

Befriending Things on a Field of Energies

With Dōgen and Nietzsche

Graham Parkes

University of Vienna*

ABSTRACT | A major factor behind the current ecological crisis is our dysfunctional relationship with the things we deal with in our everyday lives. This pathology derives mainly from our utilitarian perspective, through which we see things as mere means to our ends, and more broadly from a sense that they consist of “inanimate” matter. But this worldview is relatively recent and quite parochial, as becomes clear when we consider the East-Asian philosophical tradition with its idea of the world as a field of *qi* energies. Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist and Neo-Confucian thinkers developed sophisticated accounts of how humans and things share a common nature, which culminate in the philosophy of Zen Master Dōgen. A comparison with corresponding ideas in Friedrich Nietzsche suggests that these accounts may have general validity. More friendly attitudes toward things can enrich our experience and reduce the damage we inflict on the natural world.

KEYWORDS | Animism; Buddha-Nature; Dōgen; Inanimate Things; Nietzsche; *Qi*

* Correspondence: Graham Parkes – Margaretenstrasse 7/27, 1040 Vienna, Austria. Email: graham.parkes@protonmail.com



We find ourselves in 2023 in quite a predicament as far as the natural world is concerned: a crisis with the climate; pollution of the air, earth, and water; widespread deforestation; decimation of fish, wildlife, and insect populations; and general biodiversity collapse. A major factor here is that people in the overdeveloped world tend to be alienated from natural phenomena, cut off from them by urbanisation and the ubiquitous screens of information and communications technology. But we also have a deeply dysfunctional relationship with the “inanimate” things around us, including human-made things, and this also exacerbates our environmental predicament. The pathology derives mainly from our utilitarian perspective, through which we see things as mere means to our ends, and more broadly from a sense that things are configurations of lifeless matter. For Aristotle they were material that has been formed by some external agent, while Newton much later called matter “inanimate and brute.” More salutary views of things can be found in other thinkers and traditions.

Among the abundance of Buddhist ideas and practices that can help us remedy our dysfunction, those of the thirteenth-century Sōtō Zen master Dōgen stand out for their relevance to our interactions with so-called “inanimate” objects. Some people might dismiss Dōgen’s views as overly alien, East-Asian, Buddhist and esoteric, because they derive from the practice of zazen and consequent “non-ordinary” experiences. And so, to dispel the impression that Zen ideas are irrelevant to a crisis that derives from mainstream western and post-Cartesian ways of thinking and doing, it will be instructive to bring in the ideas of a bona fide western thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche, to see how closely several features of his philosophy resonate with Dōgen’s ideas on this topic.

The idea of “befriending” things may come across as primitively animistic, but that impression comes from a modern, parochial, post-Cartesian prejudice. And given the power of that prejudice, I’ll be devoting the bulk of this essay to a consideration of other philosophies—all of them formidable—that see things quite differently. After all, the term “animism” gained currency only in the nineteenth century, when the anthropologist, E. B. Tylor ascribed the condition to “savages and barbarians” for their tendency to “personify” things and treat “inanimate objects” as if they had souls and wills (Tylor 2010, ch. XI).

But do we moderns not do the same when we swear at a tool for frustrating our purposes? Is someone who does that regressing to a primitive mode of life—or can things really respond wilfully when we fail to pay them sufficient attention? If they appear to be doing that, wouldn’t we do better to withhold blame, take responsibility, and say “I’m sorry”? After all, things are almost always the innocent party, so a more friendly approach would surely improve our interactions. If we sometimes talk to ourselves when alone, why not bring into the conversation things that we deal with every day? (Tea cups, knives, pens, coats, bicycles, towels, pillows, etc.) That would surely make the world a livelier place.

In any case, the motivation for the entire exercise is that a friendlier attitude toward the things we deal with can both enrich our lives and reduce damage to the natural world on which we depend for our existence.

1 Soul of the World

In the beginning, Thales of Miletus (“father of western philosophy”) is said to have said: “the mind of the world is a god” and “all things are full of gods,” meaning that “a divine power moves the basic stuff” of the universe. The whole world, including things like the iron-attracting Magnesian “stone, and amber,” is thus in motion and generating motion. It’s all “ensouled,” *empsychon*, endowed with soul as “something kinetic” (Kirk & Raven 1957, 93-96).

A younger friend of Thales’ most famous student, Anaximenes of Miletus, identified “the underlying nature” of all things as “one and infinite: air” (*aēr*), which he equated with god or a field that produces gods. When “rarefied” by heating, *aēr* becomes fire, and when “condensed” by cooling it becomes “wind, then cloud, water, earth, and stones; and the rest come into being from these.” As wind especially, the one underlying nature is “always in motion.” The traditional paraphrase of Anaximenes runs like this: “From air all things come to be, and into it they are again dissolved. As our soul, being air, holds us together and controls us, so does air (as wind or breath) enclose the entire cosmos” (Kirk and Raven 1957, 144, 150, 158). This assimilation of *aēr* to *psychē* means that the human soul is one with the world.

Platonic cosmology regarded the world as, in the words of Plato’s *Timaeus*, “a truly living thing, endowed with soul and intelligence ... containing within itself all living beings that are naturally akin to it.” According to the creation myth in that dialogue, the Divine Craftsman makes the world soul, places it in the centre of the physical world, and then diffuses it throughout and around the body of the cosmos. From the remaining ingredients of the world soul he makes the human soul, with a corresponding structure though at a lesser grade of purity. And so, for a good human life the best course is to impart to one’s soul “the harmonies and revolutions of the universe,” thereby assimilating our minds to the mind of the world, and our bodily movements to the motions of the cosmos.¹ The idea of the world soul, or *anima mundi*, persisted throughout the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, culminating in the Renaissance philosophy of Marsilio Ficino.

The early Stoic philosophers understood the world as generated by two principles: *god* as the active principle, who acts on *matter* as the passive. God as divine reason pervades and directs the world through *pneuma*, or breath, which informs and animates all things through differing degrees of condensation and

¹ Plato, *Timaeus* 30b, 34b, 41d-e, 90d.

rarefaction. At its most condensed, this breath holds things like rocks together, while at its most rarefied it acts as the life force, or soul, of animals and humans (Inwood and Gerson, 72).

A later Stoic thinker, Marcus Aurelius, emphasised the human intellect's participation in the divine mind that orders the world, and the soul's participation in the breath that animates all things, including the human body.² In thinking, it is not just I who think, because it could also be the divine mind of the world thinking through me. In moving, my body is moved by the cosmic breath: inhaling, it keeps bodies together; and exhaling, it has them interact with other bodies.

Now, if these ancient views seem to us moderns quaintly animistic—*anima/psyche/soul* everywhere—that's because the advent of Christian philosophy basically eclipsed the idea of the world soul. God the creator became the prime Animator of things, and created the human being in his own image, making it radically different from all other creatures.

On the basis of this difference, thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas denied soul to animals because they lacked reason and intellect, thereby reinforcing the ontological rift between humans and the rest of creation. Only outlier mystics like Saint Francis acknowledged a close relation between humans and animals, and he even treated air and fire as brothers, and water and earth as sisters. A family man without a (real) family. But mainstream Christian philosophy gave little thought to our relation to the so-called inanimate, since to hold that the whole world is ensouled would verge on the heresy of pantheism.

Thanks to the enormous influence of the post-Cartesian dichotomy between human minds as “thinking stuff” (*res cogitans*) and physical things as “extended stuff” (*res extensa*), which even put the human body on the lifeless side of the divide, along with animals and things, this kind of division between animate and inanimate has come to seem quite natural. Nevertheless, side-currents of “world soul” thinking persisted in the Western tradition, running from the Epicureans through Spinoza to Nietzsche and Bergson, and resurfacing in contemporary figures like Deleuze and Latour (see Bennett 2010). And when you consider the world's other philosophical traditions, our post-Cartesian worldview of human souls in a mechanistic world of lifeless molecules begins to look even more peculiar.

2 Fields of Energy

Dōgen is a profound and difficult thinker, so we stand a better chance of understanding him if we are familiar with the background to his ideas in ancient Chinese understandings of how the world works. Angus Graham characterises the

² Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 8.54.

Daoist philosophy of Zhuangzi, who was roughly contemporary with the early Stoics and was also a major precursor for Dōgen, in terms that allude to a pattern of cosmological thinking found in various cultures: “All things can be conceived as condensing out of and dissolving into a universal *ch’i* [*qi*], which as Yang is pure and so free moving and active, and as Yin is impure and so inert and passive.” In the particular case of the human being, Graham cites chapter 22 of the *Zhuangzi*: “[A] man’s life is the assembling of *qi*. The assembling is deemed birth, the dispersal is deemed death. ... Running through the whole world there is nothing but the one *qi*” (Graham 1989, 328). This “one *qi*” is also invoked in chapter 6, when Confucius says to a follower that Daoist sages are able to “go roaming in the single *qi* that breathes through Heaven and Earth.”

Like the gods and soul of Thales, the air and wind of Anaximenes, and the divine breath of the Stoics, the Chinese term *qi* does not mean just “life energy”: *qi* also configures things like rivers and rocks and seas—every thing. Through its continuum of condensation and rarefaction it corresponds to the Greek *aēr*, and with its yang and yin polarities to the active and passive principles of the Stoics. *Qi* further differentiates itself through yin and yang into the four seasons, and then the “six atmospheric energies” and “five processes” of terrestrial transformation (wood, fire, soil, metal, water), so as to inform *everything*—what the Chinese call “the myriad things.”

When the *qi* energies are relatively condensed, they form local configurations such as living bodies or (at the extreme of *yin*) inert bodies like rocks; but in their most rarefied form, known as *jing* (quintessence), they pervade invisibly the entire universe. Thanks to this universal medium we have the phenomenon of “sympathetic resonance” (*ganying*), a stimulus-response interaction among beings of like kind. In the first hexagram of the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), a yang line in fifth place means that the sight of a great human being brings benefit to others through sympathetic resonance. The “Commentary” makes the general point: “Things that accord in tone resonate together. Things with similar energies tend to come together.”

This kind of “influence” on others lends its name to another hexagram, *xian* (no. 31), which could also be translated “resonance.” Above is a lake, and below is a mountain: “the yielding above, the firm below,” according to the commentary on the judgment. “These two energies resonate with one another (*ganying*) and come together”—and in a cosmic context: “Heaven and earth resonate with one another and the myriad things are born.” Along with such examples of erotic attraction and generation there are musical ones—unsurprisingly, in the context of resonance.

The standard image is of two zithers with the same tuning: when a particular note is plucked on the string of one instrument, the corresponding string on the other vibrates in sympathy. This image comes up in several ancient classics (including *Zhuangzi*, ch. 24), echoing the “Commentary” on the *Yijing*’s first hexa-

gram: “Things of the same kind naturally attract each other; things sharing the same *qi* naturally join together.” Further correlations flow (in later texts) in the heavens over earthly things: “Clouds above a mountain look like bushes; above water they resemble fish scales; above an arid landscape they look like leaping fire; above a flood they look like rolling waves.”³ They often do, as long as *you* look.

In his “Discourse on Music,” the great Confucian thinker Xunzi writes that music (as well as traditional dance) influences the body’s energies by stimulation and response: “Whenever depraved sounds arouse, discordant *qi* responds, and in modelling itself disorder is generated; when correct sounds arouse, accordant *qi* responds, and as it takes form order is generated.”⁴ A distinctive feature of the sage, for Xunzi, is the capacity for “responding to change” (*yingbian*) spontaneously, which requires refining one’s *qi* as much as possible. As Angus Graham has pointed out, such pre-reflective responses come through the medium of the “quintessential.” It’s this kind of spontaneity that allows one to get on the Way (*dao*): “Something’s nature harmonising with what is generated, the quintessential as it meets something being aroused and responding spontaneously ... is called ‘natural’” (Graham 1989, 244).

A passage in the *Annals* describes how the sage-ruler simply adopts the appropriate ritual position—and the people are moved to follow his example because “his refined essence (*jing*) has circulated among them”. Nor is such circulation the sole prerogative of the sage: quintessence also flows among family members separated by distance, as well as between lovers who are apart (Lü Buwei 2000, 9/5).

3 Resonant Buddha-Nature

The ideas of *qi* energy and sympathetic resonance also play a major role in Chinese Buddhist thought. The first great Buddhist thinker in China, Sengzhao (early fifth century), was a great admirer of the Daoist classics, and his writings ensured that several schools of Chinese Buddhism remained open to earlier indigenous ideas. Sengzhao paraphrases *Zhuangzi* in emphasising that *qi* pervades everything: “The sage ... views the transformation of all things with the clear understanding that they are all one *qi* energy, and therefore he is in accord with whatever he may encounter” (Chan 1963, 351). And his characterisation of the sage echoes Xunzi’s account of sympathetic resonance with things: “His spirit functions through responding to occasions, yet there is no deliberation therein” (Sharf 2002, 115).

³ Lü Buwei, *Annals*, Book 13, sec. 2.1; see also 20/4.

⁴ Xunzi, Book 20, sec. 3, cited in Graham (1989, 260).

A Buddhist counterpart to this notion of all-pervasive *qi* is the idea of “buddha-nature”: the inherent capacity for becoming enlightened, ascribed at first only to humans and later to all sentient beings. The Chinese translation (fifth century) of the *Nirvana Sutra* explicitly excludes “insentient things such as walls and fences, tiles and stones” from the realm of buddha-nature (Sharf 2007, 211). However, the Mahayana schools of Buddhism that developed in China generally emphasised the *nonduality* of “form” and “emptiness,” and of “samsara” and “nirvana”. This means that becoming enlightened is not a matter of leaving the world of delusion and crossing over to the farther shore, but rather of *waking up* and realising that the other shore is right here and we’re already there. This radical emphasis on nonduality tended to undermine the traditional idea that only human beings have buddha-nature.

Proceeding from the idea of “emptiness” as a field of interactivity, the Madhyamaka Buddhist thinker Jizang argued that buddha-nature (*fo-xing*) must be all-pervasive and conditioned by sympathetic resonance. On the premise that “all sentient beings have buddha-nature,” he shows that “the *qi* energies of the Buddha and of sentient beings are of the same kind,” and that this “correspondence of natural kinds” is the condition for sympathetic resonance. Jizang goes so far as to claim that “stimulus-response is the great tenet of the buddhadharma, the essential teaching of the many sutras,” explaining that “to stimulate means to bring or summon forth, and to respond means to go forth and meet in welcome” (Sharf 2002, 122).

Jizang’s near-contemporary, Zhiyi, was the founder of the Tiantai School, and another thinker interested in sympathetic resonance, which he likened to the “causes and conditions” (*yinyuan*) or “co-dependent arising” of Indian Buddhism. Zhiyi wrote: “‘Cause and condition’ refers to the fact that through this cause all beings stimulate the Buddha, and this condition gives rise to the Buddha’s response” (Sharf 2002, 130). It’s through participation in buddha-nature as the field of interactivity that we experience such phenomena as the efficacy of ritual, karmic actions and reactions, responses to appeals to a buddha, action at a distance, and instances of telepathy.

The Tiantai Buddhist patriarch Zhanran reaffirmed the consequences of nonduality for the buddha-nature of the insentient: “The individual of the perfect [teaching] knows, from beginning to end, that the absolute principle is nondual, and that there are no objects apart from mind. Who then is sentient? What then is insentient? Within the Assembly of the Lotus there are no differences” (Sharf 2007, 214). According to the first chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, the audience for the Buddha’s discourse on “Innumerable Meanings” at Vulture Peak was likewise innumerable, comprising hosts of Buddhist luminaries, kings, gods, dragons, stupas, banners, curtains, jewels and so forth—all interconnected by their listening to the discourse of the Awakened One.

Zhiyi had already said there are no things apart from mind. While human consciousness is special in being “discriminating,” the rest of the world has a different form of awareness: “All physical objects in the universe—vases, clothing, carts, and carriages—all are an undiscriminating form of consciousness [insofar as] mind and matter are nondual.”⁵ Correspondingly, according to Zhanran on the buddha-nature of insentient beings: “All [dharma] are mind-only. Thus one particle of dust is complete within the Buddha-nature of all sentient beings ... We know that a single particle of dust and a single mind are identical to the nature of mind of all sentient beings and Buddhas” (Penkower 1993, 423, 45).

A later work traditionally attributed to Sengzhao, the *Treasure Store Treatise*, assimilated his understanding of *qi* with the idea of buddha-nature: “It fills everything: it completely suffuses the grass and the trees and fully pervades even the ants. It reaches to even the tiniest mote of dust and to the very tip of a strand of hair; there is nothing that exists that does not embody the One” (Sharf 2002, 246). A Chan Buddhist text from the same period, *Record of the Masters and Disciples of the Lankavatara*, poses questions that presuppose nonduality and interactivity, and thereby the vitality of insentient things: “At the moment when you are in the temple sitting in meditation, is your body not also sitting in meditation beneath the trees of the mountain forests? Are earth, trees, tiles, and stones also not able to sit in meditation? Are earth, trees, tiles, and stones not also able to see forms and hear sounds, wear a robe and carry a bowl?” (Sharf 2017, 122). These things would obviously not sit, or see and hear, in the same way as humans do, but rather in their own more natural style.

The teachings of Mahayana Buddhism emphasise the belonging together of wisdom and compassion. When you gain insight, and come to appreciate co-dependent arising, you are naturally drawn into the interactivity. And since the human body is a particular configuration of energies within the larger energy-field that is the world, Chinese Buddhist thinkers (and later the Neo-Confucians) adopted the maxim: “All things are one body with the human.” Fazang, founder of the Huayan school of Buddhism, wrote that “to achieve perfect wisdom” is at the same time “to arouse the great compassion, which considers all things as one body with oneself” (Chan 1963, 418).

This idea derives from a radical re-interpretation of the idea of Dharmakaya, the “ultimate reality-body” of the cosmic Buddha Vairocana, as meaning this very world we live in (understood as buddha-nature, or emptiness). When asked to justify the idea that insentient beings have buddha-nature, the Chan master Nanyang Huizhong replied: “At the moment when sentient beings receive the prophecy of their future buddhahood, all the lands of the three-thousand great-thousand worlds are completely subsumed within the body of Vairocana Buddha. Beyond the body of the Buddha, could there still be some insentient object to receive the prophecy?” A contemporaneous text suggests that the fourth Chan

⁵Zhiyi, *Sinianchu*, cited in Ziporyn (2000, 164).

patriarch, Daoxin, had already made the connection between the buddha-nature of the insentient and its ability to expound Buddhist teachings. He is said to have put it in the form of a question: “The Nirvana-sutra says: ‘All beings have buddha-nature.’ If you say that walls, fences, tiles, and stones do not have buddha-nature, then how could they preach the dharma?” (Sharf 2007, 221, 216).

Returning to Huizhong: when asked by a student about the meaning of the saying “the mind of an old buddha,” he replied: “Insentient things such as walls, fences, tiles, and stones are all the mind of an old buddha.” When the student points out that the Nirvana Sutra characterises buddha-nature as “everything except insentient things such as walls, fences, tiles and stones,” Huizhong replies that, to the enlightened, “mind” and “nature” are not different. And if walls, fences, tiles, and stones as part of the physical world participate in the mind of an old buddha and the body of Vairocana, it was perhaps natural for Huizhong to take the further step of saying that “insentient beings expound the Buddhist teachings (*wuqing shuofa*)” (Sharf 2007, 220-21). Things do this simply by doing their (buddha-nature) thing: by arising and interacting and perishing on a field of dynamic emptiness.

4 Buddhist and Neo-Confucian Syntheses

The related ideas of the buddha-nature of the insentient and the insentient expounding the buddha-dharma were enthusiastically received and developed in Japan, especially by the great ninth-century Buddhist thinker Kūkai, and then some four centuries later by Dōgen. Like Huizhong, Kūkai brings the Dharmakaya as Vairocana down to (heaven and) earth by equating it with the physical universe. Dainichi Nyorai (“Great Sun Buddha”), as Kūkai calls Mahavairocana, is preaching the dharma simply “for his own enjoyment” and not for human benefit—since the historical Buddha (Gautama) as the Nirmanakaya takes care of that. Nonetheless, we human beings can listen in to this self-teaching, insofar as Dainichi “deigns to let it be known to us.”

In line with the Chinese teaching of sympathetic resonance, though drawing more from Indian understandings of the power of “seed syllables” in mantras, Kūkai understands the world as basically *vibrations*: “reality as resonance” as a prominent scholar of Shingon Buddhism has put it (Kasulis 2018, 116). The name for Kūkai’s esoteric Buddhism, Shingon, is the Japanese translation of the Sanskrit term *mantra*. So, after sufficient practice in reciting appropriate mantras, the practitioner becomes able to tune in to the different vibrations of pillars, say, or fences, by listening with the “third ear.”

The world is also expounding the teachings through visible “signs”: between the “bindings” of heaven and earth, for Kūkai, is a *sutra* written by “brushes of mountains and ink of oceans.” The idea is that practice in visualising Buddhist

mandalas will open the “third eye” to what things are telling us, through striations on rocks, or patterns in vegetation or water. Dōgen will follow Kūkai in regarding the world as a Buddhist sermon that can be heard, and as a scripture to be read.

To round out our sense of the philosophical background to Dōgen’s understanding of things: he began by studying and practising Tiantai Buddhism (Tendai in Japanese), and then spent several years in China, where he inclined more toward Chan Buddhist ideas and practices. But there was another philosophy prevalent in China when Dōgen went there, promoted by the so-called “Neo-Confucian thinkers,” who blended Daoist and Buddhist with Confucian ideas in highly creative ways. Since they, too, regarded the human as one body with the world, and the world as operating on the pattern of sympathetic resonance, I mention a few of them before we move on to the things themselves.

The eleventh-century thinker Zhang Zai was a *qi* philosopher par excellence, who argued that the whole world consists of *qi* energies flowing between the polarities of yin and yang. In his treatise *Western Inscription* he comes across as the St. Francis of Song dynasty China: “That which fills the universe I regard as my body, and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.”⁶ Here we can see an extension of the traditional Confucian virtue of *ren*, benevolence or humanness, beyond one’s fellow human beings—a move also made by Zhang Zai’s younger contemporaries, the Brothers Cheng.

According to Cheng Hao, “The humane man regards Heaven and Earth and all things as one body. To him there is nothing that is not himself. Since he has recognized all things as himself, can there be any limit to his humanity? ... To be charitable and assist all things is the function of a sage.” (Well, perhaps *he* is the St. Francis of Song.) And in a wonderful allusion to befriending things, Cheng Hao writes what could be an epigraph to the present essay: “All things form one body. ... Simply because of selfishness, man thinks in terms of his own person, and therefore ... belittles them. If he lets go this person of his and views all things in the same way, how much joy would there be!” (Chan 1963, 530, 533). How much joy indeed.

The other brother, Cheng Yi, follows Zhang Zai in understanding everything as *qi*, and modifies the traditional notion of “heaven above and earth below” by claiming that earth is “inside” and surrounded by heaven—meaning that the most rarefied *qi* encompasses what we think of as “matter” all around. “Earth has assembled like a mist, and because over a long period it has not dispersed, it is considered the counterpart of heaven. Earthquakes are simply movements of *qi*.” The premise of rarefied *qi* as all-pervasive again leads to world as sympathetic resonance: “Within heaven and earth there is nothing but stimulation and response. ... Whatever moves stimulates, and what is stimulated must respond.

⁶ Chan (1963, 497); for a good overview of *qi* cosmology, see Tucker (1998).

That to which it responds again stimulates it, and when stimulated it again responds, so that the process is endless” (Graham 1992, 33, 38).

In a *qi*-based cosmology our customary distinction between animate and inanimate, while useful on the level of common sense, is philosophically irrelevant. And that is the point of this long historical excursion around the background: to show just how recent and parochial our post-Cartesian idea is, of human souls with a monopoly on sentience, as thinking beings connected somehow (but how?) to bodies in a world of lifeless physical extension. Parochial and peculiar: though the idea may feel right to us, it pales in comparison with the overwhelming congruence of several highly sophisticated philosophies from our own and foreign traditions. Peculiar and impoverished, and thereby enervating: a restricted view that cuts us off from sources of vitality in the things around us.

5 Nurturing Things Alive

As far as such things are concerned, the Confucian way of life that prevailed in China for some two thousand years granted them careful attention. The “ritual propriety” (*li*) that the Confucians promoted as a way of enhancing social harmony required a cultivation of one’s interactions with things as well as persons. Many passages in the *Analects* describe Confucius treating the things around him with appropriate style and grace.

Insofar as ritual propriety is a distinctively human practice, Xunzi understands it as a way of “nurturing” our basic humanity. Insofar as we appreciate such things as “carved and polished jade, incised and inlaid metals, and fabrics embroidered with various patterns,” they serve to nurture the eye. The various musical instruments played during ritual events, or on festive occasions, serve to nurture the ear. And in general we are nurtured by the rooms we inhabit and the furniture and equipment we live with (Xunzi 1988, 19/1b).

In the context of ritual, interior decorations and items of clothing also have a symbolic function: to project influence and affirm one’s position in the social hierarchy. Special care is called for when handling ritual implements—spilling the goblet of wine while ascending the steps will ruin the ritual—and such care is to be extended to all the other things one deals with in the course of everyday living. And since the appurtenances of ritual were originally drawn from the natural world, to handle them skilfully helps to integrate one’s activity into the natural order. “Through rites,” Xunzi writes, “Heaven and Earth are conjoined ... the four seasons observe their natural precedence ... and the myriad things all prosper” (Xunzi 1988, 19/2c).

As for the rituals accompanying funerals and burials, “one uses things of the living to adorn the deceased, and send them to their grave in a fashion that resembles the way they lived.” Things that were companions to the person while

alive are put into the tomb to accompany the corpse—but are deliberately deprived of their functionality beforehand, as an acknowledgement that they will not actually be used. Headgear is included without the strings to bind the hair, and musical instruments are not adjusted or tuned: a matter of highlighting their presence by subtracting their function (Xunzi 1988, 19/7a). All in all, a fine affirmation of the belonging-together of persons and their things.

Anticipating the later Neo-Confucian extension of humaneness, the Daoist thinkers expanded the Confucian practice of “reciprocity”—putting oneself in the other person’s position—to *all* the myriad things. An effective way of doing this, and attuning the body’s energies to the field around it, is by practising skills using hand tools, as a special mode of befriending things and materials.

One of several significant “skill stories” in the *Zhuangzi* concerns Carpenter Qing (ch. 19), who was able to carve bell-stands that struck people as supernaturally fine, a manifestation of *shen*, a rarefied form of *qi* energy. When asked how he achieved this, he replied that the key factor is a preparation that will preserve his *qi*. After seven days of fasting to “quiet the mind” and empty the heart of distractions, he goes into the mountain forests and opens himself up to the ways the trees around him are growing. Like Michelangelo, who could see the completed statue in a raw block of stone, Qing must be able first to see the bell-stand in the right tree. He does this by “matching the Heavenly to the Heavenly,” which means attuning the natural flows of *qi* through his body with the natural energies of the tree. Thanks to his human nature, the natural flow can perform the work of culture—in this case high culture.

Similarly, Butcher Ding, in the *Zhuangzi*’s best known skill story (ch. 3, “What matters in the nurture of life”), has practised carving for so long that he no longer perceives the carcass through the senses but rather through spirit (*shen*). Working, like carpenter Qing, on the basis of sympathetic resonance, he lets “the promptings of spirit begin to flow,” so that his cleaver detects the “Heavenly perforations” (natural gaps) in the joints, making for effortless carving. A clear case of being good friends with his blade, which is still sharp after nineteen years of use.

There is a correspondence here with the art of garden making, which in China and Japan proceeded from the premise that all the garden’s constituents, along with the gardeners, are configurations of *qi* energy. According to the practice of *fengshui*, which informed the development of the classical Chinese garden, the earth is a field of energies, and rocks are special “kernels” of *qi*. You build a garden basically by setting the rocks, which the world’s oldest garden-making manual (Japan, eleventh century) describes as a mutual collaboration. “Choose an especially splendid rock and set it as the Principal Rock. Then, following the request of the first rock, set others accordingly. ... Then set the back rock, following the request of the first group of rocks” (Takei & Keane 2001, 183). The garden maker is to respond to the energy patterns of the stone; and the

more familiar he becomes with those, the better his sense of where the rocks belong.

This dialogical approach to garden making, based on a sense that the garden's constituents share a common nature with the makers, is quite different from most western approaches to the art. Think of the construction of the French formal garden, where landscape architects make a plan in advance, which is then imposed upon the passive site. With respect to the gardens at Versailles, for example, it's hard to imagine Le Nôtre consulting with the trees intended for a *bosquet* concerning where they would like to be situated, and how they would like to be pruned.

Let us now turn to some earlier branches of the Zen dialogical approach to things, in the philosophy of Master Dōgen.

6 Dōgen's Turning while being Turned

In a discussion of buddha-nature, Dōgen follows Tiantai as well Chan Buddhism in taking it to encompass not only grasses and trees, earth and pebbles, but also human-made things such as fences, tiles, and walls. By wholeheartedly interacting with these things, he tells his monks, "you attain the way." This is because "Grass, trees, tiles, and walls practise [zazen] together with you. They have the same nature, the same mind and life, the same body and capacity as you" (Dōgen 2010, 650).

Like his predecessors, Dōgen emphasises the importance for Zen practice of respecting and caring for things, from ritual implements to cooking utensils and ingredients. The monks working in the temple kitchen are to use the polite forms of Japanese nouns and verbs when referring to the things they use to prepare and cook the food, and they are also to ensure that everything is in its proper place. And what determines the proper place in the kitchen is less the mind of the cook and more the things themselves—as long as one is open to their request. Of course the coffee grinder belongs in a place that is convenient for those who use it, but things will work better if the user takes the trouble to find out where the grinder feels most comfortable and at home.

Dōgen encourages the monks to perform their duties with "parental mind," telling them: "You should look after water and grains with compassionate care, as though tending your own children" (Dōgen 1985, 65). I'm using the term "befriending things" because it suggests something mid-way between taking parental care of them and treating them with deferential respect by using the polite forms of language. I came across the idea in 1973, in Ed Brown's Sōtō Zen-inspired *Tassajara Cookbook*. On the book's last page he recommends "being good friends with the knives," and the dish sponge, the kitchen counter, the floor, and food scraps and trimmings (Brown 1973, 242). Yes, friends especially

with the knives, since they work best when the blade is kept sharp—and that makes carelessness especially dangerous.

When it comes to doing the cooking, Dōgen calls the fully engaged handling of utensils and ingredients “turning things while being turned by things,” a mode of responsiveness that anticipates the Zen garden maker’s mode of collaborating with the rocks on the basis of companionship. What prevents us from working with things in this way is the “means-ends mindset” (my term) that so often informs our attitude. A certain amount of instrumental thinking is of course necessary for our survival, but it tends to demean the things we deal with. If, following Kant, we should not treat people as means rather than ends, and especially if we should avoid “using” our friends, we might want to apply that principle to using *things* as well. And if we liberate things from constant subjection to our own purposes, we find the change of attitude enhances our interactions.

Returning to things like tiles and walls, and the idea that they can be companions in one’s practice: this is partly because they can expound the buddhadharma. Following Huizhong and Kūkai when they insist that “insentient beings expound the Buddhist teachings,” Dōgen writes that we can learn from such things as pillars and lanterns. And so, he continues: “Look to trees and rocks, fields and villages, to expound dharma. Ask pillars about dharma, and investigate with walls.” And not just things are sutras, but also doings: “It is having a meal, putting on a robe, and engaging in activity” (Dōgen 2010, 73, 696).

Certain activities are more revelatory, because more central to our existence, than others: eating, for instance, and clothing ourselves. And certain things likewise: eating bowls (also used in begging for food) and Buddhist robes are emblematic of the Zen monk and the transmission of the dharma down through the generations. In some cases particular bowls and robes were actually handed down along with a transmission of the teachings; in others they were replaced along the way.

Dōgen encourages his students to regard eating bowls as belonging to “the buddha ancestors,” or as actually “the body and mind of buddha ancestors”—and even to understand them as “the treasury of the true dharma eye,” which is the title of his masterpiece (Dōgen 2010, 721). Their temporal extension, as with many things, often exceeds that of humans, and yet “they are not limited to new or old, ancient or present.” In eating from the bowl we commune with the ancestors, who nourished their lives with such eating bowls in the past. Even if the ones we use have not been handed down to us from a previous practitioner, we are to treat them with the respect due to practices that endure from generation to generation.

Nevertheless, a bowl (like everything else) is impermanent, and so we have to be careful not to break it. Especially because it’s not just a bowl: “Eating bowls are eating bowls as a compound of all things,” Dōgen writes. “Eating bowls are assembled as all things. The total mind is assembled as eating bowls. The

empty space is assembled as eating bowls. Eating bowls are assembled as eating bowls” (Dōgen 2010, 723). Behind these extravagant utterances, poetic in their imagery, are the vast philosophical edifices constructed in Tiantai and Huayan Buddhism. Such discourses anticipate Heidegger’s discussions of the thing (in his essay “The Thing”) as something that gathers, or assembles, the four great powers of Heaven and Earth, Gods and mortals. It turns out that things that are “near”—the jug, whose containing emptiness and connection to the gods he evokes almost poetically, and the bridge, which gathers the earth as landscape on either side of the flowing river—are able to generate an entire world around themselves (Heidegger 1975, 163-80).

Another component of Zen practice that deserves respect is the *zafu* you sit on for *zazen* (though I’ve never seen mention of its being passed down, like the bowl or the robe, to subsequent practitioners). In any case, you bow to the cushion before and after sitting—which makes perfect sense, since it is what supports you, literally, in your practice. Having used mine for decades, I wonder sometimes what will become of it after I am gone. That’s the thing about our things: our current possessions fall into two classes, those that we’ll part from before we depart (because they break or wear out), and those that outlive their owners (because the latter eventually break down). Clothes are an especially poignant case, since the oldest ones—usually the best loved—eventually become unwearable and irreparable. Sad, but it’s all impermanent, after all. On the other hand, the garlic press I’ve been using for almost fifty years will surely outlast me. Not so sad, because I know someone else will use it when I am no longer here.

Turning to the Buddhist robe: traditionally it’s an assemblage, patches of fabric sewn together, optimally soiled and discarded cloth that has been washed clean and made pure. Purity of the material is a major concern, and so the best robes are composed of “excrement-cleaning cloth,” since that fabric undergoes the greatest transformation from soiled to pristine (Dōgen 2010, 117, 128). An extreme example to illustrate a moderate philosophy, a philosophy of conservation of resources. The idea is that we can counter any tendency toward compulsive acquisition by repairing or restoring things that we need to use. We thereby refuse that pernicious demand of consumer culture, which perpetuates itself by encouraging us to throw things away and let them go to waste.

The Buddhist robe and eating bowl may be extraordinary things, but they are emblematic of how “ordinary things” can be if we adopt the appropriate viewpoint. From the perspective of utility and instrumental thinking, things we use always have a connection to other things (as Heidegger’s discussion of tools in *Being and Time* amply demonstrates). But as Zhuangzi pointed out (long before Heidegger), when things are working well they withdraw into obscurity: when the shoes and the belt fit comfortably, the feet and the waist are forgotten, and we lose the sense of interconnection (ch. 19). If we are going to achieve a good

fit with the world, we do well to follow Dōgen's advice to stop thinking with "ordinary mind" and open ourselves to the wider context.

Or, in Nietzsche's words, we can "become *poets of our lives*, especially in the smallest and most everyday things."⁷ A turn to Nietzsche's take on the issues we have been dealing with here will confirm, from a quite different perspective, that broader horizons can enhance our interactions with things more than narrower views.

7 Nietzsche's Good Neighbours

Nietzsche was interested in Buddhism as a religion as well as a philosophy, but his understanding was restricted by the availability of German translations and commentaries, which at that time concerned only early, Indian schools. He thus tended to dismiss Buddhism as nihilistic—while in fact, his own life-affirming philosophy is remarkably consonant with later, Mahayana Buddhist thought, of which Dōgen is a prime representative. Basically (as I have argued elsewhere), what corresponds to the Buddhist understanding of the world as buddha-nature, and the Daoist notion of a field of *qi* energies, is Nietzsche's idea of the whole world as "will to power—and nothing besides" (Parkes 2015).⁸

As in the East-Asian traditions, the world as will to power is a field of interpretive energies, with "things" as differing, dynamic condensations and configurations of those forces. As one prominent Nietzsche scholar (innocent of Chinese philosophy) once wrote about Nietzsche's rejection of materialistic atomism in favour of an energy-field view: "it can be shown with some probability that *to be* is to be energy in an always shifting energy field" (Lampert 2001, 42). Everything is immanent here—it's all will to power and *nothing besides*: no need for any transcendent creator or agent acting from outside. And so Nietzsche criticises the western philosophical tradition for focusing on (nonexistent) things such as "the Absolute" or "the Beyond," thereby diverting our attention away from what is really important for life. As he writes in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (§16): "We must again become *good neighbours for the nearest things*, and stop looking past them contemptuously toward clouds and monsters of the night" (my translation; see Parkes 2021b)

A major factor here is that "Words and concepts constantly mislead us into imagining things as being simpler than they are, and separate from each other" (§11). If we can avoid being misled, we come to see they are all interacting, in often complicated ways. And just as Dōgen believed that we attain a fuller experience of things if we drop the means-to-ends perspective, so for Nietzsche a suspension of the drive for self-preservation will have a similar effect. "Now one

⁷ Nietzsche, *The Joyful Science* §299 (my translation).

⁸ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* §36 (my translation). For a detailed discussion, see Parkes (2011; 2015).

sees much that one has never seen before, and for as far as one can see everything is spun into a net of light, and as it were buried in it" (§308). A vision worthy of the Buddhists and Daoists—a net of light in which all things dissolve into their interrelations.

A lyrical evocation of this kind of experience comes up in the speech "Before the Sunrise" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Contemplating a cloudless sky before dawn, which bathes all things in a uniform and directionless illumination, Zarathustra merges with this "abyss of light" with whom he is "friends from the beginning." This merging lets him pronounce his blessing, which is "to stand over each and every thing as its own Heaven, as its round roof, its azure bell and eternal security." A supremely caring stance toward the things of the world.

In Platonism, things are what they are only in relation to the Ideas as grasped by reason. In Christian thought, everything is what it is only in relation to the Creator. In daily life, things are what they are in the light of my projects and plans, and the overarching purpose of my activities. This is like things being seen in sunlight, where one side is brightly lit from a single direction and the rest is in shadow. When we deal with things from the perspective of utility, we see only one aspect of them, thereby closing off many of their possibilities. But through identifying himself with the cloudless, starless, pre-dawn sky, Zarathustra adopts an open, impartial and non-judgmental stance that lets things be what they are, insofar as he "redeems them from their bondage under Purpose" (see Parkes 2020).

If we are to befriend things as neighbours and companions, Nietzsche suggests, we need to give up our usual inaccurate conception of them as "separate from each other, indivisible, each existing in and for itself," and realise that it is all "a continuous, homogeneous, undivided, indivisible flowing"—just like a sea of *qi*. Through befriending the things in our neighbourhood and understanding their "affinities and antagonisms," we can move out, through their interconnectedness, from the local to the global. And if we ask *which* things in particular we are to befriend, we find the answer where Nietzsche connects the experience of "the whole interconnection of all things" with "the thought of the eternal re-coming of all things."⁹

Nietzsche prefaces his first mention of "eternal re-coming" (in an unpublished note) by remarking "the infinite importance of our knowing, going wrong, our habits and ways of living for *all* that is to come" (Nietzsche 1980, 9:11[141]). This prospect, at every moment of our lives, demands a careful, Zen-like attention to what we are doing. Because *what if*, however you act in this moment, whatever you do, you have to re-enact, and do over and over again, for ever and ever? As Zarathustra says, "all things are knotted together so tightly" that my ac-

⁹ *The Wanderer and His Shadow* §11; Nietzsche (1980, 9:11[21], 11[148]). I translate *ewige Wiederkunft* as "eternal re-coming" (rather than "eternal return," which properly translates *ewige Wiederkehr*) to preserve the allusion to the usual meaning of *die Wiederkunft*: the second coming (of the Lord). The assonance with "eternal becoming" is also apt.

tion on something in this moment—as at every moment—affects *everything* that is to come. As Nietzsche exclaims when he first publishes the idea: “The question in each and every thing, ‘Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?’ would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight!”¹⁰

And suppose you get it right sometimes and can say an unqualified Yes to this activity, you tend to want that innumerable times more. But Zarathustra later asks, “Did you ever say Yes to a single joy? Oh, my friends, then you said Yes to all woe as well. All things are chained together, entwined, in love —”. This is why affirming eternal becoming is tantamount to what Nietzsche calls *amor fati*, love of fate: it involves saying Yes to everything that has contributed to any single moment of your life that you want to affirm. It’s a matter of *loving the world*, because you experience it as “perfect”—*vollkommen*, complete. Because the joy is wedded to the woe, the vine longs for the vintner’s knife, and the wise man belongs with the fool.¹¹ Hunger and satiety, work and leisure, illness and health: the opposites, like all things, hang together. (That’s Heraclitus, whom Nietzsche often channels, but it could just as well be Zhuangzi or Laozi).

So, for Nietzsche, if we love the things we concern ourselves with, they will be few—because if they were many, we wouldn’t have time to attend to them all properly. But full engagement with those fewer things can extend to the whole world of constant becoming. And that is just what Dōgen means when he talks of *zenki*: fully engaged activity, or dynamic functioning, in the totality of buddha-nature.

When you ride in a boat, Dōgen says, “you adjust the sail and the oar.” And since “the world of the boat” embraces “the sky, the water, and the shore,” when you ride in a boat, “your body, mind, and environs, together with the entire earth and entire sky, are the boat’s full dynamic functioning” (Dōgen 2010, 451). Any engaged interaction with some thing that we have befriended thus grants us participation in “the dynamic functioning of *all things*”—as long as we are paying full attention. This means (as a later poet wrote) looking “with an eye made quiet by the power / of harmony, and the deep power of joy,” so that we can really “see into the life of things.”¹² Because then we can become friends with them.

8 Contemporary Voices

Let’s finish with some more recent reflections on our topic from several perspectives.

10 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “On the Vision and the Riddle” §2; *The Joyful Science* 341 (my translations).

11 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “The Drunken Song” §19.

12 William Wordsworth, “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey.”

The Kyoto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji, who was deeply influenced by both Dōgen and Nietzsche, and whose thought is a paragon of the Zen philosophical tradition, published his masterpiece in 1961, *Religion and Nothingness* in the English translation (1982). In the case of Kantian philosophy, Nishitani writes, things are regarded as *objects* that appear as *representations* to us as subjects of consciousness. As finite humans we can experience things only as they appear to us, and not as they are “in themselves”. For Nishitani, all Kantian concerns with sensation, reason, representations and so forth remain on what he calls “the field of consciousness,” the level on which we usually operate. But for Zen thinking there are two further fields of experience, beneath and increasingly more extensive than consciousness: the field of *nihilicity*, and below that the field of *emptiness*. Nishitani likens this last, persuasively, to “the field of the Great Affirmation” in Nietzsche’s thought. (Nishitani 1982, 121-24)

We’re actually living on that field already—the Buddhist idea of “original awakening”—but we’re too caught up in sensing and reasoning and being conscious to notice that there’s something important going on at a deeper level. Down there, things are no longer contents of our consciousness or targets of intentionality, but are encountered on their “home ground.” Nishitani cites the poet Bashō:

From the pine tree
Learn of the pine tree,
And from the bamboo
Of the bamboo.

We come to understand trees not by gauging them by our human standards of usefulness, but by entering as far as we can into *their* ways of being, and engaging them on their home ground. No longer lingering around the circumference and observing things from the outside, Nishitani writes, we instead “leap” toward the centre, to “the middle,” the heart of the matter (Nishitani 1982, 127-30). We get through to things by way of love, and compassion, and sympathy—just as with human friends.

Moving now from Japan to the United States and Europe, let’s engage the psychologist James Hillman, whose depth-psychological account of our dysfunctional relationship with things harmonises with what we’ve heard so far. In 1982 Hillman published a seminal essay, “Anima Mundi: The Return of Soul to the World,” in which he laid out the therapeutic benefits of the idea of the world soul.¹³ The impetus was his realisation that the sources of modern psychopathology are often in the outside world rather than the minds of people seeking therapy. Part of the problem is that we’re crowded round by soulless things and substances—plastics, vinyl, polyester—intended to be uncared for and

¹³ See the section “Respecting the *Anima Mundi*” in Parkes (2019).

thrown away before long. In a later book he writes: “The idea of an *anima mundi* (ensouled world) translates into care for things” (Hillman 1995, 89).

We like to think that natural things and things we manufacture serve our purposes, but Hillman says that’s the wrong way round: more fulfilling to regard ourselves as in service to things. “Treating things as if they had souls, carefully, with good manners—that’s quality service.” He invites the reader to imagine the world soul as residing in every thing, to avoid things being “treated as dead objects and left in neglect.” To cultivate this attitude requires that we pay them careful attention: “Notice what is right under your nose, at your fingertips, and attend to it as it asks, according to its needs. Aesthetic sensitivity. Precision consciousness.” This kind of attending and serving, Hillman points out, is the meaning of the Greek term *therapeia*; and so people in therapy do well to get out and act as therapists for our ailing planet (Hillman 1995, 76-81).

A key factor in this kind of service to the world is “maintenance” (from a Latin root meaning “hold in the hand”). Hillman distinguishes two manual functions: “One hand holds the reins and steers the wheel. This is the fist of control and the pointing finger of direction.” The other kind of handling keeps in touch with things, giving us a feel for the job we are engaging in. Both functions are necessary, but the implication is that we tend to undervalue the open hand that feels. And now that modern technology plays a larger role in our lives, both functions are in decline: “As instrumentation advances we no longer give our hands to the things we live and work with all day, except at our extremities, digitally” (writing in the mid-1990s, Hillman was probably typing those words rather than writing by hand). And now we have smartphone-raised digital natives, who keep in touch mainly through thumbs tapping screens. He regrets the impoverishment of our situation by the seductions of consumerism: “Meanwhile we lose the sensuous pleasure things can give us in the frenetic pleasure of acquiring them” (Hillman 1995, 86-88).

If a lot of this sounds like Zen, that’s because Hillman finds prime examples of the requisite “aesthetic sensitivity” and “precision consciousness” in such Zen-influenced practices such as “flower arrangement, tea ceremony, calligraphy” and so forth. And when he writes, “the Japanese mind is set in a culture that pays devout attention to sensate details,” we can surely ascribe this to Zen’s distinguished contributions to that culture (Hillman 1995, 73).

In keeping with this idea, Yuriko Saito has observed that “Japanese culture has a long tradition of honoring artifacts such as knives, needles, and dolls and expressing respect and gratitude toward them when retiring them by giving them to temples or shrines for a proper service and disposal.” In this context she cites the art critic Yanagi Sōetsu, who in his book *The Beauty of Everyday Things* characterises artifacts made by unknown craftsmen as “our loyal companions and faithful friends, willing to help out when help is needed.” Such things work for us, he writes, “unselfishly, carrying out effortlessly and inconspicuously what-

ever duty comes their way.” It’s no surprise that Saito, in a chapter titled “Care Activities with the Material World,” refers to Dōgen and to Zen Buddhism as a philosophy that “advocates respecting and appreciating the Buddha nature of everything whatsoever” (Saito 2022, 129, 155; Yanagi 2019, 36).

The contemporary American author Ruth Ozeki, who is also a college professor and Zen priest, has written a wonderful novel inspired by the idea that insentient beings expound the Buddhist teachings, *The Book of Form and Emptiness*. Even before Part One begins, a voice (speaking in a different typeface from the one used in the bulk of the book) urges the reader to listen to a book that’s talking. “Things speak all the time,” it says, “but if your ears aren’t attuned, you have to learn to listen.” But it’s obvious that books can speak to us, “so try something more challenging,” like a chair or a pencil. “Can you hear the wood whisper? The ghost of the pine? The mutter of lead?” (Ozeki 2021, 3). Throughout the novel the reader (over)hears things of all kinds talking. Ozeki was apparently inspired by Jane Bennett’s book *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*—but even more so by the ideas of Zen Master Dōgen.

The young protagonist of *The Book of Form and Emptiness* is sent out for psychological counselling because he hears things speaking to him and naturally talks back sometimes. All the authors we have considered here (except E. B. Tylor) would encourage him to continue the conversation with “insentient” communities, and to ignore the ignoramuses who deplore such behaviour. Better by far to behave energetically so as to befriend things on the open field of the world.

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