

The Nature of Experience - Lecture 2

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In last week's talk I spoke about the nature of experience. I said that we miss the fundamental nature of experience in most everyday activities except in activities which are quite repetitive, especially activities like sporting events, such as running or hiking or swimming, where we are acting wholly and we are doing the same thing again and again. Because what we are doing is so simple and we are doing it again and again, we can notice the kind of basic, fundamental characteristics of experience. And I said that some of these might be, for instance, that we feel that although we are physically moving we feel like we are in the same place. So we are doing something, we're acting, but we're in the same little place; we're suspended in a kind of timeless or spaceless world, and we don't feel any separation between ourselves and the world that we're acting in.

And we all have these kind of very, very simple experiences, but because they're so simple, we kind of dismiss them. We all know that if you're doing some kind of long distance event, like running for example, you feel sometimes that you're in the world but you're not a runner going along a road running a race, but that you're just acting in a kind of timeless void. And I said that these fundamental experiences are at the heart of what Buddhism calls "action."

Then I went on to list the few assertions that Buddhism makes about the world around us: only here and now in the present is real—past and future don't really exist; body and mind are two faces of something, they're not separate; the world we are actually in, the world we inhabit, is not the same as the world of our thoughts; and, there is no good and bad in reality. Those are the kind of characteristics of Buddhism that we talked about.

Now moving on, this week I want to look at another example of experience that we've all had but all forgotten, at least I've forgotten it. That is, the experience of being a baby. If you try to imagine what it's like to be a very small baby, it's pretty well impossible. But although it's impossible, there are a few things that maybe we can agree on. For example, *a baby has no language*—I'm talking about a little tiny baby—a baby starts with no language. Another one, *a baby starts with no picture of where in the world it is*. It doesn't have a picture of, for example, it's now lying in a cot on the second floor on so-and-so street. It doesn't know where it is, or it has no picture of where it is. Also, *a baby has no intentional actions*. Of course it cries, and it cries because it wants food, or we say it cries because it wants food, but it doesn't have intentional actions in the way that we do. And maybe the last one, *a baby is content to be just where it is*. Now I'm sure everyone can find babies that are not, but just as kinds of general characteristics those things are kind of what we would say a baby's life might be like.

And because a baby has no language it can't discriminate between big and small, or wide and narrow, or tall and short. It doesn't lie there thinking, 'Oh, that was a tall person that just came in,' or whatever. Also, for instance, a baby can't keep a secret; it's ludicrous to imagine a baby having a secret and it doesn't tell anyone. Why is it ludicrous? Because to have a secret we need to know something that nobody else knows, and we need to know that no one else knows it. So a baby can't have a secret. What other things is it impossible to imagine a baby being capable of? Well, we can't imagine a baby knowing the names of the people in the room where it is. It wouldn't know the age

of its parents. It wouldn't know how long it is until its next feed. It wouldn't know what to do to keep itself warm. These seem pretty obvious things, but they're so obvious that we never recognize them.

But a baby has a certain kind of knowledge, a kind of intuitive knowledge. It knows when it's hungry. It knows when something is not quite right, when something is disturbing it—its nappy is too tight or the room's too cold or something like that, babies are very sensitive like that. And it knows when it's sleepy. So there're three things that we could probably agree that a baby knows.

So, just to summarize the state of a baby when it's very small and just emerged into the world. We could say it doesn't have any powers of discrimination. It doesn't have any objective view of the world—it can't see where it is, it doesn't have a picture in which to locate itself. It doesn't have any intention in its actions—it moves, but it doesn't have any of what we would call “intentions” in its actions. And, it's living in the present moment. This is all in my imagination because I can't remember what it's like to be a baby. But if we imagine, these seem quite plausible things to say about a baby. And maybe we could call the state of a baby like that “unconditioned”; that is, it has not yet been subjected to the conditions of society.

Now, what kind of conditioning does society place on a baby as it gets older? Well, I guess one of the first things may be language or some kind of organized thought. Maybe another one would be coordinated action, and behavior which is directed towards something. Then another one would be establishing a daily routine—feeding at so-and-so time, waking, and going to sleep. When babies are very young they wake up and go to sleep in a very inconvenient cycle, so one of the first things that happens is they change their cycle from their simple natural cycle to one that suits the rest of society, to the great joy of the parents.

Another thing that maybe the baby starts to learn is the conditions that are placed on it so that it gets used to the experience of living with other human beings. People never think very clearly about these, it doesn't seem to be important, but in fact, the baby is getting used to living with all these people around it. This must be quite a lot of getting used to to do.

Now, what kind of effect does this conditioning have on the baby? Well, I would suggest that the baby starts to see the world around it in terms of “main” objects—Mama, Papa, chair, and so on. It starts learning names for things, starts learning the names of objects and also, slowly, the names of concepts. It has limits placed on what is acceptable for it to do. For instance, toilet training is one good example—‘No, no, don't do that.’ So the parents and society place limits on what is acceptable for the baby to do, and very slowly the baby comes to see the world as we, the rest of society, do, or as the members of its own culture do. And this conditioning carries on into adulthood. As we grow older we slowly learn what kind of world we are living in—or do we? This is the question.

What I would suggest is, is that as we grow older, as well as learning what kind of world we are living in, we learn to see the world through kind of glasses which are the colour of the society and culture we live in. So slowly we learn what things are called and what we should do. And we don't

get a chance to decide whether or not we want to do that—we're conditioned. And so we put kind of layers over something, and become a "grown-up."

Now, what has all this got to do with Buddhism? Well we just practiced Zazen for thirty minutes, and Buddhism says that when we practice Zazen we are experiencing reality just as it is. And from that state the whole of Buddhist theory has emerged. And the state is very simple and very subtle, and in Buddhism we call it the balanced state. It's a state in which we're not carried off by thoughts, and not carried off by feelings and sensations, and free from intention. In fact, the state is not so dissimilar from the state we've just imagined that a baby exists in. A very simple, very basic state—we're sitting on a black cushion looking at the wall. And again, going back to what I was talking about last week, we can say the state is also rather like the state we experience when we are running, walking, or swimming for some distance, after we get into some kind of a rhythm.

So the practice of Zazen is not a practice that aims to get some kind of special state that is different from normal; rather, it's a return to a kind of unconditioned state that we can find after casting off society's cloak, or taking off the coloured glasses of society. So in that sense, we're not attaining something, we're not getting something; we're throwing something away, we're casting off something. We're casting off thoughts and casting off feelings. We're casting off the layers that we put on in society in order to function properly, where we need to think and plan and move and act.

So Zazen is like living in the present, like a very small baby. But we can never become babies again, no matter how nice the idea seems. We live in a world which places lots of demands on us and we can never escape from this world, we're stuck here. But in practicing Zazen we can return to a simple unconditioned state that's always there underneath the layers. It's a balanced and natural state. But just imagining what it's like to be a baby won't do us any good. In order to enter this simple state we need to practice. But by thinking about a baby we can catch something, or if we actually look at a real baby we can catch something about the baby's state, we can identify with something. So the next time you see a baby go and have a look at it, and you can catch something very simple, very basic, prior to any kind of conditioning. And that simple state we can catch, we can taste, we can smell, in Zazen.

Of course, sometimes our mind is very active or our body aches or we are very tired and we can't hardly catch it at all. But even though we can't catch it, it's there, we're sitting in it, but we've got lots of layers on the top. But sometimes when we practice Zazen and we're not so tired and we're not so disturbed by work or whatever, just sitting quietly and peacefully we can catch that very simple state. We are just sitting, we are just happy to be living in the present. We don't have any intentional action. We can't find an objective view of the world; that is, we're not looking at ourselves from outside somewhere. And we're not thinking—we're not thinking a, b, c, d; we're not discriminating between things. We're just simply sitting.

And this fact is the reason why Buddhist masters of the past have said that Zazen is the font, the fountain, from which all Buddhist knowledge and theory has emerged. Because all Buddhist theory is talking about the state in Zazen, which is the direct experience of reality in the present moment. If

we could all go back to being babies there wouldn't be any problem, we wouldn't need to study Buddhist theory at all.

But we can't go back to being babies, so Buddhist theory is a way of explaining what this very simple state is. And in order to explain it Buddhist masters of the past had many concepts they used, and each concept talks about one facet of Zazen, one face of Zazen. And the reason why there are many concepts that talk about facets of Zazen is because actually to describe the state in Zazen is almost impossible. It's a kind of ineffable state. If we try to explain it we'll find it very difficult. We say one thing and then we feel, 'Ah, not quite that,' and we say another thing and we feel, 'Ah, well yes, but there's something else too,' and we can keep speaking until we die. And this is the reason for, for instance, Master Dogen's great volume of works talking about Zazen. The whole of the *Shobogenzo*, the book that we study, is ninety-seven chapters talking about the simple state that we are in when we sit on a cushion and face the wall.

Now, one of the concepts they use to describe the Buddhist state in Sanskrit is called *sunyata*. *Sunyata* comes from the root word *sunya*. And *sunya* has got a lot of meanings, but it means empty, hollow, void, barren, bare, desolate, deserted, vacant, something like that. And when you stick the *ata* on the end it makes it into a kind of "something-like," so bare-like, barren-like, or, as if bare, as if barren, as if void, that kind of thing.

Now the strange thing is, there's a very large Buddhist Sanskrit dictionary that has entries for thousands of Sanskrit words and those entries also include a Buddhist meaning. And for some strange reason the Buddhist meaning is often a bit different to the normal meaning of the word. And in the case of *sunyata*, the Buddhist meaning is given as "non-existence," "non-reality," or "nothingness." What amazing words! And "non-existence," "non-reality," or "nothingness" are said to be the special Buddhist meanings of this word *sunyata*. However, the meaning of *sunyata* that we get from listening to Nishijima Roshi or studying the works of Master Dogen is completely different—it's not that meaning at all. In fact, it's closer to the meaning in the sense of describing the state we're in when we're running, acting fully, swimming or whatever. When we're in that state, such that we feel like we're in the void, we feel like we're acting but we can't find where it is we're acting. And in that situation we don't feel worried by anything.

The state of *sunyata*, as explained by Master Dogen and by Nishijima Roshi, carries nothing with it other than itself. So it's called bare—it's a bare state. And when we are in the state of *sunyata* we can't find any concepts or objects—we don't discriminate, we don't separate ourselves from the external world. So we call it empty. So the word *sunyata* refers to an empty, bare kind of state that we all experience, that we experienced just now in Zazen; however fleeting it was to notice, it was there.

So the point that I am trying to make is that many Buddhist concepts are talking about things that we experience. In fact, all Buddhist concepts are talking about things that we experience. And we experience them when we practice Zazen. But sadly, there are many people who try to interpret Buddhist concepts as meaning things that we don't experience, that are out of the range of normal experience, that are something different from normal human experience and something special. So

people spend the whole of their lives looking around to see, ‘What does this word mean?’

I’ll give you another example. There’s another concept in Buddhism called “Buddha-nature.” I don’t know what the Sanskrit for “Buddha-nature” was but it came through into Japanese as *Busho*. Buddhist masters of the past talked about Buddha-nature a lot, and there’s a tremendous amount of discussion about it. In fact, one of the chapters in the *Shobogenzo*, by Master Dogen, is completely devoted to an explanation of Buddha-nature. And he quotes stories about Buddhist or so-called Buddhist people discussing for instance, ‘Everything has Buddha-nature in it, does a dog also have Buddha-nature?’ or, ‘If there’s a worm and the worm has Buddha-nature and I cut the worm in half, which half is the Buddha-nature in?’ So, what these people are doing is they’re trying to see what is Buddha-nature talking about.

Well, Buddha-nature describes exactly the state that the baby is in before it becomes conditioned by society—simple, non-intentional conduct in the moment of the present. Just be, just being here and now. When we are sitting in Zazen, that which is present is something that is just being, and we call it “Buddha-nature.” But if we try and explain Buddha-nature as something separate from our real experience, we can end up—as lots of people in the past did—trying to work out whether a dog has it or not, whether a horse has it or not, which half of the worm has it, and so on.

So these two examples, Buddha-nature and *sunyata*, show us that the concepts that Buddhism talks about refer to real states that exist and that we experience. And Buddhism says that the essential experience, because of its simplicity, is Zazen itself. Many people think Buddhist theory talks about states and experiences that are somewhere else beyond the range of normal human experience, but this is wrong. It’s wrong wherever it happens. Buddhist theory is always describing our real experience, OUR real experience—not somebody else’s real experience. And it’s describing our real experience here in this world now. So we practice Zazen to experience that, and then we have a talk to find out what it was we experienced. And I think that’s quite a sensible way to proceed—we practice, we experience, and then we talk about it.

So we’re members of society, and because we’re members of society we receive social training. We put on pairs of coloured spectacles and we see the world through our education and social training. But when we practice Zazen we glimpse the real world that exists always here and now. And that world is separate from what we think about it, and separate from the so-called “social constructions” that we use in our daily life. And it’s a very important point to realise that all true Buddhist sutras, the works of Master Dogen for example, are talking about our real experience.

So in order to understand Buddhist theory and Buddhist writings, we have to bring them to our experience. We have to wrench them out of the arms of the academics, who want to make them into strange concepts and discuss them like, ‘How many angels on the head of a pin?’ and say, ‘No! It’s talking about something real. It’s talking about something real, here and now.’ If we read, for instance, the *Shobogenzo* while always remembering that, then we can slowly start to understand it and we can slowly start to see that although it was written in the thirteenth century it’s still relevant today. Because human experience has not changed. Society has changed, but the essential basic experience that we have is always the same.

Are there any questions?

Could you explain more about the state without any intention?

If we look at it objectively, scientifically, we can't agree with it, or we can agree with it so far but not fully. If we look at it subjectively we can't find anything to get hold of, because we know what intention is but we can't see inside somebody else's head, and so we try by ourselves. And then when we try ourselves we say, 'Well, sometimes I have an intention.' But if we practice Zazen again and again and again, we can notice that there seems to be a state where we don't have any intention. But if we then look objectively at what we were like when we practiced Zazen, we can't agree that we felt that there was a state with no intention. So we have a kind of conflict with our experience—because we are looking at experience objectively we can't agree that we have no intention. But when we actually experience, we can say 'Well, there was something,' or 'Something was.'

So for instance, when we sit in Zazen, sometimes there doesn't seem to be any "we" sitting. And Master Dogen writes of these things like, "Zazen sits us" instead of "We sit in Zazen." And his intention in writing those words is to convey that very strange experience, like that which we get if we are walking in the mountains on and on and on. There's no "we" "walking in the mountains," there's "we, the mountains, walking," in a kind of undivided wholeness. And we actually experience it, but we overlay that with our objective analysis—'Oh it can't be like that. No, there's me and there's the path, and I was walking along. So it's just a kind of way that I feel about walking.' But what Buddhism says is, 'No. "I" and "walking" and "feel" are the same thing when we are acting.' But it's a rather strange thing to say—it's a very strange thing to say, it's quite revolutionary in a way. But then if we look at it objectively we can't get the meaning that it's true.

Discrimination exists in nature. How does this relate to Buddhism's idea of no discrimination in reality? For example, in biology some cells die because they are too weak and others thrive because they are stronger. So the structure of the cell itself contains discrimination.

If we look at it. But, for example, if we look at a cuckoo when it is about to take another bird's nest. The cuckoo throws the egg of the bird whose nest it wants to take out of the nest, and if we watch it we can say, 'Yes, the reason the cuckoo is doing that is so that it can have the nest, therefore it doesn't want the egg to be in the nest.' But how does the cuckoo feel? Does it have any wanting or not wanting, or does it just simply go push, push, umh, umh, and the egg's gone? We don't know. But Buddhism says that reality at the moment of the present doesn't contain discrimination, only our viewing of it and our explanation of it contain discrimination.

It's like the debate in science about innate ability and the learned ability or influence that you get from outside, from teachers and so on. The debate about nature and nurture...

Yes, it's a huge debate. I don't think I'd like to get into that debate because I think I might lose. But if you read books by very enlightened biologists, people like Dawkins and other great modern

biologists, they talk about the world in terms of, 'Well, you know, the leaf needs to get moisture from the plant so it sucks it up,' and, 'The tree sees that the leaf is drooping so it fills it up with water,' something like that. They put intention into the action. But whether the leaf actually experiences that intention or not is a question that science hasn't yet answered. Science can't answer it because it can't be the leaf.

It seems that in the case of the cuckoo for example, if it is innate that means there is no discrimination, there is no thinking, it is just doing. But if the cuckoo notices from its experience that the egg is different and that if it throws it out of the nest it will have more space, in that case there is a kind of discrimination due to outside learning.

Yes, that's our explanation. But whether or not the cuckoo knows the difference between innate or learned, the cuckoo just acts at the moment of the present.

Yes, but that doesn't mean that the debate is not necessary.

No it doesn't, the debate is very important. But Buddhism already has an answer. It would say, 'It's both innate and it's learned, and at the moment of the present it's just simple action without intention.' But people would reject that.

It's one way not to explain.

No, it's not one way not to explain. In the discussion we can notice after several thousands of years that we are actually putting something onto nature which is from our own conception of nature. It may be there, but we now examine what it is we bring to it, which is the whole problem of the relation between subject and object. For instance, in atomic physics they are now getting to the stage where they think that observing something has some effect on what is being observed. So how does the observer of the experiment get out of the way and yet still watch it?

And these kind of very, very strange conflicts of viewpoint are coming out because we study very, very hard—'Is it the object or is it the subject?' 'Is it the cuckoo or is it the egg?' So we need to go on studying, but the results of the research may not be a conclusion that says, 'Yes, it's innate' or 'No, it's learned.' It may be, 'Oh, I see, so that's the way we look at things.' In other words, we may find something out about the way we look at things, and we may feel that that's more important than what we're looking at, or we may feel that it's equally important. So, science not only looks at the objective world, it teaches us how we look at the objective world—and that is subjective.

Perhaps we should finish now. Thank you very much.