

## **Session Abstract**

### **BEING TIME AND BEING CHANGE: DOGEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO UNDERSTANDING THE TEMPORALITY OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT**

**Ronald E. Purser**

**San Francisco State University**

Change management, as it is presently conceived and practiced, is based on a number of unexamined assumptions having to do with the temporality of change. Most theories and interventions assume that change is an external phenomenon that can be managed by an independent agent (change agent). Change is usually regarded as a necessary evil or noxious period that needs to be “managed,” in order to return, or “refreeze” the organization to a desirable state of equilibrium. In organizational development, impermanence, transience and change need to be “managed” in order to ensure and sustain the ongoing survival of organizations. The means of managing change are based on numerous interventions and methods that presuppose a certain temporal order in which change processes unfold.

However, the theory of “managing change” signifies at some level an underlying aversion to change or transience. As Haridimos and Chia (2002) point out, change theorists have ignored basic ontological assumptions that constitute the temporality of change which are inseparable from existential questions of identity and corporeality in time. Organizational change theory has been dominated by assumptions valorizing stability, order and continuity. Haridimos and Chia (2002) argue that because ontological priority has been given to maintaining stability, organizational theory has a superficial understanding of the nature of change processes. Moreover, Haridimos and Chia (2002: 567) maintain that organizations are “secondary accomplishment” arising as an attempt to “order the intrinsic flux of human action, to channel it towards certain ends...”

In contrast, Buddhist philosophy maintains that the nature of reality is inherently impermanent, and that attempts to cling to positions of stability are doomed to experience the suffering of change. For Buddhists, impermanence is an undeniable fact of reality. Similarly, Haridimos and Chia (2002) view change as the normal condition of organizational life, and proposed a theoretical approach based on a set of ontological premises that took ongoing change as a basic fact of reality.

#### **“Uji” (Time-Present/Being-Time): A Brief Introduction**

Dogen, an eminent 13<sup>th</sup> century Japanese Zen master and founder of the Soto school, placed a great deal of emphasis on acting in real time, which was achieved through a rigorous meditative discipline of zazen. Hence, in Dogen's writings we find theory and practice, knowledge and action, inseparably entwined.

This session will draw from Dogen's understanding of temporality, based on the fascicle "Uji" which is one of 96 chapters in his famous work, *The Shobogenzo*. In this essay, Dogen makes such statements as: "Time is existence, and existence is time" and "You must see all things in this world as time." The term "Uji," is roughly translated as "Being-Time," "Existence-Time," or "Time-Present." For Dogen, time is always related to existence, and the present moment is the only time that really exists. Time is always related with action in the here and now, and time can only be realized in action (Heine, 1983).

The Uji essay begins with these statements:

*Time-present is standing on the mountain heights.*

*Time-present is sinking to the depths of the ocean.*

*Time-present is an angry demon, time-present is a Buddha.*

*Time-present is a formal ceremony, time-present is the temple compound.*

*Time-present is an everyday person, time-present is pervading the whole Universe.*

*(trans. Luetchford, 2004).*

For Dogen, all manifestations depend on time, and are expressions of time. In one respect, Time-Present can be considered as a unified time, which does not flow or pass in the normal sense of time flying away. Time changes each moment without losing its continuity. Time is time because it is continuous. Such continuity can be compared to Bergson's *duree*.

Yet Uji is also quite fundamentally different from Bergson's *duree*. Uji embraces both the discontinuous and the continuity of time simultaneously. As Dogen states in GenjoKoan:

*Once firewood turns to ash, the ash cannot turn back to being firewood. Still one should not take the view that is ash **afterward** and firewood **before**. You should realize that although firewood is at the dharma-situation of firewood, and that this is possessed of before and after, firewood is beyond before and after. Ashes are at the dharma-situation of ashes, and possess before and after. Just as firewood does not revert to firewood once it turns to ash, man does not return to life after his death. (cited in Abe, 1992:113)*

The statement that firewood "has before and after" refers to the continuity of time. "Beyond before and after" refers to the discontinuity of time.

Time-present flows, not in the horizontal dimension of ordinary linear time, but in the vertical dimension (Abe, 1992). Flow in time-present does not amount to passage, or a passing away, but a deepening presence in what might be crudely stated as an "expanded, trans-temporal present."

Time, for Dogen, is not irreversible. As he states:

*Time proceeds from today to tomorrow. Today proceeds back to yesterday. Yesterday proceeds on to today. Today proceeds on through today. Tomorrow proceeds on through tomorrow. Although time can be seen as a process like this, times arriving do not pile up on top of times past, neither do they extend out in a continuous line. (trans. Luetchford, 2004)*

Uji presents time as being a flowing array of eternal moments, as a paradoxical awareness of time as "discontinuous continuity".

Dogen expresses this thought in these words: "Today proceeds on through today." In other words, time flows from the present to the present. For Dogen, time is not spatial, but dynamically present and unified. As Dogen states: "...times arriving do not pile up on top of times past, neither do they extend out in a continuous line." In this respect, Uji does not have a "from-to" structure; time does not really flow from the past to the present. Rather, we could say that the all time flows from the present. Dogen expresses such an insight quite eloquently:

*Thus the whole of existence, the whole Universe, is present at each moment of time. Have a quick look to see if you can find any part of the Universe that has escaped from this present moment. (trans; Luetchford, 2004). .*

With such awareness, we feel Time-Present as flowing, but it does not pass away in the ordinary sense. If time were merely to pass away, we would be separate from time. In other words, there would be temporal gaps between different times.

As Dogen points out:

*Seeing time as flowing away is not enough. Thinking that the only property time has is the ability to flow is not enough. If we think of time only as flowing away, then there must be gaps between instants of time-present as they pass. Ordinary people only see time as something that flows away, and this is why they do not experience time-present, and have not heard it explained. In actual fact, all the things in whole Universe are time-presents that are both continuous and separate. Real time is always time-present, and so it is always this time-present. (trans. Leutchford, 2004)*

Ordinary time assumes that past, present, and future exist in some sort of spatial like container through which existence passes. While ordinary time seems to be characterized by a past-present-future nexus, Time-Present dwells in the timeless "trans-temporal" present which encompasses all moments simultaneously. Uji thus amounts to an experience of the eternal moment, a spontaneous manifestation of dynamic presencing, quite different from the more static Medieval *stunc nans*.

## Time, Identity and Change Management

One of the fundamental tenets of Buddhist teaching is that all phenomena are impermanent, transient, and subject to change. From a Buddhist perspective, transience and time are closely related. However, our usual way of viewing time is to use it merely as a measure of transience. We in effect turn time into an abstract index, standardizing it as a measure. As a result, we come to see time as separate from the flow of events.

But Time-Present, what we might call “dynamic presencing,” is never separate or apart from events. Dogen notes that what appears to be passing in time is not a substantial entity. He uses an analogy of Spring to make his point:

*But we should not understand this momentary continuance is like the wind or rain sweeping from East to West. The whole Universe is progressing from one moment to the next; not static, but also not a continuous process. An example of this momentary progression is Spring. It has many different aspects, the passing of which we call the progress of Spring. But our practice teaches us that the passing of time moment to moment involves no external object. (trans. Luetchford, 2004).*

In other words, it is not that because *it is spring* that temperatures become milder, flowers bloom, and bees go about their business. *It is because temperatures become milder, flowers bloom and bees go about their business*, that we say it is spring. Another way of understanding this “momentary continuance with no external object” is to shift from the view that “things” change, to the direct insight that “things are change.”

Another fundamental tenet of Buddhist teachings is that the self (and all things) are empty of any inherent, independent existence. The “no-self” doctrine maintains there is no enduring substance with which one may identify one’s ‘self,’ including the physical body. To say the self (and in our case, an organization) is empty doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Rather, emptiness means that the self has no fixed, inner non-changing essence that defines it. From a Buddhist perspective, no “self-nature” (anatman) is discovered right within the flux of impermanence (annica).

If all phenomena are inherently transient, impermanent, and subject to change, then what is there actually to change from a “Change management” perspective? Change is inherent in the nature of reality. Stasis and permanence are illusory, relative notions. Yet change management presupposes the existence of entities (organizations, persons) that possess identities that are continuous and immutable in time. Change is “managed” only in the sense to maintain continuity and identity over time.

Seen in this light, change management amounts to an attempt to secure an unchanging essence against the onslaught of what is experienced to be a merciless time. Such aphorisms as managing in “constant whitewater,” “order out of chaos,” and so on—point to the notion that organizations are viewed as independent entities that must navigate the in the flow of change/time. The image of separateness from the flow of time can be likened to a bubble popping along the surface rapids of a river. The techniques and

assumptions that guide change management are geared toward maintaining the bubble, re-constructing the identity of the organization so it can maintain its illusion of permanence. In this respect, time and change must be kept at bay, for they are viewed as a threat to self-existence. The problem with this formulation is that it is doomed from the start; any state that is “attained” will also be subject to transience, change and inevitable decay. Managing change is really a misnomer. Change cannot be managed for reality is in a continuous state of flux. Impermanence is a basic underlying fact. The managing change project is really about attempts to manage identity, and to maintain some semblance of order and continuity in the face of ongoing change. But such a project is a losing battle.

Change management approaches assume a linear conception of time. Organizations are thus viewed as substantive entities that move in time from past to present and the desired state (or “vision”) is to be reached only in the future “if the time is right.” Planned change interventions--the tool kit for OD consultants--involve a chronological progression of activities, often requiring a diagnostic (unfreezing) phase of examining the history and evolution of organizational problems. The actual time of change, or actions that result in desired changes, are not usually enacted until there is an adequate understanding of the past, or an analysis of the events that have shaped the current state of the organization.

The issue here is not to deny the value of understanding the past, or to negate the value of generating valid information from data gathering. Such efforts are often very informative and useful for developing a shared understanding of organizational realities. Rather, the issue has to do with the gap between understanding and action. Conventional approaches to change management assume a temporal gap between understanding and action, as well as between each of the three times: the past, present and future. However, understanding the story or narrative of organizational problems through diagnostic data-gathering, also occurs in time-present. Visioning the future, strategic planning, imagining a more desirable future state, unfolds in time-present. Taking action, changing, implementing, also occurs in time-present. Indeed, the past, present, and future, all occur in time-present. There are no gaps in time-present. Time-present is always and forever time-present.

All change occurs in time-present, since action can only be actualized in the present. The past and future are not real. Yet, most change management activity is devoted to being either past-centered (diagnosis/problem-solving) or future-centered (planning/visioning). Real change, if it occurs at all, always happens in “real-time.” If this is the case, the ability to be in time-present seems essential for acting in real time.

Such a focus on time-present does not imply that past events do not effect the present. Time-present does not negate cause and effect relationships. Nor does time-present mean that the one should forgo all plans or thoughts about the future. Rather, if, as Dogen states that time-present exist in everything—that it existed when we were “crossing the mountain,” and it exists now, and it exists tomorrow—then all events are in time-present, meaning there is only *one* time-present. As alluded to above, from the perspective of time-present, there are no gaps between events in time.

The import of this insight for change management and organization development is considerable. First, it underscores the fact that the time devoted to preparing for change, whether this involves diagnosis or planning, is not disconnected by any real temporal distance from the time of changing, or taking action. The linear time-line which presupposes the existence of entities that move through time is a social construct that makes us lose sight of time-present. Similarly, the activities of conducting an organizational diagnosis and/or strategic planning effort are past or future oriented constructions that are constructed in time-present. Organizational identity, stories that account for current problems, images of a desirable future—are dependent on a linear time-line, which limits access only to the “horizontal” dimension of time. The time for acting, for changing, for creating is fleeting and lost to sight, since attention is allocated to either trying to understand past causes of problems (diagnosis) or to preparing to anticipate a change (planning). The act of changing itself, which can only occur in the present, slips away. Thus, organizations and managers find themselves out of step with the times, and unable to change in time.

As a corollary to this temporal principle, there also no gaps in knowing/acting (Low, 2003).

### **Beyond Change Management: Acting in Real-Time**

**(in process)**

## **Interactive Session Possibilities**

The presenter will take some initial time to highlight some of the main assertions from Dogen's essay "Being-Time" (Uji). Copies of the Uji essay will also be made available to participants (it is very short in length). The presenter will highlight the uniqueness of Dogen's understanding of time, and how it challenges the underlying premises of conventional change management. Using Dogen's Uji as an inspirational source, the presenter will lead the group into several guided meditations. Afterwards, participants will be invited to share their reflections and insights. The discussion will be facilitated towards theorizing how to go beyond change management in light of a different understanding of time.

## REFERENCES

- Abe, M. (1992). *A study of Dogen: His philosophy and religion* (Ed. Steven Heine). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dogen (2004). *Shobogenzo Chapter 11 – Uji: Time-Present: A modern interpretation* (translated by M. Eido Luetchford). Available [www.dogensangha.org.uk](http://www.dogensangha.org.uk)
- Haridimos, T. & Chia, R. (2002). On organizational becoming: Rethinking organizational change. *Organization Science*, 13(5), 567-585.
- Heine, S. (1983). Temporality of hermeneutics in Dogen's Shobogenzo. *Philosophy East and West*, 33(2), 139-147.
- Low, A. (2003). *Intelligent evolution and the evolution of intelligence: A Zen Buddhist meets Darwin*. (unpublished manuscript). Montreal, CA.
- Stambaugh, J. (1990). *Impermanence is Buddha-nature: Dogen's understanding of temporality*. University of Hawaii Press.