

The Nature of Experience - Lecture 3

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Last week I spoke about how I imagined the experience of a small baby. I said a baby has no language, no picture of where in the world it is, no intentional actions, and is happy just where it is. Or summarizing it, I said the state of a baby when it's very small may be that it has no discrimination, no objective view of the world, no intentional action, and it's living in the present moment. And I said that we could call this state "unconditioned," that is, the baby has not yet been subjected to the conditions of society, so it's unconditioned. Then I talked about the kind of conditioning that society places on the baby as it gets older. And I said that the first of these is language or organized thought, and one effect this has on the baby is that it sees the world in terms of named objects or concepts.

This week I want to talk more about language and the effect that it has on the way that we perceive the world. Words have great power, and the power that they have is to direct our consciousness in different ways, to point our consciousness in this direction or that direction. Sometimes words point our consciousness towards abstract things, for instance, the famous quotation by Descartes, 'I think therefore I am.' When we hear those words, they point our consciousness towards something abstract. Then some words point our consciousness towards concrete things, for instance, 'this is a book.' The words 'this is a book' direct our consciousness towards a certain object, so they direct our consciousness towards a concrete thing. And some phrases direct our consciousness towards actions, something that's going on, for instance, 'come over here.' 'Come over here' directs the person who is listening's consciousness towards an action; in fact, it tells them to do something. But telling somebody to do something is in fact giving a message to their consciousness to act.

And some words, not many, direct our consciousness to something which is beyond the words themselves, and more real. And probably the most common example of that is poetry. For instance, in the *Shobogenzo*, in the chapter entitled *Genjo Koan* there's a phrase Master Dogen uses to describe reality; he says, "*It's only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds, while hated, flourish.*" And what he is trying to say is something beyond the words. But it's not abstract. He's trying to say something which is real, but beyond the words. "*It's only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds, while hated, flourish.*" So some kinds of poetic expressions direct us to something beyond the words themselves.

But in talking about Buddhism, we attempt to use words to describe the truth or reality or the real state at the present moment. But to describe the real state at the present moment is almost impossible—it's rather like trying to comment on a horse race. For example, if I try to describe the real state at the present moment in this room: 'Oh, now he's opening his mouth and he's speaking and he's also fiddling with a stick in his hand, and now he's saying he's fiddling with a stick in his hand, and now...' and we can't keep up with it, because the present moment is always changing. So, fundamentally, using words to talk about the present moment presents a problem in itself.

But that's the task in Buddhism—to point us towards reality, which is the moment of the present. But because the world is changing at every moment, to try to put it into words is impossible—we'll always be behind. So, as we all notice when Nishijima Roshi talks about reality or the truth, what we

actually think about when he says “reality” or “the truth” is a concept, because we can’t actually think about what the word “reality” is referring to. So instead we think about the idea “reality.” And when we do this we get into the habit of doing it, and so we associate words with ideas or concepts, rather than things beyond concepts, which is quite natural.

Now, language is made up of words or concepts and these concepts are more or less given to us when we learn the language. We don’t make them up so much ourselves, although children often make up names for things or make up names for little friends, but adults generally use the words that already exist in dictionaries and in general usage. So we’re given the words and we use those words to describe things. But when we describe things we often think about the idea of the thing that the word gives us, rather than the thing itself. And this shows us how powerful language is: somebody gives us lots of little pictures, and we use those pictures to create a larger picture and we call that larger picture “the world” or “reality”—but it’s not. It’s a kind of model picture of reality, but it’s utterly different from reality itself. Not only that, but the words impose on us their own view of things without us noticing.

In David Bohm's book *Wholeness of the Intricate Order*, he has a rather nice chapter about language and words. He says that every language carries with it a kind of dominant or prevailing world view, which tends to function in our thinking and in our perception. So each language has its own bias or picture of the world biased in a subtle way by the words or the structure of the language itself. And I think everybody here, because we’re between Japanese and English, can see that, for instance, Japanese as a language has a different bias to English as a language. English is a very, very “fussy” language; it must be exact, the logic must be perfect, the words that join a sentence together must make a nice progression. But Japanese is much looser or more flexible, and in that sense less clear or less exact. So it’s not difficult to see in those two extreme cases that our language gives us an unconscious bias in the way that we see the world.

In English, we describe things using sentences and every sentence has a subject, a verb, and an object. What David Bohm said about this construction is that the subject, verb and object structure implies that all action arises in a separate entity, the subject, and then the action crosses over to the object. It crosses over a space from the subject into the object. Now that sounds crazy—we never think like that. But I think he’s right, although we don’t think like that.

Subject, verb, object—the action or essence crosses over from the subject to the object, it crosses a space between the subject and the object. So for example, ‘I eat an apple.’ The action is eating and the sentence ‘I eat an apple’ suggests at a fundamental level an action which crosses from me to the apple. ‘The apple is eaten by me,’ suggests an action which crosses over from the apple to me. There’s nothing wrong with this structure, it’s the fact; but it’s pervasive, and David Bohm says it leads in the whole of life to a function of thought which tends to divide things into separate entities, which is quite obvious: ‘I’, ‘the book’—‘I am holding the book.’ So language itself divides me from the book.

Now it seems obvious, but what we don’t notice is how habitual that way of thinking becomes. Perhaps we notice it a bit more as foreign people in Japan, because in Japanese you can use a lot of

sentences without the subject. And to a foreigner like me, using a sentence without the subject actually does have some kind of more “unseparate” feeling. I feel myself that the sentences, rather than describing what’s happening in the way that I’m used to, are rather pointing to something.

Now for instance, in English, or maybe all European languages, this separation gives rise to a scientific view of the world, where everything is broken down and divided up into a set of basic particles. So everything is broken down—subject, verb, object. The subject is the book, the book is made up of pages, and so on, until at the bottom level we have atoms, and electrons, and so on. This is a very materialistic view of the world, which says that the world is constructed of smaller and smaller things. That view is a direct result of being able to separate concepts in our minds. And being able to separate concepts in our mind is a direct result of language. So without language we could not analyze, and with language we can. So language really is the basis of the scientific view of the world. Of course, we can still be kind of primitive scientists like children; for example, we can find that if you mix mud and water and you paint it on something and let it dry, you can get a picture. But we can’t explain it, so it’s a very simple or crude science.

Now, because we use language almost unconsciously—like I’m doing now—we don’t notice the function of language itself, and we come to assume that the world in fact consists of the parts that language represents to us, especially in English. But on the other hand, we have to break the world into parts to be able to examine it. We can’t talk in anything but the parts. We say, ‘Yesterday I took the train to Tokyo and met my wife and we went to a cinema.’ We can’t say it without dividing it into people and parts and places, it’s impossible. We may want to, but we can’t say anything like, ‘Big mass, moving, getting on, coming out,’ and so on, although some writers have tried.

I think that’s what the stream of consciousness genre of writers including James Joyce and so on were attempting to do—to try and get past the barriers that words impose on describing what is really there. At least, that’s how I understand it. But normally we can’t speak like that because people would think we were a bit strange; because we’re all accepting the rules of language. But in Buddhism, what we have to try and do is describe reality in words, and because of the almost impossibility of this it has been said that Buddhist theory is like a finger pointing at the moon, but only *we* can touch the moon. In other words, language points us towards something but what it’s pointing towards is not the same as what is pointing.

And to express the present moment in words is to deny the process of time. But words in a sentence build up a process of time: ‘First I got on the train, then I sat on the seat, then the doors closed, and then the train started moving.’ So the sentence contains a process, and that process is what we call “time.” But to describe the present moment we have to deny process. So to describe the present moment with a sentence which contains process is very difficult, and because of that fact we gradually come to accept the world as a process in time—it’s the way we speak: ‘Yesterday I... tomorrow I’m... in a minute I’ll...’ One thing happens after another, time flows on like a kind of line drawn in space. And, of course, it’s impossible to deny this view of the world.

However, there are other experiences in life that we are aware of in our everyday life, and they’re very simple and basic—so simple and basic that we hardly notice them at all. And therefore

language doesn't include them so easily. And I spoke about those simple experiences in my first talk: the kind of experience we have when we are completely involved in doing something for a long period of time. And that very, very, primitive experience we normally don't try to put into words, because it's so primitive and simple that we don't notice it and because words in a way destroy it; and they destroy it because words put things into the process of time. So we usually say something like, 'Oh, I don't know, when I was walking the other day, it was just... em, it was like there was no time, I was just there kind of... you know, you know it's difficult to know how to put it.'

And if we're poetic, no doubt we could find poetic ways of putting it. In the *Shobogenzo* Master Dogen uses many ways of describing reality which are very unusual and also very poetic. There's one I've picked out, and it's from the chapter entitled *Uji*, the chapter about the existence of time. It says, "*because spring is the momentary passing of time, passing time has already realized the truth in the here and now of springtime.*" I only chose it because I like it and because it's the kind of sentence that if you read it just normally it actually doesn't make any sense. It doesn't make any sense to the normal person because we don't see any connection between "spring," which is a season of the year which lasts from about March to May, "momentary passing of time," and "passing time has already realized the truth in the here and now of springtime." It kind of plays with the words, and the effect that it has for me is that it destroys the kind of process of time in the sentence. If it said something like, 'Spring is passing of time, and every moment in spring is part of the truth,' then I would think, 'Oh yeah that's true, spring's going along and every moment in spring... yes, there's truth there,' and in my mind I can kind of imagine it easily. But if I read Master Dogen's words, somehow it knocks me out of the time process and tells me something that I can't quite put into words about spring.

So it's a very unusual use of words, and the unusual use of words is necessary in order to, in English, break the kind of habitual process or the habitual way that we use words to represent a kind of picture of the world. If we write just in the simple way that people normally talk about spring, then it doesn't do the same thing. I suppose I'm talking about the poetry bit—about which I know very little; but I know it when I see it. And there are lots of other examples in the *Shobogenzo*. For example, in the chapter entitled *Inmo* (*Inmo* means "it" or "what") there's a sentence which says, "*If you want to attain the matter which is it, you must be a person who is it; already being a person who is it, why worry about the matter which is it.*" That sounds crazy, doesn't it? But then if you think of a simple English phrase, 'What is the time,' we can take this phrase in two ways—as a question or as a statement. If we take it as a statement, 'What is the time,' then the time is something called 'what' and something called 'what' is something unknown, so the time is unknown.

So if we look very closely at words, like this, we can see this kind of thing in everyday language. For instance: 'It is raining.' 'What is raining?' '*It* is raining.' 'What's *it*?' 'The weather's raining.' 'Well, why don't you say "the weather's raining"?' So as you know, we usually say 'it is raining'; we don't say 'rain is coming down.' Or we say 'an observer looks at an object,' but maybe we should say 'observation is going on.' So what I'm trying to demonstrate is that in our language, unconsciously, there are lots of forms of words which we don't notice. And we accept the way that they make us think and the kind of world view that they give us.

Now one more aspect of language which is completely different from reading, understanding or listening, is speaking or writing. And the mechanism of speaking or writing is completely and utterly different from the mechanism of understanding or reading. And it seems that amongst the modern researchers of the mechanisms of speech and so on, nobody really knows what a good model is for how we produce words, as I'm doing now. And there's a quite well known professor in America called Daniel Dennett, who's written a book called *Consciousness Explained*. And in the book he says that the speaker and the audience learn what the speaker is going to say at the same time—and I think that's true actually. He says that the words, in a way, want to get themselves said: there is a speaker, and there is an audience, and there are words that want to get themselves said, and the audience and the speaker get to know about those at the same time.

And regarding getting to know about the words at the same time, another man, whom Daniel Dennett quotes, named Marvin Minsky says, "*Whatever we want to say we probably won't say exactly that.*" Or another quote: E. M. Forster, who is a very famous English author of the 1920s, said, "*How do I know what I think until I see what I say?*" So the process of speaking or writing something down is largely unknown. And it's a very strange process, but we don't notice.

So in that rather bits and pieces talk tonight, what I wanted to outline is that language is given to us and with it we are given a world view—and we don't notice. We sometimes mistake that view that language gives us for what is really here. What is really here is outside the time process, so we can't really talk about it. When we talk about it or about anything, we are not really sure what we are going to say until we say it. Those are the points I want to make.

And one final thing, the rather famous Austrian philosopher called Wittgenstein, who everybody thought was mad, said a couple of interesting things. He said, "*There are indeed things that cannot be put into words, they make themselves manifest, they are what is mystical. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence,*" which I thought was very beautiful. So ultimately, words, language is quite mystical, but we don't notice it.

Are there any questions?

I couldn't understand about the speaker and audience part. I feel that the speaker knows what he or she is going to say, then the audience hears it. Because I'm Japanese, sometimes when I speak in English I feel like I'm reading something that I'm creating in my mind.

Who is reading it from the place where you store it? Is it another you?

Kind of, it's a kind of process.

Yes, I feel too that we have something that motivates us to speak. If you read Daniel Dennett's very complicated explanation, he says that it's impossible for us actually to formulate what we want to say before we say it. There is something, but it's unformulated; and not only that, there are many different alternatives bubbling around which are fighting and we don't know which we're going to say. So we might say this one or that one. He says there's a kind of fight for the words to get out.

It's a rather complicated explanation, but it was quite convincing to me in that I don't know what I'm going to say until I say it. But although I say that, there is some kind of feeling in me. However if I read out something, then that's different because I'm reading some words.

Maybe it's the same when I write something, it feels as if the words are also fighting inside me.

He says so, and I think the theory is quite convincing. So the only thing we can do is watch ourselves, and see whether it seems reasonable or not. Of course there are times when I think, 'Now I'm going to say such and such in Japanese,' and I practice and I say it. But those are special times. When we want to express ourselves freely, I would suggest that, actually, there is no place where we think and then read it from that place into our mouth. So we don't actually know exactly what we will say until we say it. And I feel that myself, at this very moment—but there's no proof.

I was just thinking about the meaning of words. In Japanese we use Chinese characters that each symbolize something, which we call "kanji," and these kanji determine quite a lot of things...

I can't talk with any authority about Japanese but it seems to me that English and Japanese are fundamentally different and they do give us different world views. And, for instance, most English people living in England don't notice it but for the likes of English people like me living in Japan it's one thing we notice—the kind of Englishness of English, or the view that goes with the language, that's attached to the language. Somehow it's a very great problem, at least to me.

So the point is, what all the Buddhist sutras, whether they're written in Chinese, Japanese, English or Sanskrit, are talking about is something which is beyond any of those world views. They are encompassing them all, and that's the great problem of writing about or talking about Buddhism. Noam Chomsky, the famous linguistic scholar, said that all languages had what he called a "deep structure," and the deep structure in Japanese, the deep structure in English, and the deep structure in German, and so on are the same. And this means the meaning that the languages are expressing is very much more fundamental and not different between different cultures.

And a Japanese team of computer translation specialists in the 1970s and 80s actually tried to use this "deep structure" for translation. So instead of translating Japanese into English or whatever, they would translate into the deep structure. However, they were unable to find what the deep structure was and couldn't put it into a computer program. But in a way there's something in that deep structure. In a way we could say that what Buddhism wants to talk about is the deep structure, that which is common and yet beyond and yet contained in all languages. So in a way I feel that being immersed in Japanese and also in English is very, very helpful. I don't know how it's helpful, but I feel it is.

You said that what is really here is outside the time process. What does that mean?

What I meant to say is that what is really *here* is outside the time process. By outside the time process I mean that time is a process created by, I dare say, language—and I know lots of people would disagree. But I feel that the process which we call "time" could not exist in the sense that it

does without language. Of course it could exist in some sense, but the reinforced concept of time that we have in modern society and in science is very language dependent. So that's what we can notice when we sit in Zazen—if we're sitting in Zazen and we feel quite easy sitting just where we're sitting, in that state there's not such a strong consciousness of time. And sometimes there is no consciousness of time.

In your talk you spoke about babies, and I think you used the words 'babies are happy.' How do we know whether babies are happy or not?

I said they're happy or content in the present moment. But of course we don't know. And this brings me to the point about when Wittgenstein was having an argument with Bertrand Russell. Bertrand Russell said, "There are some things which we know. For instance, there is no rhinoceros in this room." And Wittgenstein said, "There is a possibility there is a rhinoceros in this room." So Bertrand Russell got up and started looking under the desk and behind the curtains and said, "I can't see any rhinoceros." So Wittgenstein got very angry and said, "There is a possibility, it's feasible that there is a rhinoceros in this room." So if I look at a baby and I see something and I say, 'Oh, it's happy.' But it may be that it's content.

Perhaps we should finish now. Thank you very much.