

General Article 【研究論著】

Dōgen: A Japanese Transformation of  
Ch'an Buddhism  
道元：禪在日本的轉化

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Five desires, Five hindrances, Active-passive scheme,  
Nondiscriminatory awareness, Seeing without being a seer,  
Foreground-background, Bottomless background, Zero Space, Zero  
Time, Being-time, Logic of interdependence, Mutual interdependence

**關鍵詞：**身心脫落、心塵脫落、五欲、五毒、主客模式、無分別意識、  
無觀者之觀、前景－後景、無底之後景、零空間、零時間、有時、  
因緣法、因緣

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## Abstract

This article is an attempt at articulating a Japanese transformation of Ch'an Buddhism by focusing on a thirteenth century Japanese Zen Master, Dōgen (1200-1254), in such a way that his religious-philosophical thought can be distinguished from the Chinese counter-parts. To do so, it will elucidate some of the salient differences by comparing Dōgen's *magnus opus*, *Shōbōgenzō* (正法眼藏) with the works of Chinese Ch'an masters. It will briefly examine the following four topics in order to accomplish the goals of the article: 1) Dōgen's stance on language, 2) his Zen Experience, 3) a philosophical analysis of the structure of appearing in light of his experience, and 4) his philosophical expression concerning Zen spatial-temporal awareness.

## 摘要

本文嘗試以十三世紀日本禪師道元（1200-1254）為焦點，經由使其宗教哲學思想可與中國對等思想互相區別的方式，闡明禪在日本的轉化。為此，本文將以道元的鉅著《正法眼藏》與中國禪師的著作相互比較，闡釋若干顯著的差異。為達成本文之目標，將概要檢視以下四點：（1）道元對文字的立場，（2）其禪體驗，（3）根據其體驗對現象之組成進行哲學分析，（4）道元對禪時空意識的哲學表達。

When one side is illuminated,  
 the other side remains in darkness.  
 —from Dōgen's "*Genjōkōan*" fascicle

## I. Introduction

This article attempts to articulate a Japanese transformation of Ch'an Buddhism<sup>1</sup> by focusing on a thirteenth century Japanese Zen Master, Dōgen (1200-1253), in such a way that his religious-philosophical thought can be distinguished in certain respects from his Chinese counterparts. In order to accomplish this goal, I will first 1) elucidate a few differences I can discern in the stance Dōgen takes on language in comparison with some of the Chinese Ch'an masters,<sup>2</sup> and then 2) I will examine his Zen experience, as preparatory 3) to philosophically analyzing the structure of how things appear in the field of meditative awareness, and lastly 4) his philosophical expression concerning Zen spatial-temporal awareness. The examination of the last two points will enable us to philosophically reconstruct an experiential structure unique to Zen Buddhism in general, and to Dōgen's Zen in particular, where I am no longer interested in

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1 D.T. Suzuki, who disseminated Zen Buddhism to the West, mentions three figures of Japanese Zen Buddhism as instances of the Japanization of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism; Dōgen [道元], Bankei [盤珪], and Hakuin [白隱]. For my general understanding of Zen Buddhism, see an online article, "Philosophy of Zen Buddhism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (<http://stanford.library.usyd.edu.au/entries/japanese-zen/>).

2 I am aware of a logical issue that presents itself when approaching the present topic in the way I have suggested above, namely that in order to articulate differences, the logic of interdependence demands that it presuppose the idea of sameness at the same time, for the meaning of difference is logically incomprehensible unless it is predicated on the meaning of sameness. In other words, this logic acknowledges that there is no absolute difference nor is there absolute sameness, because it stipulates a relativity of each term for each to be meaningful in a domain of discourse. Accordingly, I am afraid that my attempt will be charged as being one-sided, but I cannot dodge this charge, simply because the space/time available to me is limited for this presentation. Technically, this logic is called "logic of not." For further details, see Shigenori Nagatomo, *The Diamondśūtra's Logic of Not and a Critique of Katz's Contextualism: toward a Non-dualist Philosophy* (New York: The Edwin and Mellen Press, 2006). pp. xvii + 178.

pointing out differences, but instead groping for some commonalities with some of the Chinese Ch'an masters.

Regarding Chinese Ch'an masters, I would like to note at the outset that Dōgen's evaluation of them is not uniform; he praises some with exalting remarks while rejecting some others with scathing criticisms. In addition, there are cases of an ambiguous evaluation of them.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Dōgen's Stance on Language

I would like to note a significant fact that Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*<sup>4</sup> [正法眼藏] consisting of 75 fascicles, is written in Japanese. This allows him, comparatively speaking, flexibility and precision in his linguistic expression due to the postpositions that connect various syntactic elements that produce a well-formed sentence in this language. Moreover, I would like to observe in this connection that he artfully crafts his writings using an essay format, ranging from a few pages to several tens of pages. This format is different from the formats a majority of Chinese Ch'an masters use for their writings, where we find verses [*gathas*], pithy sentences, and/or short dialogue of question-answer [問答] as a way of capturing their Zen experiences. Unlike these formats, Dōgen's

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3 Just to mention a few, those Ch'an masters he praises highly include Nyojō [如淨], Hyakujō Ekai [百丈], Jyoshū [趙州從諗], Kōchi [宏智正覺], Engo [圓悟克勤], and Yakuzan [藥山惟儼] and those who he vehemently rejects are Ch'an masters belonging to the Daie [大惠宗杲] line of the Rinzai School. His evaluation of Rinzai [臨濟義玄] is ambiguous in that he praises his dedicated, "pure" practice, while denouncing the doctrines he used for guiding his disciples. See Imaeda Aishin, *Dōgen: sono kōdō to shisō* [道元：その行動と思想] (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1975).

4 We may also note in this connection that Daie Sogō [大慧宗杲] had a book with the same title. Because Dōgen unrelentingly criticizes him (see for example the fascicle "the *Samādhi* of Self-Authentication" [自證三昧], "A Deep Belief in the [karmic] Retribution" [深信因果], and [王索仙陀婆]), he must have an intention of correcting Daie's understanding of Buddhism in general, and Zen Buddhism in particular.

*Shōbōgenzō* develops descriptive explanations or explanatory descriptions<sup>5</sup> to unfold his religious-philosophical insights such that according to IMAEDA Aishin, "[b]uddhist thought achieved a unique [pinnacle by] leaps and bounds, which had not occurred before and after."<sup>6</sup> This is the first point I should like to observe as factors contributing Dōgen's Japanization of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism.

The second point I would like to mention is that Dōgen distinguishes between the language about enlightenment and the language of enlightenment.<sup>7</sup> The latter fact suggests that he is cognizant of the efficacy of linguistic expressibility or say-ability,<sup>8</sup> if I may neologize these words, of Zen enlightenment experiences. This is in fact his conviction, so that he masterfully forces the Chinese compounds/sentences to perform a task of describing reality apprehended in and through Zen meditation. Observe the following examples: he changes "at one time" (有時) to read "being-time;" "all sentient beings, without exception, have Buddha-nature" (一切眾生悉有佛性) to "all are sentient beings and every being is a Buddha-nature."

Dōgen's stance toward language as is exemplified above shows a marked difference, for example, from the attitude which Baso [馬祖] lineage (洪州宗) generally assumed during the Tang dynasty. Take the examples of the following mottoes: "Special transmission outside of scriptures" (教外別傳) and "No

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5 I do not mean to suggest that because Dōgen provides descriptive explanations or explanatory descriptions, the content of his writing is easy to follow and understand. Regarding this point, Tamaki raises the following question, while commenting that it is possible to understand Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Hegel and Heidegger even for a Japanese as long as he/she can follow their logic and the thread of their thinking, why is it difficult to understand Dōgen? He notes that even though their writings are developed with an axis of thinking, there must be a difference in what it means to think between these Western thinkers and Dōgen. He thinks that a total personal being is involved in case of Dōgen's "thinking," which is beyond the discursive mode of reasoning, and as such it is "to think of the unthinkable" when it is seen in light of the everyday standpoint. It is done vis-à-vis Zen meditation. See Takaki Kōshirō, *Nihon no meicho: Dōgen* [日本の名著：道元] (Tokyo: Chūōkōron sha, 1974), p. 8.

6 Imaeda Aishin, *Dōgen: sono kōdō to shisō* [道元：その行動と思想] (Tokyo: Hyōronsha, 1975), p. 2.

7 See for example, "Say-ability" [道得] fascicle in the *Shōbōgenzō*.

8 This should not suggest, however, that he believed every aspect of Zen enlightenment experience could linguistically be articulated.

dependence on words" (不立文字). These mottoes are predicated on the belief that language is incapable of capturing the transcendent and trans-logical<sup>9</sup> event of Zen experience<sup>10</sup> and declare that language is simply a pointing device.

A question we may now entertain is: what enabled Dōgen to hold the conviction such that he came to believe the extra-linguistic events could be captured linguistically? One of the ways we can approach this query, aside from acknowledging his innate capacity to handle language, is to look into his Zen experience, because it transformed him to existentially ground the whole of his being, including his use of language.

### III. Dōgen's Zen Experience

Dōgen's Zen experience I have mentioned above refers to an experience he had under the tutelage of his Chinese master, Nyojō (Juching), as a confirmation of his enlightenment. He captured this experience linguistically as "casting off the mind and the body" (身心脫落). According to Takazaki Jikidō, this is Dōgen's creative *misunderstanding*, because no phrase to this effect appears in Juching's recorded sayings. Instead, Takazaki notes that a similar sounding phrase, "casting off the mind-dust" (心塵脫落) is used only once in it,<sup>11</sup> where it

9 I mean by this term the logic that goes beyond the Aristotelian either-or logic with its three laws of identity, contradiction and excluded middle.

10 We can find Dōgen's rejection of the doctrines which some Ch'an masters employed as the standard for teaching in such fascicles as "the Buddha's Teaching" [佛教], "the Buddha Way" [佛道], and "Spring and Autumn" [春秋]; for example, "Four Scenes of Weighing" [四料簡] and the use of Four Illuminations [四照用] proposed by Rinzai [臨濟]; "Three Phrases" [三句] utilized by Unmon [雲門]; "Three Paths" [三路] and Five Ranks [五位] upheld by Dōzan [洞山]. In addition, we may also mention that he vehemently rejected "oneness of the three teachings" [三教一致] in the fascicle "the Monks of the Four *Dhyānas*" [四禪比丘] as "the worst of all evil teachings," "its extreme folly to which nothing is comparable," and "destroying Buddha *dharma*s."

11 See Takazaki Jikidō in Umehara Takeshi, *Bukkyō shisō 11: Kobutsu no manebi — Dōgen* [佛教思想11: 古佛のまねび] (Tokyo: Kaokawa shoten, 1974), p. 50.

is understood to mean an elimination, following the traditional understanding of Buddhism, of five desires and/or five hindrances.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, we are led to acknowledge that Dōgen's misunderstanding had opened up a philosophical horizon of describing Zen experiences in a way that had been impossible before. To replace the traditional categories<sup>13</sup> with the phrase "the mind and the body," which is not usually a technical terminology in Buddhism, enables us, for example, to philosophically discuss his experience in light of the mind-body issue. The phrase suggests that in his confirmatory experience there was no lived, dualistic distinction between the mind and the body. That is, the mind-body dualism, as it is operative in our everyday standpoint, was overcome experientially. It was a nondualistic experience.

#### IV. The Structure of Appearing

Given Dōgen's nondualistic experience, what is the structure of things appearing in the field of meditative awareness that enables him to provide descriptive explanations or explanatory descriptions to many of the topics he addresses in the *Shōbōgenzō*?<sup>14</sup> We can interpret his nondualistic experience epistemologically as that experience which arises from a nondiscriminatory state of meditational awareness.<sup>15</sup> In this nondiscriminatory awareness, no ego is

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12 Buddhism counts five desires: desires for material wealth, sex, food, honor, and sleep, while the five hindrances include avarice, anger, sleep, anxiety and doubt.

13 The traditional phrase to thematize the whole person in Buddhism was five *skandhas*; form, consciousness, perception, sensation and potential formative force.

14 We may note here that his *Shōbōgenzō* is a collection of profoundly philosophical-religious fascicles, but is not a systematic treatise of philosophy as most of the fascicle were delivered to his disciples and lay followers either as a lecture or in an epistolary form.

15 To be more specific, the nondiscriminatory awareness means that it is the foundational background that is bottomless or is nothing, and as such it does not participate in the discriminatory activity. However, when a thing appears, a discrimination occurs on this foundational, though bottomless, background. Because it occurs on this foundation, it does not distort the shape of things along with its force. With this qualification, it is more accurate to use a phrase, nondiscriminatory discrimination, to capture a sense of how things appear in meditational awareness.

posited either as an active or a passive agent in constituting things of experience as this awareness renders useless the active-passive scheme as an explanatory model. Rather, it is the state of no-ego in which no projection from the unconscious content and no superimposition of intellectual ideas occur in the field of meditative awareness.

Moreover, because things are experientially constituted in this manner, we can interpret the epistemological structure of appearing to be such that things appear in the field of meditative awareness without presupposing the Gestalt psychology's distinction between foreground and background. This is because the ego is turned into nothing in the state of nondiscriminatory awareness, and hence no-ego, where this nothing is paradoxically a background that is not the background at all, or it is a *bottomless* background. To use Nishida's terminology, the nondiscriminatory awareness is an act of "seeing without being a seer." Or, to use the terminology of phenomenology, the bottomless background or the background of nothing means that because the noetic act is rendered nothing, the noematic object is allowed to announce itself without an intentional constitution of the latter. This is the meaning of "no projection" and "no superimposition" mentioned above. It consequently opens up a bottomless horizon, on which a noematic object announces itself *in toto* as a phenomenon.

This opening up simultaneously accompanies a de-substantialization and de-ontologization of things of experience, because there is no act of the ego that substantializes and ontologizes them; substantialization and ontologization both arise as a consequence of an anthropomorphic activity that is intricately tied to the discursive mode of reasoning. This implies that Dōgen's stance mitigates the idea of "seeing into one's nature," where a substantialization of nature is implied.<sup>16</sup> We are led to conclude that things of experience announce themselves *in toto*

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16 This was the stance, of example, that was assumed by the Taihui [大慧] lineage of Linchi school [臨濟宗], flourishing at the time of his visit to Sung China (1224-1228), and under which school's masters he studied for approximately two years at different temples before he came to study under Juching for another two years.



without concealing anything behind them, because there is nothing in the bottomless background to determine or delimit how things appear. To capture it, Dōgen states in the "Buddha-nature" (佛性) fascicle that "nothing is concealed in the universe."

These points invite us to rethink the problem of constitution, because they are a rejection of the idealist as well as the empiricist position. In the nondualistic experience, the logic of interdependence makes clear how things are mutually dependent on each other, a point which Dōgen emphasizes in his writings. For example, we can see the idea of interdependence in the statements: "the fish swims the ocean and the ocean swims the fish," or "the sky flies a bird and the bird flies the sky." This exemplifies the logic of interdependence.

## V. Dōgen's Philosophical Expression: Time and Space

What does this bottomless background that is nothing mean when it is examined in light of a spatial-temporal awareness? We have a clue to respond to this query in the above mentioned Buddha-nature fascicle in which Dōgen articulates his understanding of what the Buddha-nature is, by stating that "if [a time] arrives" (若至) means "[it] already arrives" (既至). If one attempts to understand this identification by following a linear concept of time, it will force us to dismiss it as meaningless and nonsensical because it appears to be hopelessly confused, as it violates the logic of everyday understanding. If on the other hand, Dōgen's nondiscriminatory experience is a transcendent experience that goes beyond the confine of the everyday mode of dualistically experiencing things, this identification makes sense only if we take the bottomless background to mean that there is no transpiration of time as well as no spatial distinction between parts and whole. Accordingly, the bottomless background comes to be characterized as zero time and zero space, although both zero time and zero space

are, needless to say, an "unthinkable" designation for time and space as long as we rely on the discursive mode of thinking.<sup>17</sup> This means, when interpreted in reference to things of experience, that there is absolutely no determination, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, as to how things appear in the field of meditative awareness. Buddhism uses the term "suchness" (真如) to designate this state of affairs, i.e., things, as they really are, announce the primordial mode of their *being*.

With this interpretation of the bottomless background that is nothing, we can appreciate how Dōgen develops temporal and spatial awareness. I will deal with the spatial awareness first and then the temporal awareness. In the fascicle of "this mind is a Buddha" (即心是佛) of the *Shōbōgenzō*, we find the following passage:

What the mind is, is mountains, rivers and the great earth. It is the sun, the moon and the stars. However, if one advances beyond what is thus captured linguistically, it will become inadequate, and if one retreats from it, one will err.

In this passage we see Dōgen rejecting both materialism and idealism as being a one-sided recapitulation of reality. Instead, he shows a clear instance of how things appear in the spatial awareness when the background is bottomless or nothing, that is, without postulating the foreground-background distinction. There is no difference between the mind and the natural phenomena, because the natural phenomena announce themselves *in toto* in the mode of nothingness that is the mind. Hence, for Dōgen looking at the mountains and rivers is no different from looking at buddhas.

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<sup>17</sup> The understanding of them belongs to the realm beyond thinking that is disclosed in meditational experience.

Another important point in this spatial awareness is an idea of mutual interdependence among things. Observe the following sentence taken from the *genjōkōan* fascicle (現成公案): "Fish swims the ocean and the ocean swims a fish; a bird flies the sky and the sky flies a bird." Here, space is not conceived of in terms of a container model. Instead, spatial awareness in Dōgen is characterized by the mutual interdependence among things, while being permeated by the announcement of the primordial mode of being that is their suchness, and their announcement is propelled by the dynamic activity of time.

In order to see how the above mentioned structure of appearing, as well as the logic of interdependence operate, let us look into Dōgen's understanding of time and space. This is an issue concerning a temporal-spatial awareness reflective of the non-dualistic experience, in which time and space are expressions of things "thinging" the primordial mode of their being. This "thinging" of things springs from zero time and zero space. It presupposes an experience of non-temporalization and non-spatialization of things. One must stand in the zero ground to understand this point. We will now turn to the idea of his temporal awareness.

His theory of time is found in the fascicle "Being-time" (有時), where he develops a creative reading of the Chinese compound, "有時." While the compound is ordinarily understood as "at one time" or "at a certain time," he advances a theory of time as "being-time" such that time is a being and a being is a time. Time and being are inseparable from each other: temporalization of a being is a spatialization of a time, whether this inseparability is taken ideally or really. The idea of spatialization and temporalization makes sense only if and when the bottomless background is zero time and zero space, from which being-time announces itself as an individuating being-time. Here, reality of being-time in the temporal axis is interconnected with the spatial axis of a dynamic activity of mutual interdependence of things. Dōgen takes this temporal-spatial interconnection to express impermanence, and religiously as an expression of buddha-nature, i.e., impermanent-buddha-nature.

Dōgen's "being-time" has two profiles of "just now" and "ranging": the former indicates an aspect of discontinuity of time, while the latter indicates an aspect of its continuity. Seen in this manner, "just now" captures a sense of discontinuity *qua* continuity while "ranging" or "passing" discloses a sense of continuity *qua* discontinuity.<sup>18</sup> Dōgen conceives of "being-time" as expressing multi-directionality:

It moves from today to tomorrow; it moves from today to yesterday; it moves from yesterday to today; it moves from today to today; it moves from tomorrow to tomorrow.<sup>19</sup>

This multi-directional movement of time is predicated on the meditational awareness that is anchored in the nondiscriminatory dimension of the bottomless background, where time and space, as we observed in the foregoing, are zero.<sup>20</sup> Dōgen metaphorically speaks of these movements as if observing atop the highest mountain range, an indication of, paradoxically, a deep state of meditative awareness. It is a dynamically lived time, where according to TAMAKI Kōshirō, time, being, illumination and the authentic self are inseparably tied together.<sup>21</sup>

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18 We may note that his theory is not of a quantifiable time, as in Aristotle's definition of time as a measurement of before and after, or as in natural science's theory of time where time is conceived to be a linear or symmetrical series of uniformly punctuated, homogenous units for the purpose of quantification or measurement of things. Moreover, there is no theoretical postulation of time (and space) as in Newton's absolute time (or absolute space) without any content to it. Kant's understanding of time and space as an *a priori* condition for sense intuition is a philosophical rendition of Newton's absolute time and absolute space.

19 See his "being-time" [有時] fascicle.

20 A linear concept of time, it would seem, is anchored in a model of sensory perception, while presupposing a presence of the body to an object. This model is in turn predicated on an anthropomorphic observation of a human birth and a death, thus rendering time to have a beginning and an end, allowing it to "move" from the past to the future.

21 Takaki Kōshirō, *Nihon no meicho: Dōgen* [日本の名著：道元] (Tokyo: Chūōkōron sha, 1974, p. 59 ff.

## VI. Concluding Remarks

In the foregoing I have given a cursory treatment of Dōgen's religious-philosophical thoughts with the view to showing a Japanese transformation of Ch'an Buddhism, by briefly touching on his stance on language, his Zen experience, how things appear in light of the Zen experience, and his theories of time and space. I am afraid that this article has not gone beyond the situation where a blind man describes an elephant by touching a miniscule part of it. In spite of this, I hope it has given the reader a glimpse into Dogen's Zen, and I hope an interest has arisen in the reader wanting to read him on his/her own.

To conclude this article, I would like to offer a concern for the spread of Zen Buddhism. Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* didn't see the light of the day for several centuries even inside the Sōtō school, and much less in a larger circle of the Japanese intellectual community until Watsuji Tetsurō wrote in 1929 a book on him, *Shamon Dōgen* [Dōgen, the Monk of the Way], based on *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*. After Watsuji's work, Japanese scholars have become interested in him, producing voluminous amounts of writings on him to the point that one can become a Dōgen scholar. Today there has been an increasing number of Western scholars who also show interest in him, due primarily to Abe Masao's initial efforts of introducing him to the West, an intellectual milieu of which was prepared by D.T. Suzuki since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I wonder if this trend in the West will continue, because Buddhism in Japan, at least its *raison d'être*, has increasingly been minimized, and consequently it is playing a negligible role in contemporary Japanese society. I have this concern because Chinese Ch'an Buddhism disappeared as an independent school from Chinese history after merging with Pure Land Buddhism in the Ming dynasty.

## Glossary

1. Casting off the body and the mind: Dōgen's linguistic expression to designate his Zen confirmatory experience under the tutelage of Nyōjō, wherein the dualistic distinction between mind and body disappeared.
2. Casting off the mind dust: Nyōjō's phrase to designate a Zen enlightenment experience.
3. Five desires and five hinderances: the five desires are desires for material wealth, sex, food, honor, and sleep, which five hinderances include avarice, anger, sleep, anxiety, and doubt.
4. Active-passive scheme: An explanatory scheme to account how the mind functions in constituting its object, whether it is an idea or an external object.
5. Nondiscriminatory awareness or "seeing without being a seer": a deep state of meditation or a state of absorption in which awareness becomes nondiscriminatory, or a state of awareness in which no ego is posited for awareness to occur.
6. Foreground-background distinction: Gestalt's psychology's terminology to explain how a thing appears in the field of perceptual consciousness.
7. Bottomless background (of nothing): refers to a special mode of awareness which is in tune with the primordial ground of things that are not determined by anything else except by its own self-determination.
8. Zero Space and Zero Time: the primordial ground of things wherein there is no temporalization and spatialization.

9. Being-time (just now & ranging/passing): Dōgen's theory of time wherein time and being are thought to be inseparable from each other.
10. Logic of interdependence: the logic which states that a being or a thing depends on something else for it to be.
11. Mutual interdependence: a thing/event is what it is in virtue of the fact that it is determined by other thing-events, and while at the same time determining them.♦

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