

CHAPTER 4
THE CONCEPT OF NOW IN DOGEN'S PHILOSOPHY

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Belief in the totality of the present moment forms one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhist philosophy. According to Buddhist thought, the past is not real, because it no longer exists, and the future is not real because it has not yet come into existence. Only the present moment is real existence. Early Buddhist philosophers developed a theory of existence as a point-instant, and this view finds parallels in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. The 13th century monk/philosopher Dogen wrote extensively about our concept of time set against our experience of time. In his masterwork, *Shobogenzo*, he expounds on the nature of the Now in a stimulating essay rich in imagery and metaphor.

1. Introduction

Belief in the totality of the present moment forms one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhist philosophy. According to Buddhist thought, the past is not real, because it no longer exists, and the future is not real because it has not yet come into existence. Only the present moment is real existence. But any attempt at analysis of the very moment in which we exist leaves us running in circles. How then, can we approach a description of the structure of the Now, this most difficult of philosophical problems, when, as Wittgenstein points out, the end of this sentence is in a different present moment to its beginning? How can we reconcile our received linear view of time with a view that makes the instantaneous present the only reality? If Now is the only time that is real, where is our past, and

where will our future be? Does the present contain the past and future? How is that possible? What is the structure of a Now that contains all? ^a

2. The Theory of Instantaneous Being

This problem was addressed by two great Indian Buddhist philosophers in the 6th and 7th centuries – Dignaga and Dharmakirti – under the title “Ksanika-vada” (The Theory of Instantaneous Being). An excellent exposition of their work can be found in the book *Buddhist Logic* by Stcherbatsky, who summarised their ideas as follows:

“Such is the leading idea of Buddhism – there is no other ultimate reality than separate, instantaneous bits of existence. Not only eternal entities, be it God or Matter, are denied reality, because they are assumed to be enduring and eternal, but even the simple stability of empirical objects is something constructed by our imagination. Ultimate reality is instantaneous.”¹

The Buddhist philosopher and teacher Nagarjuna had already addressed the problem in the 2nd century in his work *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, in a chapter entitled “Kala-pariksa” (An Examination of Time).

*Surely if the present and the future exist relative to the past,
They will both be contained in time past.
But if the present and the future are not both contained in the past,
How can they be related to it?
Again, it is impossible to establish the existence of either the present
or the future without their being related to the past.
Thus present and future time do not exist as such.
Using the same process, it can be clarified whether present time –
or future time –*

^a I am using the phrase “the Now” in the sense of “all that is here and now”, not just to represent time at this moment, but embracing the present time and present place as one indivisible whole. In this sense, it represents the oneness of space-time-existence, and has the same meaning as Dogen’s “Uji” – Existence-Time or Time-Present.

Comes before, after, or between the other two, or whether they are all a unity.

The nature of time is instantaneous and so it cannot be grasped.

Static time, which can be grasped, does not exist.

Since time is impossible to grasp, how can we understand it?

If time depends on things, how can time exist when there are no things?

And as there are no things anywhere, how can there be time?²

In the last lines of this chapter, Nagarjuna points out that our concept of time depends on our belief in the existence of “things”. By this, he is referring to the naming of things, to our conceptualisation of the world. To Nagarjuna, reality exists in front of us in a preconceptual, uninterpreted state, that he calls “empty” (sunya) in the sense that it is empty of concepts. He states that our concepts of reality are always different from reality itself.

The poet T. S. Eliot, who is known to have studied Buddhist thought, was also much interested in the concept of instantaneous time, which he alludes to in the opening stanza of the first of his *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton”:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future

And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present

All time is unredeemable.

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility

Only in a world of speculation...

Time past and time future

What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

3. The Concept of Now in Dogen's Philosophy

The 13th century Japanese monk/philosopher, Eihei Dogen, expounds on the nature of time and existence in his lifework *Shobogenzo*, in a chapter entitled "Uji". Composed of the two Chinese characters "U" and "Ji", this is often translated as "Being-Time". However, I much prefer the translation "Time-Present", since this really does focus us on the immediate. This short chapter is full of imagery and opposing viewpoints and its contents provide us with a treasure chest full of inspiration for investigating the nature of the Now itself. Here is my modern interpretation^b of the full text of the chapter, which is based on the translation by Nishijima & Cross.³ The chapter begins with a poem that describes the independence of each moment of existence. Dogen then comments on the poem from different viewpoints. He then quotes a koan story to illustrate the conduct of someone who has realised the nature of the Now, and adds his commentary. This is followed by another poem that illustrates natural behaviour in the here and now. Dogen then concludes with his own version of the poem. I have inserted lines in italic after each section giving a summary of the main points he is making.

A buddha of old said:

Time-present is standing on the mountain heights.

Time-present is sinking to the depths of the ocean.

Time-present is an angry demon, time-present is a buddha.

Time-present is a formal ceremony, time-present is the temple compound.

Time-present is an everyday individual, time-present is pervading the whole Universe.

^b Dogen's original essay is written in 13th century Japanese, and the stories and poems are quoted in Chinese. The Nishijima-Cross translation, although an excellent translation, is strictly literal and often quite difficult to understand, since it follows the original grammatical constructions quite closely. In my interpretive version, I have tried to present the text in easier-to-understand phrases.

Time-present means that time is the present and the present is time. The state of buddha is always made real at a time, and because of this, the state is illuminated by the light of the present.

[Dogen quotes this poem by Chinese Zen Master Yueshan Weiyao (745-828) as an illustration of time identified with concrete events in the Now, rather than time as a uniform flow. His comments identify time and present existence.]

But we must also study time as 24-hour time this day. Anger has its time, and so it is 24-hour time. 24-hour time is relative; although we can't be sure if one period of 24-hours is longer or shorter, or faster or slower, than another, we still say that a day lasts for 24 hours.

[Time can be seen as a continuous process. But although time is experienced as a subjective and relative experience, it is usually thought of as an objective measurable period.]

And although we never doubt our ability to trace clearly the passage of time, we cannot be sure that we know clearly what time is. As ordinary people we have many doubts about many things, but our doubts are not always the same; they are always changing. But although this is true, every one of those changing doubts is time-present.

[But although we don't doubt our received notion of time as a linear trace, do we really know what time is? Although we doubt many things, our doubting always takes place in the Now.]

We understand that the Universe consists of all the things contained in this world. We must also understand that all the people and things in the Universe have their time-present. Just as individual things are independent of each other, so individual time-presents are independent of each other. This means that many people can want to find the truth at the same time, and there can be many times at which a single person wants to find the truth.

[The Now is both independent and inclusive. Each person and all things in the Universe experience the Now independently. The Now includes an array of personal Nows; a person experiences a series of Nows.]

This is true, not only of wanting to find the truth, but also of actually realizing the truth, and actually practicing a Buddhist life. This person who I think of as myself is a “person” that I put together at one time-present. We can apply this thinking to everything in the Universe. This kind of intellectual analysis is the starting point of Buddhist practice.

[To “realise the truth” is to realise what is real at each concrete Now, This is to practice a Buddhist life. The Self is a construct, put together at each moment; in the same way, our interpretation or conceptualization of the Universe is an instantaneous construct.]

But a person who has clarified their real state sees only each thing, each thing, each thing, and lets go of understanding the nature of each thing. And at that moment, time-present contains the whole of time, and that time contains all things. Thus the whole of existence, the whole Universe, is present at each moment of time. Have a quick look to see if you can find any part of the Universe that has escaped from this present moment.

[Someone living fully in the Now is not interpreting the world, but experiencing the world. Realising the instantaneous nature of reality means realising that each Now contains all. Nothing is left out.]

Until we study the Buddhist view, it is normal to think that “time-present” means at one particular time we become angry, and at another particular time we become a buddha. We imagine events as parts of a journey, as though we were crossing a river or walking over a mountain pass. And although we feel fairly sure that the mountain pass or the river are still present back there where we crossed them, we have already passed them and moved on to be illuminated by the present, leaving them behind in the far distance.

[We construct a line of time by joining events into a "journey" with events passing from the present backwards into the past; we model the present as an illuminated band that sweeps along our constructed journey]

But this is not the only way to think about it. At the time when we are crossing the mountain pass, or crossing the river, we are present there, and so time is present there. Time cannot elude the present. Accepting that time does not appear and disappear, the time when we are crossing the mountain pass is also a real time-present. And even if time were to appear and disappear, the time when time is actually present is also time-present. Then how can the time when we are crossing the mountain pass or crossing the river not be swallowed up in the time when we are illuminated by the light of the present. How can we say that the time when we are crossing the mountain pass or crossing the river does not spew out this present brightness?

[Time exists only at the present. Although we construct present Nows and past Nows, all time-presents are enfolded here in the eternal Now.]

Although the angry person is an event in the past, and the buddha is here today, we can also think of time as if going up into the mountains and looking out over thousands of peaks, rather than seeing time as passing by us. The time-peak when we become angry is then a time-present, even though it seems to have receded into the past. And the time-peak when we become buddha is also a time-present, even though it seems to be back there. Then a pine tree is a time-present, and a bamboo thicket is a time-present.

[The Now is compared to a spatial array of time-presents. All presents are arrayed in the Now; the past and future are arrayed in the Now. The Now is inseparable from concrete objects (pine trees, bamboo thickets) existing at the present moment.]

Seeing time simply as flowing away is not enough. Thinking that the only property time has is the ability to flow is not enough. If we

think of time only as flowing away, then there must be gaps between the instants of time-present as they pass. Ordinary people only see time as something that flows away, and this is why they do not experience time-present, and have not heard it explained. In actual fact, all the things in the whole Universe are time-presents that are both continuous and separate. Real time is always time-present, and so it is always this time-present.

[Our concept of time as a linear trace does not fully capture the nature of time. If moments flow, then they must be discrete and separated by gaps, as represented by the metaphor of time as consecutive frames in a film. To see time only as flowing is to lose the experience of being fully in the Now. Time can be modelled as both continuous and discrete; it can also be experienced as neither (or both) of those. The Now is eternally present.]

But time-present can also be thought of as a process. Time proceeds from today to tomorrow. Today proceeds back to yesterday. Yesterday proceeds on to today. Today proceeds on through today. Tomorrow proceeds on through tomorrow. Although time can be seen as a process like this, times arriving do not pile up on top of times past, neither do they extend out in a continuous line. And for this reason we see that Master Seigen's life was made up of moments of time-present, and so were the lives of Master Obaku, Master Baso, and Master Sekito. Both I and the external world exist in time-present, and so practice and realization of the truth exist at time-present. All our daily struggles are also at time-present. People have their own views today, and they think these views are produced by their own causes and circumstances. Although they think that their views form the basis of, and are based on, their experiences, they are not the basis of their reality. They themselves are only reality presenting its results at this time-present as causes and circumstances.

[Time is a marker for process. But instants of time have no existence per se; they do not accumulate or extend. Buddhist masters of the past lived

in the Now. The self and the external world are conceptualisations of an undivided Now. Our life takes place in the Now. People mistake their views of reality formed from their past experience for reality itself, but reality is not based on past experience. It exists Now.]

People do not see reality itself as being this time-present – what exists at this moment – and so they feel that the state of a buddha is not time-present, but a state that they must make efforts to attain. But even the moment in which they make their efforts and reject the state of buddha because they cannot see that it is their state, is also time-present – it is the time-present of a person who has not realized who they are. It is time-present that causes the hour of 12 o'clock and the hour of 2 o'clock arranged as they are today as they rise up and drop away at their place in the Universe. Two o'clock is a time-present; 6 o'clock is a time-present; living beings are time-present; buddhas are time-present. The concrete time-present of being angry makes the whole Universe real. The concrete time-present of being a buddha makes the whole Universe real. The time-present in which the Universe makes itself real is called perfectly real. The state of buddha which wants to search for the truth, practice Zazen, attain the truth, and enter the balanced state to make the state of buddha real, exists at time-present. It is making perfectly real that the whole of time is the whole of existence, with nothing left over. But since something left over is just left over, even making the whole of time-present only half real is making half of time-present wholly real. Even the times when we seem to be blundering along heedlessly are at time-present. To leave those heedlessly blundering time-presents as they are is to see that they have their own places as time-present. The vivid state of being in our own place in the Universe is time-present. We should neither confuse it with not being present, nor force it into being present.

[Because people do not see that only Now is real, they project their aims into a future "present" and make efforts to achieve them. People mistakenly think that the state of a buddha is something to be attained in the

future by efforts in the present. They do not see that to be present in the Now is the state they are trying to attain.^c But even their misguided efforts take place in the Now. Times are markers for concrete Nows; a concrete Now is the Universe itself. Time-present is the only reality and is indivisible; the Universe is created at this moment; we cannot escape from the Now; acceptance of this reality at this moment is neither to avoid being in the Now nor to try to be in the Now.]

We suppose that time just passes away, and do not understand that time never arrives. Although our understanding itself is time-present, our understanding of time does not influence circumstances. People see time as coming and going, and there are few people who see it clearly as time-present here and now. Then how can it be easy for them to get the time to attain the truth? Even among those who see time as what is present now in the Universe, who can express clearly what the ineffable something is that they have already got? And even among those who have long been asserting that they have it already, none of them have stopped groping around trying to find out who they already are. But leaving these people to their time-present, even attaining the truth and the balanced state is just time-present that appears to come and go.

[The Now neither arrives nor passes; it is eternally present. Our attempts to understand the Now themselves take place in the Now, but our understanding does not influence the character of the Now. It is difficult to grasp the nature of the Now intellectually, and even more difficult to express what is already present.]

In short, time-present is always made real without ridding ourselves of hindrances and delusions. The benevolent forces that appear to the right and left of us are the time-present of our wholehearted efforts in this moment. All the living beings of the lands and oceans are also the time-present of our wholehearted efforts in this moment.

^c See Wittgenstein, *Culture & Value*; 7e: “The place I really have to get to is a place I must already be at now.”

All the beings in this world and other worlds are also the time-present of our moment-by-moment wholehearted efforts. Our practice teaches us that without our own moment-by-moment effort in time-present, nothing could ever be made real, or continue from one moment to the next.

[It is not a question of getting rid of things that prevent us being in the Now; whenever we make wholehearted efforts we are in the Now. Our wholehearted effort at this moment not only brings us into the Now, it creates the Now at each moment.]

But we should not understand that this momentary continuance is like the wind or rain sweeping from east to west. The whole Universe is progressing from one moment to the next; not static, but also not a continuous process. An example of this momentary progression is Spring. It has many different aspects, the passing of which we call the progress of Spring. But our practice teaches us that the passing of time from moment to moment involves no external object.

[There is a difference between our concept of a succession of Nows and the experience itself; the progression is neither continuous nor discrete. There is nothing external that regulates the passing of time from moment to moment.]

For example, momentary Spring passes through a process that we call Spring. But the passing is not Spring itself; we just think of Spring as the movement of momentary Spring through the process Spring. But Spring is made real at every time-present in the process of Spring. We need to come back to this again and again. In discussing the momentary passing of time, if we think that there are only individual things that change on the outside, but there is some real unchanging entity that passes from moment to moment moving through all worlds and all times, we are becoming lax in studying Buddhism in our practice.

[Concepts are not reality; what we call “Spring” is only a process we conceptualize by connecting together a succession of momentary Springs. Reality is not something unchanging that underlies our conceptual world]

One day, at the suggestion of Master Sekito Kisen, Master Yakusan Igen asked Master Baso Doitsu a question: *“I have more or less understood the meaning of Buddhist theory and its classifications. But I want to ask you, what was Bodhidharma’s intention in coming from India to China?”*

On hearing this question, Master Baso Doitsu replied, *“At one time-present he was moved to raise his eyebrow and wink, at another time-present he was not moved to raise his eyebrow and wink. At one time-present, to raise his eyebrow and wink was right, and at another time-present, to raise his eyebrow and wink was wrong.”*

When Master Yakusan heard these words, the whole of Buddhism became clear to him, and he said to Master Baso, *“When I studied with Master Sekito, I was just a mosquito sitting on the back of an iron ox!”*

[Dogen quotes this record of a conversation between two Chinese Zen masters to illustrate natural behaviour in the Now. Bodhidharma was the third son of a southern Indian king and the successor of Master Prajnatarā. He sailed to India in the sixth century and became the first Buddhist patriarch in China. The question “What was Master Bodhidharma’s intention in coming from India to China?” is really a question about how to live as a Buddhist; about whether Bodhidharma intentionally planned where he was going in his life. The answer affirms that Bodhidharma acted naturally at each moment, following the circumstances of his life. His actions were not limited by ideas of right and wrong. These independent and momentary actions in each Now formed Bodhidharma’s real life.]

No-one else could have uttered these words of Master Baso’s. The eyebrow Master Bodhidharma raised or the eye he winked may in-

dicating a mountain or an ocean, because the mountains and oceans and his eyebrows and eyes are one whole. Being moved to raise an eyebrow he sees the mountain. Being moved to wink, he rules the ocean. Being right has become part of him and pulls him in. Wrong is not always not done, and not doing is not always wrong. All these are time-present. The mountains are time-present and the oceans are time-present. Without time-present the mountains and the oceans would not exist. We cannot deny that time-present *is* the mountains and the oceans here and now. If time-present decays, so do the mountains and the oceans. If time does not decay, neither do the mountains and oceans. It is from this truth that the bright star appeared to Gautama Buddha, the state of buddha appeared, his ability to see the truth appeared, and his acknowledgment of Mahakasyapa appeared. All *are* time-present. Without time-present nothing could be here and now.

Master Kisho from the Sho region is a descendent of Master Rinzai and the successor to Master Shuzan Shonen. On one occasion he preaches to the assembly:

At one time-present will is present but words are absent.

At one time-present words are present but will is absent.

At one time-present both will and words are present.

At one time-present both will and words are absent.

[Dogen comments that these simple actions that formed Bodhidharma's life were not separate from the circumstances of each moment. Each Now is complete in itself; our conceptualisation of the Now produces time and space, right and wrong, people and circumstances, observers and observed, out of one indivisible whole. Dogen then quotes a tenth century Chinese Zen master describing in a very realistic way the experience of preaching to his students. Sometimes we want to say something, but the words don't come. Sometimes we have the words, but not the impetus to speak.]

Both will and words are time-present. Both presence and absence are time-present. Before the moment of absence has ended, the moment of presence has come. Before the will has left, the words arrive. To be present does not mean that something has arrived. To be absent does not mean that something has left. Time-present is like this. Presence is just being present, it is not being absent. Absence is just being absent, it is not being present. The word “will” describes will itself, and depicts will as an object. The word “words” describes words themselves, and depicts words as an object. The word “description” describes description itself, and depicts description as an object in time-present. Descriptions describe things, but a description of a thing is never the thing itself. When I meet a person, a “person” meets another “person.” When I meet myself, a manifestation meets a manifestation. If there were no time-present none of this could happen. In summary, will is one time-present that makes the Universe real. Words are one time-present in the balanced state. Being present is just the time when everything is here and now. Being absent is just the time when a fact is not here and now. This is how we should understand and make ourselves real.

[The Now is beyond conceptual explanation; all actions take place in the Now, the eternal present. Language misrepresents what is being described. We describe events in time as arriving and leaving, but in reality, there is only the instantaneous Now. Now it is present. Now it is absent. Now we have the will. Now we have the words. Now we have both. Both the will and the words are just facts at the moment of the present. Both presence and absence are facts in the here and now.]

Although this poem is how one master of the past expressed himself, I feel moved to express my own understanding:

*Will and words being half present is also at time-present.
Will and words being half absent is also at time-present.*

We can study the situation like this:

He was moved to raise his eyebrow and wink in half of time-present.

He was moved to raise his eyebrow and wink in the jumble that is time-present.

He was moved not to raise his eyebrow and wink in half of time-present.

He was moved not to raise his eyebrow and wink in the jumble that is time-present.

To experience arriving and leaving like this is to experience time-present. To experience being present and being absent like this is to experience time-present.

[Dogen presents his own version of the poem, in which he replaces time-present by half of time-present. In doing this, he deconstructs our conceptualisation of the Now, which is indivisible. He suggests that our experience of the Now is an instantaneous experience; Now, Now, and Now...]

4. Time and Concrete Existence are Indivisible

Bringing together the summaries of the main points of each paragraph, we obtain the following overall view of what Dogen is saying in this chapter.

Time is always identified with individual concrete events, and time does not exist separately from them. We can view time as a continuous process, both subjective and relative, and objective and measurable.

Although we do not usually doubt that time is continuous, a linear progression, we cannot grasp the true nature of time. Although our belief in the concept of linear time is virtually complete, any doubt we have about this will also occur in the Now. The Now is experienced independently by each individual, but the Now is also inclusive. (The Now is both a series and an array.)

We construct our concept of self in each Now, and we construct (perceive and conceptualise) the world we live in at each Now. To be present

Now is to experience the world, not to interpret or conceptualise the world. To realise that only *Now* is real is to realise that everything is contained in the *Now*. We see the progression of events as a journey in time, with the present as an illuminated band sweeping along our constructed journey. But we can also view past, present, and future events as all arrayed in the *Now*.

Our linear concept of time is not sufficient to describe reality. Although time can be seen as continuous (analogue?) or discrete (digital?), time is actually inseparable from the *Now*. The *Now* is the only reality, and this time and this place are inseparable. Each *Now* is the Universe created and we can never escape from this reality. We do not arrive in the *Now* and we never leave the *Now*; we are always *here*. But no matter how hard we try, we cannot grasp this fact intellectually. It does not require an effort to be present, but our action in this moment itself *is* the *Now*.

Our concept of the *Now* and our actual experience are different; in reality, the *Now* is neither continuous nor discrete. Concepts are not reality, but neither is reality something unchanging that underlies our conceptual world. When we are present in the *Now*, our behaviour is natural. And natural behaviour is complete in itself. The *Now* is beyond conceptual explanation and complete in itself, unmoved by our inability to express it. But although we cannot express it, we can experience it.

5. Conclusions

In today's world, more than 800 years after Dogen wrote about Time-Present, the linear view of time still rules, and other personal experiences of time we may encounter are labelled as "subjective". When, immersed in a task, we find that "the hours have flown past", we have no hesitation in accepting that our experience is just a feeling, and that in fact, the seconds have ticked past exactly as dictated by the clock. That is our received notion of reality. Our life moves on as the hands of the clock revolve. The river of life flows onwards.

Einstein conceived that time is always relative to the observer. He showed that it is not always linear and not the immovable standard that we had come to accept. At the frontiers of modern physics, situations are emerging in which events cannot always be meaningfully ordered in time. We may need to fundamentally review our notion of time itself.

Dogen uses a three-layered theory of time, in which each of the three layers is represented by a different and mutually exclusive viewpoint.

- Layer 1 (Continuous): The traditional view of time; time is an objective linear stream in which the events in our lives occur. Time is quantifiable and the same in all locations.
- Layer 2 (Discrete): The conclusion reached by Buddhist philosophers such as Dignaga and Dharmakirti: The theory of instantaneous existence – “Every duration in time consists of point-instants following one another [like the frames in a film]. Every extension in space consists of point-instants arising in contiguity and simultaneously, every motion consist of these point-instants arising in contiguity and in succession. Therefore there is no time, no space, and no motion over and above the point-instants of which these imagined entities are constructed by our imagination.”⁴
- Layer 3 (Eternal present): The one irrefutable fact is that we are always here in this place at this time. The present is thus *always* present. It is *always* Now. Both past and future are contained in the Now. The Now is eternal. It never starts and never ends; it has no definable duration. The present reality does not come from somewhere and then pass on to somewhere else; everything is always part of the Now. How can we imagine this kind of Now? How is it possible for the moment of the present to embed all that was, is, and will be? What kind of mathematical structure is needed to model something with no duration?

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