

A Few Comments on Dogen's "A Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance" (Bodaisatta-Shishobo Shobogenzo)

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The activity of a Bodhisattva is characterized by the practice of the Six Perfections and the fulfilling of the Four Bodhisattva Vows. Both teachings are both broad and deep. It is good practice to work with these teachings in all of their inconceivability. However, it is also good to work with them in a practical, concrete way as well. Dogen's fascicle *Bodaisatta Shishobo* in the *Shobogenzo* is a relatively accessible teaching on the "Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance" and can give us guidance in what the day to day activities of a bodhisattva may look like.

The four methods of guidance are:

- Giving
- Kind Speech
- Beneficial Action
- Identity Action

When I first started studying Dogen, I assumed that Dogen was just coming up with these teachings from his own creativity and insight. It turns out that Dogen used traditional teachings in at least some cases. He often put his own, novel spin on these teachings. Nevertheless, teachings like the Bodhisattva's Four Methods of Guidance are rooted in traditional Buddhist teachings. Before starting in on Dogen's fascicle, I would like to provide some of this context from traditional Buddhist teachings.

These four methods are found in at least couple of places in the Nikayas (Pali Canon). In the *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN) these are mentioned in **AN4:32**, **AN4:256**, and **AN8:24**.¹ In **AN4:32** they are portrayed as the "linchpin" to forming and sustaining positive relationships. The teaching is construed rather broadly as a teaching on general social relations. The Pali term for the four methods is *sangaha* which literally means, "inclusion, bringing together, holding together".² They are translated as, "giving, endearing speech, beneficent conduct, and impartiality". In **AN8:24**, the Buddha asks one of his monks, how does he sustain such a large group of followers? The monk replies, he uses these four methods as taught by the Buddha and that which method he uses is based on the needs of the person with whom he is interacting. This is an example of what is called, "skillful means" in Buddhism.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the term for these four methods of guidance is known as *samgrahavastu*³ and the meaning shifts a little, particularly in the fourth quality. In Pali, the fourth method, "impartiality" means being "the same in both happiness and suffering. This means sitting together with them, living together, and eating together".⁴ In Mahayana Buddhism, the fourth method morphs into "acting in accordance with one's own teachings ... consistency between words and deeds" (Sanskrit:

1 *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Anguttara Nikaya*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, **2012**, pp. 419-420 and 1153-1154.

2 *ibid* footnote 687, pp 1684-1685.

3 *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, Princeton University Press, **2014**, Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr. p. 754.

4 *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, footnote 687, p. 1685.

samanarthata).⁵ The practice of these four methods are explicated in the sixteenth chapter, verses 73-80 of the *Mahayanasutralamkara*, an important work written by Asanga with a commentary written by Zen Ancestor Vasubandhu.⁶ As far as I can tell, the *Mahayanasutralamkara* is more studied and used in Tibetan Buddhism than in Zen. In any case, according to this work, the purpose of teaching and practising the four methods of guidance was to teach people the Six Perfections of a Bodhisattva. The *Mahayanasutralamkara* describes the purpose and effects of each of these four methods.

Personally, I find it fascinating and a rich source of practice inspiration to be aware of how these teachings shift in meaning throughout Buddhist history. In my opinion, one isn't better than the other, but it enriches and deepens our practice to work with all the different meanings in our practice.

We can consider *Bodaisatta-Shishobo Shobogenzo* Dogen's commentary on these four methods of social relations or four methods of guidance used by bodhisattvas. We are fortunate to have several translations of this fascicle from which to draw. For this talk, I am using the translations by Cleary,⁷ Tanahashi,⁸ and Nishijima and Cross.⁹

Giving

His discussion on giving is the largest section of this fascicle. Dogen starts the fascicle by stating his definition of giving which is simply "not being greedy". He goes on to say that not being greedy means not to covet and not coveting means not trying to curry favour (*i.e.* grovelling, flattery and the like). I like Dogen's definition because "giving" isn't seen as something you have to attain. Rather, it is seen as stopping or dropping some other activity, namely, the active contrivance of being greedy. This is a very Buddhist approach in my opinion. Our work is the work of cessation rather than cultivation. Not being greedy is a way to undermine our notion of a self. Greediness necessarily creates a sense of "I, me, and mine". By practising generosity in this way, we are undermining the notion of a self. Dana Paramita, or the "Perfection of Giving" is described in the *Diamond Sutra* (Chapter 4),

... a Bodhisattva who gives a gift should not be supported by a thing, nor should they be supported anywhere. When they give gifts, they should not be supported by sight-objects, nor by sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or mind-objects. For Subhuti, the Bodhisattva, the great being should give gifts in such a way that they are not supported by the notion of a sign. And why? Because the heap of merit of that Bodhi-being, who unsupported, gives a gift, is not easy to measure.¹⁰

I believe this is the same practice of generosity about which Dogen is speaking. The word "supported" in this passage should be taken to mean "relying on". When we rely on sense objects, we are creating a subject which perceives and relies on those objects.

5 *Dictionary of Buddhism*, p. 744

6 *The Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahayanasutralamkara)* by Maitreyantha/Aryaasanga together with its Commentary by Vasubandhu. Translated from the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese sources by L. Jampal, Clark J. Wilson, L. Zwillig, M. Sweet, R. Thurman, co-published by American Institute of Buddhist Studies and Columbia University's Center for Buddhist Studies, and Tibet House, **2004**, pp. 217-219.

7 *Shobogenzo: Zen Essays by Dogen*, University of Hawaii Press, **1986**, Thomas Cleary, pp 116-120.

8 *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, Shambala, **2010**, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, pp.473-477.

9 *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo*, vol. 3, Windbell Publications, **1997**, Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross, pp. 29-34.

10 *Buddhist Wisdom, the Diamond Sutra and Heart Sutra*, translation and commentary by Edward Conze, 2001, Random House, p. 18 (adapted to use gender inclusive language by Kuden Paul Boyle).

Dogen puts a further spin on his negative definition which I think is geared more to the time, place, and culture in which he lived. The monks in his monastery are his audience. He emphasized in his definition not grovelling or indulging in flattery. I think this is good advice for us as well, but I think our time and culture emphasizes different practices of greediness. It is worth considering how does greediness manifest in our own time and culture.

Dogen gives a few examples of giving as he understands it – giving away unneeded possessions to someone you don't know, or offering flowers blooming on a distant mountain to a Buddha, to give away treasures from one's past life.

The first time I read this fascicle I was baffled by the Dogen saying it was generosity to offer flowers blooming on a distant mountain to a Buddha. What could this possibly mean? It is taking me years to feel my way into what this might mean. I'll offer my current understanding. I often read "Buddha" to mean "reality as it is". Reality as it is includes ourselves and our own perceptive processes. So, the way to offer Buddha flowers blooming on a distant mountain is to simply stop and notice them. To let your senses take up the flowers. To experience this sensory input "as it is" means that we are receiving the experience without generating notions of "I", "me" or "mine". When there is no "I", "me" or "mine", there is the absence of greed. Dogen tells us that generosity is simply the absence of greed. When we take time to notice flowers, or leaves on a tree, or the sounds and sights of flowing creek, we are making offerings to the Buddha. The more we are able to do this, the more open and generous we become. This kind of practice has nothing to do with giving away presents or possessions (although that can also be generosity as well).

After giving these various examples of giving, Dogen follows with, *There is a Buddhist principle that even if things are not our own, this does not hinder our free giving.*¹¹ Our "free giving" simply comes from not being greedy rather than being reckoned by the items we own or don't own. This is how we can offer a Buddha flowers blooming on a distant mountain.

In the Tanahashi translation there is a sentence which I found striking. It reads, *The question is not whether the gift is valuable but whether there is genuine merit.* When we think about how valuable a gift is, we are, in essence, objectifying it. If we are objectifying it, we are also creating and strengthening the notion of a subject. We have divided the world up into a subject-object duality. There is the object which we are giving, and it has an attribute which we call "value". In this dualistic thinking, a gift is "better" if it is more valuable. In this perspective, a Porsche is a more valuable gift than a cup of coffee from Tim Horton's. Dogen is telling us that this is not how we should perceive the activity of giving. For the Zen practitioner, the heart of the matter is whether the activity giving generates genuine merit. Maybe that cup of coffee is just what is needed by someone at a particular moment.

So, what is this "merit" which Dogen mentions? The *Dictionary of Buddhism* defines merit (Sanskrit: *punya*) as "a store of wholesome karman created by the performance of virtuous deeds".¹² This "good karma" results in happiness in the future. "Karma" simply means "intentional action". People often think of "good karma" and "bad karma" as a sort of cosmic, metaphysical reward or punishment. Personally, I prefer a much more concrete understanding. If you are engaging in wholesome behaviour, your life will tend to be less chaotic or unmanageable. Conversely, if you are engaging in

11 Nishijima and Cross, pp 29-30.

12 *Dictionary of Buddhism*, p. 681

unwholesome behaviour, then chaos and unmanageability will tend to come into your life. That being said, if you are practising wholesome behaviour it doesn't "guarantee" that your life will never have any bad stuff happen. The way I understand it is more about "tending toward". So, according to Dogen, the benefits of giving isn't about the object given, but the intention motivating the giving. So, here is the subtlety of practice manifesting – how do we develop intention which is not rooted in notions of self, not rooted in notions of "I, me, and mine" not to mention "receiver" and "gift"? This is something with which we must practise. We investigate this teaching through practice. This is basis of the "genuine merit" mentioned by Dogen. This sort of non-dualistic intention setting leads us back into the territory of the Four Bodhisattva Vows and all of their inconceivability.

The definition given above refers to "a store of wholesome karman". What does this "storing" mean? I think it refers to sustained effort which results in the development of a habit of tending to engage in wholesome actions. When we falter, it is easier to recover if we have practised and have formed the habit of engaging in wholesome behaviour. It is like having money in the bank. If we lose our job, having some money in the bank allows us to draw on that reserve to maintain our standard of living until we can find another job. If we have no money in the bank (or a practice habit) on which to draw, we find ourselves in a crisis.

According to Buddhism, this merit can be transferred to benefit others. The transfer of merit is important in all branches of Buddhism – Theravadin, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. One thing about this transfer is that it is not a zero sum game. If you transfer merit, it doesn't diminish your own merit. The example given is that it is like a candle which is used to light other candles. When the candle transfers its flame, the flame is not diminished. The transfer of merit is a form of giving which is very much aligned with the type of giving which Dogen is talking about.

Dogen closes the section on "giving" by pointing out how giving is an aid in the work of guiding beings to realization. He starts off with, "The mind of a sentient being is difficult to change." I guess that was as true in Dogen's time as it is today. Dogen goes on to say,

By starting with a gift we begin to change the mental state of living [sentient] beings, after which we resolve to change them until they attain the truth. At the outset, we should always make use of free giving". This is why the first of the six paramitas is the dana-paramita.¹³

First off, I'm not in love with this translation (e.g. "we resolve to change them" is awkward). I would rephrase this to something like – "we resolve to work for their highest benefit". Here Dogen is talking directly about the work of Bodhisattvas – the concrete work of liberating all beings. We start with a gift. By giving someone a gift, their state of mind shifts. As pointed out above, this giving is not a manipulative *quid pro quo* sort of giving. It is the groundless giving of Bodhisattvas. Nevertheless, giving a gift changes someone's mental state. In some sense, giving a gift is just like any other input of sensory stimuli – consciousness (i.e. mental state) changes. However, a gift differs from general sensory stimuli because it is given with intention, and it conveys our intention. At the very least, a gift is an expression of goodwill. Look at your own experience. How do you feel when someone gives you gift? For me, among other positive feelings, I feel acknowledged and seen. I feel an openness toward the person. This is an entry for a Bodhisattva. We resolve to work with that being until they realize the

13 Nishijima and Cross, vol. 3, p. 31

truth. This is also a form of giving. In the last part of this quote, Dogen points out that this is why Dana Paramita, the perfection of giving is mentioned first in the Six Paramitas.

Dogen then continues,

*The bigness or smallness of mind is beyond measurement, and the bigness and smallness of things is also beyond measurement, but there are times when mind changes things, and there is free giving in which things change the mind.*¹⁴

This quote is about not judging the other person or the quality of the gift. We don't know how someone will respond and we don't know and can't calculate the effect of our giving. We might be tempted to think that someone who appears to be small minded to us, will react in small minded ways, but then, they respond from a place of magnanimous mind. Conversely, we may think someone is open minded, and they may react in a small minded way. Dogen is suggesting that we approach bodhisattva work with "don't know" mind. This is our most intimate practice – to enter a situation without any preconceived ideas of how it is going to go. We enter the situation holding open the question, "What is most beneficial?" We may be surprised by how they respond. In addition, the effect of our giving may not be immediately apparent. It may be years before the effect manifests, and we may not even know if our bodhisattva giving has had an effect. Similarly, how impactful our gift might be is also beyond quantitative calculation. Dogen wrote, "there are times when mind changes things". We might perceive the object or words we are giving as nothing special, but we give it to another and that mundane boring object changes into something great for that person. That is the mind changing the thing. Conversely, as we have already mentioned, the bodhisattva giving's changes the mind of a sentient being.

Kind Speech

"Kind speech" is the next method which bodhisattvas use to guide beings. Dogen starts this section by stating,

*Kind speech means that in looking upon living beings one should first arouse a mind of kindness and love and should utter caring kind words. It is the absence of harsh speech.*¹⁵

The first thing which stands out for me is that in kind speech, we first set our mind on being kind. This is the crucial step in my opinion. I think chanting the *Metta Sutta* can help predispose our mind to focus on kindness first before speaking. Another thing which stands out for me in this passage is the phrase, "in looking upon". The other translators translate this a little differently, e.g. "when seeing" or "when meeting". However, I like Cleary's translation because his phrasing aligns with the activity of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. It is worth pointing out, in my opinion, at least, that Avalokiteshvara means "the lord who looks down" (with compassion).¹⁶ This passage in *Bodaisatta Shishobo Shobogenzo* is reminding us that our practice is the practice of embodying the practices of bodhisattvas. In this case, we embody Avalokiteshvara's compassion in the activity of kind speech.

The next two point Dogen makes with regard to kind speech are: 1) praise those with virtue, and pity those without virtue, and 2) the habit of kind speech increases the more one practises it.

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Cleary, p. 118

¹⁶ Conze, p. 82.

With regard to the first point, Dogen is basically saying to “keep it positive”. For example, if someone’s life seems out of control because of the choices they are making, pity rather than criticism, judgment, and blaming is the response of one practising kind speech. Conversely, if someone seems to be doing well, and making good choices, give them praise. It could be something simple like, “I am happy for you.” Envy, and jealousy are not part of kind speech practice.

I consider kind speech to be a subset of Right Speech, which is part of Buddhism’s Eight-fold Noble Path. In the Middle Length Discourses (MN 58), there is a sutra in which the Buddha outlines the process as to whether a Tathagatha should speak. In addition to Dogen’s comments about kind speech, we can receive additional guidance from this sutra. There are a series of questions we can ask ourselves before speaking:

Is what I am about to say true or false? If the answer is “false”, then don’t speak. If the answer is “true”, then we can ask ourselves another question:

Is what I am about to say beneficial or not beneficial? If the answer is “not beneficial”, then don’t speak. If the answer is “beneficial”, then we can ask ourselves another question:

Is what I am about to say going to be accepted or rejected by the listener? If the answer is “accepted”, then we can speak. If the answer is “rejected”, then we wait for the right time to speak.

The order of the questions is important as the inquiry goes from gross to subtle. If we do our due diligence, whether something is true or false is something we can objectively determine. Whether something is beneficial or not beneficial can be more subtle. I would suggest as a guide when evaluating something is beneficial or not, that we can ask, will what I am about to say cause more clinging, or craving, and therefore more suffering? If what we say could give rise to someone clinging or craving something, it is probably not beneficial.

The last question of acceptance or rejection regarding what we are going to say is even more subtle we need to get a sense as to what that person’s state of mind is. What we want to say could be true and beneficial, but if they person is not open to hearing it, it is better to wait for the right time. The right time is when someone is receptive to what we want to say. Saying something to someone who is not open to it, simply runs the risk of alienating them. Those of you who are parents might be able to relate to this. Sometimes waiting for the right time can take years.

In returning to Dogen’s commentary, he exhorts us to practise kind speech as a continuous practice. He points out,

*If kind speech is offered, little by little kind speech expands. Thus, even kind speech that is not ordinarily known or seen comes into being. Be willing to practise it for this entire present life; do not give up, world after world, life after life.*¹⁷

I read the first sentence two ways: First, the more we practise kind speech, the more our capacity to use kind speech expands. Second, the more we use kind speech, maybe the people with whom we have practised kind speech will be more inclined to use kind words with others. So, our efforts ripple

17 Tanahashi, p.475

inwardly building our own capacity, and ripple outwardly beyond our own direct interactions. The second sentence, points out that the more we practise kind speech, the more kind speech will be part of situations where we don't normally expect to hear or say kind speech. Finally, Dogen reminds us that we should apply continual effort, in every moment and in every circumstance in which we find ourselves.

Dogen then talks about the effect which kind speech can have on others,
*Kind speech is the basis for reconciling rulers and subduing enemies. Those who hear kind speech from you have a delighted expression and a joyful mind. Those who hear of your kind speech will be deeply touched; they will always remember it.*¹⁸

In the first sentence Dogen is pointing out that kind words and positive interactions have a better chance of resolving conflict than harsh words and coercion. The remaining sentences talk about the effect on a more personal level – kind speech has a beneficial effect on the lives of others and the impression it makes stays with them.

Beneficial Action

Dogen then begins discussing the next method of guidance, namely, “beneficial action” which he says means,

*... utilizing skillful means to benefit living beings, high or low, looking into the distant and near future and employing expedient methods to benefit them.*¹⁹

According to Dogen, beneficial action means working for the benefit all beings, no matter what their particular circumstances are, or whether they are in a good or bad place. Our bodhisattva practice is to include everyone without discrimination. However, we are also cognizant that different beings need different beneficial actions at different times. That is what skillful means or expedient means means – it is like giving someone a pair of shoes which fits their feet rather than giving them the biggest pair because of some preconceived idea that “bigger is better”. We also look to both their immediate and longer term benefit. We can better look into the future when we understand causality better, and we use our understanding of causality to benefit beings.

Dogen then gives an example of people helping an “exhausted turtle” or an “ailing sparrow”, and points out that people were moved to help these creatures simply by the motivation provided by “beneficial action”. They did not seek rewards or compensation from these creatures. Bodhisattvas don't ever work from a *quid pro quo* basis. They see the need for some beneficial action and just do it.

Dogen continues the section on beneficial action by admonishing,

*Fools think that when benefit to others is put first, one's own benefit will be reduced. It is not so. Beneficial action is one principle; and it is universally benefiting self and others.*²⁰

Dogen is unambiguous on this point. Beneficial action benefits others and it benefits yourself. Only fools take up the limited and small minded view that beneficial action is a zero sum game. Now, of course, the benefits derived may very well be different. Giving someone a coat warms them up, and the bodhisattva benefits by practising in this situation. In this section, Dogen gives an example of a

18 Tanahashi, p.475

19 Nishijima and Cross, p. 32.

20 Cleary, p. 119.

ruler who allowed himself to be interrupted in order to be of benefit to others. I think this speaks to the timeliness of help. It doesn't do anybody any good to show up a day late with your "help" in hand.

A sentence in this section which struck me reads, "There was never a question that he might not teach them just because they were the people of a foreign land".²¹ This is important, in my opinion, because beneficial action is not based on notions of "my people" or "my group of people". Dogen points out that we practise beneficial action toward both our friends and foes alike. We don't discriminate, we simply respond to need.

In closing this section, Dogen writes,

If you have this heart, even beneficial action for the sake of grasses, trees, wind, and water is spontaneous and unremitting. This being so, make a wholehearted effort to help the ignorant.

There is a big history of discussion in Zen as to whether insentient beings are capable of enlightenment. I guess, I don't feel inspired to talk about that or try to interpret this passage in that light. I interpret what Dogen is saying is: if you have this spirit of practice, beneficial action will permeate all of your relationships, not only with living (sentient) beings, but with how we interact with our environment. We will naturally live a life with a smaller ecological footprint, we will live more frugally, and less focused on material things. Living in such a manner is beneficial action in action. This being so, we use our whole life to try to help ignorant or foolish people.

When I was reading this section, the question which came up for me, how do we know what actions are really beneficial actions? I came up with two aspects – listening, and understanding causality.

For me, beneficial action starts with listening. Listening is more complicated than it sounds because there is what the person is saying and there is what I am hearing. They are not the same, and sometimes the gulf between what is said and what is heard is quite vast. We can lessen that distance between what is said and what is heard by dropping as much as possible, our own preconceived ideas, to go and listen to someone with "don't know mind". There is a Zen expression from the *Book of Serenity* which says, "Not knowing is most intimate." When we reduce the gap between what is being said and what is being heard, that is intimacy. When we don't already know, our mind and heart are more open. This allows us to empathize and practise compassion. When we can empathize can respond from a place of relatedness.

Let us recall that Dogen advises us to look for both short term and long term beneficial action. Again short term and long term beneficial action may be not look the same. There is the old expression, "Give a person a fish and they eat for that day, teach that person to fish and they can eat for the rest of their lives". A bodhisattva both gives a fish today, and teaches the person how to fish. As Dogen points out, beneficial action is not an either/or proposition with regard to short term and long term benefit.

Aside from listening, I think truly beneficial action also depends on understanding the causality of the situation. Dogen, in a number of his lectures and talks emphasized that understanding cause and effect was essential for students of the Buddhadharma. For example in *Shinjin Inga Shobogenzo (Deep Faith in Cause and Effect)*, Dogen wrote, "In studying buddha dharma you should first understand causation.

21 Nishijima and Cross pp. 32-33

By denying causation, you generate outrageously crooked views and cut off wholesome roots”.²² Similarly, in the *Eihei Koroku (Extensive Record of Dogen)*, Dogen writes, “Students of the way cannot dismiss cause and effect. If you discard cause and effect, you will ultimately deviate from practice-realization.”²³ In both of these quotes Dogen connects the student of the Way’s understanding of cause and effect to their effectiveness in practice. So, in our practice of beneficial action, it is a good idea to have a good understanding of the cause and effects which are relevant to a particular situation.

Like listening, what we might think is obvious, might not be so, and understanding cause and effect can be subtle and tricky. Along these lines, I would encourage you to not try to do some “beneficial action” impulsively, based on how it makes you feel. If you don’t understand the causality underlying the situation, your actions may do more harm than good.

To give you an example, when I was in my 20s, I tried offering help to blind person crossing the street. This person adamantly refused (to the point of tears) my offer to help. I backed off, and this interaction gave me an opportunity to reflect on “being helpful”. I didn’t know anything about this person’s life, but maybe what was most important for them in that moment was to develop a sense of autonomy and confidence in their ability to get around town. So, the most beneficial action was to let this person be and work through their own struggle. However, we have to be careful to not make our previous experiences into a “rule”. Sometimes, the right thing to do is to help the blind person cross the street. There are no rules, only a moment by moment engagement with immediate arising situation.

Understanding cause and effect is facilitated by being in touch with reality – reality meaning what actually is rather than mistaking our beliefs about reality for reality itself. Not mistaking our beliefs for reality is really a multi-layered issue. Our beliefs are conditioned phenomena and arise from a variety of contexts. I’ll divide them up along several arbitrary categories. There are our personal beliefs which come from our own personal interior process, then there are the beliefs which arise from our immediate social environment – from our family, friends, co-workers. Then, there are our beliefs held by our society in general. This is the mythology of our culture. We may not explicitly or consciously believe in our societal myths, but they still inform how we may perceive and cognize situations. Part of beneficial action is understanding how our belief systems may impede our ability to see the actual cause and effect in a situation.

It is all of these beliefs which form our sense of conventional reality. From a Buddhist point of view, part of what makes conventional reality a conventional reality is that people assume that these beliefs aren’t simply conditioned beliefs but are, in fact, inherently existent realities. Conventional realities are useful in many ways, however, if we impute that conventional realities are inherently existent, then, that is delusion. In some sense, part of delusion is misassigning cause and effect. For example, conventionally, we associate red traffic lights with stopping our car. However, there is no “stoppingness” as an intrinsic quality of red lights, and a red traffic does not compel us to stop our car.

Identity Action

The fourth item in the Bodhisattva’s Four Methods of Guidance is called “identity action”. This term has also been translated as “cooperation”. Nishijima and Cross give a footnote which explains the Japanese term, *doji*, literally means “identity of task” and is derived from the Sanskrit, *samāna-arthatā*, term which means “identity of purpose” or “sharing the same aim”. The term has the same sense and

²² Tanahashi, p. 857

²³ *Dogen’s Extensive Record*, Dharma Hall Discourse 510, translated by Taigen Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, p. 454

the English expression, “being in the same boat”.²⁴ Given that, I prefer the term used by Tanahashi, “identity action”.

As mentioned earlier in the talk, the method of guidance is translated from the Pali Canon as “impartiality” and means being “the same in both happiness and suffering. This means sitting together with them, living together, and eating together”.²⁵ This sense is pretty close to the sense noted above for the English expression, “being in the same boat”. In the Mahayana work, the *Mahayanasutralamkara*, this method of guidance is understood as “consistency between words and deeds”.

With that background in place, let’s look at what Dogen says. He starts off this section (Tanahashi),

*“Identity action” means nondifference. It is nondifference from self, nondifference from others. For example, in the human world the Tathagatha took the form of a human being. From this we know that he did the same in other realms.*²⁶

In this opening Dogen establishes that in our practice as bodhisattvas, we do not differentiate ourselves from others. We do not put ourselves or others on pedestals, rather we seek to fit in. So, Dogen’s understanding of identity action is more along the lines of the teaching in the Pali Canon rather than that of the *Mahayanasutralamkara*. The other interesting thing Dogen does in this passage is that he makes the inference that since the Tathagatha appeared in human form for the sake of humans, the Tathagatha appears in other forms for the beings in those other realms. I think this is emphasis that the bodhisattva aspires to be flexible and adaptable in their fitting in order to aid other beings.

Dogen then adds,

*When we know identity action, self and others are one.*²⁷

Here Dogen is saying that identity action is the practice of non-duality. We are practising non-duality in our action. The phrase, “when we know identity action” doesn’t just mean to have a passing or intellectual familiarity with the teaching of identity action. It means we are proficient in practising identity action, that our proficiency is based on our direct experience.

In the next paragraph, Dogen, (I think), tries to illustrate this with an analogy of “lute, song, and wine”. I don’t really understand this. According to a footnote in Nishijima and Cross, this phrase comes from a Taoist text and is used by Dogen, “to express the principles of mutual agreement between subject and object and identity of subject and object”.²⁸ That really didn’t help me too much either. In the last couple of sentences, however, he does spell out some limits to identity action. He writes,

*Human beings are one with human beings, devas are one with devas, spirit beings are one with spirit beings. To understand this is to understand identity action.*²⁹

24 See Nishijima and Cross, volume 3, p. 33, footnote 25.

25 *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, footnote 687, p. 1685.

26 Tanahashi, p. 476

27 *ibid*

28 Nishijima & Cross, footnote 28, p. 33

29 Tanahashi, p. 476

We can look at the examples of 12 Step groups to see the efficacy of identity action practised in this way. As some of you know, there are different 12 Step groups which address different addictions. In this model alcoholics relate to alcoholics, narcotic addicts relate to narcotic addicts, gambling addicts relate to gambling addicts, and so on. Beneficial action is most likely when help is offered from someone who can relate intimately to the problems we are having. At the very least there is a more accessible avenue for empathy and compassion to arise. It is more effective to say, “I’ve been in a similar situation, here’s what’s worked for me ...” than to offer something you’ve only read about in a book. The best way to be able to help others is to develop your own self-awareness and work on your own issues. At some point, your experience will allow you to relate to and benefit others.

In addition, one is less likely to be helpful if the person being helped thinks you can’t relate to their experience. Our bodhisattva effort is to be open minded and flexible, but we are not infinitely flexible being able to adapt and fit into any situation. We all have our own karma which has shaped how we perceive situations and relate to other beings. This is something we need to respect. We need to respect our own limitations. That isn’t to say that our limitations are fixed. We can push our comfort levels and grow beyond the limitations we have presently. However, it is generally a bad idea to try to be something or someone we are not. In some cases, there could be someone more appropriate and capable to help a particular person at a particular time in a particular situation. Knowing when to yield and let someone else step in is wisdom.

Dogen then starts to comment on the term “action”, he writes,

“Action” means right form, dignity, correct manner. This means you cause yourself to be in identity with others after causing others to be in identity with you. However, the relationship of self and others varies limitlessly according to circumstances.³⁰

Nishijima and Cross translate, “form, dignity, correct manner” as, “concrete behavior, a dignified attitude, and a real situation”.³¹ Cleary translates this phrase as, “is a manner, is a standard, is an attitude”.³² These seem fairly different to me. I’m going to base my discussion on Tanahashi’s translation, but I’m mentioning the others to give you other possible shades of meaning.

The way I read this passage is that Dogen is saying that the doing part (i.e. “action”) of identity action has three aspects: “form”, “dignity”, and “correct manner”. Here is how I see what each of these terms mean:

Form: We are familiar with “form”. Zen practice has “forms”. In the Zen context, “form” means an agreed way of doing things. The way of doing things has two functions: a) to support the sangha interacting in a harmonious way, and, b) as a gauge for mindfulness. Expanding on this first aspect of form, I think when Dogen mentions form, he is talking about harmonizing with the other beings’ way of life – their cultural mores, what is considered polite and respectful interactions.

Dignity: When engaging in bodhisattva activity, we carry ourselves with dignity. We maintain our deportment – that is, how we conduct ourselves, and how we act towards others and in front of others. In our engaging in bodhisattva activity, we are, in some sense, transmitting the Dharma. We may be, in

30 *ibid*

31 Nishijima & Cross, p. 33

32 Cleary, p. 120

that moment, the embodiment of the Dharma that others see. It behooves us to convey ourselves with seriousness and earnestness. This reminds me of the tenth Clear Mind Precept, a disciple of Buddha does not disparage the Three Treasures. We don't disparage ourselves or others.

Correct manner: Getting a little speculative here, but I would offer "correct manner" meaning beneficial action in a real situation. In some sense, the four methods of guidance are turn back into themselves. So, "identity action" include "beneficial action", "kind speech", and "generosity". If we jump to the end of the fascicle, we see that Dogen, writes,

*Each of these four methods of guidance includes all four. Thus, there are sixteen methods of guiding sentient beings.*³³

I think this passage substantiates the idea that the correct action aspect of identity action is comprised of the previous three methods of guidance. We will come back to this passage, but for now, I want to move through the fascicle in order.

Dogen then quotes *Guanzi*, a Taoist text and makes some commentary. Dogen's comments are,

That the ocean does not exclude water is identity action. Water does not exclude the ocean either. This being so, water comes together to form the ocean. Soil piles up to form mountains.

*My understanding is that because the ocean itself does not exclude the ocean, it is the ocean and it is large. Because mountains do not exclude mountains, they are mountains and they are high.*³⁴

The ocean's inclusive acceptance of water is our model for identity action. Dogen turns the phrase around to say that water doesn't exclude the ocean either. In our work as bodhisattvas, sometimes we are the ocean, sometimes we are the water. When we are the water, we are being generous by allowing the ocean to express its generosity by accepting us. At the end of the day though, waters, in whatever form, come together and form the great ocean.

In the next phrase, Dogen, as Dogen typically does, tries to undermine even the most subtle dualities, ... *because the ocean itself does not exclude the ocean, it is the ocean and it is large*. The ocean is just wholeheartedly the ocean. When our effort is wholehearted like this ocean, it is non-dual effort and is identity action. Like the ocean, when we are engaging in wholehearted identity action, our action is large, our capacity is large. The same is true for mountains. Pick the analogy which inspires you the most.

Both the *Guanzi* and Dogen talk about qualities of political leaders (i.e. "wise lords") and how identity action relates to them. The *Guanzi* says, *A wise lord does not exclude the people; that is why he has many subjects*. Dogen changes the expression a little to say, the ruler of a nation does not weary of people. Dogen then talks about reward and punishment both in his time and in "ancient times". I can't really comment on that context. In general, however, I take this passage to mean that when a political leader is engaged, understands the needs of their people, and prioritizes the needs of the people, the

33 Tanahashi, p. 477

34 Tanahashi, p. 476

people, in return, follow and support that leader. In our contemporary times, it seems that no matter what political party has formed the government, they seem to put the interests of businesses and corporations above those of the people. This breeds alienation among the population. Sometimes the political party uses rhetoric which makes it sound like they are putting the people first, but policies indicate otherwise. Unfortunately, Dogen offers no insight into what a bodhisattva would do in the case of being ruled by an unwise lord.

In this last part of this section Dogen writes,

*People form a nation and seek a wise lord, but they do not completely know the reason why a wise lord is wise, they only hope to be supported by the wise lord. They do not notice that they are the ones who support the wise lord. In this way, the principle of identity action is applied to both a wise lord and all people. This being so, identity action is a vow of bodhisattvas.*³⁵

The gist of this section seems to be that “the people” are not sure what makes a wise lord wise, they just hope the lord supports them, and further they do not realize that they are the ones who support the lord. This “not knowing” I don’t think is meant to be taken in a condescending way. Rather, I see it as doing the right thing in an uncontrived, guileless way. This is our model of a bodhisattva’s enacting identity action. We do it without contrivance or fabrication.

The last sentence in the identity action section is,

*With gentle expression, practice identity action for all people.*³⁶

The key here is “gentle expression”. No one has ever really grown by being harsh with them. When in doubt, be gentle with other. The other point is “all people”. We exclude no one from our practice.

In my own mind, I make an association between “identity action” and the political notion of “solidarity” which is defined as “giving support to a stranger *on their own terms* ... and differs from philanthropy because it is given on the stranger’s *own terms* not that of the giver.”³⁷ This emphasis on giving support to someone on their own terms is what makes me draw the connection between Dogen’s identity action and solidarity. This also nicely dovetails with the bodhisattva’s vow to liberate all beings. We cannot know all beings, but our vow extends to all beings.

Solidarity depends on trust, and according to the political glossary I am using, “Trust and solidarity are relationships which are underpinned by certain *virtues*; to acquire a virtue, one must go through the *relevant life-experiences*.”³⁸ Again, this all fits rather well, in my opinion, with what has been discussed with regard to identity action – the basis of shared activity and trust.

Dogen’s Closing Statement

Dogen closes the fascicle with this sentence,

35 Tanahashi, p. 477

36 *ibid*

37 <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/s/o.htm>

38 *ibid*

*Each of these four methods of guidance includes all four. Thus, there are sixteen methods of guiding sentient beings.*³⁹

Many Buddhist teachings use this convolution⁴⁰ method to increase the comprehensiveness of a teaching. For example, the 20 identity views are formed by convoluting the five skandhas with the four types of attachment. In other cases, a Buddhist scripture might name only the first or the first and last items of a list, and then leave it to the reader to expand the teaching fully. I think many people shy away from doing this explicitly. However, I think expanding Buddhist teachings in this way is a concrete and practical way to orient our mind toward bodhisattva practice. When we do this, we make an effort (*Viriya Paramita*), more specifically, *a vow fulfilling effort* to open up the Dharma Gate of a teaching (the Third Bodhisattva Vow). In any case, we will do the full expansion to see what Dogen is bringing up. See the table below,

	Generosity	Kind Speech	Beneficial Action	Identity Action
Generosity	Generosity as generosity	Generosity as kind speech	Generosity as beneficial action	Generosity as identity action
Kind Speech	Kind speech as generosity	Kind speech as kind speech	Kind speech as beneficial action	Kind speech as identity action
Beneficial Action	Beneficial action as generosity	Beneficial action as kind speech	Beneficial action as beneficial action	Beneficial action as identity action
Identity Action	Identity action as generosity	Identity action as kind speech	Identity action as beneficial action	Identity action as identity action

When I was putting this table together, I needed to decide how I was going to express the sixteen ways Dogen outlines. I thought about “kind speech in generosity” or “kind speech as generosity”, or drawing inspiration from Dogen’s phrase “practise-realization”, it could be “kind speech-generosity”. I chose the second one, “kind speech as generosity”. The other thing Dogen states is that there are sixteen ways of practice. This implies that “kind speech as generosity” is not equivalent to “generosity as kind speech”. If they were equivalent there would have only been ten distinct practices in the matrix of sixteen. This may or may not be true. There might be subtle differences or there might not. I think the kind of permutations Dogen is laying out and how they are expressed in bodhisattva activity is something we have to explore on our own.

At this point in my reflections on this teaching, I prefer to explore Dogen’s teaching in a simple way. I think the sixteen ways of practice of the bodhisattva’s four methods of guidance as a matrix. This points to two different types of bodhisattva activity. The diagonal elements (from upper left to lower right) of the matrix are one type of practice. For example, “beneficial action as beneficial action”. The other type of practice is characterized by the off diagonal elements of the matrix. For example, there is “kind speech as beneficial action”.

I think of the practice of the diagonal elements as analogous to the Six Perfections of a Bodhisattva – the Perfection of Generosity, the Perfection of Kind Speech, the Perfection of Beneficial Action, and the Perfection of Identity Action. That is the four methods of guidance are practised in the same way

³⁹ Tanahashi, p. 477

⁴⁰ The term *convolution* is a mathematical operation which takes 2 functions to produce a third function. A convolution expresses how the shape of one function is modified by the other.

with the same spirit as the Six Perfections of a Bodhisattva. We can recall the quote from the *Diamond Sutra* referenced earlier in this talk.

*... a Bodhisattva who gives a gift should not be supported by a thing, nor should they be supported anywhere. When they give gifts, they should not be supported by sight-objects, nor by sounds, smells, tastes, touchables, or mind-objects. For Subhuti, the Bodhisattva, the great being should give gifts in such a way that they are not supported by the notion of a sign. And why? Because the heap of merit of that Bodhi-being, who unsupported, gives a gift, is not easy to measure.*⁴¹

A bodhisattva practice activity is done without any supports, unsupported by the notion of a sign. I forget who, but a contemporary Zen teacher I've heard speak, said that for Dogen everything is a gerund (a noun used as a verb). There is only activity, in the midst of activity there is no fixed subject, or no fixed object. In giving a gift, there is no giver, receiver or gift, only giving. So, it can be with the perfected practice of the other four methods of guidance. Dogen put in well when he wrote in *Genjokoan*,

When buddhas are truly buddhas they do not necessarily notice that they are buddhas. However, they are actualized buddhas, who go on actualizing buddhas.

Buddha-activity is activity without (self) conscious effort.

For the “off diagonal” elements of Dogen’s 16 ways of practising this teaching, we can think of them as responses to a question like, “how can a practise a particular method of guidance?” One response would be use the other three methods of guidance. For example, “how can I practise generosity?”. Practise generosity through kind speech, beneficial action and identity action. I consider this a jumping off point rather than an exhaustive laying out of the possibilities.

As I mentioned above, Dogen said there were sixteen ways of practising the four methods of guidance. This implies that “generosity as identity action” is practised differently “identity action as generosity”. Let’s examine how these two differ and how their practice may also differ.

Generosity as identity action. In my opinion, this means we are building a sense of unity, shared effort, and camaraderie through generosity. A good, simple example of this would be sharing a meal with someone. Eating is a fundamental human activity. When we share this experience with another human being, we are, in some sense, equals because of this activity. We are eating the same food, doing the same activity. If the food is spoiled, odds are we will both get sick. However, we don’t have to have the same experience with regard to the food in order to build a sense of acceptance and unity. Sharing the activity is enough. By sharing a meal, we are acknowledging our sameness. This is identity action. Given a bit of time, I am sure we can all think of other shared activities which facilitates identity action.

Identity Action as Generosity. I see this method as subtler than “generosity as identity action”. Dogen has told us that “generosity” means to not be stingy. The way I see “identity action as generosity” is

41 *Buddhist Wisdom, the Diamond Sutra and Heart Sutra*, translation and commentary by Edward Conze, 2001, Random House, p. 18 (adapted to use gender inclusive language by Kuden Paul Boyle).

that when we are not holding to a fixed view of ourselves, this is a generous act. You can think of having a tight, fixed view of yourself as a form of stinginess. You're greedily clutching your self-view. This can, and will, make you inaccessible to at least some other people. This reinforces dualistic views. When we practise identity view, are open, adaptable, and flexible which allows us to more easily relate to others. It is this relatedness which allows us to build unity, solidarity, and camaraderie. This is being generous with ourselves and undermines dualistic conceptions.

I consider *Bodaisatta Shishobo* one of the more accessible fascicles in the *Shobogenzo*, and is, despite its apparent straightforwardness, is a rich and highly relevant teaching to our lives. Thank-you for your attention.

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