

# NEW SCHOLAR IN FOCUS

## Eitan Bolokan

Researcher and translator who specializes in the history and literature of the Japanese Zen tradition. Writing his PhD at Tel Aviv University's School of Philosophy about Dōgen Zenji's thought, he also studied in the Faculty of Buddhist Studies at Komazawa University (Tokyo).

### **What interested you in Japan?**

I believe that, like many, my interest in Japan began in early childhood. I practiced martial arts, and this steadily ignited an interest in Japanese culture as a whole. After I finished my military service, I visited Japan several times for the sake of both training and learning the language. Eventually, I became very interested in Japanese ancient traditions, especially Zen.



### **Can you tell us about your academic studies?**

My undergraduate studies were in the departments of East Asian Studies and French Studies at Tel Aviv University. In 2007 I began my graduate research in the Religious Studies Program, focusing on the philosophy of religions. My MA thesis, under the supervision of Prof. Jacob Raz, examined the aesthetical qualities of classical Zen literature. Narrowing the analysis to the Japanese Sōtō tradition and basing my methodology on the linguistics of J. L. Austin, I discussed the aesthetical affinity between Sōtō

philosophical scriptures and its poetry — an affinity I termed "performative aesthetics."

The thesis presented a comparative aesthetical comparison between the short version of the Heart Sūtra and the tanka poetry of monks Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253) and Taigu Ryōkan (1758–1831). This enabled me to show that in the Sōtō tradition both scriptures of knowledge and scriptures of poetics share a common aesthetical quality that goes beyond the informative to the performative. As the thesis was written in Hebrew, this required much demanding translation work. While the Heart Sūtra had been previously translated into Hebrew, the tanka poems of Dōgen and Ryōkan had not. For the translation of Dōgen's tanka, I used the *Sanshō Dōei* collection (also known as the *Dōgen Waka-shū*), and for Ryōkan's poems I used the *Ryōkan Zenshū* and the *Ryōkan Kashū* collections. A major consequence of this thesis was the publication of a collection of Hebrew translations in the summer of 2011 called *Within Thin Snow: The Zen Poetry of Dōgen and Ryōkan*.

Upon completing my MA thesis, I was granted a Japanese government scholarship for a two-year research affiliation to the Buddhist Studies Doctoral Program at Komazawa University where, under the guidance of Prof. Tsunoda Tairyū, I studied traditional Sōtō theology. The research I conducted there, regarding the philosophy and textual legacy of Dōgen, has become the core of the doctoral thesis I am currently completing under the supervision of Prof. Jacob Raz.

Although my main field of research is Zen philology and philosophy, in recent years I have found myself increasingly drawn to a comparative consideration of

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Jewish philosophy and Buddhist thought. I am particularly interested in the philosophical affinities between the Chan and Zen traditions and the thought of Maimonides (1135-1204) and one of his major contemporary commentators Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903-1994).

## **Can you explain more about your research?**

My doctoral research deals with Dōgen's philosophy. Specifically, I ask two intertwined questions that target the theme of nonduality in his thought. The first targets Dōgen's terminological spectrum of nonduality — how he articulated and exemplified it. I look into the diverse, at times conflicting, terminologies found in Dōgen's essays and sermons to shed light upon the complex meaning of nonduality in his thought. The second question is based on the above philological inspection. I ask how we can better clarify the subtle differences, if they do indeed exist, between the category of nonduality and the category of unity in Dōgen's discourse and what are the ontological consequences of such a distinction.

Of course, the question of nonduality did not originate in Dōgen's philosophical creations. It goes back through the long history of the Mahāyāna and touches not only Japanese Zen but also Tibetan Vajrayāna, for example. In this regard, one of the roles of the dissertation is to clarify Dōgen's position in the dynamic and ongoing evolution of the tradition. The preliminary chapters deal with these contextual issues and, particularly, with the nondual paradigms found in the Chinese Caódòng and Tiāntái Schools which greatly influenced Dōgen's thought.

The core of the dissertation is dedicated to inspection of nonduality as reflected in Dōgen's own essays in the

*Shōbōgenzō* collection and his official sermons as recorded in the *Eihei-Kōroku* collection. I claim that there is indeed a difference in meaning between the category of nonduality and that of unity as reflected in Dōgen's discourse. This categorical difference can further clarify the meaning of the actual practice he founded, *zazen*, the practice of sitting in meditation.

## **What kind of difficulties have you encountered during your research?**

There are many challenges to any study that deals with philology and hermeneutics. For me, the main difficulty was forming a coherent basis of knowledge that would enable me to efficiently highlight those themes in Dōgen's thought that I wanted to examine: to actually know what I do not yet know and what I needed to know. So these primary scholastic orientations — the vast preliminary research — was a major crossroad that I had to face in order to actually get the study on its way.

Another difficulty is linguistics. Dōgen wrote in both ancient Japanese (*kobun*) and Chinese, so the linguistic challenge is always tremendous. One has to be not only familiar with these two languages but also proficient in Japanese annotations of classical Chinese (*kambun*) in order to inspect the many commentaries written about Dōgen in later times. In addition, there are many modern Japanese renditions of Dōgen's creations, edited by leading scholars from within Japanese academia, not to mention a vast body of research on the subject. Just being able to survey and study this immense treasury of hermeneutics was, and still is, a constant challenge. My research, translations, and ongoing efforts owe a huge debt of gratitude to the advice and guidance of my many teachers.