

Endorsement of
The Dark Side of the Mirror,
David Brazier
Windhorse Publications, Cambridge, UK, 2019

Life is a near-paradox: one needs to take care of it and at the same time, in view of its transiency, relinquish attachments. A young Japanese boy Ehei Dogen, born 1200 AD, experienced this when he became an orphan at the age of eight. He then vowed to become a Buddhist monk to find solace and ordained at the age of thirteen. Some of the teachings he received stated that all humans have Buddha nature, implying that nothing needed to be done. Other teachings stated that becoming enlightened was too difficult for ordinary humans. This confused Dogen. He practiced without solving his pain. In 1223 he went to China as a senior monk in search for more original teachings. There he experienced humiliation, not being recognized as a monk. After several years, when there was a new abbot, Ju Ching, he was admitted, but only as a lay-person. After witnessing an interaction of Ju Ching with another monk, unexpectedly enlightenment happened to Dogen. From that moment his aim in life became to teach liberation by practice and transmission. Back in Japan, in 1233, Dogen wrote the enigmatic 'Genjo Koan', consisting of just 77 lines, describing the near-paradox and how to live it. Enlightenment transforms grief into energy to practice. Forget the obstructing self. After enlightenment blossoms still fall and weeds do grow, but one experiences these differently. Dogen's work is a valuable bridge between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Posthumously Dogen's teachings brought forth the Soto school of Zen Buddhism, still thriving in several parts of the world.

In this wonderful book, David Brazier gives a historic background, a new translation, extensive comments and a convincing interpretation of Genjo Koan, clarifying the provocative language of Dogen. Brazier uses words that are clear like the bright moon and intimate like a subtle poem. Many remarks in this book are essential for practitioners today. Meditation intending self-enhancement will not bring enlightenment: one needs to be humble, practice and then surrender. Then, when one forgets the self, it may happen.

Henk Barendregt