

The Whole Works

by Eihei Dogen Zenji, translated by Thomas Cleary

Introduction

This essay is strongly reminiscent of the central teaching of the philosophy of the Kegon school: interdependent origination, and its corollaries dealing with the interpenetration of existence and emptiness, unity and multiplicity.

The word zenki consists of two elements: zen means "whole" or total or complete; ki has many meanings, those relevant to this case including "works" in the sense of machinery, potential, impetus, pivot or vital point, and the flux of nature. Ki therefore refers to phenomena in respect to their dynamic aspect, and to the dynamic or vital point itself which underlies, and is revealed by, the active coexistence of phenomena. In Kegon terms, ki includes both senses of phenomena and principle, phenomena being interdependent things, the principle being that of interdependence itself. Zen refers to the inclusiveness and pervasiveness of ki in both senses. We translate zenki as "the whole works" to convey by the colloquial sense of this expression the notion of inclusion of the totality of existence, and by the standard sense the notion of the total dynamic underlying the manifestations of existence.

In the Zen classic Blue Cliff Record, the sixty-first case says, "If a single atom is set up, the nation flourishes; if a single atom is not set up, the nation perishes." This essay of Dogen's may be said to center around a restatement of this theme: "In life the whole works is manifest; in death the whole works is manifest," or, to render the same passage another way, "Life is the manifestation of the whole works; death too is the manifestation of the whole works."

In terms of the existence-emptiness equation, from the point of view of existence (represented by the terms "set up" and "life") all that exists, while from the point of view of emptiness ("not set up," "death") all is empty. The concurrence of existence and emptiness is not as separate entities, but as different aspects or perspectives on the same totality. To borrow Kegon terms again, life as the manifestation of the whole works illustrates ki as phenomena, while death as the manifestation of the whole works illustrates ki as noumenon.

The passage from the Blue Cliff Record alludes to the Kegon doctrine that phenomena do not exist individually but interdependently, that the manifold depends on the unit and the unit on the manifold. A refinement of this principle in Kegon philosophy is called the mystery of principal and satellites: this means that every element in a conditional nexus can be looked upon as the hub, or "principal," whereupon all the other elements become the cooperative conditions, or "satellites" - hence all elements are at once "principal" and "satellite" to all other elements. It is the mutuality, the complementarity, of the elements which makes them functionally what they are. Dogen presents this idea by likening life to riding in a boat - one is naught without the boat, yet it is one's riding in it that makes it in effect a "boat." Furthermore, "the boat is the world - even the sky, the water, and the shore are circumstances of the boat. . . . The whole earth and all of space are workings of the boat."

The distinction of existence and emptiness, the noncontradiction and mutual interpenetration of existence and emptiness, and thereby the transcendence of existence and emptiness - these are traditional steps of Mahayana Buddhist dialectic. In this essay they are presented by Dogen in his subtle, almost covert way, evidently to induce the reader to search out these insights by personal contemplation. The ultimate vision of totality, in which the whole and the individuals foster one another - the crown of Kegon Buddhist metaphysics - is one of the fundamental themes of Dogen's philosophical writings, to be met with time and again in various guises. In this essay it is conveyed in a most succinct manner, worthy of representing Zen Buddhist philosophy.

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Shobogenzo Zenki by Eihei Dogen Zenji, translated by Thomas Cleary

The Great Path of the Buddhas, in its consummation, is passage to freedom, is actualization. That passage to freedom, in one sense, is that life passes through life to freedom, and death too passes through death to freedom. Therefore, there is leaving life and death, there is entering life and death; both are the Great Path of consummation. There is abandoning life and death, there is crossing over life and death; both are the Great Path of consummation.

Actualization is life, life is actualization. When that actualization is taking place, it is without exception the complete actualization of life, it is the complete actualization of death. This pivotal working can cause life and cause death. At the precise moment of the actualization of this working, it is not necessarily great, not necessarily small, not all-pervasive, not limited, not extensive, not brief.

The present life is in this working, this working is in the present life. Life is not coming, not going, not present, not becoming. Nevertheless, life is the manifestation of the whole works, death is the manifestation of the whole works. Know that among the infinite things in oneself, there is life and there is death. One should calmly think: is this present life, along with the myriad things concomitant with life, together with life or not? There is nothing at all, not so much as one time or one phenomenon, that is not together with life. Even be it a single thing, a single mind, none is not together with life.

Life is like when one rides in a boat: though in this boat one works the sail, the rudder, and the pole, the boat carries one, and one is naught without the boat. Riding in the boat, one even causes the boat to be a boat. One should meditate on this precise point. At this very moment, the boat is the world - even the sky, the water, and the shore all have become circumstances of the boat, unlike circumstances which are not the boat. For this reason life is our causing to live; it is life's causing us to be ourselves. When riding in a boat, the mind and body, object and subject, are all workings of the boat; the whole earth and all of space are both workings of the boat. We that are life, life that is we, are the same way.

Zen Master Engo Kokugon said, "In life the whole works appears; in death the whole works appears." One should thoroughly investigate and understand this saying. What thorough investigation means is that the principle of in life the whole works appears has nothing to do with beginning and end; though it is the whole earth and all space, not only does it not block the appearance of the whole works in life, it doesn't block the appearance of the whole works in death either. When the whole works appears in death, though it is the whole earth and all space, not only does it not block the appearance of the whole works in death, it doesn't block the appearance of the whole works in life either. For this reason, life doesn't obstruct death, death doesn't obstruct life. The whole earth and all space are in life and in death too. However, it is not fulfilling the potential of one whole earth and one whole space in life and fulfilling their potential in death too. Though they are not one, they are not different; though they are not different, they are not identical; though they are not identical, they are not multiple. Therefore, in life there are myriad phenomena of the appearance of the whole works, and in death too there are myriad phenomena of the appearance of the whole works. There is also the manifestation of the whole works in what is neither life nor death.

In the manifestation of the whole works there is life and there is death. Therefore, the whole works of life and death must be like a man bending and straightening his arm. Herein there are so many spiritual powers and lights which are manifest. At the moment of manifestation, because it is completely activated by manifestation, one sees and understands that there is no manifestation before manifestation. However, prior to this manifestation is previous manifestation of the whole works. Although there is previous manifestation of the whole works, it does not block the present manifestation of the whole works. For this reason, such a vision and understanding vigorously appears.