it consists of various individual chapters – also called fascicles, because they were small scrolls – on a wide variety of topics. There are different versions that have been handed down. You can't really see a clear thematic progression in the most commonly conveyed versions. There are indications that Dōgen planned on doing something like that towards the end of his life, starting with the simplest, basic Buddhist truths, so to speak, and then building that up successively. But unfortunately, he didn't complete that; we don't have that. And the individual chapters are usually structured in such a way that there is an opening sequence in which the topic is introduced, often by a quotation from a sutra, i.e. a canonical Buddhist source, or from the recorded discourses of an old master. And then the topic is worked through, in discussion with commentaries on it or other sayings on the same topic from other masters, and Dōgen's own interpretation or reading guide on it. The interesting thing is that he often also lists contrasting sayings and suggests taking a certain stance in the exercise to see what comes out of it. And then to take the other stance on the same topic to see what comes out of that.

AM: Can you perhaps give us some examples of such topics?

RS: Yes, I was planning on giving you this example: There's a very famous Kōan, where a monk comes to Master Zhaozhou – one of the Chinese masters – and asks him: “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?” This Kōan exists twice. In one version, Zhaozhou says: “wú” in response, which means “no” in Chinese, but also represents the nothingness from which

everything comes and into which everything goes again; and of course, has this onomatopoeic aspect: “woof”.

AM: That sounds like a dog, yes.

RS: Yes, and in the other version he says “yes”. Dōgen, in the chapter on Buddha-nature, lists both. And then asks: what does this mean, what does no mean, what does yes mean in this case? Another Zen master chose the answer “no” – “wú” or “mu” – and then said that you should let this syllable fill you up completely, so to speak, until it takes over the whole mind and nothing else remains, until it then explodes. And then something new should open up. So, in Zen Buddhism there are different ways of dealing with these things, even in meditation.

AM: We just spoke about Kōans. Can you elaborate on what a Kōan is?

RS: Literally, a Kōan is something like a judgment or a case. That is, typically a seeking person comes to a master and asks a question – as in this case: “Does a dog have Buddha-nature?”, and then the master responds. They often react very strangely; they clap their hands or slap the questioner's face, or say “woof” or “mu” or such. This statement by an enlightened one and is then returned as a task, accordingly. So other seekers have to find out what this actually means.

AM: If one is enlightened, then one understands it in a certain way. And if not, then it's a mystery. Did I understand that correctly?

RS: Yes exactly. Typically, this developed to be touchstones of sorts. So you're given a task and then you have to say something about it. And depending on how you perform, it's either good or it shows that you are perhaps not yet ready. And not being ready has different dimensions. It was also about showing that you know the literature, that you know other answers from the history of Zen Buddhism, that you can relate things. But just also that you personally don't get irritated by a funny face, what the master is doing or things

like that. It's about sovereign performance, you could say. And that counts as proof of this insight.

AM: So this is a kind of touchstone for students. Does this also have a meditative function? Can you also meditate on a Kōan, or is that less common?

RS: Yes, you have to do that in preparation. You're given the task and then you're alone with it for a certain amount of time and you just have to see what you make of it. And you take that with you into the meditation. In this respect, the answers that are accepted are usually those that are preceded by a certain preparation time. And one always notices in the reports that, to a certain extent, this goes through different stages. So, of course, people first think discursively about what it could be. Then one goes through the Buddhist doctrines and tries somehow to bring that in connection with it. And then you come up with some clever answer and then the master says: "no". This is often interpreted as somebody still hanging on to concepts and basically trying to prove how smart they are. And that would still not be the insight that it's about.

AM: So it's also about using these Kōans to detach yourself from conceptual thinking?

RS: That's a big argument in the Zen school. And Dōgen is on the side that says: no, it's not conceptual thinking per se that's the problem, you have to work with concepts, you should also think about it, you should try to understand it conceptually as well. But one must not believe that in some conceptual formulation, one has steadily grasped the insight. There is a passage in the text *Genjōkōan* – which I think will also be available as accompanying material – where he says: "One always reveals only one side. And then the other side remains dark." And that's actually what it's about. That's why he often approaches his texts with such contradictory statements, where he tells you to look at something from one side and see what you can get out of it. And then to look at it again from the other side. There is no closure in this effort, but you can always get more out of these things. And you have to understand that as well.

AM: This is almost reminiscent of Greek or Pyrrhonian skepticism, where this conceptual thinking is lived or is not fundamentally criticized, and where a counter-opinion must be formed to every opinion.

RS: Yes. Buddhism is always about making the distinction between oneself and the world transparent. And not disconnecting oneself from other people, especially in the confrontation with others. And accordingly, it is important to consider different possible points of view. That's how I see Dōgen's strategy, how he deals with it. There are others, as I said. There are also people in the Zen school who say, no, no, conceptual thinking is per se already infected by ego, so to speak, people want to empower themselves and make themselves the master of the world through their mind, and that's bad, so we have to give that up. But that's not Dōgen's strategy.

AM: We have discussed the Kōans as a text form of the Shōbōgenzō. Are there other textual forms, or is the Kōan the main form that the Shōbōgenzō comes in?

RS: It uses passages from the recorded conversations of old masters, and comments on them. And there are also passages, paragraphs where Dōgen explains something himself. It's not just a Kōan collection. Dōgen made those, too. There is a collection of his where he simply lists three hundred Kōans. But the *Shōbōgenzō* that we're talking about now, is not a pure Kōan collection, but it's chapters on certain topics where relevant passages are collected and discussed by Dōgen.

AM: And does this discussion by Dōgen also contain personal references to himself or his life, or is it rather the opinion of a scholar or perhaps of an enlightened person, which then flows into his comments?

RS: There are very few passages where he refers to his personal life, and then, generally, he says: I was in China and I saw this, and this is how it is done, yes. But the larger part is just about interpretations of canonical writings to gain personal insight. So I think scholarship – depending on how you understand it – could also give you the wrong picture. It's not just about proving knowledge of the text, but for him, in fact, these texts are always about the

question: when I read this, what does it tell me about enlightenment? What does it tell me about my practice? How can I deal with it so that I can solve this basic Buddhist problem of sorrowful existence?

AM: You mentioned that there were certain schools that regarded this as a very exclusive path. So that only certain, select people could realize this Buddha-nature, perhaps in a monastic environment. What was Master Dōgen's point of view?

RS: So for him, actually, it's also crucial that you make the decision to leave the worldly life and enter the monastery. However, that is something that one had to be able to afford at that time. He also considers the option to only stay into the monastery temporarily – one could, for example, stay in the monastery for a three-month summer retreat – but it is certainly the case that, especially under the social circumstances of the Middle Ages, this was a path that was not really open to everyone. He also has writings where he says: Yes well, whoever can't do that, for whatever reason, he or she should then just practice as best he or she can – by the way, an interesting point: 'he or she', for Dōgen there is no gender in the monastic community. So, men and women are accepted there, and he criticizes all the people who come from the patriarchal environment of his time and say that women have an inferior status. And he says: we can't really be interested in that here in the monastery.

AM: Because this Buddha-nature is potentially present everywhere?

RS: Because it is present everywhere, and when women practice, the same thing happens to them as to men; that is, in the practice they are in unity with all enlightened beings. And gender does not matter.

AM: Were there any female masters in his time?

RS: He has a few female students, and he puts them in leadership positions. And that means that he obviously trusted them with the corresponding insight.

AM: Maybe in conclusion, you've mentioned the relationship between presence and impermanence as a theme around which the Shōbōgenzō revolves. When I think of impermanence from a Christian perspective, it's something very sad, something tinged with melancholy, or perhaps despair, where the only way out is the surrender to an infinite God or hope for life after death. How is that in the Shōbōgenzō?

RS: Impermanence is central, but impermanence is also virtually equated with Buddha-nature in Dōgen. On the one hand, the present is something that you can't hold on to, which is why he says: "All these secular projects, accumulating wealth and such, all completely pointless, don't waste your time with them." But the present is also the place where you can decide. Where you can decide for the way of Buddha and where you can realize it. And when you realize it, you are one with enlightenment. The present is the place that transcends time through this unity. In this respect, there are always passages where he says: It would be completely un-Buddhistic to wish oneself away from this life. And the idea of an eternal God is a bad construct from a Buddhist point of view anyway.

AM: And to seize the present as an opportunity to choose, would that be to choose sitting meditation or to choose a life in the monastery?

RS: That is the path, according to Dōgen. The primary decision is to leave the worldly life behind and to live your life according to the example of the enlightened ones. And the best way to do that is in a monastery.

AM: Our time is already up – thank you very much Mr. Steineck.

RS: Thank you very much, Ms. Morawietz.

AM: This podcast was produced by Martin Münnich with the support of ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation, Forum Humanum in Hamburg.

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Thank you for your time and goodbye!