

The Monastic Instinct to Revere, to Conserve, to Be Content with Little, and to Share
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Part 1
Cultivating the Monastic's Instinct
Standing an Egg on its End.

In 1418 a competition was announced in the city of Florence, Italy, for the design and building of the dome of the new cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore. The participants had six weeks to build models, draw designs, and make suggestions on how to vault the largest cathedral dome ever built. Sponsoring the competition was the 'Opera del Duomo,' the office of works in charge of building the cathedral, which was begun in 1296. With a handsome commission and plenty of prestige at stake to attract the most talented designers of the time, more than a dozen models were submitted for consideration. But the most daring and unorthodox model did not come from a famous architect, builder, or mason; instead, it was the brainchild of jeweler and clockmaker Filippo Brunelleschi. [1]

Brunelleschi's model of the dome spanned 6 feet and was 12 feet high. It needed 49 cartloads of quicklime to harden the mortar which held 5000 bricks together. It was big enough for a person to walk inside and inspect its construction. Brunelleschi's model omitted the wooden framing usually required to build any kind of a dome, and this radical departure completely distinguished his design from anyone else's. So different was his approach that the Opera's wardens were completely baffled about how he was going to build it. Filippo's design plans were a complete mystery. He was very secretive; he did not discuss his plans, he submitted no drawings, and he always worked alone, with only one or two other trusted assistants to help him. Finally, when the cathedral wardens demanded to know how he would build the actual dome, Filippo refused to tell them. The wardens called him 'an ass and a babbler,' and they tossed bodily him out of one meeting during a spirited conversation about the dome's construction. Finally, Filippo proposed to the group of wardens that whoever among the competitors could make an egg stand on end on a flat piece of marble should be given the commission. When all the other contestants failed the test, Filippo simply tapped the egg on its narrow bottom and stood it upright. The other competitors protested that they could have done the same had they known the method, and Filippo pointed out that likewise they would all know how to vault the dome, if they knew his plans. The Opera del Duomo grudgingly accepted Filippo's model for the new dome and, after many difficulties, trials and tribulations, Filippo Brunelleschi completed the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore in 1436. Pope Eugenius IV consecrated the cathedral one month later, 16 years and two weeks after construction on the dome had begun.

Filippo Brunelleschi knew how to make an egg stand on its end. The humble egg is an unremarkable object familiar to everyone. Millions of pounds of eggshells are thrown away each day without much thought given to the proportion and design of that elegant oval. But how many people know how to make an egg stand upright by flattening its end? The egg standing on its end is a perfect metaphor for the monastic life. The very ordinary egg is something that everyone is

familiar with and no one thinks twice about it. But that egg, handled by someone with special wisdom, who recognizes its shape and all that its shape is capable of, that egg can be made to do something quite remarkable. In the same way, the wisdom of a monastic, which comes from his/her vows and religious practice, enables the monastic to do something that very few people know how to do: find true happiness and contentment within themselves. That happiness does not come from prestige, fame, gain, accomplishment, wealth, or property, but from the intentional cultivation of reverence, renunciation, gratitude, and generosity. These monastic instincts are the egg standing on its end.

Although Filippo Brunelleschi had built his model of the dome of Santa Maria, he had not yet worked out the details of how he would build the actual dome itself. He didn't fully know how he was going to do it, but he believed that he could do it, and his ingenious construction methods were all developed in the course of the cathedral's construction. Filippo had faith in himself that he could do it and complete it successfully. A monastic cultivates religious faith to lead a life of reverence, renunciation, gratitude and generosity; however, learning the practical cultivation of these virtues is something that gets worked out as we go along. We have to cultivate the faith needed to meet and overcome the obstacles, both internal and external, that are inevitable in the religious life. Even though we don't know how to do it when we start, we cannot allow that to prevent us from going ahead. It is a creative work in which monastic virtues are both created and discovered; we learn how to do it by doing it. It requires a lot of faith and wisdom. With faith and wisdom, Filippo Brunelleschi built the largest church dome in the world. Our monastic lives are composed of the very virtues which can help to save the world in the midst of the modern environmental crisis which we all must face. With faith and determination, these virtues can be cultivated and practiced by anyone, not just monastics. Everyone can learn how to stand an egg on its.

Part 2 Everything is Buddha Nature Dogen's Religious Vision

The founder of the Soto Zen tradition in Japan, Eihei Dogen (1200-1252 CE), was advised by his Chinese Master to find a place "deep in the mountains, away from the world" where he might practice the Way of the Buddhas. Nowadays, Dogen is regarded as a kind of Buddhist Thoreau, embraced both by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike as an environmental prophet many centuries ahead of his time. We are likely to see his name linked more and more with environmental issues, and his voluminous writings will undoubtedly be quoted many times over. Dogen's writings and teachings deserve to be included and studied in this modern context; however, as with many prophets, his teachings are often misunderstood, his words often misquoted, and his meaning somewhat distorted. He is popularly thought of as a nature mystic, a kind of Buddhist St. Francis, because his works are rich in natural imagery. Indeed, it is easy to think of him this way, especially since one of his more famous discourses is entitled "The Mountains and Rivers Sutra." But Dogen was not an environmental prophet; instead, he was a revolutionary religious thinker and monastic. He saw the relationship between the sentient and non-sentient world, between the human world and the natural, in a fresh, deep, and far-reaching way, a radical religious fusion. Once we understand his religious vision, Dogen becomes a true

luminary of the monastic view of the environment as well as a real prophet of a sacred and sustainable environmental culture.

One of the themes of our conference is the monastic instinct to revere. Dogen's vision of the Eternal, which he called Buddha Nature, can be described as reverential realization. Dogen believed that everything IS Buddha Nature. Buddha Nature is the essence of Buddhahood that permeates all beings. Every one is endowed with Buddha Nature, and each and every one of us can fully realize Buddha Nature through our religious practice. To Dogen, however, it was insufficient to say that all beings are endowed with Buddha Nature or have Buddha Nature: everyone is Buddha Nature. And not just every one; every thing is Buddha Nature, too. Every one and every thing, be it sentient or insentient, is Buddha Nature. The only way, then, to practice the Buddha Nature of every thing and every one is to treat every one and every thing as Buddha Nature. To Dogen, every one and every thing is literally the living body of the Buddha.

In Dogen's view, both human beings and the physical world are the living expression of the Life of the Buddha. Everything is the object of veneration of the living essence of Buddha Nature. When this vision is applied to the environment, the implication for environmental consciousness is staggering. Nothing is mundane; everything becomes sacred. That which is sacred must be revered, protected, preserved and maintained. Reverence is not only an attitude of mind; there must also be a physical expression of that reverential attitude. One treats everything as if it were — because it is — the living tissue of Buddhahood. If you think this through, this view means saving the entire world and everything that is in it through the way we live, because the way we live is our realization of religious practice, and that practice itself is the vehicle of reverence. Dogen's view of the indivisibility of Buddha Nature is a religious mandate for environmental stewardship as well as for the enlightenment of human society. It is a mandate given not only for the sake of helping living beings, but one given for the sake of helping everything. It is for the sake of everything and everyone that one venerates, reveres, cherishes and takes care of the world and everything in it. Everything is Buddha Nature, and everything is equal in that Buddha Nature. The grasses and the trees, the mountains and the rivers – says Dogen – proclaim the Buddha's Teaching just as eloquently, just as equally, as any human being does. There is no boundary between that which is sentient and insentient; the insentient communicate their sacred equality just as eloquently as the sentient. Creatures and things express their life each in their own way, and they communicate that life in ways which nowadays we can actually observe through our senses, understand intellectually, and even measure scientifically. This is the essence of Dogen's religious vision: Everything (and everyone) is Buddha Nature. Therefore, we must treat it as such and care for it with reverence (love), renunciation (non-greed), gratitude, and generosity.

The deep realization that Buddha Nature is everything and everything is Buddha Nature permeates the entirety of Dogen's thought and teaching. However, it was not just philosophy. First and foremost, Dogen was a monastic as well as the founding abbot of a community of monks, so he applied his vision practically to encompass and govern all the aspects of monastic life, from the most sublime down to the most earthy. This man who wrote the "Mountains and Rivers" discourse also gave his monks clear instructions on how to use little clay balls to clean themselves after defecating and how to use the toothbrush, accompanied with prayers taken from the scriptures to remind them what they were doing and why. His writings are full of these

practical methods, each accompanied with exhortations to focus the mind on contemplation and spiritual realization.

For instance, since everything is Buddha Nature, nothing is to be wasted, especially food. In his work called the “Tenzokyokan”, “Instructions to the Chief Cook,” Dogen gives clear guidance on how the monastery food (in this case, rice and water) is to be prepared and cared for. He says, “

Once the food has been prepared it must be cared for in the same way as we care for our own eyesight; the common property of the temple must be accorded the same care as that accorded to our own eyes. This food must be dealt with as if it were for the royal table; exactly the same care must be given to all food, whether raw or cooked.” [2]

He directed that the water in which the daily rice was washed was to be strained to make sure that even a grain of rice did not escape.

The water with which the rice is washed must not idly be thrown away; in the old days a straining bag was used for the purpose of ensuring that no rice was ever left in the water....” [3] “Every grain of rice must be washed carefully...by the Chief Cook personally; he must never leave until the washing is over and he must, on no account, cast away even a single grain.... [4]

Dogen did not just focus on food; the kitchen pots were seen as part of Buddha Nature and were to be cared for with the same spirit of devotion:

...the pot in which the rice is cooked must be thought of as our own heads; the water in which the rice is washed must be thought of as our own life. [5]

In our tradition, “The Instructions to the Chief Cook” is a model for the way all the monastery seniors should carry out their duties, including the abbot. The monastery cook must be able to see the Buddha Nature in everything; he/she must be content with the quality of food offered to and purchased for the monastery, and do his/her best to prepare the food that is to be cooked for that day. Above all, he/she must be able to see and show the Buddha Nature within it. Dogen says,

The Chief Cook must not eye the food superficially or with a discriminatory [judgmental] mind; his spirit must be so free that the Buddha Land appears within a blade of grass, whenever he and others behold it, and he must be capable of giving a great sermon even on the very heart of a particle of dust. He must not be contemptuous when making poor quality soup, nor should he be overjoyed when he makes it with milk; if he is unattached to the last, he will not hate the first. There must be no laziness in him, however unappetizing the food may be; should the food he beholds be of good quality his training must become all the deeper so that he might avoid attachment thereto. His speech in the presence of all men must be the same, unchanging in mode for, should he change it, he is not a true seeker after Buddhahood. He must be polite in all he does and strenuous in perfecting his efforts at cooking for these actions will lead him in the path

of purity and care once trodden by the excellent monks of old: I myself long to be thus. [6]

He also says,

It is absolutely essential that the pure actions of the Chief Cook shall come forth from his realization of unity with all things and beings; having no prejudices himself, he must be able to see into the minds and hearts of others from only a stalk of cabbage, he seems to produce a sixteen-foot-long body of the Buddha. [7]

Dogen taught that the chief cook must cultivate three fundamental virtues: gratitude, love, and generosity. The monastic cook must cultivate gratitude and express that gratitude in the way that he or she serves the monastic community. Dogen says,

How lucky we are. How blessed is this body: for all eternity there will be no greater opportunity than that offered to us now; its merit is undefileable. When we serve our fellow monks purely, hundreds and thousands of lives are enfolded in one single day's or hour's work, which will bear fruit for many lives to come; to grasp Truth thus is clearly to express gratitude. [8]

Reverence for Buddha Nature, which we Buddhists would express as devotion to the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, is the mind of love. Dogen explains that the cook must love the materials of his work in the same way that he loves the Three Treasures, and likens that love to the way parents love their children. Think of this kind of love in terms of cherishing our entire world, with the beings and things that exist within it. Dogen writes,

The mind of our parents expresses love and we must love the Three Treasures in the same way as our parents love us. However poor a person may be it is frequently possible to see the love he expresses towards his children; who is capable of understanding the extent of his loving mind other than he himself? All men, whether rich or poor, long for their children to grow strong and big, protecting them with unsparing devotion against inclement weather; this is the greatest of all sincerity; no one who does not possess this mind can understand it. A Chief Cook must love water and rice in the same way that parents love their children; the Buddha gave us forty-five years of his life because he wanted to teach us parental love by his example.... [9]

Here is a monastic model of love that cherishes Buddha Nature in all things, while devoting itself selflessly in service to the monastic community as it protects the resources of the community. Here is an example of a heart and mind which is at one with its spiritual source, and which expresses that spiritual unity by selflessly loving the things of the earth and the activity of those things in the same way that parents love their children. This mind of love based on reverence is the foundation for an ultra-responsible stewardship of the earth and all the things contained within it.

Charity—sharing—generosity is the foremost Buddhist virtue; all Buddhist morality begins with charity, which we call dana. It is charity that opens the heart and enables us to care for something

other than ourselves. Dogen says,

[T]he offering of only one coin or blade of grass can cause the arising of good, for the Teaching itself is the True Treasure and the True Treasure is the very teaching; we must never desire any reward and we must always share everything we have with others. It is an act of charity to build a ferry or a bridge and all forms of industry are charity if they benefit others. [10]

“If they benefit others,” he says. But what if others are harmed by industry? What if industry harms the resources of life for all beings by fouling the water, polluting the air, and unnaturally accelerating the warming of the planet? If this kind of industry harms others, then there appears a moral obligation to change our industrial practices in order do that which will help, not harm, the delicate web of life. This kind of action is consistent with the spirit of Right Livelihood, one of our most fundamental teachings. And, it has to be done in a spirit of loving-kindness, compassion, charity, tenderness, benevolence, and sympathy. Here is a real project for human beings.

This is only a shadow of Dogen’s teachings, but it gives you a good sense of how the monastic life becomes a template for an environmental renaissance. In Buddhism, there is more than enough teaching to serve as a wholesome foundation for environmental awareness and education, and as a support for compassionate, vigorous, and decisive action.

Part 3 Our Everyday Contribution

In our monastery, we are trying to adopt available technology for cleaner and more efficient energy. We’re vegetarians. We have a vigorous recycling program. We try to conserve as much as possible, and we try not to waste and to make our resources stretch as far as we can. We are careful not to buy more than we need and to keep our needs simple. We try to purchase green products, and we have a long term plan for greening our monastery. We live on donations, so the limitations are obvious. But, we are still trying to do our part, and we are continually looking for better ways to reduce our environmental impact. We are “active-contemplatives,” and in our teaching we are trying emphasize the qualities of monastic life and general Buddhist practice which can help people cultivate the faith and determination to solve the difficult environmental issues of our day. As all of you are aware, the grave problems which we humans experience, including our environmental challenges, are fundamentally spiritual problems.

I personally feel that the environmental situation is very grave, and I am trying to remain positive. We can already see the signs that the beings of our world in this and coming generations are already and will continue to experience the hard consequences of our lack of wise stewardship. There will doubtless be many difficult and painful choices to be made in order to affect and reverse the environmental damage that has already been done. In dealing with those problems, the virtues of the monastic life become an invaluable resource and actually contain the blueprint for success: reverence, renunciation, noble poverty, generosity, celibacy, compassion, conservation, selfless service, education, faith, morality, kindness. . . . The list goes on and on. In coming years, people may well have to learn to live more like monastics, learning to be content

with less, as conditions force us all to elevate our vision in order to do what will be necessary to sustain the natural conditions for life on our earth.

My prayer is that we monastics can have a positive influence, that we can be as the egg standing on its end. Through our monastic lives and vows, we can take something very ordinary and transform it into something extraordinary. We can show people by example how to be happy and fulfilled without having to have a lot of stuff. We can help others by inspiring them to cultivate a life of virtue that seeks to help all beings as it cherishes the world and all the marvels contained within it. These virtues are the pathway to human happiness and, eventually, to enlightenment itself. May we all realize it together; may all beings be happy; may all be free from suffering.

[1] King, Ross. Brunelleschi's Dome. Penguin Books, 2000.

[2] Jiyu-Kennett, P.T.N.H. Zen Is Eternal Life, 4th edition. Shasta Abbey Press, 1999, p. 146.

[3] Ibid., p.147.

[4] Ibid., p.148.

[5] Ibid., p.149.

[6] Ibid., p.149.

[7] Ibid., p.150.

[8] Ibid., p.160.

[9] Ibid., p.160.

[10] Ibid., "Shushogi: What Is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment," p.100.