

Foreword

My interests in the game of go and in Buddhist philosophy developed quite independently of each other, although both were prompted by a visit to Japan in 1974. As a philosopher, I was already aware of Buddhism, of course, but not of go. I began reading contemporary Japanese literature and eventually came across Kawabata's novel, *The Master of Go*. I thought it sounded like a fascinating game and eventually found someone who could teach me how to play. After a few years I discovered the American Go Association and slowly became more involved in the world of go. A major highpoint of that involvement was being invited to spend two months in Tokyo as a guest of the Nihon Kiin in 1996 to learn how to teach go to beginners, especially children. That program resulted in my being certified as an International Go Instructor by the Nihon Kiin. Since then I have taught the game to hundreds of people, from kids in elementary and middle schools, to students in my courses on Go and Eastern Philosophy at the College of William and Mary, to people in retirement homes.

In the 1980s I also began to be seriously interested in Eastern thought, especially the philosophy of the Kyoto school in Japan, a fascinating expression of Buddhist thought by philosophers who are solidly trained in Western traditions. Then, in 1994, I suddenly noticed the parallels between these two interests and discovered that these parallels were well known to many go players and had been for a long time. I began writing about them and even developed a course that I taught at the College of William and Mary, where I was in the Philosophy department, on the game of go and Eastern philosophy. This was a very popular course, and I taught two sections of thirty students every semester for several years. Some of my colleagues had reservations about such a course, but by then I was the senior member of the department and was given a certain leeway in such matters. With the aim of devoting more of my time and energy to go, I retired from the college in 1998.

The column *The Empty Board* started in the *American Go Journal* in 1994 and still continues as this book is published. The idea for it was really the inspiration of the editor of the journal at the time, Roy Laird. When Chris Garlock replaced Roy as editor of the *American Go Journal* in 1998 he suggested some changes in the column, primarily opening up to a broader range of topics and making the writing style more focused and disciplined.

At the end of 2002, Chris and I started the AGA's *E-Journal*, which eventually replaced the quarterly print journal altogether, except for an annual yearbook containing "the best of the E-Journal". The *E-Journal* format necessitated a further reduction in the length and a sharpening of the focus of *The Empty Board* columns as they were now being published as parts of an email magazine.

During this period I also published a general overview of the theme of the connections between go and Buddhist philosophy in the *British Go Journal* and a more academically oriented and much longer piece on this topic in an English language scholarly journal published by Kyoto University in Japan, *The Eastern Buddhist* (XXX, 2, 1997). This article was published in abridged form in the magazine *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* in 1999 (VIII, 3, Spring 1999).

All of these writings are reproduced here as they were originally published, even though there are some places where I would now say things a bit differently. I have appended introductory notes to each of the articles to provide a bit of context for the reader. Essays that are published after this book is produced can be found archived at www.slateandshell.com .

The Empty Board #4: The Overcoming of Self in Go

When I wrote this essay, I had not yet discovered the explicit reference to go in the writings of Dogen. There is something of an academic tone to these early essays with their references to specific philosophers and their use of foreign terms—and their long, convoluted sentences. This gradually fades away as I move toward a more relaxed, conversational style. The importance of the handicapping system in go first comes up in this essay, as well as the notion of go as a sedentary martial art.

It is interesting to think of go as a sort of sedentary martial art. In earlier days it was often seen that way quite self-consciously. Go was looked upon as a Way (*do/tao*), a practice through which one could achieve the ultimate level of existence and establish contact with the highest level of reality, that is, achieve enlightenment and enter nirvana. In the martial arts this goal is often spoken of as overcoming the self and becoming one with the *tao*. A common misconception thinks that this is similar to the experience of losing oneself in an activity, but in the martial arts this is not simply a matter of learning to concentrate on the activity and ceasing to be self-conscious—something any accomplished athlete masters. In the martial arts the idea is to destroy a particular way of understanding oneself and the related way of experiencing the world and relating to others. This is expected to have a profound impact on every aspect of one's life, not just on the way one practices the art. It is a thorough transformation, like waking up from a nightmare.

One can still approach go as a *tao* in this sense, of course. In fact, I find it amazing how often the game seems to have some of this sort of impact on players who are surely unaware of this way of thinking about it. Just playing the game seems to bring many players closer to *nirvana*, or, as the ancient Chinese claimed, make them “better” (that is, enlightened) people. This is exactly the way it would be with a proper *tao*. “Just do it—that is being enlightened,” as Dogen, the 13th century Japanese Zen master, said. He was talking about sitting meditation (*zazen*), but it comes to the same thing.

To understand how one enters *nirvana* just by playing go, one needs some understanding of what it means to overcome the self. The Buddhist view of

what a human being is contrasts radically with the common Western view. In the latter, it is assumed that each person is a unique, self-contained, self-responsible agent. Even though the individual person has parts, these parts constitute the person on the basis of their relations to each other. These internal relations are what make up the real self; external relations to other persons and the world are not constitutive of one's fundamental being on this view.

Thus, groups of individuals such as families or communities are abstractions for most Westerners; it is their individual members that are real. These individuals can leave one group and join another and still be the same persons. This is the famous Cartesian ego, the ego that says, "I think, therefore I am." It is the philosophical notion that is at the root of Western individualism, the view that all actions and all values are ultimately the actions and values of individuals. Such individuals can cooperate with each other, but they remain separate individuals.

It is just this view of the self that the Buddha said is the number one source of human suffering and is thus the most serious of all the delusions that humans are prone to. It is the self in this sense that the martial arts are designed to overcome; the point of the practice is to get rid of this delusion. This view of the self causes terrible problems because it encourages us to believe that we can make our lives better by acquiring or achieving things for ourselves as separate individuals. Buddhists argue that life is in fact a common endeavor; we are all part of each other in the most literal sense. Thus, it makes no sense to think that I could help myself at your expense. At this point, we can begin to see how go can help us to overcome self in the common Western sense.

In most competitive games it is easy to believe that by winning, which is a personal achievement, one is doing something that is inherently good and, in at least a small way, making one's life better. The handicapping system in go effectively counters this unfortunate assumption. The point of handicapping is to make the quality of the playing of the game, which is a joint and not a personal achievement, the thing that matters. Even if a player only thinks of the handicapping system as a nuisance and tries to focus on winning, the practice counteracts this attitude. Players just naturally begin to pay more attention to the process of the game, delighting in plays that are particularly effective—even when the effect damages their own chances of winning a game.

Another striking instance of this overcoming of self is the common practice among go players of pointing out in a tournament when the other has failed to hit the clock after making a play. This practice obviously damages one's chance of winning, and there is no rule that requires one to draw the other's attention to this slip. Yet it is a very pervasive practice among go players.

The extent to which playing go just naturally leads to the overcoming of self in this sense is one of the great attractions of the game. Even if people do not realize that it amounts to getting a toe into *nirvana*, in Buddhist terms that is what it is. *Nirvana* is the place/condition of being enlightened. Being enlightened is the condition of having overcome self. So just play—and notice how often you find yourself sharing a smile.

American Go Journal XXIX, 3 (Summer 1995), 30-31

The Empty Board #15: Partners vs. Opponents

I begin to step back a little from the rather dry philosophical analyses of earlier columns in this essay. It's also the first in which I mention the idea that you should apologize to the other player when you make a blunder that loses the game. I had blundered in a recent tournament, putting a group of my own stones in atari right at the end of the game, so this issue was at the front of my mind. The bad feeling a losing blunder evokes should not be primarily a response to the fact that it causes you to lose the game.

The person you play against in a game of go is obviously your opponent. You must do your best to win, which means trying to defeat the other player, who is opposing that aim. At the same time, you, of course, are the other player's opponent, working for the opposite of the other's victory.

But it is also obvious that there are important ways in which the other player is not your opponent. Without the other player's cooperation, you can't play the game at all. Playing the game requires a complex mutual agreement that makes possible a joint activity that neither can engage in alone.

Opponents are usually also partners. Surprisingly, this is true even of war. You can destroy the other, but you can't have a fight with the other unless the other decides to cooperate by resisting. This is one of the reasons why, in traditional Japanese culture, both children are punished when a fight breaks out. Who started it is not the crucial point; learning not to opt for certain types of behavior is.

In the case of go, the role of partner is more significant than in most competitions, and thinking about the other player as your partner, rather than only as your opponent, brings out some of the essential qualities of go. Virtually anyone can function as an opponent, but certain requirements must be met in order to be a plausible partner. A partner is much more than someone who opposes you in some way.

It would be odd to call someone a partner unless you shared some positive goal which you can both contribute towards achieving, a goal that includes mutual benefit, not just the opportunity to defeat the other. So, the shared goal must be the enjoyment of the game, not just the chance to enjoy winning, since both players don't get to enjoy winning.

The handicapping system points us in this direction, of course, since its effect is to prevent us from winning more than about half the time. If the enjoyment we seek is in winning, go is not the best game to choose. If we're going to have a chance of enjoying more than about half our games, the quality of the game has to be the focus, and that's where the idea of the other player and oneself as partners comes to the fore.

This has an impact both on my attitude toward the other's playing and on my attitude toward my own playing. Since my goal is not just to win, I want my partner to make the best plays possible, not blunders that enable me to win easily. I want to win, of course, but what I really want is to win a game that has been brilliantly played—by both partners.

Hence, it is important for me not to make blunders, either. It's not just that they are likely to lead to my losing. Thanks to the handicapping system, I'm going to lose about half the time no matter how I play. The problem with my making blunders is that they prevent me from enjoying the game, whether I win or lose. The enjoyment of winning due to your partner's stupid blunders is very slight indeed. The enjoyment of playing well even though losing is far superior.

And that's one of the essential qualities of go. You must play well, not just so that you may win, but so that you can enjoy the game. When I try something in a game, not knowing just where it will lead, I don't want my partner to just collapse. I want the other player to come up with a challenging response that will push us both to higher levels of play. That is our common goal, to reach higher levels of play, not just to win games.

This sort of partnership, aiming at improving the quality of play, exists in most games, but in go it gets more emphasis than in most cases because of the handicapping system. Handicapping helps us to remember that the other player is more our partner than our opponent and that as partners we share an obligation to try to find the best moves we can, not just to win, but to produce a better mutual creation, a well-played game. So, I should apologize to my partner when I make a blunder that gives away the game. By my carelessness, I've undermined the goal both of us were seeking.

American Go Journal XXXIII, 3 (Summer 1999), 24

The Empty Board #27: Comes the Revolution

I enjoy wearing the tee shirt mentioned in this column. Appropriately, it is bright red. The quote is genuine, but Che was talking about soccer, not go.

“It is not just a simple game; it is an important weapon in the revolution.”

This statement is attributed to Che Guevara, the doctor turned revolutionary who challenged dictators in Cuba and throughout Central America in the 1960s. It appears on a t-shirt created by the folks at www.philosophyfootball.com (an English site for soccer fans). Naturally, the statement made me think of go, which has been such a revolutionary force in so many lives.

This “simple game” turns out to be surprisingly powerful. It’s not just that we become addicted to it; it makes us better people, too. If more people played go, the world would surely be a better place. I still clearly remember how impressed I was when I discovered that the people at the Nihon Kiin are, in all seriousness, promoting go around the world as a way to bring about global peace.

A revolutionary force changes the way people think, as well as the way they act. Playing go certainly does both. “Have a plan, but be flexible.” “Pay attention to the surrounding situations.” “Let your opponent have something.” Ideas like these become second nature to a go player, but are all too rare in other circles.

In order to become a better player I must have stronger opponents, so I try my best to make you a better player. For me to win, you do not have to be destroyed. Just think what the world would be like if that sort of attitude toward your competitors was more common. Instead of invading “evil” countries, perhaps we should be teaching their leaders to play go.

So, the next time you introduce go to some kids at the local public school, remember: it’s not just a simple game.

American Go E-Journal, January 6, 2003

Appendix #2: The Game of Go: An Unexpected Path to Enlightenment

This is the complete version of the article that was abridged for *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (see pages 44 – 50 above)). It was published in *The Eastern Buddhist*, an English language journal published by Kyoto University in Japan, New Series, XXX, 2, 1997, 199 – 213.

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of traditional practices in Japan that have been used as aids in the search for enlightenment. These include such things as the arts of flower arranging, of archery, of sword fighting, of the tea ceremony, of karate, etc. All are seen as involving one or more of the attitudes that are characteristic of a Buddhist so that by engaging in them one can experience elements of the Buddhist perspective in a concrete form that is more readily accessible than koan study or meditation practice. In addition to serving as paths to enlightenment, these practices can illuminate the nature of the Buddhist perspective for those seeking simply to understand Buddhism, and there are a number of well-known works that use a description of these practices and the experience of engaging in them as a way of explicating Buddhism. Some examples are Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Gustie L. Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958); Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Horst Hamnitzsch, *Zen in the Art of the Tea Ceremony* (New York: Avon Books, 1982); Thomas Hoover, *Zen Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977); etc.

However, there is a major traditional practice in Japan that has been associated with Buddhism for centuries and is traditionally referred to as a “way” or *do* (pronounced *dao* in Chinese) that has been neglected by those seeking to explicate Buddhism, although it is an unusually effective vehicle for illuminating the Buddhist perspective. This is the game Westerners call “Go,” known in Japan as *igo* or *kido*, “the way of Go.”*

From a Buddhist point of view, the game effectively manifests the way Buddhists conceive of the world process and straightforwardly

* William Pinckard points out this connection although he makes little effort to explicate it. See “Go and the ‘Three Games’,” in *The Go Player’s Almanac*, edited by Richard Bozulich (Tokyo: Ishi Press, 1992), pp. 4-6.

inculcates the attitudes of mind and heart that Buddhists praise. In fact, the game provides a useful way of depicting and experiencing the fundamental aspects of life as Buddhists understand it. My intent here is to show how this is so.

DOGEN ON GO

That there is a special connection between playing go and the authentication of enlightenment is suggested by a striking passage in Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo*. In the essay "Spring and Autumn" (*Shunju*), written in 1244, Dogen uses a reference to go to help his audience understand a famous koan.* In response to a monk's question as to how to avoid being cold or hot, the ninth century Chinese Zen master Dongshan tells the monk to go where there is no cold or heat. Dogen refers to several traditional explanations of this response that interpret it as making a philosophical point about the unity that must be prior to all distinctions. That is, a unifying concept of temperature must be prior to the distinction between cold and hot. The traditional explanations take Dongshan to be pointing toward the denial of the ultimacy of all distinctions. However, Dogen insists that such interpretations are inadequate: "If the Buddha-dharma had been transmitted merely through the philosophical investigation of unity and distinction, how could it have reached this day?"

Dogen says that we should instead heed the words of Hongzhi, a twelfth century Chinese Zen master, who said: "It is like when you and I are playing go. If you do not respond to my move, I'll swallow you up. Only when you penetrate this will you understand the meaning of Dongshan's words."

Dogen then goes on to clarify this surprising reference to playing the game of go. He comments, "Suppose there is a go game; who are the two players? If you answer that you and I are playing go, it will be as if you have a handicap of eight stones, and if you have a handicap of eight stones, it will no longer be a game. What is my meaning? When you respond to my question, 'Who are the two players?', answer this way: 'You play go by yourself; the opponents become one.' Steadying your mind and turning your body in this way, you should examine Hongzhi's words, 'If you do not

* "Spring and Autumn" is translated by Katherine Thanas and Dazuaki Tanahashi in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, edited by Dazuaki Tanahashi (New York: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 108-113. My quotations are based on this translation.

respond to my move.’ This means ‘you’ are not yet ‘you’. You should also not neglect the words, ‘I’ll swallow you up.’ Mud within mud; a jewel within a jewel. Illuminate other, illuminate the self.”

Dogen offers this as an adequate explanation of Dongshan’s remark, along with an additional explanation in terms of his own notion of “dropping off body and mind” (*Shinjin datsuraku*). His use of the reference to playing go suggests that he assumes his audience at the Eiheiji Temple is thoroughly familiar with the experience of playing the game and that he himself is also. It also suggests that he sees playing the game as at least comparable to the experience of “dropping off body and mind.” However, since I cannot assume that the readers of this paper are very familiar with go, I will say something about the game and how it can be connected with basic Buddhist ideas before unpacking this passage from Dogen’s *Shobogenzo*.

THE GAME OF GO

The game of go originated in China at least 4000 years ago and in ancient Chinese tradition was seen as one of the four activities a person had to master in order to be considered truly civilized, the other three being poetry, music, and painting. It was brought to Japan around the seventh century of the common era, probably by Buddhist monks returning from training in monasteries in China. Thus, the game is much older than Buddhism, but it was quickly recognized by Buddhists as a useful tool for Buddhist practice. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the strongest players in Japan were generally Buddhist monks. (The oldest extant game record in Japan is traditionally ascribed to Nichiren, the 13th century founder of the Nichiren sect of Buddhism.) The game was popular as a means of instilling the virtues of overcoming fear, greed, and anger among the Samurai, whose instructors in go were Buddhist monks. Its capacity for making its players better people is part of the reason go is still widely popular in Japan, Korea, and China, where millions of people play regularly and there are substantial groups of professional players who make their living at go, usually by teaching the game.* The increasing popularity of Go in Europe and America, where there are thousands of enthusiastic amateur players and a few professionals,

* William Pinckard provides a general overview of the involvement of Buddhist monks in the development of go in Japan. See “History and Philosophy [of Go],” in *The Go Player’s Almanac*, edited by Richard Bozulich (Tokyo: Ishi Press, 1992), pp. 7-19.