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Corealization in Postmodernity: Bridging Deep Ecology with Dōgen's Vision

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Abstract:

A study of the evolution of our ecological consciousness shows a definite progression from the animistic faiths of the Palaeolithic age to the dualistic perspective prevalent during the agricultural age. Such progression carries important lessons concerning the limitations faced by contemporary theories. Although deep ecology has made remarkable progress, it is still limited by its lack of clarity regarding demarcations, especially pertaining to nonliving things. The current study aims to remedy these limitations using the theory of "Corealization" developed by Eihei Dōgen.

Dōgen's reinterpretation of the *Nirvāna Sūtra* establishes a nondualistic ontology in which Buddhanature constitutes the "entirety of being," explicitly including the "non-sentient" realm. By dehumanising existence, Dōgen establishes an effective foundation for a comprehensive ecological framework. Ultimately, the paper posits that this "Corealization" is a practical necessity, fostering a shared destiny and mutual respect among all beings to ensure a truly inclusive and sustainable future.

Keywords: Corealization, Deep Ecology, Buddhanature, Non-sentient.

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The turn of the twenty-first century has forced humans to come to terms with an increasing lack of stability within Earth's ecosystems. Humans have long been dominated by the urge for material domination over nature, an urge that was shaped through the philosophy of the Enlightenment era and has seen nature as subservient and separate. In today's world, however, the destruction of the environment has become too evident to continue viewing it as such, and a shift towards postmodernity provides an essential turning point. It allows one to acknowledge the need for overcoming centuries of exploitation in favour of the concept of ecological interaction. Indeed, it has become a crucial requirement for human existence in today's crisis, when our aspirations must be brought to accord with those of nature.

The paper contends that concern for the nonhuman sphere was a natural corollary to the era's collective consciousness, accentuated by the impacts of climate change, drought, floods, and other forms of ecological degradation. Significantly, interest in the natural world flourished well before the postmodern or poststructural eras. In fact, the concern for nature has existed throughout human history. This is evident in diverse religious and philosophical texts, which have consistently emphasised the intrinsic value of nature. Certain religious traditions, such as Hinduism, extend this further by identifying the divine with the natural world. This ontological unity is celebrated in the great statements (*Mahāvākya* [1]) like 'I am God' (*Aham brahmāsmī*[2]); 'That Thou Art' (*Tat tvam asi*[3]) and so on.

Anthropological research indicates that the use of totems in Palaeolithic societies might have had roots in an intense feeling of relatedness between humans and nature. They gave expression to — and drew sustenance from — the indigenous understanding of human life as continuous with, rather than separate from, the broader web of nature. As a relative latecomer within the history of life on Earth, humanity emerged from ecological processes that have long been recognised in the natural sciences. Max Oelschlaeger, in his book *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* conjectures that such feelings of deep communion with

the rest of nature must have reinforced and sharpened human intelligence: "(s)eeing all nature as a society may ever have made possible the evolution of intelligence to that acute degree of awareness without which the vast physical universe would be found terrifying, even intolerable" (Oelschlaeger 13). The capacity of Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer peoples to inhabit wilderness environments with relative ease — exemplified by communities such as the Inuit of the polar regions — is widely acknowledged. Scholars note that food insecurity and famine appear to have been less acute among such groups, and the durability of their way of life across approximately 200,000 years speaks to a remarkable degree of ecological adaptability. Oelschlaeger and others trace this sustainability to a worldview in which no sharp boundary divided the human from the natural. In such an animistic framework, divinity was not transcendent but thoroughly immanent — as present in the soil, mountains, rivers, and living creatures as anywhere else. This sense of sacred immanence cultivated reverence and restraint, and the Palaeolithic mind, animated by awe, was disinclined to rupture the equilibrium it shared with the nonhuman world (Oelschlaeger 24).

The shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture has long been regarded by environmental historians as a decisive threshold in humanity's changing relationship with the nonhuman world. It was accompanied by the emergence of transcendent conceptions of divinity and a growing tendency to perceive nature in dualistic terms: the cultivated field set against the untamed forest, the domesticated plant against the wild, the tended against the feral. Philosophical and theological systems arose alongside these new productive arrangements. The causes of this transition were undoubtedly multiple — demographic pressures, climatic shifts, and contingency all played their part. Crucially, however, it was not driven by any conscious preference for civilised life or antipathy towards the wild: as Oelschlaeger observes, "One thing is clear: no longing for civilisation and abhorrence of wild nature led to agriculture" (Oelschlaeger 24). Yet the agrarian turn brought in its wake a constellation of new social

afflictions. Many scholars have argued that poverty, chronic hunger, organised warfare, and epidemic disease can be understood as structural consequences of the agricultural mode of life.

Within a philosophical framework, the Biblical 'Fall' may be viewed more as a mythical and nostalgic narrative that bewails the crisis of transition to an agrarian economy. This allows us to interpret the "Fall" not as a literal historical event, but as a symbolic rupture with the nonhuman realm. Despite the numerous perspectives regarding what these statements imply, one can unmistakably conclude that reverence for nature occupies a central position in the scheme of things. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that the ecological consciousness emerging in the wake of postmodernism and poststructuralism differs fundamentally from the conventional love of nature expressed in terms such as environmentalism, nature worship, or support for nature, all of which still place humanity at the centre. Nature is indeed valued, but only to the extent that it serves human survival. If human love for nature is predicated on anthropocentric survival, comfort, and happiness, it may be nothing more than a form of narcissism concealed as love for nature. On the other hand, the crucial point of departure in the ecological approach in the age of postmodernism is the centrality, if any, that is accorded to nature.

Postmodernity provided the intellectual conditions within which ecocriticism, as a sustained critical project, became possible. Yet this paper takes issue with the assumption that ecocriticism has adequately cultivated genuine ecological awareness. What is required is not merely a critical reorientation but a deeper transformation in human consciousness — one capable of grounding a truly sustainable ecological paradigm. Deep ecology, for all its advances, remains bound by what might be called a "means-ends" orientation, which tends to instrumentalise the natural world in service of a projected future. This forward-oriented logic generates what can only be described as a "fundamental restlessness": it treats the present moment as something to be overcome rather than inhabited, and reduces ecological

preservation to a strategy rather than a mode of being. The result is that contemporary ecocriticism struggles to articulate a form of human engagement with nature that does not reproduce alienation. The way beyond this impasse may lie in a turn to Eihei Dōgen's 13th-century ontology. For Dōgen, practice and realisation are not sequential but simultaneous — to live in harmony with existence is not preparation for enlightenment but its very expression. Although deep ecology is a distinctly modern formation, its deepest aspirations find a remarkable counterpart in Dōgen's 13th-century vision.

Eihei Dōgen, a 13th-century Buddhist Philosopher, esteemed monk, and the founder of the Soto School of Zen (26 January 1200 – 22 September 1253), also revered as Dōgen Zenji, Dōgen Kigen, Kōso Jōyō Daishi, or Busshō Dentō Kokushi[4], introduced a philosophical vision where humans and the nonhuman world are seen as fundamentally interconnected. Originating from an aristocratic lineage during the Kamakura period, Dōgen faced the loss of his parents at the tender age of seven. By the age of 13, he had embarked on a monastic journey, delving into Buddhist scriptures at Mount Hiei, the heartland of Tendai Buddhism. Between 1223 and 1227, his quest for deeper understanding led him to China, where he studied Zen meditation and attained enlightenment under the guidance of Master Rujing. Upon his return to Japan, he fervently disseminated Soto Zen teachings across various temples. In his later years, Dōgen settled at Eihei Temple, a haven he founded atop a secluded hill in present-day Fukui. His first significant work, *Fukan zazengi* (1227; "General Teachings for the Promotion of Zazen"), serves as a succinct guide to Zen practice. Dōgen's literary legacy includes numerous instructive compositions, among which his magnum opus, the *Shōbōgenzō* (1231–53; "Treasury of the True Dharma Eye"), a voluminous masterpiece of 95 chapters crafted over two decades, encapsulates the essence of Buddhist doctrine.

Dōgen's view and deep ecology converge on many points in their approach to the nonhuman world, though there are significant departures. The parallelism is underscored by

their common emphasis on interconnectedness, nondualistic cognition, and ethical accountability, which serve to illuminate a shared basis of profound interconnection. The integration of facets from both paradigms holds the potential to enrich the discourse surrounding ecological and ethical predicaments, yielding a more comprehensive and concordant framework for their consideration. In Dōgen's vision, the world of the nonhuman is neither a bondage from which one seeks liberation (*Mokṣa*), nor a hostile entity to be tamed and conquered for further exploitative existence together, but agents in 'Corealization'. Realisation or Enlightenment in Dōgen is far from a privilege to which human beings alone have exclusive access, nor is it a personal affair. To Dōgen, everything is Buddhanature. Anything with Buddhanature is capable of Enlightenment. Nothing is outside the purview of liberation — a profoundly egalitarian proposition.

'Corealization' is a term employed by Dōgen. It is a way of being in the world, without hierarchy and without equality, a pure thusness where valorisation is bypassed. Among other things, Dōgen says: "All things are sentient Beings, all things are the Buddhanature, the *tathagatha,* abides constantly, is nonexistent, yet existent and is change" (Kodera 273). For Dōgen, the Buddhanature inheres in everything and it is the totality of all things, of both organic and inorganic entities, all of which have minds of their own. This renders Enlightenment something other than an exclusive privilege of the human realm and extends to everything. Dōgen initiates a "dehomocentric reversal," which shifts from a human-centric standpoint toward a thoroughly cosmological dimension. This model suggests that mountains and humans coexist in their impermanence, and we are realised by the mountain's "walking" rather than simply observing it. Such a democratic sentiment informing Dōgen's thought is well positioned to foster a more balanced ecological vision. Consequently, in such a vision, the natural world will no longer be secondary or subordinate to be mastered by humans.

The concept of Corealization propounded by Dōgen aptly addresses the theoretical gap underpinning deep ecology. Dōgen's thought upholds the realisation of all, equally encompassing both human and nonhuman elements. An analysis of his thought shows that deep ecologists have long neglected an important concept of a transformed sense of self. Starting from the nondualist, nonanthropocentric arguments that are essential to deep ecology, Dōgen's view may be seen as different from ecological self-realisation propounded by Spinoza or Naess. Dōgen's favoured term is 'Corealization' which refers to the ultimately democratic liberating paradigm that does away with any sense of hierarchy between the nonhuman and the human realm. This entails not only widening the self to accept all other things in nature, but also understanding the relational self of all sentient and non-sentient beings as shaped by the concept of Buddhanature. This reveals the interconnectedness of all beings. Corealization should be the umbrella term within which self-realisation is an integral part. Dōgen's concept of Buddhanature refuses the dichotomy of living and nonliving. He says emphatically:

> Impermanence is in itself the Buddhanature…[Therefore] the very impermanence of grass and tree, thicket and forest is the Buddhanature. The very impermanence of people and things, body and mind is the Buddhanature. Lands and nations, mountains and rivers are impermanent because they are Buddhanature. Supreme, complete enlightenment, because it is the Buddhanature, is impermanent. Great Nirvāna, because it is impermanent, is the Buddhanature. (Dōgen 76)

He puts forward an all-encompassing concept, the concept of Corealization, where there is no duality and everything is the same. In such a dispensation, all the stakeholders of the ecosystem are viewed as equal players with their own characteristic roles, including the so-called nonbiotic sphere. For such an egalitarian perspective, an analysis is necessary not only in terms of the lived life but also in terms of destiny. Significantly, both the human and the nonhuman realms are conducted on the economy of differential destiny. The nonhuman, by and large, ends

up here in this world and human beings will move on to liberation, which is forbidden to all the rest unless they become human. The final liberation becomes the defining moment for human uniqueness, superiority, and even arrogance. Dōgen questions this ultimate level of existence. Even though man assumes more wealth and power, after his death he becomes one with the elements of nature. There is no existence beyond nature. We are made up of the elements in nature and we become these elements upon death. There is no '*atman*' or 'self' that transcends reality and has its existence in a high-level world.

Dōgen's version of realisation, with its perception of the world as interconnected and interdependent, where the intrinsic value of each life form is recognised and within which the destruction, oppression, or even control of nature is resisted, is unrivalled. Such a holistic view transforms the conventional worldview from notions of fragmentation towards oneness. It is at once deanthropocentric as well as anthropocentric, as humans also receive their due importance and are not considered the sole reason for any problems in the world. Dōgen's concept of realisation, even though it is almost eight centuries old, remains relevant today and is, in many ways, more nuanced than any contemporary theories.

In Dōgen's scheme, each entity has space of its own as much as every moment is real in itself and has its place. Dōgen says: "water means life [for the fish], and the sky means life [for the bird]. lt must be that the bird means life [for the sky], and the fish means life [for the water]; that life is the bird, life is the fish" (Dōgen 43). The observation here indicates the dynamic oneness of reality. For fish, 'water' is the reality but for the bird, 'sky' is the reality. They do not have an existence beyond it, but still there are other realities beyond them. 'Life' may be said to be manifesting the ultimate reality as this nondualistic oneness. Dōgen's profound view regarding the nature of reality and being makes him a philosopher par excellence, whose philosophy can be studied in the light of postmodernism itself: the inversed hierarchy of every power that brings in a balanced view of nature in which everyone plays his

own role that cannot be altered. The position is very close to the deep ecological approach where nature is perceived as having higher authority.

Arne Naess argued for the expansion of self to the broader, inclusive, cosmological self that identifies with all of nature. Dōgen speaks of it in a relational sense of self that experiences interpenetration with nature in seated meditation and in mindful everyday living. Naess's explanation of the ultimate realisation of self in terms of 'a*tman*' or eternal self (Curtin, "Dōgen" 205) is contrary to Dōgen's concept of self as impermanence. Dōgen states that the self is not separate from nature, neither expanded nor transpersonal. Instead, the self that unifies with the whole is relational, defined through a consciousness of its interconnectedness. This self-realisation emphasises the Corealization of everything, rather than the anthropocentric or even biocentric realisation. "Dōgen points toward Corealization with *all* things. This is what Abe has called Dōgen's "dehomocentric reversal": We are realised by the mountain's "walking". The relations through which realisation occurs move both ways" (Curtin, "A State" 259). The Corealization of all beings represents a mode of existence in the world devoid of hierarchy and equality, embodying a pure state where valuation is transcended. It ensures the realisation of both the human and nonhuman entities in nature, as opposed to the deep ecological position that alienates the human from nature to ensure the purity and quality of the nonhuman realm.

What Dōgen's philosophy ultimately demands is a reorientation of our fundamental relationship to the nonhuman world — away from the instrumentalising logic that treats it as raw material or mere backdrop, and towards a recognition of its status as an active and equal participant in the unfolding of existence. This is not simply a theoretical proposition but a practical and ethical imperative, one urgently relevant to the ecological predicaments of our time. The present paper holds that drawing Dōgen's framework into contemporary ecological discourse opens the possibility of a more genuinely inclusive and balanced approach to

environmental thought and practice. Such an approach would honour the principles of deep ecology while overcoming the risk of human estrangement from nature — instead cultivating a sense of shared belonging and mutual obligation among all beings. The concept of Corealization, as developed in Dōgen's thought, offers precisely this: a way forward that neither diminishes the human nor marginalises the nonhuman, but holds both within a vision of profound and indissoluble interconnection.

The future course of ecological awareness lies in how we are able to use the lessons of history wisely instead of mindlessly following what was done before. The philosophic tradition represented by thinkers like Dōgen, coupled with the developments in postmodern thinking, serves as critical guideposts in this regard. It is only in bringing all these different schools of thought together that we can develop an ecological perspective that meets the demands of the current times—an outlook that is truly inclusive, sustainable and fully aware of the interconnected reality of existence.

Notes:

1. *Mahāvākya* They are "The Great Sayings" of the *Upanishad*s, as characterised by the Advaita school of Vedanta, with *mahā* meaning great and *vākya*, a sentence. It explains the unity of Brahman and Atman, which is the basic principle of Advaita Vedanta. Most commonly, *Mahāvākyas* are considered four in number: *Tat Tvam Asi*, *Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi*, *Prajñānaṁ Brahma, Ayam Ātmā Brahma.* ("Mahāvākyas"; Radhakrishnan 915)
2. *Ahaṁ Brahmāsmi* "I am Brahman", or "I am Divine" (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10 of the *Yajur Veda*). It is the core philosophy in *Advaita Vedanta*, indicating absolute oneness of *atman* with *brahman.* ("Mahāvākyas")

3. *tat tvamasi* The verse originally appears in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (6.8.7) of the *Sama Veda* as the culminating thought in a dialogue between Uddalaka and his son Svetaketu. It is first uttered at the end of their discussion and then repeated as a refrain for the rest of the text. The story behind the phrase is that the young Svetaketu was proud of his learning, and his father tried to humble him by articulating a teaching that would allow him to see the vastness of the universe and the limitations of each individual's knowledge. In describing how everything emanates from one eternal Truth, and how his son indeed partakes of that Truth, he ended with the words "Of everything that exists, this Being is the innermost Self. He is the Truth, the Self. And you, Svetaketu – you are that!" According to Sankara, the preeminent Advaitin philosopher of the eighth century, *tat tvamasi* expresses the oneness of the individual soul with Brahman, or the Supreme Spirit, i.e., God. ("Mahāvākyas"; Radhakrishnan 915)
4. Eihei Dōgen also known as Dōgen Zenji, Dōgen Kigen, Kōso Jōyō Daishi or Busshō Dentō Kokushi: Founder of the Soto Zen school in Japan and a major figure in Japanese intellectual history. In 1232, he became the first Abbot of Koshoji and was later offered the opportunity to establish Daibutsuji, later known as Eiheiji, by Hatano Yoshihige. He passed away at this temple. In Japan, he is revered as Eihei Dōgen Zenji or by his posthumous title given in 1879, Kōso Jōyū Daishi (Kennett 85). *Zenji* is a title meaning zen master. He was given the posthumous name and title of Busshō Dentō Kokushi in 1854 (Bowker 289).

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