

The Nature of Experience - Lecture 4

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Master Dogen's book the *Shobogenzo* was written in the 13th century, and because it was written in the 13th century it's quite difficult to catch what Master Dogen is trying to say. But listening to Nishijima Roshi talk again and again, we can see that Master Dogen is talking about everyday life, about real things in the real world. And because he's talking about real things in the real world, I feel a duty to try and talk about Buddhism using today's language in today's world. There are lots of books about Buddhism which talk about rather ancient concepts and rather scholarly analyses of ancient texts, and of course that's very important, but in these talks I want to talk about this world, and what Master Dogen says about this world. So I called the talks "The nature of experience."

In the first talk, I talked about the very simple kind of experiences that we have when we do something active, especially when we do some kind of sport which has a lot of repetition—like long distance running or swimming. And if we do those kinds of things, we have an experience which is so simple that we tend to ignore it or miss it. And I said that that kind of very simple experience is at the heart of Buddhism. And because it's a very simple experience and because it's so easy to miss, people don't think that Buddhism is talking about that experience. They think it's talking about some experience which is outside their field of experience. They think that Buddhism is talking about something in another world other than this world, and they try to get towards that. But Master Dogen is not doing that, and Nishijima Roshi doesn't teach us to find the truth in another world—but in this world.

And in the second talk, I spoke about the very simple experience we have when we're babies. And the reason I talked about being a baby is because a baby comes into the world with very little in the way of human experience. Of course, it's experiencing reality at every moment, but it doesn't have the kind of social experience that it gets when it gets older. So we talked about the baby having rather simple unintentional actions and so on.

Then last week, in the third talk, I went on to talk about language, because the one thing that probably more than anything else turns a baby into an adult is the acquisition of language. And when we acquire language we don't just acquire words, we acquire a view of the world. But because that view of the world becomes so natural to us, we don't notice it anymore. So when we speak about the world, what we talk about and the way we think the world is become the same thing inside our brains. So language has an effect on the way that we perceive the world.

And because words are very powerful, language directs our consciousness in many ways. For example, if I say something like Descartes said, 'I think therefore I am,' then it directs your consciousness towards some kind of abstract thought. And if I say, 'a half a kilogram of apples,' then it directs your consciousness towards something rather practical. And if I say, 'I've got to catch the bus tomorrow to go to work,' it directs you towards some kind of everyday activity. And if I quote a piece of poetry, for instance from the *Shobogenzo*, "it is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds, while hated, flourish," which is a piece of poetry from the chapter entitled *Genjo Koan*, it directs our consciousness beyond words to something else. And most people would agree that the role of poetry is to tell us something which is in between, or beyond, the words it conveys. And in

talking about Buddhism, we tend to use words to describe the true situation or the truth or the real state at this moment in the present, but because the world is always changing, it's impossible to put it into words—we'll always be a bit behind.

This week I want to talk a bit about another way we perceive the world that is very closely connected with language, and that is the material view of the world represented by science. I think it's very important to look at the origins of the scientific view of the world in order to see quite clearly what it is that we're doing. Because, for instance, in modern society we're very, very deeply rooted in a scientific view of the world. Even people who say, 'Oh, I'm not interested in science, I don't like science,' are deeply rooted in the scientific view. For instance, they believe the world is round. And the reason, perhaps, that they believe the world is round is that somebody told them when they were in school, and then in recent years they've maybe seen pictures from a spacecraft. But both of those are not real experience in the sense that seeing pictures from the spacecraft is some kind of trust in technology. So whether we like it or not, we all have a very strong scientific view of the world.

At its most fundamental level science is a way of interpreting nature, but it's only one way of interpreting nature, one way of looking at the world. We can see this if we go back in history, back to the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, and look at what historians say about that time. I'm going to quote a bit from a rather good book called *Magic, Science, and Civilization*, by a well-known scientific historian named Jacob Bronowski. He died about twenty-five years ago, but he has some very interesting things to say about the history of science. One thing he says is that between the years 1500 and 1700 there was a big change in the way that people looked at the world, and it was a change that was so complete that we can never go back to the way that things were before that time.

Now we need a bit of imagination to think about what things were like before that time. For example, around about the year 1600, for the very first time in human history perhaps, it became accepted that you couldn't persuade people of one thing when another thing is true simply by using words. Now that seems pretty obvious. If one thing is true, you can't persuade somebody that another thing is true just by saying so. But that wasn't the case before the 1500s, because of the power of spiritual religions. So, for instance, if a priest said some particular mystical thing was true, then people were ready to believe it. Religions such as Christianity asserted very clearly that God could intervene in the way that the world is running: here is the world, it's running on quite normally, and then God could intervene and change things a bit whenever he wanted to and cause things to happen. And when he did that, they sometimes said that there were miracles or acts of God.

Now we all know this, but imagine what it must have been like to live in a world like that. For instance, around 1200 or 1250 or so a very famous theologian named Thomas Aquinas said that when a priest in the Christian mass says particular words, a piece of bread which he is holding changes into flesh of Jesus Christ; and when he says other special words, a cup of wine which he is holding actually changes to blood. Not represent it, but actually become it. And everybody believed it; it was normal to believe those kinds of things.

So the priest had special powers. The words said by the priest had the power to transform things, and people who had these special powers had a special relationship with God and access to special powers that transcended the kind of earthly laws. So human beings could use a kind of spiritual magic to get nature to obey what they said. Now, if we think about natural law in modern times we can't imagine wine changing into something else, but in the twelfth or thirteenth century they believed that a particular man had a particular power and could make nature change. And this is called religious belief. And Jacob Bronowski uses the word "magic," not in the sense of making a trick, but to try and describe the kind of beliefs which were very widespread.

And we can say that this view of the world wasn't reasonable, at least it's not reasonable to us because it meant people couldn't use simple logic to understand the way that the world worked—you had to trust somebody else. But, slowly during the 1500s people began to see that the only way, really, that you could get nature to obey what you wanted it to do was to find out how nature worked and then use nature for your own purposes, or to your own advantage. That sounds like a very simple thing, but in fact, it's the very basic essence of the scientific view: to look at nature, and nature means everything, not just the trees and mountains, but everything, all natural phenomena; to understand how nature works; and then to use the way nature works.

And in the two hundred years from 1500 to 1700, that view became common and accepted for the very first time. People started to become interested in finding out about the way things worked, and they started to be able to use logical ways to find out how the world worked and to get rid of, to forget about, the superstitions which much of the belief in the world was founded on in those times. And they had a lot of very, very, unusual beliefs. If we read about them now we can laugh at it, but if we imagine for a moment the whole of the world based on these beliefs, we can catch some kind of glimpse, some kind of picture, of how much the world changed.

We take it for granted these days that the way that we view the world is the way that everybody viewed the world, but it's not true. And particularly in Master Dogen's time, there was a great deal of spiritual belief, based on fables and spiritual ideas and spiritual stories. And if we read the *Shobogenzo* we can see how Master Dogen attempts to cut through those stories and to say, 'Yes yes, but it's not the spiritual story itself, it's standing for something real in the world.'

So gradually the world came to be viewed in a different way that relied on a kind of reasonable explanation which is not attributed to spiritual powers. You didn't need to be a special kind of person in order to understand things, and if you explained something, you could demonstrate to somebody else that it was true—you didn't have to ask them to believe something strange, you could show them that something was true. For instance, if you wanted to show that there was gravity you could hold up a pair of glasses and you could drop them, and you could explain that they are being pulled down towards the earth. But before the fifteenth century, the way they explained things like that was using concepts like, "God has a very strong love for all objects, so the glasses love the earth." That's a kind of simile, but that's the way they explained things. But we don't explain things like that nowadays; we use the scientific method almost a hundred percent in modern times.

However, the scientific method is based very largely on language. Science is not only a model of

how nature works, it's a living language to describe nature—in order to give a reasonable explanation of how something works we have to use language. And science is closely connected to language; in fact, we could say science *is* a language. People usually think that science is something that people do, and of course it's true, scientists do science, but what they do is they create a picture of how the world works—and to create that picture they must use language. So from that point of view, science equals language. And, in fact, maybe one of the purest parts of science, mathematics, is a very condensed form of language.

So we use words to represent things, and then—the special power of human beings—we take the words and move them around to explain things in different ways. For instance, I can say, 'I pick up the glasses. I put the glasses on my face,' or I can say, 'My face receives the glasses from my hand'—and we're manipulating or moving around words in our brain to explain something. But the thing that happens is that we believe that the words that we use represent real things. And in thinking and believing the words represent real things we impose a structure on top of the world, as human beings.

We've all lived for so long with words and things and actions that we suppose this is the only way to look at the world. We think that the world consists of objects and chairs and people, and actions that people do, and properties like red, green, or smooth, or tall or wide. But if we think for a moment about an animal, say a dog, a dog doesn't think of the world as full of "trees," that have got "leaves," which are "green"; a dog doesn't think of "a man," cutting down "a tree," with "an axe." A dog doesn't think like that. We know enough from experiments which have been done on the visual systems of animals and from watching the way that animals behave to know that they don't view the world in terms of objects; but we do.

Objectification, which means making things into objects, objectification of the world is something that possibly only human beings do, and it depends on language. We give names to phenomena and concepts and fix them as objects in our mind and in our language, and then we move around the ideas in our brain to come up with different views. And that activity is the basis of science: to make an analysis of the world using language which matches as closely as possible to the world that we see. So, groups of things, concepts, classes of things, and so on.

But Buddhism says that the world which actually exists and which we experience is beyond that view. So we can't grasp it with the scientific view, we can't grasp it with language, but we can grasp it with something very simple; that is, real experience. So, sitting in Zazen, as we did before the talk, simply sitting facing the wall in an upright posture without thinking anything and without concentrating on feeling, that very, very, simple experience is an experience of the world beyond words. And when I say beyond words, it means beyond things, because things are linked to words. So, if we read the *Shobogenzo*, we can find many places where Master Dogen attempts to use language to get beyond the words. Of course he can't, but he tries.

So summing up, we can say that there are different ways to view the world. Language itself gives us a way to view the world, it's a kind of limited view; so even my speaking now is imposing a view on the world. Science is something which is so widespread in modern times that we don't notice, but

if we look back into history, before the fifteenth century, we can catch a glimpse of a very, very different way of viewing the world.

Now, Nishijima Roshi teaches us, with his eternal optimism, that what is happening in the present century is that we are moving to a completely new world view, a world view which is beyond science and beyond language—so he says it's based on action. We can say it's based on experience. But the problem is, the world view based on experience doesn't fit into language. And because it doesn't fit into language we have to use a very special multi-view way to grasp it. And that's what I want to go on to talk about in more detail in future weeks.

Those of us who have studied with Nishijima Roshi already know his four philosophies. But, maybe using different words, I want to put them in a different way to try and illustrate the fact that we can't escape from the views on the world: that human beings' views on the world have changed much more than we could ever imagine. And Buddhism has a view on the world that needs us to use all the other views in order to grasp it, because it's a view which is beyond language and is something very simple. And because it's so simple, it's very difficult to grasp. And because it's so difficult to grasp we practice it. The practice of Zazen is just that.

I'll stop talking now. Thank you very much.