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Thinking with Dōgen:
Reading Philosophically into and beyond the Textual Surface

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Before we start looking at Dōgen's text, I would like to dwell a little on the different ways we can approach it, and to argue that it is not necessarily in the nature of texts, any texts, to "be" mystical or philosophical or historical or fictional (to be sure, they have got to have some necessary feature to qualify for any of these roles), but their status largely depends on the way how we look at them ourselves. For example, whenever we (modern Westerners) have a text like Dōgen's, coming from a very different period, place and culture than where we now are, we can look at it *philologically*. A philologist would want to compare all the available versions of the text in order to determine, which of these is the correct one, and then read that text so that its correct meaning is established. For example, if the author uses a word we know, can we be sure that the word had the same meaning at the time when the work was written? Or perhaps our current usage reflects the influence of some later associations? A philological reading is thus basically an advanced form of semantic reading, a procedure to detect the correct (and quite possibly ambiguous) significance of what the text says, but without any claims on how we should interpret it.

Another way to look at such a text is to read it for *intellectual history*. Any author has obviously been influenced by previous thinkers, and normally combines those influences in a novel way with the new things (s)he has to say. What seems to be strikingly original may in fact be a reworked version of someone else's unduly forgotten idea. And vice versa: something we have come to treat as a commonplace may actually have been expressed for the first time in the text before us. A historian thus traces the influences, the threads of thought, developments, as well as reactions and rebuttals to other authors, and shows us how and why

the individual contribution of an author has taken place by following its lifeline right down to its genesis. For example, we find some statements in Dōgen's text that look remarkably like some thoughts by Kūkai. Is it possible that Dōgen was actually influenced by him? Not very likely, but then during the period when Dōgen was studying in his first monastery, there was a trend of integrating esotericism into that school in order to match the popularity (accompanied by the financial support) that Kūkai's followers were getting from aristocrats, and ideas similar to (or plagiarised from) Kūkai were thus widely in circulation. Having established that, the intellectual historian may no longer be concerned with what exactly and why has Dōgen done with those ideas.

Since Dōgen was the founder of a Buddhist school, it is of course only to be expected that his work is often also read *religiously*. A religious reader is not necessarily bothered by the correct semantic meaning of the text, nor its intellectual genesis, but first and foremost by the relevance it has for the reader's own experience of the world. Thus such a reader is inclined to accept the interpretation given to her by a spiritual teacher, or one forged (in both senses of the word) by an institutionalised religious tradition. From the philological and historical points of view, such interpretations can be completely nonsensical, and yet for the adept they are more meaningful even than what the text quite obviously is trying to say. Which is why it is not ours to say that this fellow human being is mistaken, or does not correctly understand what the text means: it means for her in a different way than it does for us, and there is really no point in getting into heated arguments about whose explanation is longer.

And finally, there is the way how Dōgen has most often been read in the West — the *philosophical* reading. What does it mean to read a text philosophically, and how does this register of reading differ from all others? First of all, for the philosophical reader it does not matter so much whether the text she has is actually the only truly correct version. Another variant of the text might yield a slightly different variation, and so much the better — but if someone comes along and says that the text we are working with is inauthentic, this does not make the results of our work go away. What matters is intepretations, their

quality, their productivity for further thought. For example, many statements in Martin Heidegger's work do not hold even a little drop of water philologically, but this does not make them less significant for his philosophical followers. Similarly, a philosophical reading need not be concerned with historical corroboration. On the contrary: we can and should compare to each other the statements of philosophers who could never possibly have read each other — we can compare Wang Yangming to Berkeley, C.S.Peirce to Kūkai or Wittgenstein to Nāgārjuna without assuming any further connection between them than certain parallel lines in their thought. We are free in all this, as long as we can show that our arguments are valid, and similarly we are free from any traditional interpretation of the text that might have been handed down within a religious institution. We read as we please, as long as we make sense. And no philosophical interpretation of a text can ever be final, just as no scientific theory will ever be eternally undisputable or an artistic representation the only correct way to see things. Moreover, if the point of a religious reading is to support the reader in her spiritual quest — which means that the meaning produced in the process must be overwhelmingly significant for her — then a philosophical reading can produce a profound intepretation of a text with which the reader nonetheless disagrees, totally or in part. For the philologist or the intellectual historian, the agreement or disagreement with a text is not an issue at all.

To sum up: the philosophical reading of a text is based on an open encounter with it, wherein we are allowed to roam freely and present arguments in favour of new interpretations as long as these make sense. We can and should try to strip the text of its cultural particularities[1] and look for what the text is saying to us, not just its original audience. The interpretations we produce as the result of our work do not have to be overwhelming and life-changing, but

1. This does not entail the reduction of our terminological apparatus to the received Western vocabulary and claiming for it an universal status, as Min OuYang, ('There Is No Need for Zhongguo Zhexue to Be Philosophy.', *Asian Philosophy* 22, no. 3 (August 2012):199-223) would have us believe. Any text written within a cultural system of any kind should be opened up to this stripping, this questioning of its coherence-buidling claims, Western ones included.

they should help us to make our own thoughts clearer and to solve conceptual issues we are struggling with in our minds.

All that said, it should be added that these registers of reading are in no way mutually exclusive. A good philosophical reading can only become better if it is supported by philological and historical work, and it is in no way impossible for a religious reader to be inspired by a philosophical reading. It can happen that religious readers are wary of a historical reading, or that philological readers challenge philosophical ones, but all in all it should be for every individual reader to decide which approaches and to what extent she wishes to combine in her own encounter with the text she has decided to engage with. Pleasures are to be found in all directions.

Dōgen as a philosopher

Researchers of Zen history such as William Bodiford note that apart from his voluminous writings, nothing sets Dōgen apart from other religious leaders of his time.[2] This may well be true, but the difference these writings make is enormous. Moreover, what makes Dōgen different from not only his contemporary reformers of the tradition, but also from many other renowned Asian thinkers, is that his is a philosophy that transcends the boundaries of the tradition. Even though his mode of philosophising is wildly different from the system-builders of the West, I would like to claim that he is expounding a consistent and coherent (and strikingly individual) worldview that can be found behind the fragmentary exposition of it in sometimes shorter, sometimes longer essays and his idiosyncratic interpretations and comments on Buddhist scriptures. Whatever might be our evaluation of it, this worldview has remarkable beauty as a work of philosophical art, and — I insist — it can be to a significant extent taken out of its cultural context so that it could also appeal to people who have no interest in Japanese medieval intellectual history or becoming a Buddha. I would also like to claim that this worldview does

2. William M. Bodiford, *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 8 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 22.

not involve an "enlightened perspective", any religious experience by the reader in order to be fully understood, but that it is possible to read Dōgen rationally. Concerns of space do not permit me to present enough argument for this claim here, but it has to be stated because it informs the way how Dōgen's text is going to be treated below.

All of this is why Dōgen is important beyond the boundaries of his culture and his thought tradition: what can be translated is actually relevant for us and could be productive within our own thought system, helping, among other things, to understand some of the opinions we hold or contest about the world with more perspective. However, translating Dōgen is not that simple, as anyone even cursorily familiar with his work already knows.

A lot has been written about Dōgen's linguistic strategies,[3] as these quite obviously fly in the face of anything we (or Dōgen's contemporaries, for that matter) could expect from a text like this. The situation is not made easier by his using classical Japanese as his main vehicle of expression, but for conveying what he had to say he simply did not have any choice. Most of his writing presents itself as comments on and explications of passages from sutras or the records of Chinese Chan masters, i.e. texts in classical Chinese. However, if he would have let the readers follow their own accustomed path of reading these texts, his own points would not possibly have been made. So, to be quite precise, the exact linguistic space from within which Dōgen thinks is the gap between classical Chinese and Japanese, the place where one language can be used for challenging the other. My main purpose here is to show how this happens, but in order to do that, we have to take a look at the structural logic of classical Chinese first.

3. Most authors writing about Dōgen comment on this, but there are also articles specially dedicated to this issue, for example a seminal piece by Hee-jin Kim, ('"The Reason of Words and Letters": Dōgen and Kōan Language', in *Dōgen Studies*, ed. William R LaFleur, Studies in East Asian Buddhism (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 54–82). I have also analysed the topic in more detail in 'Inside the Concept: Rethinking Dōgen's Language', *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East* 21, no. 2 (2 May 2011): 123–137.

Notes on Classical Chinese

As speakers of Western languages, we are accustomed to the division of our textual flow into sentences, which have a regular structure, normally consisting of a subject and a predicate, sometimes an object, sometimes some attributes to characterise the subject or the object, or adverbials to characterise the predicate. We also divide our words into categories that normally fit these roles — we have nouns that can be subjects and objects, and verbs that can be predicates, and adjectives that can function as attributes or also predicates, and so on. Western thinkers are so accustomed to this "normality" of language that many of them, such as Edmund Husserl or Noam Chomsky, however enormous their differences otherwise, have insisted that this is not a structure developed by our mind, but a reflection of the logical structure that is in itself inherent in outside reality. [4]

With little (though significant) differences this is how Japanese (or modern Mandarin) also works, but classical Chinese is a completely different matter, efforts to describe it in the terms of the Western "normality" notwithstanding.[5] The Chinese writing system consists of characters, which correspond to one syllable each, and each of these syllables is also the minimal meaning carrying unit. Most of them have one dominant meaning, but there are some with several. (Apologies to the readers for whom this is elementary; however, not everything in this section is going to be.) Nonetheless, this dominant meaning does not mean we could translate them correctly with one word. The same character 上, for example, can mean "up", "on", "over", "rise", "raise", but also "ruler" and a number of other things similarly derived from the spatial relation. Compared to the number of characters, the number of pronouncable syllables, even with their tone combinations, is much smaller, which makes such a writing system efficient, even if

4. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, International Library of Philosophy and Scientific Method (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 500–524; Noam Chomsky, *Language and Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

5. See, f.ex. Christoph Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, vol. 7, part I, Science and Civilisation in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Edwin G Pulleyblank, *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995).

difficult to master. Another important feature of classical Chinese is that the discrete unit in the textual flow is not a sentence, but a phrase. Most phrases are perhaps 4-6 characters long and some may indeed correspond to sentences, others, however, may just contain one word, such as "said". Therefore, when we translate Chinese prose into a Western language, we have more liberty in deciding where one sentence ends and another one begins than when translating from one Western language into another. In traditional editions of the classical works the borders of phrases are indicated by one single punctuation mark, the full stop. (Current mainland Chinese editions have also included other punctuation marks as well as quotation marks, but this is a bit tricky, because one can not always be sure which ones should be used and where, thus a certain interpretation is forced on the text, and not always the only possible one.)

So meaning is produced by relations that arise between words. The words themselves do not change, there are no inflections indicating the past tense or plurality or anything else. The English sentence "Big fish eat small fish" would translate into classical Chinese just like that. The problem is now to find out how the relations between the single characters appar.

Each phrase, as we saw, consists of a number of characters standing next to each other. And every two neighbouring characters can relate to each other in just five different ways, to be discussed below. As a result of such a relation, they form something we will call a compound. This compound can now enter into one of the same five relations with a character next to it, and form a compound of the next level, which can again form a relation with a neighbouring character. Until the whole phrase is structured. Any compound acts on a higher level like a character acted on the previous one, and the same rules apply. Similar relations between compounds are obviously also possible.

We will now turn to the analysis of these phrases and the rules that make them up, and this is something I would like to make understandable also to those readers who do not know any Chinese characters. (For quotations from source texts, the original Chinese phrases and passages are provided for the benefit of those who can read them.) From now on, characters will therefore be replaced by words

in capital letters. Sometimes, I will need two words connected by a hyphen for one character, and I also cannot promise that each character is always rendered with the same equivalent. Italics are reserved for characters that cannot stand on their own.

So let us now look at these five types of relations in turn.

The first one is what we will call juxtaposition and designate with a plus sign, "+". This relation could be translated with the conjunction "and", but not quite. For example, a typical juxtaposition is MOUNTAIN + WATER, yielding "mountains-and-waters", in other words, "landscape". So a juxtaposition is possible between two characters that on the one hand have something in common, but are on the other hand somehow opposed to each other, stay in a tension. Many words in contemporary Chinese and Japanese have grown out of such fixed juxtapositions. RITUALS + ORDER, for example, yields "politics", and Mandarin even has WEST + EAST for "things", that is, all and sundry. There is also a special character, *AND*+, which indicates that the characters on both sides of it are linked by this relation, and in case it is used, the tension between them is slightly weaker.

The next type of relationship is attribution. It will be designated by a colon, ":", and means that the first member of the compound somehow characterises the second. The attribute can be a quality, or indicate possession, but it may just simply highlight some members from a larger set. BRIGHT : MOON would be fairly obvious, and so would YOU : NAME. But attribution can also indicate an action that characterises the second member of the compound, so, for example COME : GUEST would be "the guest who has come". However, the second member of the compound need not refer to a thing at all. Speakers of Mandarin would recognise GOOD : EAT as "tasty" (good for eating) and GOOD : LOOK as "beautiful" (good for looking at). Again, classical Chinese also employs a special character, which will be rendered as *OF*: (although the order of words in a normal English of-construction should be the other way round) to indicate this relation now and again. But this might make matters to easy, so the same character can also the relation of direction (to be discussed next) and in addition has the meaning of GO once in a while, just not to let you relax.

The third type of relation is direction and it is designated by an arrow, "→" or "←", usually pointing from the first character to the second, but in rare cases also the other way round. The meaning of the relation is in both cases the same and corresponds largely to predicate-object relations in Western languages. However, it is broader than that. Some thing or action may be directed toward another even if our own linguistic intuition would not necessarily perceive the other as an object of the activity of the first, for example as in GO → CITY. As said, the relation of direction can be expressed by a special character (rendered, in this case, as →*IT*), in addition, it is also implied by several modifying words, which add to it some kind of additional twist and will also appear in italics.

The fourth type of relation will here be called predication and designated by a tilde, "~". Normally, predication tells us that the entity indicated by the first character is also the entity indicated by the second character, or is the subject of the action it refers to, but here also we have to take the relationship more broadly. Predication works very clearly when the second character indicates a quality, like in HOUSE ~ SMALL, but for two separate things usually an additional modifying word is used, which will be rendered here *IS* — the italics are there mostly because there are many more words signifying "being" in classical Chinese than there are in English, and the word really does not have any other function than to draw our attention to the fact that predication is in progress.

Modification is the last type of relation, and it only happens when one of the words is not really able to stand alone, but modifies the meaning of the other. The modifying word (or its close approximation, and these are not always easy to come up with) will appear in italics and is connected to the other word by a hyphen "-" . Sometimes the modification would not appear necessary to us at all. For example BY - BEFORE would simply translate as "before", but this combination would also indicate that we are talking about time rather than space. An interjection like "aargh" or "wow" can modify the whole phrase.

As said, the compounds formed by these relations can function as building blocks for next-level compounds. In the notation, I am going to use normal brackets for the first level, square brackets for the

second and curly brackets for the third level, just like in math. (LOOK → FLOWER) : MAN will read as "the man looking at flowers".
So, now we are ready to look at some classical Chinese texts in practice. Here, for example, is the notation for a famous poem by Li Bo:

牀前明月光
疑是地上霜
舉頭望明月
低頭思故鄉

(BED : FRONT) ~ [BRIGHT : (MOON : LIGHT)]
DOUBT → {THIS ~ [(GROUND : UP) : FROST]}
(RISE → HEAD) + [GAZE → (BRIGHT : MOON)]
(LOW → HEAD) + [THINK → (OLD : HOME)]

Or, in other words,

In front of my bed, there is bright moonlight.
Or maybe this is just frost on the ground.
I raise my head, and I gaze into the bright moon,
I lower my head, and I remember my native place.

When we read actual prose, it normally gets a little more complicated. Here is a classical short story about the foolish man who wanted to buy shoes.

鄭人有且買履者。先自度其足。而置之其座。至之市　而忘操之。已得履。乃曰。吾忘持度。反歸而取之。　及反。市罷。遂不得履。人曰。何不試之以足。曰。寧信其度。無自信也。

(ZHENG : MAN) ~ {THERE-IS : {[INTEND → (BUY → SHOE)] : WHICH}}.
PREVIOUSLY - {SELF ~ [MEASURE → (ONE'S : FOOT)]}. *AND*+ [(PUT →*IT*) → (ONE'S : SITTING)].
[(ARRIVE + GO) → MARKET] AND+ [FORGET → (TAKE →*IT*)].

ALREADY : (GET → SHOE).
THEREUPON + SAY.
I ~ [FORGET → (BRING → MEASURE)].
(RETURN + GO-HOME) AND+ (TAKE → *IT*).
NEXT - RETURN.
MARKET ~ CLOSED.
SO : [NO : (GET → SHOE)].
MAN ~ SAY. WHY ~ {NO : [(TRY →*IT*) → (BY - FOOT)]}.
SAY.
RATHER - [BELIEVE → (ONE'S : MEASURE)].
[IS-NOT ~ (SELF ← BELIEVE)] ~ *IS*.

In Zheng, there was a man who intended to buy shoes. First, he measured his own foot himself and put the measure on his chair. Then he went to the market, but forgot to take the measure with him. When found the shoes, he said, "I forgot to bring my measure". He then went back home to take it. After that, he returned. But the market was (already) closed, so he did not get the shoes. People said, "Why did you not try the shoes on your feet?" The man answered, "I would rather believe my measures than myself, that's why".

Quite obviously the system is rather ambiguous and it is not always clear what exactly should the relationship between two adjacent characters be. This is why classical Chinese employs a lot of parallelism: already in the first extant texts, oracle questions carved on bones, we see that several phrases might have the same structure (as the two last lines of the example poem do), and this supports us in our reading — whenever we are not sure, we can look at another phrase (sometimes the next, sometimes the one after that) for help. But when we get to the really difficult stuff, even that is not always enough. And then we are faced with two options: either to read it as we are told to by some commentator (which is what most people do), or to try to figure it out on our own. And then, of course, there is the third option, the one that Dōgen took most of the time: to read the text in the most interesting and sometimes the least plausible way.

It should be noted that he was not the only one who challenged the traditions. Revising traditional interpretations and not being

satisfied with texts as they had always been read had become something of an intellectual fashion during the Song dynasty. Everybody did that. The Neo-Confucian philosophers breathed new life into the old classics (sometimes quite justly ridding them of faulty overinterpretations they had accumulated over the centuries), and even such a figure as the reformist prime minister Wang Anshi (1021-1086) tried his hand in reading Laozi in a new and different way. Here is a sample, two phrases from the first chapter of the *Daodejing*.

無名天地之始。
有名萬物之母。

IS-NOT NAME HEAVEN EARTH *OF*: BEGINNING
IS NAME TEN-THOUSAND THING *OF*: MOTHER

The traditional way to read this (which is also what most Western translators have followed) has been established by the comments of Wang Bi (226-249):

(IS-NOT : NAME) ~ [(HEAVEN + EARTH) *OF*: BEGINNING]
(IS : NAME) ~ [(TEN-THOUSAND : THING) *OF*: MOTHER]

Or, in plain English:

The Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth.
The Named is the Mother of ten thousand things.

Wang Anshi was not satisfied with this and proposed another reading, just as grammatical, just as cryptic:

IS-NOT ~ {[NAME → (HEAVEN + EARTH)] *OF*: BEGINNING}
IS ~ {[NAME → (TEN-THOUSAND : THING)] *OF*: MOTHER}

which we could translate as

Nothingness is the starting point for naming Heaven and Earth.

Being is the mother who names then thousand things.

You can take your pick. The original allows for both readings equally. This is precisely both the beauty and the horror of classical Chinese: the grammar often tolerates a lot of wild and seemingly absurd readings. This happens in other languages too, but not so often. When someone says in English "time flies like an arrow" we can be pretty sure she is not talking about a peculiar species of insects who happen to adore a certain piece of weaponry, although grammatically there is no reason why any such interpretation should be ruled out.

How Dōgen's Text Works

Most of Dōgen's writing purports to be an explanation of passages written in classical Chinese, which he reads as he pleases, substituting and changing the relations between adjacent characters, not according to his whim or in the spirit of free play, as has been suggested[6] , but in order to extract as much meaning from them as possible, and to force the mind of the reader to rid itself from the conventional bounds of textual organisation.

Let us now look at how this actually happens in practice, on the example of a passage from the essay entitled "Old Buddha Mind" (*Kobusshin* 古佛心):

さらに又古心の行佛なるあるべし、古心の證佛なるあるべし、古心の作佛なるあるべし。佛古の爲心なるあるべし。古心といふは、心古なるがゆゑなり。心佛はかならず古なるべきがゆゑに、古心は椅子竹木なり[7]。

Unfortunately it is impossible to present you with a ready and complete translation of the entire passage at this point. We will have to

6. See f.ex. Joan Stambaugh, *Impermanence Is Buddha-nature: Dōgen's Understanding of Temporality* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 43–44.

7. Dōgen, *Dōgen Jō*, ed. Tōru Terada and Yaeko Mizuno, vol. 12, Nihon Shisō Taikei (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1972), 115.

read it little by little, because any translation of the text already has to contain in itself the process that we have to follow step by step in order to understand how it actually works. Moreover, even the tentative translation of the passage will contain grammatically unprocessed material. This is because when we start to read, we still do not know what are the precise relations between the Chinese characters, and accordingly, what exactly do they mean as compounds.

However, in spite of what the appearances tell us, this text has a very clear and rational structure and a perfectly intelligible significance, but one which becomes apparent when the meaning of the text changes as we continue to read and apply our understanding of later moments of the text to previous sentences we still retain in the mind. This is very much like the way how poetry works according to the semiotician Michel Riffaterre: combinations of words that do not apparently make sense ("ungrammaticalities", as he calls them) are regrouped and clarified by a "retroactive reading" into imagery that is meaningful through a qualitatively different structure that has emerged in our minds as we proceed through the text.[8]
So, let us begin:

さらに又古心の行佛なるあるべし、古心の證佛なるあるべし、古心の作佛なるあるべし。

And then there must be PRACTICE BUDDHA of OLD MIND, TESTIFY BUDDHA of OLD MIND, PRODUCE BUDDHA of OLD MIND...

How should we translate PRACTICE BUDDHA of OLD MIND? "Practicing Buddhas of the old mind" seems to be the most logical choice, which initially presupposes attributive relations joining both compounds, (OLD : MIND) : (PRACTICE : BUDDHA). But this is not clear enough: it could be that we are speaking about Buddhas who have "the old mind", whatever that is, and who practice something — a statement with an underlying structure like [(OLD :

8. Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, Advances in Semiotics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 4.

MIND) : BUDDHA] ~ PRACTICE, but equally well it can be about Buddhas who are themselves practicing this "old mind", or BUDDHA ~ [PRACTICE → (OLD : MIND)]. The next two phrases incline us toward the latter: "testifying Buddhas of the old mind" and "producing Buddhas of the old mind" clearly indicate that "the old mind" is the commong denominator here and that there are all these different types of Buddhas who somehow relate differently to it (or Buddhas that relate to it in different fashions at the same time). So, for now, we have for the first sentence:

And then there have to be Buddhas who practice the old mind, Buddhas who testify to the old mind, Buddhas who produce the old mind.

We move on:

佛古の爲心なるあるべし。

There must be BECOME MIND of BUDDHA OLD...

This does not seem to make much sense. "It must be that the Buddhic oldness is the becoming mind"? Cryptic at best. This is the first time for the character BECOME to appear in the fascicle, so no previous context for its intepretation is available either. But the next sentence claims to be an explanation, and indeed this is where the key to the passage is hidden, although it remains invisible to us at first:

古心といふは、心古なるがゆゑなり。

This is because what is called OLD MIND is MIND OLD.

Up to now we have assumed that there is an attributive relation between OLD and MIND, so this is what we will be trying first: "the old mind is...". But if we propose an attributive relation also for the second compound, the result is tautological: "the old mind is mind's oldness". So we have to try something else. We peek forward to the next

sentence, which starts with

心佛はかならず。

MIND BUDDHA is necessarily...

An attributive relation in this compound is clearly absurd. But what fits admirably between these two characters is the directional relation, MIND→BUDDHA, "directing your mind toward the Buddha". So, if we have just discovered MIND → BUDDHA, why not MIND → OLD in the sentence we are struggling with? And suddenly it starts to make sense: it gives us "mind-*ing* old-*ness*", concentrating your mental activity on something called "the old", such as the original Buddha-nature or the tradition that has been handed down. MIND : OLD would have been a stable entity, but MIND → OLD is a process, and, as always in the cases of such symmetric assertions, we should now try the same relation also for the first compound. From OLD : MIND "the old mind" it now becomes OLD → MIND, "aging the mind", where OLD is no longer a quality, but an activity. The phrase turns upon itself: "what is called "the old mind" is "mind-*ing* old-*ness*" is "aging the mind"". Aging, here, does not mean making it older than it is at present (in oak casks or otherwise), but bringing its age out, letting the "old" core take over.

And when we now continue to read backwards, the text starts making more sense with every moment. If OLD is no longer a quality, but an activity, that means that BUDDHA OLD can be understood as BUDDHA ~ OLD, "the aging [practiced] by the Buddhas" and the directional relation of OLD → MIND lets us also see a directional relation in BECOME MIND, not BECOME : MIND "the becoming mind", but BECOME → MIND "becoming the mind". The meaning of that cryptic sentence thus becomes:

It must be that the original practice of (or: the tradition handed down by) the Buddhas consists in becoming that [very] mind.

When we now continue this retroactive reading, it also yields

us a different view of the first sentence of the passage. We can now view all the compounds here as referring to activities, not to entities, so that PRACTICE BUDDHA, for example, is not PRACTICE : BUDDHA "practicing Buddhas" but PRACTICE → BUDDHA "the practicing of Buddhahood". This brings us to quite a different translation of the passage up to this point:

And then there is the practicing of Buddhahood through the aging of the mind, the testifying to Buddhahood through the aging of the mind, the production of Buddhahood through the aging of the mind. It must be that the original practice of the Buddhas consists in becoming that very mind. This is because what we here call "the aging of the mind" means that your mind joins that old practice.

And we are now much better equipped for moving on:

心佛はかならず古なるべきがゆゑに、古心は椅子竹木なり。

It is because MIND BUDDHA is necessarily OLD that OLD MIND is CHAIR BAMBOO WOOD.

As we noticed before, the first compound is held together by a directional relation, "the mind directed toward the Buddha", or perhaps even "the mind turning into the Buddha", and its necessarily being OLD does not mean that the mind itself has to have the quality of "oldness" from the beginning, but that it most certainly has to engage in the practice of "aging", bringing the original practice (which is also the received tradition) out in itself. The final phrase again tells us what this means, with simpler words. "Chair-bamboo-wood" is in the original a sequence of four characters in two pairs. The first two compose the word chair, the latter two, juxtaposed, are the bamboo and wood the chair is made of, CHAIR ~ (BAMBOO + WOOD). What we have is thus:

Directing one's mind toward the Buddha necessarily implies this aging, therefore "aging the mind" is seeing the [original] bamboo

and wood [as present] in the chair.

In other words, "aging the mind" means that whenever we look at the world, we see in it the causal and temporal processes that have made it into what it is at this present moment. Any entity — including ourselves — is a crossing point of multiple heterogeneous intersecting flows, each of which proceeds according to its own internal logic and rules, and together they make up the world with ourselves in it. To realise that means to go back, within oneself, to the possibilities of which we have become what we are, and that is precisely what "aging the mind" means. There is no substantial or fixed entity that could be called "the old mind", somewhere hidden in ourselves to be found by careful seeking. It is not a component of what we are, it is a way of seeing what we are.

And at this point the text has returned to the starting point of the passage, because here, OLD MIND should be simultaneously read as OLD → MIND and again also as OLD : MIND as we did in the beginning, because the practice of "aging the mind" is, in fact, also "the old mind" that has been handed down by the tradition. So, in the end, it means also OLD ~ MIND, or "the old practice is the mind". A "living word" cannot be bound down in fixed relations, it is always contextual, and even within the same text never precisely the same at every moment. It is in the nature of Dōgen's text to change while we read it and as it forces us to rescan the possible relations between adjacent characters in order to find the one that makes the most sense — and then to go back to previous sentences to reread these as well. In the beginning I said that when we start to read, we do not know what the exact meaning of the compounds is, but now we can see that actually the situation is even more complicated. There is no exact meaning. There is no correct translation. It changes as you read. It consists of multiple layers of sense that you uncover as you move forward in it, and that make you move backward at the same time. In other words: it is not possible to read Dōgen's text as a self-identical discourse with a permanent sense, but only in an interactive encounter, where the sense of what we read itself changes as we read and realise, and which therefore does not present us with a unidirectional flow, but rather a rhizomatic structure, a textual

space which changes and moves in different directions at the same time.

I hope a glimpse into the inner life of the textual organism helps to understand that Dōgen is not carried away by the waves of language and engaged in free play, but is in fact employing a coherent expressive strategy, even if radically different, but one uniquely suited for what he has to say. And aren't there numerous Western philosophers, Nietzsche for example, who have practically shown to us that serious philosophy need not be presented in a spinozistic and static "geometrical order", but may well be also conveyed by linguistic means otherwise more appropriate for poetry? Thus metaphors can be as efficient carriers of precise thought nuances as logical formulae, or, for some specific purposes, even better. In other words, metaphors, or any other deviant use of language can be developed into a method for the expression of philosophical thought. Working from a gap between two structurally incompatible languages and expressing ideas clearly resistant to locked and reified formulations, what Dōgen has done is nothing else than devising such a method of his own.