

The Nature of Experience - Lecture 5

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I learned Buddhism from Nishijima Roshi and I haven't studied with anybody else, so the only Buddhism I can tell you about is the Buddhism I learned from him. I've been giving this series of talks to try to explain what the nature of Buddhism is, and I gave the talks the title "The nature of experience." And the reason I called the talks "the nature of experience" is because Buddhism is about our real experience.

However, almost all the people in the developed world don't know what Buddhism is. And even though there are quite a few of them who are studying Buddhism, the true explanation and teachings of Buddhism that Nishijima Roshi explains based on Master Dogen are in a way so surprising that it's very difficult to introduce them to people who are interested in Buddhism. One reason for this is that when people are interested in something, they normally think that they come with nothing and then they build up their knowledge until they learn something.

So when we go to school, for example, we go with nothing and then we're given lots of books and we're given lots of knowledge and we fill in lots of notes in many notebooks, and we absorb knowledge. And we learn how to move the knowledge around in our mind so that we can answer questions which experts called teachers ask us. And then we go on to college, and college is the same—we go into college as a freshman with no knowledge and we expect to build up our knowledge until we have a big store of knowledge and we become an expert. And then we go to a company, and we enter the company as a new employee and we stand there very innocently and we listen and we say, 'Yes, yes, yes, yes,' and we learn how to do everything, and we build up knowledge and so on.

And we have a kind of image of building ourselves up layer by layer by layer—getting better, getting better. Then as we get better and better and better, we are taught that usually we get more and more successful in different ways. Some people think that as we build up our knowledge and expertise we become more successful as some kind of expert, we become more knowledgeable. Other people think that when we build up our expertise we can become richer, we can improve our status. But always in our mind is a kind of image of improving, getting better, building up, getting more, getting more.

And this is one reason why studying Buddhism is so difficult for so, because Buddhism is utterly different to that. We sit on a black cushion facing the wall, and the teacher says to us, "Don't think anything," and then after we practice for 30 minutes we get up, and then maybe after a day or two we wonder, 'What did I get? What was that? Do I feel better?'

Recently I read some sayings from Master Kodo Sawaki, a famous Buddhist master in Japan, which were translated into English, and when somebody asked him, 'What do you get from Zazen?' he replied, 'You can't get anything, nothing.' So all our lives we are going through a process to get more something—more knowledge, more skill, more money, more expertise, more status, more confidence, more something, but when we come to Buddhism we get nothing. So we start to search: 'There must be something I can get.' And our search leads us to reading books about Buddhism.

But we study the books and study the books and in the end we wonder, 'What can I get out of this, just a headache?' Or we go to Zazen sesshins or retreats, and we sit and we sit and our knees hurt and our back becomes stiff and we wonder, 'What did I get, just a stiff back and sore knees?'

So really, Buddhism is fundamentally different to all of the social training that we're used to. Because Buddhism is not getting something—it's losing something. And in the *Shobogenzo*, a very famous phrase that Master Dogen is supposed to have said when he noticed the true nature of Zazen and which he writes in the *Shobogenzo* in Japanese is, "*Shin Jin Datsu Raku*," or "throwing away body and mind." So Master Dogen says "throwing away," and Master Kodo Sawaki says "nothing," so I guess there can't be a lot to get.

But we're so used to achieving, to getting, to expecting, that it's very, very difficult to notice what Buddhism is about. And this seems to be true whether we're talking about people in Japan, or people in America, or people in Europe. Even now there are quite large groups of Buddhists in the West, and all of them seem to be looking for something. We're used to expecting to get something from Buddhism—that's the big problem.

Now, if we say Buddhism has nothing, then it's not very interesting for anybody. Well it does have something, because as we grow from babies to adults society gives us a very strong view of the world that we live in, but because we start to learn from a very young age, we don't notice that view and we think that that view is real. For example, we very quickly learn when we are children that the piece of paper that has some kind of color and shape on it is called a picture and that picture represents something real—and the child learns that. But it's almost impossible for us to notice that actually the picture is nothing like what is real. There have been some studies of showing pictures and photographs to very primitive people, for instance people living in the Amazon jungle, and when they see the photograph which represents something real to us, it doesn't represent that to them at all. They see just the strange, maybe beautiful, pattern. So even for something as very fundamental as a picture, we learn the meaning of the picture when we're very, very small and it becomes natural to us—'Oh, there's a photograph of so-and-so,' or 'Oh, there's a picture of Rome,' or 'There's a picture of the Eiffel Tower.'

But these kinds of processes that we are trained into as we grow up, we can call them socializations, are so numerous and we learn so many of them that we don't notice. We turn on the television and we see a picture of Serbia or Kosovo and we watch pictures of the refugees and it's so sad we feel like crying. But what we are watching is pictures on a piece of glass moving around by a magnet, which is the television set. But we've learned that those pictures represent something real which is not here in this place, and we've learned it so much that to us it becomes real. Although it is quite difficult to accept, Buddhism insists that what is real is only what is here in this place at this time and everything else is something different from real. In the modern world, what we think is real includes what is here in this place and goes out and out using books and our imagination and the television and communications, so that what we call reality in the modern world extends out and out—everywhere.

Now, of course it would be foolish to say that Serbia is not real, or Kosovo doesn't exist, or the

person in the photograph is not real. So Buddhism is not insisting that the world doesn't exist, but it's saying that what is here and now in this place has a different quality to what we think is real, because we learn that kind of way of thinking. What we think is real may be real. So we can watch the television and we can say, 'Yes, the situation in Kosovo is very serious,' and we believe it, and of course we are probably not wrong. But Buddhism says that there is some kind of more fundamental reality, and that fundamental reality is, if you like, more primitive. It's more like the reality of a small child. That is, what is here and now we call real. What may be in other places that we believe is real is a kind of belief.

Now that's quite a difficult picture to accept in the modern world, and in order to accept it we have to "take off" our knowledge—not put on more knowledge, but throw away knowledge. We have to come back to a more simple way of looking at things. But at the same time, it would be foolish of us to deny social reality. It's impossible to deny the reality which society creates and in which we live, because that reality contains our work and our aims and our dreams and the rest of the world and the whole of modern civilization. But still Buddhism insists that what is real is something more basic, and it's here and now in this place.

Well we can hear somebody say that, but to notice the fact is rather difficult. If you go out to the bar across the road and tap on somebody's shoulder and say, 'Excuse me, excuse me, this is the only place which is real,' they'll say, 'Yes, yes, yes, okay, yes, yes, yes,'—they're not interested. Most people would probably say that. So it's a very bare, dry, kind of view of the world. However it's the view of the world which Master Dogen describes in the *Shobogenzo*, and it's the view of the world which Master Nishijima talks to us about.

But because it's very difficult to grasp something that is so simple, we have to practice noticing that simple something—and so we practice Zazen. And when we practice Zazen, instead of solving problems by absorbing knowledge, we let go of all that. We let go of our thinking, we let go of our worries, we let go of our pain, and we sit in something very simple, very immediate and very real. And if we sit in that very simple state everyday, after a while we notice the flavour of reality, the taste of reality, and then we notice that what society says is reality has a different quality. And although it's important because we live in society, we don't need to believe that it's reality.

Now this sounds very abstract kind of talk, but in our daily life changing our view by practicing Zazen can mean quite a lot in terms of how we live our life. For instance, if we're brought up in a very traditional family and we think that a certain kind of duty to our company is very important, then we may even endanger our own health in trying to follow something which we learn from society: 'I must do this job, I must do the next job, I must meet the deadline, I must get somewhere.' But if we notice that although it's a social pressure it is not actually the nature of life, then we can be freer from it. Of course, we can't be free from the pressures of society as long as we live in society, but if we notice what the nature of society's pressure is, then that noticing itself makes something different. And that's the second thing about Buddhism: we're not trying to do something to get better. If we can't get anything from Zazen, if Zazen gives us nothing, then how can we improve?

And Nishijima Roshi denies that Zazen is a method of improving ourselves. Zazen is a method of

noticing what we are like, of noticing what reality is like. And noticing the fact itself is a kind of solution. So if we sit in Zazen and we notice that we are very tense, then noticing the tension itself is the solution—we don't need to jump up and get rid of our tension. Or if we sit in Zazen and we notice that we're worrying about something, just noticing the fact that we are worrying is the solution.

In the modern world we are educated to think that first we identify the problem, then we think about the solution, and then we move towards the solution. But Buddhism says there is no movement from noticing the problem to acting the solution—the problem and the solution are at the same place and noticing how we are is the most that we can do. So if, as is often the case, we suddenly notice how stupid we've been over some time over some kind of problem, at the moment we notice how stupid we've been the problem disappears.

But this way of thinking is not the way that we are trained to think, and it's not the way we are educated to think, and so it's very difficult to change our way of thinking. But when we practice Zazen, we notice the simple facts, again and again, and then we start to believe them. But we don't get anything else, just we notice how stupid we are or how tired we are or how happy we are, and that's all.

I'll stop talking now and if anybody has anything to say, please go ahead.

You said noticing is not improving, but from another point of view I think noticing is improving. In some way, by noticing we can improve ourselves.

We believe that we are improving—it's a kind of belief. But when I say "noticing," it's a little different to "being aware of ourselves." There's a word which is quite often used in Buddhism in the West called "mindfulness," and it has the kind of meaning of being aware of ourselves, watching ourselves. I don't mean that kind of noticing; I mean simply "Oh," "Ahh," that kind of noticing.

For instance, if we think of a factory and an assembly line in a factory, we can say that when the workers notice mistakes on the assembly line they can correct them and the product is improved; that's true. But when we say it's true, it depends on believing a whole lot of things, for example, that a smoother product is better than a rough product, or a clean product is better than a dirty product.

So when we talk about improving in normal life we share an image of what improving is, and that image is a kind of belief. So for instance, we think we believe that society is improving. Just after the Second World War nobody in Japan had a refrigerator and nobody had a colour television, and then when the Olympics came to Tokyo everybody got a colour television and everybody got a washing machine and everybody got a car—so society is improving we say. But it's a kind of belief or kind of agreement between members of society. However, on a more fundamental level, whether it's improving or not depends on your point of view and on your feeling. For example, when I get on the train in the morning and it's very crowded, if I compare it to what Japan may have been like one hundred years ago I wonder if I can call it an improvement or not. I get to work faster, but is it an

improvement or not? We can agree that it's an improvement, but that's a kind of social agreement.

Nishijima Roshi has been studying the works of Master Nagarjuna who lived in the fourth century and was a very famous Buddhist philosopher at that time in Northern India. Master Nagarjuna wrote a very famous book that is translated into Chinese and Japanese as *Chu Ron*, but which was originally called the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. Nishijima Roshi has been studying this book for more than fifteen years now and he keeps saying, 'Oh, how could Master Nagarjuna have had such an incredibly high level of philosophical thought so long ago, before Japan had even emerged from the trees.' So he said, 'Recently I wonder whether society is improving or going backwards?'

So we can have a different view at different times—sometimes we can feel things go backwards, sometimes we can feel things go forward. But whether they're going backwards or forwards is the question, and Buddhism says, 'They're not going backwards or forwards. They're just here now, and then they're here now, and next they're here now; and there is no backwards or forwards!' But in our mind we invent a movement backwards or forwards because it's the only way we can understand with our mind what we call "process."

If Buddhism denies that there's a backwards or forwards and says real is only here and now and everything else may be real or may be not, then it's certainly a very revolutionary religion or a revolutionary philosophy. And it's true, it is very revolutionary. Therefore we need to do something very revolutionary by sitting on a cushion and practicing Zazen. We have to throw away what we learned in order to understand something; "*Shin Jin Datsu Raku*," "throwing away body and mind."

You mentioned about noticing. Unfortunately, people sometimes fail to notice some simple things in daily life, for instance, when we brush our teeth we often let the water run from the tap while we are brushing which wastes water and money.

And isn't it strange that when millions of people are brushing their teeth, when they notice, 'Oh, I'm brushing my teeth,' then they turn the tap off. And that action of noticing they're brushing their teeth can save the world millions of litres of water. Very funny, 'Oh, I'm brushing my teeth, oh, better turn the tap off. Where was I?' Often I notice when I'm washing my face, 'Oh, I'm washing my face.'

The action is not only noticing, but also acting at the moment.

Ah yes, but when we return to reality we know that instant, 'Oh, I'm brushing my teeth.' And often while we're brushing our teeth we're thinking, 'I've got to go to so-and-so, then I've got to do such-and-such, oh, do I have enough time?' then, "Boom" we notice, and then we can act, or we notice and act at the same time. So it's returning to the present, returning to this place; we never left it, but we notice it. We can't leave the present, but somehow we return to it. It's impossible to leave the present moment.

So if you notice your daily activity and what you're missing, then you can improve yourself. If you

don't notice you can never ever improve yourself.

You can turn the tap off. Of course everybody agrees about improvements: 'Oh, I practice Zazen everyday and I feel a lot better.' And of course, we have an agreed meaning, 'Oh yes, I improved. I studied and I improved. I went to the sports club everyday and I feel much healthier. I improved.' But Buddhism says that improvement is a kind of agreement that we share in society, and in reality there is only now—so, acting now, acting now. But there seems to be something called improvement.

I am interested in improving myself, so I practice Zazen every morning even for just five or ten minutes, and I find it very helpful. And now doing Zazen every morning has become a habit, so I can't stop. It's just like playing a sport. It's addictive.

Addicted to Zazen. Yes, because if we practice Zazen we can't improve ourselves, just we practice Zazen, and carry on day after day.

Sometimes I leave work during the day to come here to practice Zazen for thirty or forty-five minutes and then go back to the office. It gives me a very fresh feeling.

Wouldn't it be very nice if all offices and all universities had a room for Zazen and people could go and practice and have a break during their day? Still, I think the recent growth in sports activities is similar. Because, as Nishijima Roshi says, and my experience supports very strongly, doing sport simply and sincerely is to live in the moment in the same way that Zazen is, so that people who pursue sports can notice reality or the way things are. And that's a very nice trend in modern society.

To think about noticing the moment we must, as it were, stop time so that we can think. But we can not stop the moment, it continues on. So what do you mean by noticing?

When we think, our mind creates time. So when we think, we move mentally. And even if we think about what is here, when we think about it we take it out of reality—we make it abstract; and so it no longer is what is here. So it's impossible to think about what is here. And even from ancient times the Buddhist scriptures said that it's impossible to describe reality in words. Because to make words, to make thoughts, we take something out of reality and place it into our brain or our mind, which is called abstracting or abstract. So it's impossible to think about the present moment.

But noticing doesn't include the intellectual process—it's a kind of flash. Of course, afterwards we may think about something, but noticing or coming back to reality is in the instant. For instance, we're sitting in Zazen and suddenly we notice something in the instant that we were thinking something and we straighten up, or if we were tired and went asleep we suddenly notice, 'Oh.' In that instant, we are in reality. But we can never catch it, because it's only here. So our thought is always removed from reality. That's the way human beings are; we can't do anything about it. But we can try to use words, we can try to use ideas, to describe something which is beyond the words or beyond the ideas.

Buddhism sometimes uses the image of the moon—you can see the moon but can't touch it. The image is the moon, but you can't touch the moon because our thinking and our description already leave reality. Although they may describe reality, they've left it. So we practice Zazen to experience what we cannot exactly talk about. And Nishijima Roshi says that practicing Zazen regularly is important, not so much to practice for a long time in several days of intensive practice, but every day, every day, because we can notice the nature of where we are.

I guess we better finish now. Thank you very much for listening to me.