

When Dōgen Went to China: Chan Poetry He Did and Did Not Write¹

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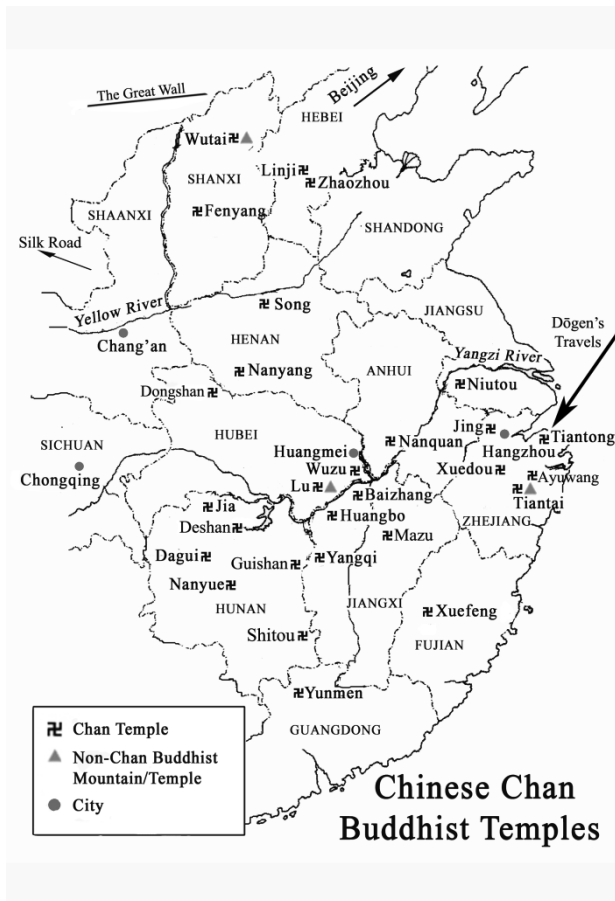


Figure 1.

On Dōgen's Chinese Writings and Poetry Collection

When Zen 禪 (Ch. Chan) master Eihei Dōgen 永平道元 (1200-1253), the founder of the Sōtō 曹洞 (Ch. Caodong) sect during the early Kamakura era of medieval Japan, went to China as a young monk for a four-year stint from 1223 to 1227, he visited several temples in the area of the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou and gained enlightenment. This experience was attained under the tutelage of Caodong master Rujing 如淨 (Jp. Nyojō, 1163-1228) at Mt. Tiantong 天童山 (Jp. Mt. Tendō), which was previously the seat of master Hongzhi 宏智 (Jp. Wanshi, 1091-1157), another prominent Caodong abbot (Fig. 1). From this training, which abetted his reading prior to his travels of the entire Buddhist canon (Tripitaka), including voluminous Chan works, while he was studying in Kyoto on Mt. Hiei as well as at Kenninji, the first Zen temple in Japan, Dōgen apparently became intimately familiar with a variety of Chinese Buddhist textual materials.

According to an oft-cited passage in one of his sermons, Dōgen returned from China “with empty hands” (*kūshu genkyō* 空手還郷).² That is, he preferred to emphasize interior knowledge and wisdom gained during the journey, without the need to have accumulated many of the relics and regalia that were featured in the homecoming of most other Buddhist monks of this and earlier periods, when collecting paraphernalia and external symbols of spiritual attainment and authority was highly valued. As I have discussed previously, Dōgen's empty-handed return to Japan does not suggest that he was empty-headed, although his head was “full of emptiness,” makes a wordplay on the Buddhist metaphysics of vacuity 空 (Ch. *kong*, Jp. *kū*).³ Dōgen came back to his native country with an immense knowledge of and appreciation for the Chinese literary tradition and its multifarious expressions through various forms of Chan writings, including poetry, which he both emulated and transformed via engagement and integration with rhetorical styles of Japanese Buddhist literature and discourse.

Dōgen's profound understanding of Chinese Chan sources as well as his ability to cite them extensively and with great power of recall of the details of particular passages, while also challenging and changing their implications to suit his own conceptual needs, are the keys to explaining the greatness of his two major writings. The first of these writings is the vernacular (*kana*) *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏, a collection of informal sermons 示衆 (Ch. *shizhong*, Jp. *jishu*) composed in Japanese that are largely based on citations and reinterpretations of Chinese Chan texts, which Dōgen revises and modifies—or, some would say, distorts, perhaps deliberately but also in some cases unwittingly—in order to convey his distinctive religious vision regarding the relation between practice and realization amid the

world of impermanence and incessant change. The other major writing is the *Eihei Kōroku* 永平広録, a ten-volume collection composed in Sino-Japanese (*kanbun* 漢文) consisting of formal sermons 上堂 (Ch. *shangtang*, Jp. *jōdō*) and lectures in the first eight volumes and of several different styles of Chinese poetry (*kanshi* 漢詩) in the final two volumes, to be discussed below.⁴ Here again, Dōgen often cites or alludes to and at the same time innovatively critiques and refashions a wide variety of Chan sources, including those of Hongzhi and Rujing as well as several dozen other prominent masters, especially from the seminal transmission of the lamp text, the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (Jp. *Keitoku Dentōroku*) compiled in 1004 and published five years later with a new introduction by a prominent poet.



Figure 2. Mountain Setting of Eihei-ji Temple

It is important to observe that the vernacular *Shōbōgenzō* was compiled in the early period of Dōgen's career (1231-1243) while he was still in Kyoto, where many of his followers probably could understand Chinese fairly well, whereas the Sino-Japanese collection was primarily from the later period (1244-1253), when he was located at Eihei-ji 永平寺 temple in the remote Echizen mountains, where the vast majority of disciples who had not been with him in the capital would not have had a good comprehension of Chinese or knowledge of *kanbun* sources (Fig. 2). However, it is clear that a prime motivation for Dōgen's transition from *kana* to *kanbun* writing was that, once he established a formal Dharma Hall 法堂 (Ch. *fatang*, Jp. *hattō*) at his mountain temple in 1244, constructed in the manner of what he experienced at Mt. Tiantong and other Chinese monasteries, he was eager to

follow the teaching model of his Chan mentors and predecessors. In any case, in both the *Shōbōgenzō* and the *Eihei Kōroku*, Dōgen often presents his own interpretation, which critiques the mainstream view that he had learned in China regarding various Chan sayings and dialogues.

Dōgen's Chinese poetry contained in the *Eihei Kōroku*, primarily the ninth and tenth volumes, consists of over 300 verses. The following table provides a detailed content analysis of the types and numbers of poems Dōgen composed:

Dōgen's Chinese Poetry Collection

<i>Eihei Kōroku</i>	Subtotal	Total
Vol. 1-8 <i>Jōdō</i> 上堂 (Ch. <i>Shangtang</i>)		57 (?)
Vol. 1 (1236-1243, ed. Senne)	9	
Vol. 2 (1245.4-1246.7, ed. Ejō)	1	
Vol. 3 (1246.7-1248.4, ed. Ejō)	6	
Vol. 4 (1248.4-1249.8, ed. Ejō)	3	
Vol. 5 (1249.9-1251.1, ed. Gien)	14	
Vol. 6 (1251.2-1251.10, ed. Gien)	7	
Vol. 7 (1251.12-1252.12, ed. Gien)	15	
Vol. 8 (n.d., ed. Ejō) <i>Hōgo</i> 法語 (Ch. <i>Fayu</i>)	2	
Vol. 9 (1235)		102
<i>Juko</i> 頌古 (Ch. <i>Songgu</i>) on 90 <i>Kōan</i> 公案 (Ch. <i>Gongan</i>)		
Vol. 10		150
<i>Shinsan</i> 真贊 (Ch. <i>Zhenzan</i>)	5 (4 irregular)	
<i>Jisan</i> 自贊 (Ch. <i>Zizan</i>)	20 (12 irregular)	
<i>Geju</i> 偈頌 (Ch. <i>Jisong</i>)	125	
1-50 in China (1223-1227)	50 (37 secular)	
51-76 in Kyoto/Fukakusa (1227-1243)	26 (1 secular)	
77 in Kamakura (1248)	1	
78-125 in Echizen/Eiheji (1243-1253)	48 (1 secular)	
Also: Misc. (Bell, Silent Illumination, Death)		3
TOTAL		312 (plus?)

To sum up the contents briefly, there are four main categories of *kanshi* compositions:

- The largest number of verses is contained in vol. 10 of the *Eihei Kōroku*, which includes 150 poems written throughout the various stages of Dōgen's career, including the only known writings (50 poems) from his stay in China, and encompasses 25 verses on the

enlightenment experience of the Chan patriarchs (*shinsan*) and of Dōgen himself (*jisan*), as well as 125 poems of various styles under the general heading of *geju*, primarily on lyrical and naturalistic topics as well as communications with lay followers (this is only true of the poems composed in China), monastic rituals, and some of Dōgen's personal experiences and evocative reflections on the role of language versus silence, or emotion versus detachment in the quest for spiritual realization. The indication of "irregular" verses means that these do not follow typical poetic patterns, and the indication of "secular" verses means these do not deal explicitly with religious themes.

- (b) The second largest group in vol. 9 includes 102 four-line verses, or *juko*, on 90 of the spiritual riddles or *kōan* cases that are the hallmark of Chan literature and practice (some of the *kōans* have two or three verse commentaries); all of these were composed in 1235, around the same time Dōgen was also working on the compilation of 300 *kōan* cases in the *Mana Shōbōgenzō* 真字正法眼藏 (a.k.a. *Sanbyakusoku Shōbōgenzō* 三百則正法眼藏), which is a list of case records without any commentary, and both of the mid-1230s *kōan* collection texts seem like they were a part of a phase of preparation by Dōgen to gather in his mind relevant Chinese textual materials before embarking just a few years later on the groundbreaking interpretative style of case records in his *Shōbōgenzō* and *Eihei Kōroku* sermons.
- (c) There are also verse comments that Dōgen integrated with his formal and informal *kanbun* sermons in the first eight volumes of the *Eihei Kōroku*; it is noteworthy that the number of these increases significantly in volumes five through seven, which may mark a shift in Dōgen's approach in his later years or reflect the predilections of editor Gien, who is thought to have included more poetry than the previous editors did; however, the grand total of such poems is uncertain since modern Japanese editions of the text generally do not mark a distinction between where prose comments end and poetry begins in Dōgen's sermons.
- (d) In addition, there are several prominent Chinese verses that appear elsewhere in Dōgen's collected works, including an example in which he rewrites one of Rujing's verses on the symbolism of the ringing of a bell, one that is a reworking of a famous verse by Hongzhi on silent-illumination as a form of meditation, and a poem at the time of his passing inspired by Rujing's death verse.

Furthermore, Dōgen composed a collection of 66 Japanese-style verses or 31-syllable waka 和歌, most of which were first included in the Sōtō sect's official biography, the *Kenzeiki* 建擲記 published in 1472, over two hundred years after his death; of these, 53 verses are considered authentic by modern scholars, and 13 verses are deemed likely to be spurious.⁵ There are a number of instances in which the *kanshi* and waka verses cover similar thematic territory or use comparable rhetorical styles.

In the *Shōbōgenzō* and *Eihei Kōroku* as well as many of his other writings, Dōgen produced a significant body of work that has been prized by traditional and modern commentators for developing a unique way of assimilating Chinese sources into Japanese contexts. However, some aspects of Dōgen's ability with citing and writing in Chinese forms adapted to Japanese was somewhat limited, and an analysis of his prose and poetic texts in comparison with those of Chinese masters shows that there are certain styles typical of Song Chan poetry that he did not attempt to write, or only sparingly so, in that he either was forced by deficiency or preferred as a form of expression targeting his Japanese followers to forge new discursive pathways.

Perhaps the main example of this is that, even though Dōgen commented extensively on dozens of Chan kōan records, he gave up writing four-line verse *gatha* (Ch. *songgu*, Jp. *juko*) comments after an experiment with this style in 1235 included as the ninth volume of *Eihei Kōroku*. He also generally did not try his hand at crafting poetic capping phrase 着語 (Ch. *zhuoyu*, Jp. *jakugo*) remarks on kōans, which was the rage among Chinese commentators at the time, especially in the *Blue Cliff Record* 碧巖錄 (Ch. *Biyanlu*, Jp. *Hekiganroku*) of 1128, the most prominent kōan collection text that Dōgen apparently knew very well. In some cases, such as Dōgen's interpretation of a famous verse by Northern Song lay Buddhist poet Su Shi 蘇軾 (1036-1101) featured in a fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen apparently favors the use of prose commentary rather than trying to compete with the literary giant's original composition.

The article examines the kinds of Chan poetry Dōgen did and did not compose and their significance for interpreting his oeuvre against the background of East Asian Buddhist literature. It focuses on the following topics:

- (1) the overall impact of Dōgen's Chinese and Japanese poetry collections for understanding his career writings, as well as the way his poetry has been received and appropriated over the centuries

- (2) the issue, explored in some of Dōgen's verses, of whether literary imagery serves as a useful vehicle for expressing and enhancing, or as a distraction from, the realization of spiritual awareness
- (3) how some of the poems convey autobiographical reflections in a way that is not otherwise revealed in Dōgen's prose writings
- (4) the use of poetry to highlight and enhance Dōgen's Buddhist view of naturalism and his affirmation of phenomenal reality as influenced by indigenous religiosity that valorizes nature and everyday experience
- (5) his prose rather than poetic commentary on Su Shi's Buddhist verse on gaining enlightenment through contemplation of nature
- (6) how poetry is sometimes employed by Dōgen to convey a doctrinal message, but also why some Chan poetic forms are not utilized or prose commentary is chosen instead
- (7) a final comment on whether Dōgen does or does not appear to go beyond didacticism in his poetic compositions

I. Overall Impact of Poetry and Poetic Composition

In analyzing Dōgen's strengths and limitations as a creator of Chinese poems, it is important to make a basic distinction between what Dōgen achieved as a writer of prose commentaries, whose works reflect literary influences through a generic sense of literary embellishment and rhetorical flourish to enhance the elegance and eloquence of his writing, and what he accomplished specifically through verse compositions. While the vernacular narrative writings of the *Shōbōgenzō* are greatly admired for their lyrical quality and are often included in discussions of classical Japanese literature, this is far less the case with his *kanbun* writings in *Eihei Kōroku*. His Chinese poetry in particular has not been much appreciated or studied due to a variety of factors, in large part for sectarian reasons because literature and the arts were generally considered the domain of the rival Rinzaï 臨濟 (Ch. Linji) sect in the highly specialized world of Japanese religions where government supervision traditionally pigeonholed Buddhist schools in terms of the kinds of practices they were allowed to follow.

First, let us consider the literary aspects of the prose writings of Dōgen, who is known from the *Shōbōgenzō* for being the first major Buddhist thinker to use Japanese vernacular writing, which at the time was used exclusively in the realm of literature exemplified by the Heian era *Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語 and *Kokinwakashū* 古今和歌集. This innovative yet eclectic text has been included in collections of classical Japanese literature such as the *Nihon no Koten Bungaku* 日本の古典文学. There is also some evidence suggesting that Dōgen was a participant in *uta-awase* 歌あわせ poetry contests held among the court literati in Kyoto around 1230, a

transitional phase of his career, and that he befriended Fujiwara Teika 藤原定家 (1162–1241), the most renowned poet and literary critic of the era, who was editor of the *Shinkokinwakashū* 新古今和歌集 waka collection of 1205.

From a philosophical standpoint, Dōgen's probing and evocative approach to the issues related to the transiency of reality have been associated with the medieval Japanese "metaphysics of impermanence,"⁶ which is also expressed in such prominent Buddhist-influenced literary works as Kamo no Chōmei's (1153?-1216?) *Hōjōki* 方丈記 on reclusion, the war epic *Heike Monogatari* 平家物語, and Yoshida Kenkō's (1282?-1350) *Tsurezuregusa* 徒然草 on monastic manners. Dōgen's sense of naturalism evoking the pristine mountain setting of Eihei-ji temple reflects the view of Japanese aesthetics that combines original enlightenment thought (*hongaku shisō* 本覺思想) of Tendai Buddhism with native animism.

In addition, Dōgen's prose writings show stylistic and thematic features that draw on both Japanese and Chinese literary traditions. These range from Dōgen's impressive use of calligraphy as evidenced in the original script still available today of his meditation manual, the *Fukanzazengi* 普勸坐禪儀, supposedly the first text he wrote after returning from China, recognized for its formal handwriting technique, to his extensive manipulation in the *Shōbōgenzō* of linguistic meanings through philosophical punning and wordplay that highlights discrepancies in Japanese pronunciations and syntactical uses of Chinese characters (Fig. 3). Dōgen's *kanshi* poems, which are influenced by the Chan and broader Chinese literary traditions, demonstrate knowledge of the use of end-rhyme following the schemes of AABA or ABCB, as well as level/oblique tonal patterns. Moreover, many of his poems, in addition to the prose commentaries consisting of interlinear comments on source texts, seem to follow the typical fourfold Chinese literary approach (*qi cheng zhuan he [jie]* 起承轉合[結]) of offering an opening statement (*qi*), followed by explanatory development (*cheng*), and then a turnabout or inversion of meaning (*zhuan*), and finally a synthetic conclusion (*he [jie]*). This seems to be crucial for understanding Dōgen's way of providing criticisms that change or reverse through subtle rewriting and wordplay the implications of prior interpretative approaches to Chan sayings and dialogues.

However, it is also the case that Dōgen's Chinese and Japanese poetry collections are not so well known or received. For one thing, Dōgen himself disputes the role of elegant words used in poetic writings in favor of didacticism and pure Dharma instruction in a prominent passage in a collection of evening lectures known as the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* 正法眼藏隨聞記 of 1236. It has also been pointed out by some scholars that his

waka were included in the *Kenzeiki* long after his death and may be an unreliable source, and that the *kanshi* poems are, with only one or two exceptions, not included in the prestigious medieval Japanese Five Mountains Literature (*Gozan Bungaku* 五山文學 collections) dominated by contributors from the Rinzai sect. It is further mentioned that the *Eihei Kōroku* was compiled early on but that extant editions were probably significantly edited in the Edo period in the context of shogunal oversight of religious sects, and therefore the text's authenticity may be called into question.

However, the traditional skeptical view of Dōgen's poetry was altered significantly with the 1968 Nobel Prize acceptance speech of Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成, "Japan the Beautiful and Myself," in which the novelist made an opening reference to one of Dōgen's waka as being a major source of inspiration.⁷ This caused the Sōtō sect to reevaluate the founder's view of poetry, and since that time both the Japanese and Chinese collections have been examined more vigorously than at any phase since an eighteenth-century revival of scholastic studies. One major development was that a former abbot of Eihei-ji temple provided an analysis of the rhyme scheme of the *kanshi* collection. However, almost all of these newer studies have been conducted by sectarian scholars and/or priests whose main goal is to explore Buddhist symbolism, and for the most part Dōgen's poetry is still not being studied by literary scholars in Japan today.

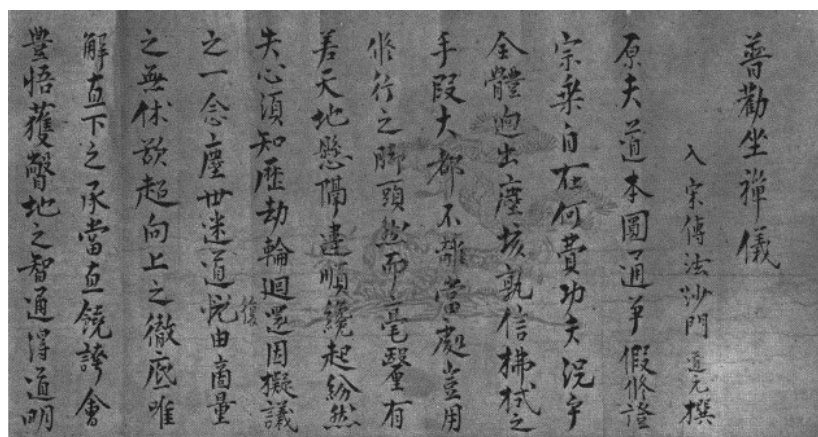


Figure 3. Calligraphy of *Fukanzazengi*

II. Literature as Vehicle or Distraction?

Part of the reason for the continuing reluctance on the part of researchers to engage and examine Dōgen's poetry is that he himself expressed a disavowal of writing as an end in itself. Yet it is also clear that he could not help but be greatly influenced by the world of literature and that a highly creative sense of ambivalence regarding words in contrast to the renunciation of language seen in relation to the spiritual quest is compellingly conveyed in a number of his Chinese and Japanese verses. When Dōgen became a monk on Mt. Hiei in 1213 and went to Mt. Tiantong in China a decade later, in both cases he entered into a cultural environment where there was profound interaction of Buddhism and the literati, many of whom were lay practitioners whose support was crucial to sustaining Chan/Zen temples, as well as an interdependency of pro-literary and anti-literary polemics.

This controversy is referred to as the debate between conceiving of Zen as a "special transmission beyond words and letters" 教外別傳 / 不立文字 (Ch. *jiaowai biechuan* / *buli wenzi*, Jp. *kyōge betsuden* / *furyū monji*) as opposed to "literary Zen" 文字禪 (Ch. *wenzi chan*, Jp. *monji zen*), or emphasizing speech versus silence in the context of making a commitment to live in and transform the mundane world while seeking solace through the path of detachment. In other words, should one who pursues the Dharma with firm dedication remain in the realm of ordinary affairs and risk secularization or leave behind communication for what may become a stubborn sense of isolation? Can such a seeker write about the religious quest in order to instructively evoke feelings of compassion and longing for the Dharma, or must he give up pen and paper to emphasize the path of renunciation?

In the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, Dōgen apparently draws a clear line between religion and art by warning his disciples against the pursuit of "style and rhetoric," which may distract from or impede their spiritual development. Dōgen conveys a "great doubt" about the need for writing while undertaking sustained meditative practice when he cautions, "The composition of literature, Chinese poetry and Japanese verse, is worthless, and must be renounced." Also, he insists, "Zen monks are fond of literature these days, finding it helpful to compose verses and write tracts. This is a mistake....No matter how elegant their prose or how exquisite their poetry might be, they are merely playing around with words and cannot gain the truth....Writing is a waste of time, and the reading of this literature should be cast aside."⁸

This harsh critique comes from a Zen master known for continually editing his graceful though challenging *Shōbōgenzō* prose throughout his career and even to his dying days. The distinction indicated by Dōgen

between “art for art’s sake” and the search for truth, or between an idle indulgence in literature and an exclusive determination to fulfill the pursuit of the sacred, was played out in his own life. His biography gives prominence to his departure from the elite, aesthete world of the Kyoto court, where he could have had a successful career based on his aristocratic birth and education. But, despite pursuing the Buddhist path—or perhaps because of Buddhism’s powerful connections with the literati in Japan and China—it is precisely an attraction to the realm of literature and to a shared sense of responsibility with writers to construct compelling rhetoric about the spiritual quest that is captured not only in the prose writings, but also in his poetry.

Dōgen’s Chinese and Japanese verse reveals that he is ever reminded that the frail beauty of nature arouses feelings which inspire spiritual striving. These feelings are expressed through literature in spite of, and in continual recognition of, the inevitable limitations of emotional responses to transiency as well as the innate restrictions of language in trying to depict religious experience. In a verse contained in *Eihei Kōroku* 10.105, he evokes the Buddhist struggle of being in the world, being mindful of the attraction of natural phenomena while straining to retire from feelings and the desire to compose, which is a form of attachment:

For so long living in this world without	久舍人間無愛惜
attachments,	
Since giving up using paper and pen	文章筆硯既拋來
I see flowers and hear birds without feeling	見花聞鳥風情少
much,	
While dwelling on this mountain, I am	乍在山猶愧不才
embarrassed by my lack of talent. ⁹	

In the first line, if the verb “living” (*she* 舍) contained the hand radical, which one commentator suggests may have been lost in the editing process, so that it becomes “abandoning” (*she* 捨), this part of the verse would emphasize detachment even more strongly. Meanwhile, the last line is filled with a sense of shame and misgiving about the choices Dōgen has made as well as his inability to carry through fully with either side of the delicate balance between feeling and speaking in opposition to serenity and silence.

This creative tension is similarly conveyed in a couple of Dōgen’s Japanese poems, with the first of these bearing a title stressing renunciation that is contraindicated by the verse’s content highlighting the potentially productive role of language:

Furyū monji No Reliance on Words or Letters

Ii suteshi	Not limited
Sono koto no ha no	By language (petals of words),
Hoka nareba	It is ceaselessly expressed;
Fude ni mo ato o	So, too, the way of letters
Todome zari keru.	Can display but not exhaust it. ¹⁰

The next example expresses Dōgen's own sense of uncertainty about his qualifications as either writer or renunciant:

Haru kaze ni	Will their gaze fall upon
Waga koto no ha no	The petals of words I utter,
Chirinuru o	As if only the notes
Hana no uta to ya	Of a flower's song
Hito no nagamen.	Shaken loose and blown free by the spring breeze? ¹¹

The following *kanshi* verse in *Eihei Kōroku* 10.71 uses an idiom in the third line that literally means “withered like chicken skin and crane's hair” to highlight Dōgen's ironic sense of becoming obsolete while feeling an ambivalence regarding the tension between withdrawal and engagement:

Snowy Evening in Spring	春雪夜
Peach and plum blossoms, snow and frost, have no attachment,	桃李雪霜非愛処
Green pines and emerald bamboos are shrouded in cloudy mist.	青松翠竹幾雲煙
I am not yet dried up and over the hill, Even though it's been several decades since I renounced fame and fortune. ¹²	雞皮鶴髮縱無染 名利拋来数十年

Another translator seems to overemphasize human subjectivity a bit by rendering the opening as, “Peach and plum blossoms under snow and frost are not what I love.”¹³ This reading tends to personalize and thus modify the implications of having emotions in a passage that refers to being guided by transcendence amid impermanence, symbolized by the image of flowers enduring snow in late winter/early spring, as well as the pines and bamboos remaining unaffected by the cloudy mist. The natural phenomena are aged but not withered.

III. Autobiographical Poems

One of the interesting features of both the Chinese and Japanese poetry collections is that they include several prominent examples commenting on Dōgen's feelings about key turning points in his life, thereby offering a rare glimpse into the thoughts and emotions of a master known primarily for metaphysical musings.¹⁴ For example, the following *kanshi* verse in *Eihei Kōroku* 10.69, one of six poems written in a hermitage, reveals Dōgen's thoughts around 1230, several years after returning from China but also three years prior to the opening of his first temple in Kyoto when he no doubt felt a bit frustrated in trying to establish his new Zen sect in Japan.

How pitiful is birth/death with its constant ceasing and arising!	生死可憐休又起
I lose my way and find my path as if walking in a dream.	迷途覺路夢中行
Although there are still things I cannot forget, Evening rain resonates in my hut in the deep grass of Fukakusa. ¹⁵	雖然尚有難忘事 深草閑居夜雨聲

During this period Dōgen was staying in a retreat in the area of Fukakusa 深草 to the southeast of the capital that was favored by many of the literati as a pristine getaway from the turmoil of court life. Because the name of the town literally means “deep grass,” this term was ripe for being the source of many puns in Japanese waka of the era reflecting on life in the city versus the countryside.

Here, the vulnerability and instability Dōgen was experiencing is disclosed in a way that makes such attitudes productive for stimulating dedication to the religious quest. Many of the characters in the second line can also bear an explicit Buddhist connotation, including delusion (*mi* 迷), awakening (*jue* 覺), transcendence (*mengzhong* 夢中 [literally, “within a dream”]), and practice (*xing* 行), so that the passage could be rendered, “I practice within a transcendental realm while experiencing both delusion and awakening.” This wording does not alter the meaning but highlights that the verse can be read as directly or indirectly evoking the effects of Buddhist discipline.

Another *kanshi* poem with intriguing autobiographical implications deals with Dōgen's return to Eihei-ji temple in the third month of 1248 after six months of travel (beginning in the eighth month of 1247) to the new capital of Kamakura at the bequest of shogun Hōjō Tokiyori, who offered him the opportunity to lead a new temple being built there (which eventually became Kenchō-ji 建長寺, a leading Rinzai temple supervised by an abbot imported from China). Before looking at the verse, let us consider

a prose passage in *Eihei Kōroku* 3.251, which comments on Dōgen's return when he was apparently sensitive to criticism from the monks who had been left leaderless at Eihei-ji and may have feared that he had changed his spiritual message to accommodate new lay followers involved in political power struggles and warfare.

Dōgen acknowledges that he traveled "to expound the Dharma for patrons and lay students," and that, "Some of you may have questions about the purpose of these travels."¹⁶ But he goes on to argue for the ethical component of his teaching that is consistent with monastic training based on the doctrine of karmic rewards and punishments:

It may sound like I value worldly people and take monks lightly. Moreover, some of you may ask whether I presented some Dharma that I never expounded, and that you have not heard before. However, there was no Dharma preached that I have not previously expounded, or that you have not heard. I merely explained that people who practice virtue improve and those who produce unwholesomeness degenerate, so they should clarify the cause and experience the results, and throw away the tile [mundane affairs] and only take up the jewel [Dharma].

Nevertheless, as was the case with the Fukakusa verse and other poems, Dōgen can be found in this sermon brooding about his missteps as he confesses, "How many errors I have made in my effort to cultivate the way! Today, I deeply regret I have become like a water buffalo. This mountain monk has been gone for more than half a year. I was like a solitary wheel placed in vast space." Yet, he concludes the sermon on a more upbeat note by saying, "Today, I have returned to the mountains, and the monks [literally "clouds"] are feeling joyful. My great love for the mountains has been significantly enhanced."

According to some of what can only be considered legends, when Dōgen refused to accept the shogun's offer, the Hōjō became enraged and threatened the Zen master's life, though his sword was dissuaded by the force-field generated by Dōgen's meditative prowess. In other versions, the shogun paid tribute to Dōgen as he walked off for his return with a sense of dignity and integrity still intact. In any case, as part of the celebration of the 800th anniversary of Dōgen's death in 2003, a new stele was installed across from Kenchō-ji commemorating the spot where Dōgen took a stand for his commitment to just-sitting meditation (*shikan-taza* 只管打坐) (Fig. 4).

The poem on the topic of the Kamakura journey is *Eihei Kōroku* 10.77, which was apparently composed while Dōgen was still in Kamakura but making up his mind about leaving:

For half a year I've been taking my rice in the home of a layman.	半年喫飯白衣舍
The old tree's plum blossoms sitting amid frost and snow—	老樹梅花霜雪中
Awakened from my slumber by the crash of thunder and lightning,	警蟄一雷轟霹靂
In the capital, spring is colored red by peach blossoms. ¹⁷	帝鄉春色桃花紅

Comparing himself to a plum tree known for symbolizing rejuvenation, Dōgen's verse refers to his dismay at realizing suddenly, from the stirring effect of an early spring storm (the last three characters in line three form an onomatopoeia evoking the “bang bam boom” of thunder), that he had been lost in a kind of spiritual hibernation, so to speak, while being entertained by a layman (the shogun), and now he longs for Kyoto, which is close enough to Echizen to remind him of the life of monastic purity. However, as we have seen from the sermon delivered upon his return, he had to face another challenge in coming to terms with the feelings of betrayal and alienation on the part of his followers, who may have felt that he had abandoned them for six months.



Figure 4. “Shikan Taza” Stele in Kamakura

IV. Naturalism and Affirmation of Phenomenal Reality

Dōgen's primary interest in writing poetry was probably not to express either personal feelings or impersonal thoughts, but to go beyond that distinction by evoking naturalism through images of seasonal changes, which had long been used in both Chinese and Japanese literature as a symbol of interiority and spiritual development ever tinged with ambivalent feelings. A main example of this is that there are over forty references in *Eihei Kōroku*'s sermons and verses, especially from the late period of his career, which express Dōgen's appreciation for the imagery of plum blossoms, which bloom while there is still snow, as a symbol of renewal after a period of decline. This is seen in prose writings as well; for instance, *Shōbōgenzō* "Baika" 梅花 (Plum Blossoms), written after three feet of snow fell on the sixth day of the eleventh month of 1243 at a hermitage in Echizen, suggests: "When an old plum tree blooms unexpectedly, just then the world unfolds itself with the flowering."¹⁸ In *Shōbōgenzō* "Kūge" 空華 (Empty Flower) Dōgen says, "A plum tree that some days ago did not have flowers blooms, signaling the arrival of spring. When the time is right, it immediately blooms."¹⁹

Here and elsewhere Dōgen is no doubt influenced by works such as a famed verse by eighth-century Buddhist literatus, Wang Wei 王維 (699-759):

Miscellaneous Poem

雜詩

You, who have come from my hometown,
Let me know what's been happening there!
On the day you arrived, would the late winter
plum blossoms
have opened yet in front of my silken
window?²⁰

君自故鄉來
應知故鄉事
來日綺窗前
寒梅著花未

According to the naturalistic worldview this evokes, the very first whiff of the sweet fragrance of the plums heralds the advent of spring and, indeed, the new season is contained in, or its manifestation is coterminous with, the budding of the blossom. This sense of awakening is a cyclical event that occurs regularly on the same withered branch every year but each time is experienced as a spontaneous rejuvenation in the midst of decline and dejection. From a pantheistic standpoint, one single branch equals all branches and the whole tree in that the here-and-now aspect of blooming generates the power of arising everywhere and at any time. Furthermore, the purity of the white color of the blossoms amidst the fallen snow creates a monochromatic spectacle that gives rise in the imagination to a display of

manifold hues, thus combining the one with the many and the real with the illusory.

Dōgen may have also had in mind a specifically Chan symbolism suggesting that the five petals of the plum evokes the five branches of the fledgling Tang dynasty religious movement, of which the Linji and Caodong schools emerged as the main rivals by the time he arrived in Southern Song China. Dōgen was further influenced by the counter-intuitive or inverted Buddhist notion suggested in a two-line verse by Rujing that the image of the plum may be as good as or better than reality in that it endures longer and appears unflawed:

Original face is not bound by birth-and-death.	本來面目無生死
Spring abiding in the plum blossoms enters into a painting. ²¹	春在梅花入畫圖

In *Eihei Kōroku* 7.481, a poem that comprises the entire sermon from the time of the full moon of the first month of 1252, Dōgen expresses feelings of being captivated by the plum:

How is there dust in the snow-covered reeds?	雪覆蘆花豈染塵
Who can recognize the Pure Land amidst so many people?	誰知淨地尚多人
The fragrance of a single late winter plum blossom bursts forth,	寒梅一點芳心綻
There in the emptiness is held the awakening of spring. ²²	喚起劫壺空處春

In *Eihei Kōroku* 7.530, in the next to last formal sermon Dōgen delivered before falling into illness that led to his death a year and a half later, he writes of the account in which King Prasenajit asks Venerable Pindola if he ever met the Buddha.²³ First, Dōgen cites a Rujing verse interpreting this episode in light of plum blossom symbolism:

By raising his eyebrows, he completed the dialogue,	策起眉毛答問端
He met Buddha face-to-face and they did not hide anything from each other.	親會見佛不相瞞
Today he is worshiped in the four corners of the world,	而今應供四天下
Spring occurs on the tip of a plum branch wrapped in a layer of white snow. ²⁴	春在梅梢帶雪寒

An alternate translation of Rujing's verse that tries to preserve the AABA rhyme scheme of the original reads:

Raising his eyebrows to answer the question,
Meeting Buddha there was nothing not mentioned.
Worshiped today throughout the world,
Spring inhabits a plum branch amid a snowy dimension.

In commenting on his master's composition, Dōgen adopts the strategy he frequently uses of rewriting the words of his predecessors by modifying the role of the flowers to represent eternity rather than renewal, and further reinforcing this innovative approach by substituting for plums in the last line the image of the crane, a similar but somewhat different symbol of happiness (*fu* 福) that also suggests longevity instead of ephemerality:

He met Buddha face-to-face and they	親會見佛語言端
exchanged words forthrightly.	
Raising his eyebrows, he tried not to conceal.	策起眉毛欲不瞞
In the field of merit, spring petals do not fall,	功德田春花未落
In the jade forest, the wings of an ancient crane	瓊林老鶴翼猶寒
are still chilled. ²⁵	

The following is an alternate, rhyming version of Dōgen's verse:

His face-to-face meeting with Buddha is bold,
The raising of eyebrows reveals what is told.
The merit-field prevents spring petals from falling,
In the jade forest, a crane's wings grow cold.

V. Commentary on Su Shi's Buddhist Verse

Unlike his rewriting of Rujing's poem, in his interpretation of a famous verse by Su Shi known as "Sounds of Valleys, Colors of Mountains" 谿聲山色 (Ch. *xisheng shanse*, Jp. *keisei sanshoku*), Dōgen refrains from trying to compete with or surpass the source text, yet he vigorously maintains his style of challenging the literary master in an extended prose commentary passage in *Shōbōgenzō* "Keisei sanshoku." According to Su Shi's expressive evocation of his own personal experience of sudden realization that apparently occurred after he had heard a rousing sermon regarding the enlightenment of sentient and insentient beings by a Chan master, he reflected on this while gazing all night at the natural landscape:

The valley stream's sounds are the long tongue 谿聲便是廣長舌

[of Buddha],	
The mountain's colors are none other than the	山色無非清淨身
pure body [of Buddha].	
With the coming of night, I heard eighty-four	夜來八萬四千偈
thousand gathas,	
But how am I ever to tell others in days to	他日如何舉似人
come? ²⁶	

Dōgen remarks in “Keisei sanshoku,” “While on a visit to Mount Lu, Su Shi was struck by the sound of the valley stream rippling through the night, and was enlightened. He composed the following poem about the experience, which he presented to Changshe 長舌, who said in approval, ‘Just so!’” However, Dōgen then makes the ironic comment, “What a pity that the mountains and streams conceal sounds and colors, but you may also rejoice that colors and sounds emerge through the mountains and streams.... During past springs and autumns, Su Shi had not seen or heard the mountains and streams.” Dōgen continues to comment in a questioning manner on Su Shi's experience:

Su Shi had this awakening experience shortly after he heard Changshe talk about a kōan case in which insentient beings are expressing the Dharma....But was it the voice of the stream or was it the sermon by the master that awakened Su Shi?...Perhaps Changshe's comment that insentient beings express the Dharma had not yet ceased to reverberate in Su Shi, and, unbeknownst to him, had intermingled with the sound of the stream's rippling through the night. Who can fathom the water—is it a bucketful or does it fill the whole ocean? In short, was it layman Su Shi who awakened or the mountains and streams that were awakened? Who today can clearly see the tongue and body of the Buddha?²⁷

Although he does not try his hand at rewriting the master's *kanshi* verse, Dōgen's Japanese poetry collection includes a waka, which is one of five poems on the *Lotus Sutra* that celebrates Su Shi's experience:

Mine no iro	Colors of the mountains,
Tani no hibiki mo	Streams in the valleys,
Mine nagara	All in one, one in all
Waga Shakamuni no	The voice and body
Koe to sugata to.	Of our Sakyamuni Buddha. ²⁸

Furthermore, to briefly indicate how the intertextual dimension of Dōgen's prose and poetic commentaries reveals an intermingling of his views with those of various Chan records, in *Shōbōgenzō* "Mujō seppō" 無情說法 (Preaching of the Dharma by Insentient Beings) he cites a Chan master's intriguing verse in regard to the preaching of insentient beings like the mountains and rivers. This passage comments on the synaesthesia implicitly involved in naturalism as an extension of Su Shi's spiritual experience by concluding: "Do not listen with the ears, but hear with the eyes!" However, Dōgen also cautions that this injunction should not be taken in a simplistic way to presume that all things automatically embody the Buddhist teachings, but as a motivation to purify the mind in order to embrace natural phenomena as appropriate to one's own spiritual realization.

VI. Doctrinal Poems

The topic of Dōgen's appropriations of Chan and Buddhist doctrines expressed through his groundbreaking interpretations of kōan cases via prose and poetic remarks, often based on reworking Chinese syntax through Japanese rhetorical appropriations, is tremendously complex and varied, so I will limit my discussion to his commentaries on the so-called "Mu Kōan" 無公案 (Ch. Wu Gong'an). According to the version of this case that is most frequently cited in Chan texts, in response to a disciple's question of whether a dog has Buddha-nature 佛性 (Ch. *foxing*, Jp. *bussō*), a universal endowment possessed by all beings according to Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, master Zhaozhou 趙州 replies "No" 無 (Ch. *wu*, Jp. *mu*), which literally means "it does not have" but can be taken to imply transcendental negation rather than absence or lack. However, there is an alternative version in which the negative answer is followed by an ironic dialogue and is also accompanied by a "Yes" 有 (Ch. *you*, Jp. *u*) response, which literally means "it does have," and is followed by yet another brief dialogue. While the truncated No-only version of the kōan is taken to highlight the notion of absolute nothingness, the more complex Yes-No version suggests the relativism of opposites.

Following Hongzhi, who cited the complex version in his recorded sayings *Hongzhi lu* 宏智錄, which became the basis of the *Record of Serenity* 從容錄 (Ch. *Congronglu*, Jp. *Shōyōroku*) kōan collection of 1228, the complex version is cited by Dōgen in *Mana Shōbōgenzō* and *Eihei Kōroku*, as well as in an extended passage in *Shōbōgenzō* "Busshō" ("Buddha-nature"); note that in some cases in the citations of Hongzhi and Dōgen as well as other masters from the period, the negative response precedes the positive one but in other instances this sequence is reversed.

The *Record of Serenity* resembles the *Blue Cliff Record's* multilayered structure for one hundred cases that includes the main kōan case along with

capping phrase comments and additional verse commentary with its own set of capping phrases, and that is also accompanied by wide-ranging prose remarks. I cite below two of the important sections featuring this literary style contained in case 18 (capping phrases are in parentheses) because of its intrinsic value and also to demonstrate that capping phrases, which are a uniquely Chan form of indirect, allusive, ironic rhetoric, are a key example of the kind of Chinese poetic expression that Dōgen did not attempt to construct:

Record of Serenity 18 Main Case with Capping Phrases²⁹

A monk asked Zhaozhou, “Does the dog have Buddha-nature or not? (He blocked his way for a while).

Zhaozhou said, “Yes.” (This did not add to understanding).

The monk said, “Since it has, why does it force itself into this skin-bag?” (As soon as you welcome someone, it immediately causes you to stick your neck out).

Zhaozhou said, “It knows better, but it willingly transgresses.” (Meanwhile, he does not admit to talking about “you” [the monk]).

Another monk asked, “Does the dog have Buddha-nature, or not?” (They were born of one mother [or, “the apple does not fall far from the tree”]).

Zhaozhou said, “No.” (This does not detract from understanding).

The monk said, “All sentient beings have Buddha-nature. How come the dog does not?” (The foolish dog snatches a sparrow hawk).

Zhaozhou said, “Because it has karmic consciousness.” (As usual, Zhaozhou seizes the occasion of small talk to wrap up the case).

Next follows Hongzhi’s Verse Comment with Capping Phrases by a later editor:

The dog has Buddha-nature;	狗子佛性有
the dog does not have Buddha-nature	狗子佛性無
(Beaten into one ball, melted into one lump)	打做一團鍊做一塊
A straight hook really seeks fish who’ve given	直釣元求負命魚
up on life	
(Now these monks go belly up)	(這僧今日合死)
Wandering pilgrims [itinerant monks] follow	逐氣尋香雲水客
the smell looking for incense	
(They don’t even know that it has penetrated	(穿卻鼻孔也不知)
their nostrils)	
The noisy chatter of idle speculation	嘈嘈雜雜作分疏

(Fighting and gnawing at dried bones—crunch! snap! howl! roar!)	(競齧枯骨嗶啾嗷吠)
Making quite a show	平展演
(If you do not deceive them, your fellows will pipe down the chatter)	(沒蹺欺休廝諗)
And feeling so comfortable	大鋪舒
(When talents are lofty, the speech sounds superb)	(材高語壯)
No wonder my family was confused from the start	莫怪儂家不慎初
(As soon as a word is uttered, even wild horses can't pull it back)	(一言出口駟馬難追)
Even if you only point out its flaws, you still try to grab the jade	指點瑕疵還奪璧
(Like a thief pointlessly trying to pick someone's pocket)	(白拈巧偷)
The King of Qin was not aware of Lin Xiangru	秦王不識藺相如
(Even though it's right in front of him, he keeps walking by).	(當面蹉過)

The aim of the capping phrase commentaries in this complex Yes-No version of the Mu Kōan is to showcase that there is no single clear understanding to project and yet also no full misunderstanding to reject, since errancy and illusion lead circuitously to appropriating truth and reality, which in turn can never escape their opposites.

Dōgen's main commentary on the case is in the penultimate section of the 14-part "Busshō" fascicle, which elsewhere examines a variety of Chan sayings and dialogues about the meaning of the Buddha-nature in relation to sentient and insentient beings. The purpose of Dōgen's analysis resembles the *Record of Serenity* in overcoming the dichotomies of yes or no, positive or negative, have and have not, and right versus wrong, but the rhetorical style varies significantly in relying on interlinear prose comments that allude to other Chan sources yet are tinged on occasion with a poetic flair.

To cite some key examples, in his comment on the disciple's initial query Dōgen highlights the transcendence of opposites from the standpoint of dedication to the religious quest:

The meaning of this question needs to be clarified....The question does not ask whether the [dog] must have the Buddha-nature nor does it ask if the [dog] must not have the Buddha-nature. It asks whether a man of iron also studies the way. Although [the monk] may regret having stumbled upon a poisonous hand, this recalls the

situation of meeting half a saint after thirty years [a reference to an obscure Chan dialogue].³⁰

Dōgen then remarks on Zhaozhou's positive response in order to move beyond conventional understandings of having or affirming realism:

Zhaozhou said, "Yes." The meaning of this yes [or being or existence] is not the being of scholastic treatises or the being discussed by the Sarvastivadins [an early Buddhist school of realism]. The being of Buddha is the being of Zhaozhou; the being of Zhaozhou is the being of the dog; and the being of the dog is the being of the Buddha-nature.

Furthermore, in his comment on the monk's follow-up question about why, if the dog has Buddha-nature, it forces itself into the shape of a living being, Dōgen zeroes in on the philosophical meanings implicit in the term "already":

The monk's saying inquires whether it is present being, past being, or "already being," and although already being resembles the various kinds of being, already being clearly stands alone. Should already being imply forcibly entering or should it not imply forcibly entering? There is no merit in idly considering the effort of forcibly entering the bag of skin.

Although the discussion in "Busshō," one of the longest *Shōbōgenzō* fascicles and the one with the most sustained argumentation on a single topic, is his best known writing on the topic, Dōgen also offers two *kanshi* verses on the case in *Eihei Kōroku* 9.73 (in addition to several other prose comments in the sermons in the first seven volumes):³¹

The whole body of dog, the whole body of Buddha—	全身狗子全身佛
It is difficult to discuss whether there is or is not [Buddha-nature].	箇裏難論有也無
Selling off or gaining back through buying comes out the same.	一等賣來還自買
Have no regrets over losses or partial gains.	莫憂折本又偏枯
Yes and no as two sides of Buddha-nature	有無二佛性
Does not determine the fate of sentient beings.	不造眾生命
Even though it seems like milk turning into	雖似酪成蘇

cream,
 It leads to the complete extinction of thought in 猶如滅盡定
 samadhi.

In both of these poems, Dōgen reinforces the ideological message of “Busshō” by stressing the relativism of apparently contradictory answers to the case’s core query. Given these verses written in the early stages of his career over a half a decade before “Busshō,” and despite the variety of ways in which he approaches interpreting the Mu Kōan, it is notable that he refrains from attempting the capping phrase technique.

VII. Whither Dōgen’s Poetry?

It is difficult to assess Dōgen’s accomplishments as a writer of poetry in Chinese as well as Japanese because of two main interpretative disconnects mentioned above: he repudiates poetry and literature yet composes several hundred *kanshi* verses, plus the prose throughout his canon relies heavily on the use of poetic expressions; also, his Chinese poems have been almost entirely excluded from major collections of medieval verse, yet his prose is considered a classic of Japanese literature from that era. Because of sectarian tendencies and the highly specialized nature of scholarship on Buddhist studies in Japan in terms of adhering strictly to academic discipline, an ongoing lack of interdisciplinary approaches that could persuasively link religious thought and literature will probably remain the case. The verse of Dōgen, who may never have felt comfortable or confident as a “poet,” if studied at all, will no doubt continue to be examined from historical and textual rather than literary perspectives.

Therefore, the question of whether Dōgen’s poetry goes beyond didacticism, or is valuable for reasons other than those directly related to an evocation of the Buddhist Dharma, will undoubtedly still linger. On the other hand, if we could speculate regarding the way that the master himself might respond to the situation, to say that the intriguing element of his poetry is that it enables an appreciation of how literature contributes to a seamless understanding of his overall body of writing that invariably captures and holds true to the creative tension of ambivalence regarding words and silence, or attachment and withdrawal, would probably not be seen as the source of but rather the answer to one of the main hermeneutic issues in Dōgen Studies (*Dōgen kenkyū* 道元研究). Most of all, Dōgen would prefer to be understood as one influenced by a poetic dimension that does not use rhetoric for its own sake but as a skillful means of challenging conventions and overturning assumptions in order to inspire students to think for themselves by reading between the lines yet not taking any particular theoretical or practical perspective at face value.

Endnotes

1. This article draws in part upon several of my publications, especially *The Zen Poetry of Dōgen: Verses From the Mountain of Eternal Peace* (Mt. Tremper, NY: Dharma Communications, 2004); but all of the Chinese poems in this article cited have been re-translated.
2. *Eihei Kōroku* 1.48, in the collected works of Dōgen, *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū* 道元禅師全集, ed. Kawamura Kōdō, et. al., 7 vols. (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1988-1993), 3:34.
3. Steven Heine, “Empty-Handed, But Not Empty-Headed: Dōgen’s *Kōan* Strategies,” in *Discourse and Ideology in Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, edited by Richard K. Payne and Taigen Dan Leighton (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006), 218-239.
4. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 4:182-297; for a careful and generally outstanding translation of the entire *Eihei Kōroku*, see Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, trans., *Dōgen’s Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Kōroku* (Boston: Wisdom, 2004). I have consulted this translation extensively but in most cases departed from it.
5. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 7:152-179.
6. Akane Shōichi, *Mujō no shisō* 無常の思想 (Tokyo: Renga shobō shinsha, 1980).
7. Kawabata Yasunari, “Utsukushi Nihon no watakushi” 美しい日本の私, translated by E.G. Seidensticker as *Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969).
8. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 7:90.
9. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 4:290.
10. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 7:159.
11. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 7:156.
12. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 4:278.
13. Leighton and Okumura, *Dōgen’s Extensive Record*, 628.
14. Additional Japanese poems comment further on the visit to Kamakura, where his primary teaching to the shogun was through a collection of a dozen waka verses.
15. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 4:276.
16. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 3:166-168; see also Leighton and Okumura, *Dōgen’s Extensive Record*, 246.
17. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 4:280.
18. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 2:71.
19. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 1:133.
20. *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, 25 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 4:1304.
21. *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū*, 2:77.