

## New Steps in Japanese Studies

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# Dōgen and *mitate*

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**Abstract** In the beginning I will introduce the concept of *mitate*, which is a rhetoric device very similar to a metaphor largely used in Japanese literature in order to hint at something outside a text. After having explained its structure and function, I will examine how it was employed in the field of Buddhism and, especially, in the Zen sect. Then, I will focus on on the Sōtō Zen master Dōgen (1200-1253) and his major work *Shōbōgenzō* in which we can find examples of *mitate* used to teach the Buddhist doctrine. However, Dōgen has a particular approach to *mitate*, which I call 'de-constructive' because he uses *mitate* to invalidate its function overturning its structure. This is a very original approach and an efficient strategy in order to transmit the ultimate truth taught in Zen. In this paper, I will present and analyse a few examples.

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**Keywords** Dōgen. *Mitate*. Japanese Buddhism. Deconstruction. Metaphor.

## 1 Introduction

First, I want to introduce the concept of *mitate*, which in Japan is generally considered to be a literary rhetoric tool, but can be applied also in non-literary situations, for example in Buddhist teaching, as in the case that I am going to present in the following pages.<sup>1</sup>

In the Japanese context, *mitate* means 'to suggest' or 'to infer' an element B, which is absent, through an element A that is present in the text. The rhetoric strategy of *mitate* consists of recalling something *in absentia* by means of something *in praesentia*. Though not present in the text, the concealed element can be inferred by means of what is present. This process can be carried out successfully thanks to inference, or intuition, that

1 For a general description of *mitate* in Japanese aesthetics see Isozaki, *Mitate no tehō*, 122-130; Haft, *Aesthetic Strategies of the Floating World*, 69 ff.

is a link based on the connection between the two elements.

Normally in the element A, which is present, there is a clue that allows the reader to infer element B, which is not present. In this way, a simple text can have a double meaning, or two parallel meanings, of which one is evident and the other is concealed. This device is mostly used in poetry, where rhetoric strategies are largely employed.

Just to give a simple example, the word ‘rain’ can be a *mitate* for ‘tears’: ‘rain’ is composed of water drops that can recall the water drops of the human eye, that is ‘tears’. In this case, the inference of ‘tears’ from ‘rain’ is easily inferred and the author can remind the reader of a condition of sorrow by means of a rainy day.

The capacity of inferring the hidden meaning of *mitate* ultimately depends on the reader and his sensibility.

## 2 *Mitate* in Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō*

In the major work of the Zen master Dōgen (1200-1253), one of the most important buddhist masters of Japan, *Shōbōgenzō*, there are many examples of *mitate*. One is the poem by the Chinese master Wanshi (宏智 1091-157) that Dōgen presents in the chapter “Zazenshin” (坐禅箴). The last part of it says:

「水清徹底兮  
魚行遲遲  
空闊莫涯兮  
鳥飛杳杳」(Sokuō 1965, 1: 406)

Water is clear to the bottom  
Fishes swim quietly  
The sky is vast and extends boundlessly  
The birds fly away somewhere.

In this case, “water is clear to the bottom” is a *mitate* for the mind that is clear and the same can be said for “the sky is vast and extends boundlessly”. As to fishes and birds, their unrestrained movements are a clear hint at the spontaneous movements of those who have reached enlightenment. Dōgen comments this unrestrained movement of fishes, saying:

「魚もしこの水をゆくは、「行」なきにあらざ、行はいく万程となくすゝむといへども、不測なり、不窮なり。」(408)

If a fish moves in this water, it is not that it does not move. Even if it goes for ten thousands of degrees, it is not measurable, it is not exhausting.

And then he adds the following comment:

「飛空(ひくう)は尽界なり、尽界飛空なるがゆへに。この飛、いくそばくといふことしらずといへども、卜度(ぼくど)のほかの道取を道取するに、「杳々」(ようよう)と道取するなり。」(409)

Flying in the sky is the whole world, because the whole world flies in the sky. Though you know how wide is this flying, in order to express it beyond measurability, we say “fly away somewhere”.

The above two comments are clearly a *mitate* for the freedom of those who have reached enlightenment. After quoting and commenting Wanshi's poem, Dōgen composes his own poem, saying in the last strophe:

「水清徹地兮  
魚行似魚  
空闊透天兮  
鳥飛如鳥」(410)

Water is clear to the bottom  
And fishes swim just like fishes do,  
The sky is vast and extends as far as the heaven  
Birds fly just like birds do.

Which is his own way of expressing awakening.

In the famous chapter “Genjō kōan” (現成公案), Dōgen takes up again the example of fishes and birds in order to express the state of liberation by means of nature.

「魚の水をゆくに、ゆけども水のきはなく、鳥そらをとぶに、とぶといへどもそらのきはなし。しかあれども、うをとり、いまだむかしよりみづそらをはなれず。只用大のときは使大なり。要小のときは使小なり。」(86)

Fishes swim and in their swimming there are no limits to the water. Birds fly, and in their flying there is no limits to sky. Things being like that, fishes and birds since ancient times do not separate from water and sky. When they want to use the big, they use the big, and when they want to use the small, they use the small.

Again, in the chapter “Yuibutsu yobutsu” (唯仏与仏), Dōgen speaks of fishes and birds:

「むかしよりいへること有り、いはゆる、うをにあらざればうのこころをせず、とりにあらざれば鳥のあとを尋づねがたし。このことわりをもよく知れる人まれなり。。。

しかあるを、鳥はよくちひさき鳥のいく百千むらがれすぎにける。これはおほきなる鳥のいくつらみなみにさり、きたに飛にけるあととよと、かずかずにみるなり。車の跡の路のこり、馬の跡の草にみゆるよりもかくれなし。鳥は鳥のあとを見る也。この理は、仏にも有り。」(Sokuō 1965, 3: 235)

There is a saying from ancient times: “Those who are not fishes cannot understand the mind of fishes. For those who are not birds it is difficult to follow the tracks of birds”. Very few people can understand the meaning of this saying.

However, birds know very well the track of their fellow birds that in hundreds and thousands in flock have passed by, and the tracks of a certain number of big birds that went south and have flown to the north. For them these tracks are even clearer than the tracks left by the wheels of a cart or the footprint of a horse on the grass. Birds see the tracks left by birds. This principle is the same also for the Buddhas.

Fishes and birds and their moving freely is a *mitate* of how nature is a manifestation of enlightenment, or said with a Buddhist expression of “original enlightenment”. Then, the *mitate* continues saying that only those who have achieved enlightenment can understand the “freedom of the awakened status”, and those who have not achieved enlightenment cannot understand it.

### 3 *Mitate* in Zen

In the field of Zen, *mitate*, metaphors and the like are very often used in teaching. In general, religions have a large repertory of parables, similes and so on: the Christian religion is a typical case. As examples of this type of discourse in Zen, I will show in 3.1 the Ten Ox Herding Pictures (十牛圖) and in 3.2 the poem of the mirror by the Sixth Chinese Patriarch Enō (慧能,<sup>2</sup> 638-713).

#### 3.1 The Ten Ox Herding Pictures

The Ten Ox Herding Pictures is a parable of the process that leads to enlightenment: a young shepherd has lost his ox and goes to look after it. He first sees it from a distance, then little by little gets nearer and nearer, until he can seize it. Ultimately the ox is caught and the shepherd controlling the ox comes back home on his back playing a flute. The ox is a *mitate* of enlightenment, and the young shepherd is that of the man in search of it.

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2 The names of Chinese Buddhist masters are given in their Japanese version.

3.2 *The Poem of the Mirror* by the Sixth Chinese Patriarch Enō

This example is particularly meaningful for what will be said afterwards. The Fifth Chinese Patriarch ordered his disciples to write a poem (*gāthā*) in order to express their comprehension of enlightenment. The author of the best poem will receive transmission and will become the Sixth Patriarch.

The foremost disciple Jinshū 神秀 (seventh century) wrote:

The body is a Bodhi tree  
 The mind is a standing clear mirror  
 Polish it diligently all time  
 And let no dust remain on it.

In this poem the “clear mirror” is a *mitate* of the mind of enlightenment: mirror ⇒ an object that reflects reality ⇒ *mitate* ⇒ human mind.

If dust covers the mirror, the latter cannot reflect faithfully. In the same manner, a mind obscured by a whirl of thoughts cannot see clearly the phenomena. Only wiping it all the time, it may remain clear: this is Jinshū’s comprehension.

However, Enō (who will become the Sixth Patriarch) reading Jinshū’s poem, replies with a counter-poem that says:

In Bodhi originally there isn’t any tree  
 The clear mirror is not a stand  
 Originally not a single thing is existent  
 Where could dust be attracted?  
 (Yampolsky 1967, 130-2)

Reading the two above poems from the point of view of *mitate*, Jinshū says that the body is a tree where enlightenment (Bodhi) is present, and the mind is a clear mirror. So, if we wipe away our attachments and passions (dust), the mind (mirror) will remain clear and man can attain enlightenment.

According to Enō there is no tree of the Bodhi, not even the mirror (mind). Since not a single phenomenon is existent, there is no place for dust (attachments and passions) to be attracted. In this way, he speaks from the point of view of the Void. He rejects the fact that there can be something by which man is caught.

While Jinshū’s comprehension is based on a logical assumption, that is a relative approach, Enō’s, instead, is based on the point of view of the absolute: nothing exists ⇒ the mirror also does not exist ⇒ therefore, dust cannot be attracted by anything ⇒ in conclusion, returning to the *mitate*, also ‘mind’ does not exist.

Enō seeing mind and enlightenment from the point of view of the 'void' cannot but arrive to that conclusion.

From the above poems, we can say that while Jinshū has a 'constructive' approach, Enō is in the position of a 'de-constructive' approach.

This means that according to Enō, enlightenment cannot be reached with a logical approach. In other words, while Jinshū's poem is a comprehension from a point of view of 'relative truth' (俗諦), that of Enō is from the position of 'absolute truth' (真諦).

The poem based on the 'relative truth' uses *mitate*: mirror as mind, clearness as enlightenment. Whereas, the poem based on the 'absolute truth' rejects *mitate*: refusing to establish parallels, it shows reality as it is.

## 4 Dōgen's 'de-constructive' *mitate*

There are examples, in *Shōbōgenzō*, where Dōgen rejects Jinshū's 'constructive approach' in favour of the Enō's 'de-constructive approach'. In his teaching of enlightenment by means of *mitate*, Dōgen is convinced that the logical approach is ineffective and thinks that only an intuitive approach can lead to awakening, which is to be perceived deeply within the human being.

Also in the practice of Zen called *kōan* 公案, an extra-logical approach is implemented in order to catch the real matter of reality. Dōgen is not interested in *mitate* as a literary rhetorical tool, rather as a tool to point to enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

Let us see a few examples of the 'de-constructive approach' of Dōgen's *mitate*.

### 4.1 Polish a Tile

In Chinese Chan literature, there is a famous anecdote of the Chinese master Baso Dōitsu 馬祖道一 (709-788), called "polishing a tile to make a mirror" (磨磚成鏡). The story says: Baso was the disciple of master Nangaku 南嶽. Baso was sitting in *zazen* when master Nangaku came by and asked him what he hoped to obtain by sitting in *zazen*. Baso said that he was trying to obtain buddhahood. Then Nangaku picked up a tile and began rubbing it. Baso asked the master what he was doing and Nangaku replied that he was trying to polish it into a mirror. Baso said that this was impossible, and the master retorted: "how can you become a Buddha by sitting in *zazen*?"

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3 On *kōan* language see He-Jin Kim, *The Reason of Words and letters. Dōgen and Koan Language*, in LaFleur 1985, 54-82.

Dōgen comments:

「大聖もし磨磚の法なくは、いかでか為人の方便あらん」(Sokuō 1965, 1: 300)  
If master Nangaku did not have the strategy of polishing a tile, how could he teach his pupils?

Again Dōgen comments:

「いまの人も、いまの磚(かわら)を拈じ磨(ま)してころみるべし、さだめて鏡とならん。磚もし鏡とならずは、人ほとけになるべからず」(301)

Even the persons of today should try to keep a tile in their hands and polish it. Surely it will become a mirror. If polishing, the tile does not turn into a mirror, people cannot turn into Buddhas.

The story of polishing a tile is clearly a *mitate*, but in the hands of Dōgen ceases to be a *mitate* and becomes the ‘true thing’. It is the same as the flower that the Buddha Śākyamuni gave to Mahākāśyapa in a ‘special transmission’. In Zen this is called ‘*ishindenshin*’ (direct transmission from mind to mind 以心伝心), which is a special and mysterious transmission.

Dōgen uses *mitate* as a ‘skillful means’ (*hōben* 方便) in order to give a special and ‘mysterious’ (*myō* 妙) teaching. In fact, polishing a tile is a *mitate* that is normally interpreted as the fact of sitting in *zazen* does not lead to buddhahood. However, depending of the interpretation, this *mitate* can change its meaning and function. The normal interpretation of polishing a tile makes of it a *mitate*: the tile is the person doing *zazen*, the mirror the enlightened mind, and the polishing the practice of *zazen*.

However, Dōgen gives this *mitate* an original and profound meaning: going beyond logic reasoning, he explains the story from a special and mysterious point of view. Starting from a negative approach to the fact of not becoming a mirror and not obtaining buddhahood, he gives a positive interpretation of it, that is becoming a mirror and obtaining buddhahood. In this way, polishing a tile ceases to be a *mitate* as such and becomes the ‘real thing’.

In the poem by Jinshū, things are stated separately, i.e. mirror as mirror, dust as dust, but in Enō’s poem, things are not separate: since all phenomena are at the same time delusive and also enlightenment, they do not exist as such. This is an omni-comprehensive approach and Dōgen takes the same stand, that is from the point of view of absolute truth.

#### 4.2 “Kūge”, The Flowers in the Sky (or in the Void)

In the chapter “Kūge” (空華) there is a very interesting *mitate*. The word *kūge* means ‘flowers in the sky’ or ‘flowers in the void’, and as a *mitate* it refers to a hallucinatory view of reality, that is illusion. Flowers in the

sky do not exist and their existence is due only to an illness of the eyes.  
Dōgen says:

「迦牟尼仏言、「《又如翳人、見空中華、翳病若除、華於空滅》」。この道著、あきらむる学者いまだあらず。」とある。(Sokuō 1965, 2: 167)

Śākyamuni Buddha said: “again, it is like a person with an illness of the eyes who sees flowers in the sky. If the illness disappears also the view of flowers disappear. However, there is not yet a single scholar (of Buddhism) who has understood this expression.

The structure of this *mitate* is as follows: flowers in the sky (*mitate*) = seen because of the illness of the eyes = flowers that do not exist = illusory flowers: illusion.

The meaning is: ‘since the common people cannot see true reality, deluded, they see flowers in the sky that do not exist’. This is the normal attitude of common people viewing reality. If illusion disappears, true reality manifests itself. Therefore, if the eye illness is cured, people can attain awakening (view of true reality). This is a very simple teaching.

However, Dōgen gives a different interpretation of this *mitate*. In fact he says: “there is not yet a single scholar (of Buddhism) who has understood this expression”. His interpretation is ‘de-constructive’ and reads the *mitate*, not as such, but as the ‘true thing’: “if the illness disappears also the view of flowers disappear [= illusion disappear]”. However, Dōgen rejects the consequence that, if illusion disappears, enlightenment manifests itself.

He says:

「諸法実相なれば翳花実相なり」(169)

All phenomena being the true aspect of reality, [also] flowers in the sky seen with eyes illness are true reality.

Again he says:

「しかあればしるべし、翳花の乱墜(らんつい=落下)は諸仏の現成なり、眼空の花果(花と実)は諸仏の保任(ほにん=保ってたえる)なり」(172)

Therefore, we should know that the fall (from the sky) of so many flowers seen with the eyes illness is the realization of all Buddhas, and the fruit and flowers of the eyes of the sky is doing all Buddhas our own.

As a consequence,

「こゝをもて、翳也全機現、眼也全機現。空也全機現、花也全機現なり」(172-3)

Therefore, the illness of the eyes is the ‘manifestation of the entire dynamic activity’ (*zenki* 全機), and the eyes are the manifestation of the entire



dynamic activity. The sky is the manifestation of the entire dynamic activity and the flowers are the manifestation of the entire dynamic activity.

All phenomena, just as they are, are enlightenment. Also illusion is part of enlightenment; therefore, also illusion is the manifestation of the entire dynamic activity. This ‘manifestation of the entire dynamic activity’ is nothing else than ‘true reality’.

According to the two above-quoted examples, that of “polishing the tile” and that of “flowers in the sky” (but others as well can be mentioned), we can draw the conclusion that for Dōgen *mitate* strategy is ‘de-costructive’, since he denies the separation or opposition between the element *in praesentia* (flowers in the sky) and that *in absentia* (illusion). In simple terms: he denies that, as a consequence, the removal of illusion leads to the view of ‘true reality’, that is awakening, since illusion is a part of ‘true reality’. Enlightenment and illusion belong to the same one-only reality.

In the same way, the impossibility of a tile to become a mirror and the opposition between tile and mirror are denied. In a special and mysterious manner (妙), tiles can become mirrors and, in the same way, men can become Buddhas. At another level, Dōgen wants us to understand that the opposition between Buddhas and common people does not exist: Buddhas are common people and vice versa.

*Mitate* is based on difference and similarity: similar but different, such as rain and tears. The contrast allows *mitate* to exist. However, when tiles become mirrors and flowers in the sky are true reality, *mitate* has no ground for existence. Dōgen uses *mitate* in order to de-construct *mitate* and, thus, overturns false views. *Mitate* is based on ordinary logic, but the dimension of enlightenment is outside the scope of logic and belongs to the realm of intuition, where tiles become mirrors and flowers in the sky are real. In *mitate* the element *in praesentia* is a vehicle leading to that *in absentia*, but for Dōgen nothing is a shade of something else since all is the true thing.

### 4.3 *Mitsugo*

*Mitate* consists of a ‘hidden language’ that, in esoteric teachings, corresponds to secret words. In Japanese esoteric Buddhism, such words are called *mitsugo* 密語, ‘secret language or words’.

In Zen, which is based on a direct transmission from master to disciple, and outside the written language (*tanden* 単伝, *furyūmonji* 不立文字), there is the word *mitsuin* (密印), which means ‘subtle signs’ that are words that, by means of ‘mysterious signs’ (*myō na in* 妙な印), can lead to enlightenment, or that show the attained enlightenment..

Generally speaking, *mitsugo* means ‘secret language’ and in Japan it is largely used in the esoteric Buddhist school of Shingon, i.e. a language

such as that of *dhāranī* and *mantra*, used in secret transmission and addressed only to initiates. Secret language is the language that directly expresses the ultimate truth.

In *Shōbōgenzō* there is a chapter called “Mitsugo”, which explains what is the real meaning of ‘secret words’ according to Dōgen.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, Dōgen, as an example of wordless transmission, takes up the famous tale of the flower shown by the Buddha to his disciple Mahākāśyapa and of his smile of comprehension (*nengemishō* 拈華微笑) and comments:

「すでに世尊なるは、かならず密語あり。密語あれば、さだめて迦葉不覆蔵あり(Sokuō 1965, 2: 247)

All the Honoured Ones (Buddhas) have secret language. Since there is secret language, there certainly is a Mahākāśyapa who unveils it.

And after this:

「汝若不会世尊密語、汝若会迦葉不覆蔵」(247)

If you do not understand, it is the Honoured One’s language. If you understand it is Mahākāśyapa unveiling the secret language.

This means that Mahākāśyapa has the task of unveiling the secret language and, by this, of leading human beings to salvation. However, man must make any possible effort in order to understand the secret language of the Honoured One.

「参学すといふは、一時に会取せんとおもはず、百廻千廻も審細功夫して、かたきものをきらんと経営するがごとくすべし。かたる人あらば、たちどころに会取すべしとおもふべからず」(248)

By studying, do not think that you can understand everything immediately, but exerting to the utmost strive a hundred or even a thousand times, as if you were trying to cut through something hard. Do not imagine that when someone has something to relate to you, you should immediately understand what is being said.

Secret language (*mitsugo*) is of course difficult to understand, however, striving “a hundred or even a thousand times, as if you were trying to cut through something hard”, also common people can do the same as Mahākāśyapa.

However,

「愚人おもはく、密は他人のしらず、みづからはしり、しれる人あり、しらざる人ありと」(250-1)

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4 For the english translation of this chapter, see Tanahashi, *Enlightenment Unfolds*, 179-184.

Stupid people think that *mitsu(go)* is not comprehensible by other people<sup>5</sup> and is only for oneself, and there are people who cannot understand.

This is a “stupid” way of thinking, actually it is not like that. In other words, according to Dōgen what we call “secret language” is not secret, and this is an important point that shows Dōgen’s originality.

「いはんや天眼天耳、法眼法耳、仏眼仏耳等を具せんときは、すべて密語密意あるべからずといふべし。仏法の密語・密意・密行等は、この道理にあらず」(251)

When one is equipped with sharp eyes and sharp ears, or the eyes and the ears of the Law, the eyes and the ears of the Buddha, there can be no such thing as ‘secret language’ and ‘secret intentions’. ‘Secret language’, ‘secret intentions’ and ‘secret practice’ is not in accord with the Buddhist Law.

This means that Dōgen considers ‘secret language’ and anything else that is ‘secret’ as non-existent or impossible to exist. For those who have sharp eyes and ears, that is for those who are attentive and are good learners of the Way (*Dō*), there are no secrets, since everything is clearly manifested. ‘True reality’ is always under our eyes and ears, but often we are not able to see and to hear.

In order to explain this point of view, Dōgen uses an ingenious linguistic strategy:

「いはゆる密は、親密の道理なり。無間断なり」(251)

What is called ‘secret’ actually is ‘familiar’, ‘intimate’. It is in-mediate.

The word and character for ‘secret’ (密) strangely have two very different, almost opposite, meanings: 1) secret and 2) familiar, intimate. Dōgen interprets the ‘*mitsu*’ (secret) of *mitsugo*, not as a “secret” but with the second meaning, as something “familiar” and “intimate”. Therefore, *mitsugo*, from the meaning of ‘secret language’, becomes a ‘familiar, or intimate language’, that is an in-mediate language: a language which is not mediated by conventions, pointing directly to the true reality.

This approach, seen from the point of view of *mitate*, leads to change the meaning of *mitate* from the interpretation of ‘hidden language’ in which something in the forefront indirectly points to something in the backstage, to a language that directly points to true reality. Language ceases to be a tool that has hidden meanings and cross-references and becomes a manifestation of the dimension of enlightenment.

5 Namely those who are not initiated.

What we consider to be secret language – metaphors<sup>6</sup> and *mitate* – are, for Dōgen, the ‘real thing’ and not a shade for something else, if only they are well understood by making efforts for their comprehension.

Dōgen considers language to be a tool with which it is possible to manifest ultimate reality and, therefore, *sūtras* – i.e. the words of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs, the so-called ‘secret language’, *mitate* and so on – are an ‘intimate and ‘direct’ language, a ‘true language’ (*shingon* 真言), which is a clear and manifest one that shows us enlightenment, just like fishes swimming in the endless water and birds flying in the vast sky.

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6 On ‘language and symbols’ see Kim 1987, 77-95.