

## The Nature of Experience—Lecture 7

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I will carry on with the same theme that I have been following, which is an attempt to talk about the nature of experience. I got as far as talking about the development of science and how science emerged formally some time between 1500 and 1700 when people started noticing you couldn't say secret words and get nature to obey you. Instead, you had to notice how nature worked and then set things up so that nature did what you wanted. And that kind of very simple change of viewpoint was the beginning of science as we know it; and it gave the world a new viewpoint.

And this new viewpoint was based on reason, because up to that time power had been held by people who were in touch with God, called priests. And because the priest had a direct link with God and was thought to be a pure and holy person, he could say, from the basis of secret knowledge, how the universe worked and people believed him. But that kind of knowledge based on secret statements started to be no longer accepted—people no longer thought things like, 'If I say a bad word to my neighbour I will catch smallpox,' or 'If you do such and such you will go to hell.' They started to notice that the world around them had much more basic rules and these rules could be explained based on reason. So as they noticed and explained how the world worked, they formulated what has become the ever-changing rules of science.

So science is a kind of model of how nature works. But it's not only a model of how nature works, it's a living language describing nature; because in order to give a reasonable explanation of how something works, we need to use language. And so science is so closely connected to language that we could almost say that science is, in fact, a language for viewing the world. People often say that mathematics is a language for describing the way the world works, but we could say, in a way, that science is a language for viewing the world—and therefore we need to have names for things in the external world. We have words that represent things; and human beings, in contrast to animals, possess a special power of taking these separate words which represent things and rearranging them in different ways. And by rearranging the words for things in the external world in different ways, we impose on the world a structure which wasn't there before.

So our manipulation of language is fundamental to the scientific view of the world—we move the words around and create a structure, which is what I'm doing now. But the important thing is that, that structure was not there before. At least if we look at the transition period, say pre-1600 and post-1600, a structure emerged of the external world that did not exist before. But since the 16th century up until now, we've lived so long with words and things and actions that we suppose there is only one way of looking at the world, at least "we" meaning society as a whole.

We think the world consists of objects—chairs, people, desks, paper, and words and so on. And we think it consists of the actions that people do and the properties of objects—an object is green or big or red or small, etc. However, what I'd like to suggest is, that a dog, for example, doesn't see the world composed of "trees" with "leaves" that are "green" and so on. And a dog doesn't think about a "man" who "cuts down" a "tree"—it doesn't think in terms of that kind of action. And we know from investigating visual systems in animals, which is done by connecting something to the brain and noticing how the brain reacts to visual signals, that animals don't seem to view the world in terms of

objects like we do. If you look at the brain of a human adult person and bring objects in front of that person, the brain reacts: it's recognition. But if you do that with an animal the results are different. So it seems clear that science seems to suggest that animals don't view the world in terms of recognized objects.

And it's quite interesting, because in the chapter entitled *Sansuigyo* in the *Shobogenzo*, Master Dogen talks about water being viewed by different beings in different ways. That's exactly the point: we can say that different beings view the world in different ways. And the way that the human being views the world in modern society is based on a world view that is scientific, whether that person likes it or not, because nobody can escape from science. Even my cousin, who doesn't like anything scientific and reckons the world will come to an end because of technology, cannot escape, she's in the middle of it. And of course we all feel too, especially foreign people living here in Japan, that we can notice how much religious content there is in our viewpoint—whether we like it or not, whether we deny it or not.

But I think it's true to say that the scientific viewpoint of the world is much greater now than the religious viewpoint—much, much greater. And so we view the world in terms of shared meaning, and that meaning is largely scientific. And this ability to make the world into objects, to objectify the world, seems to be something specifically human—and it depends on language. Because if we cannot give a name to an object then we cannot abstract it, we cannot think about the object. Of course, if we look at the situation very closely we could say, 'Yes I can. I can see an object and then I can get an image of it without a name,' but actually that's impossible. We are all too far gone. We can't take names away from things. We can pretend to, but we can't do it.

So the names and objects are one to us, they're firmly fixed. And giving names to phenomena, objects, abstract concepts, and so on fixes them in our mind as objects—it fixes them in language and then we manipulate the objects in our language to come up with different views. And that's how we construct scientific theories: we construct the theories somewhere in our consciousness. So we could say that science is to make the analysis of the world itself using language exactly match how the world seems to be. So we use language, and language includes mathematics and all forms of abstracting with names, to make an exact match between our analysis of the world and how the world is. And to do that we make groups of things and concepts and classes and so on.

And the point I'm trying to make is that we cannot escape from objectifying the world, and that objectifying of the world is very, very largely scientific, because objectifying the world itself is the basis of science. And objectifying the world means that we believe that what is outside us consists of objects, phenomena, things and so on.

So the fundamental basis of science is our belief when we look out through the two holes in our head and see in front of us something which we believe consists of this and that and the other—A, B, C, 1, 2, 3, dog, tree and so on. And that is a kind of belief, because we can't actually go any further than to say that that's what we do, we can't prove it. And, therefore, it's extremely difficult for us to see the world in front of us without filtering it through these scientific notions, language, experience and so on.

So when we think about the world, we invariably think about it in terms of concepts. For instance, if I say the word “thinking,” it suggests a concept to you and a concept to me; but what I mean by “thinking” is not always the same as what somebody else might mean. That may be one of the roots of the long-term discussion between Nishijima Roshi and one of his students who lives in England. They are conducting a discussion about “intention,” and in their discussion I can see not only a possible different understanding of Buddhism, but also a possible different use of words. And that makes the situation quite difficult.

So when Nishijima Roshi and his student talk about “intention,” what does Nishijima Roshi’s “intention” mean and what does his student’s “intention” mean? Nishijima Roshi says, ‘There’s none there,’ and his student says, ‘Yes there is.’ So we can see in very simple terms that misunderstandings of different definitions of terms can lead to disagreement and different views.

Anyway, when we look at the world we invariably look at it in terms of the names and concepts that we attach to the objects that we perceive. This morning I looked out of the window of our apartment at a huge green tree which is outside, and on the tree I noticed something brown, so I said to my wife, ‘What is it?’ and she said, ‘Oh, dead leaves or something.’ But already that little brown thing had suggested itself to be lots of things to me. I thought, ‘Is it a bat? Is it an animal hanging on the branch?’ So the shape in the tree was searching my brain for a name. And until I could find a name in my brain for the brown thing, or until the brown thing could find a name in my brain, I couldn’t rest. So I thought, ‘I’ll get the binoculars and have a look,’ but from my experience in Zazen I realized it was just a brown thing and left it, though I think it was probably leaves. But the point is, only a human being would be caught by a brown thing in a tree—you would never see a dog or a bird peering out and trying to find a name for it.

So the point is that we try to find names for everything, and to try to find a name for something is a kind of understanding of it. In the original Japanese version of the *Shobogenzo*, there are quite a few places in the Chinese writing sections where the term *Inmo*, which means “what,” is used. And it is translated sometimes as a question, ‘What is in the tree?’ and sometimes as a statement, ‘What is in the tree,’ meaning ‘The ineffable is in the tree.’ In other words, not that we don’t know what is in the tree, but suggesting that what is in front of us is nameless; the tree, too, is nameless. And our naming of things is, in one way, one of the excellent qualities of human beings and the cause of our excellent civilization, but in another way it’s a kind of fixed pair of glasses which we can’t take off.

Nishijima Roshi sometimes talks about coloured glasses, and that we should take off our coloured glasses. But in my case, I wonder if it’s possible to actually take the glasses off. The only time I can take the glasses off is in a certain situation, that is, when there is absolutely no time for me to think or perceive. So, in the situation where there is absolutely no time where I can think and no time where I can perceive and reflect, then everything becomes nameless. But the rest of the time my glasses are firmly fixed around my ears.

And the state in which we have no time to think or perceive and reflect on the names of the something which is in front of us, the state where we can’t do that, is called “action.” So we should

define action relying on the state, rather than define the state from our understanding of the word “action.” And the reason we should do that is because our understanding of the word “action” is when we have our glasses on. So, if we try to think what action is and then having understood what action is in our mind we look for it, we can never find it—because we’re wearing glasses. Because without the glasses we can’t see the name “action,” we can’t see the action called “action”—we can only experience it or do it.

So language has a very, very powerful influence and is connected with our whole view, society’s whole view, and science’s whole view. And I think probably in modern society our glasses are coloured ninety percent science and ten percent other. I noticed on the television this morning that they are investigating “crop circles” in England at the moment. A “crop circle” is where there is a very large field of corn and there are some large patterns made in the corn. Nobody has found out the reason for the patterns so they’re doing a scientific investigation to find out whether it is alien beings who are making these crop circles or not, and the result is not yet clear, scientifically speaking. But we could say that that’s an example of the glasses being, maybe, eighty percent science and twenty percent other.

But normally, although they have a hunger for spiritual things, the view of most people in modern society is very firmly fixed in science, and that is the reason why they have a hunger for something else. They’re fed up with the glasses that they’re wearing and they’re trying to take them off. But they’re trying to take them off and put some others on. Whereas what we try to do in Buddhism is to take off the glasses and put no others on. However, we can’t take the glasses off and exist without glasses, but we can experience what it is like without glasses when we are acting—in other words, when we are in the state where there is no time to think or to perceive and reflect about what is in front of us.

And quite interestingly, I was talking to Nishijima Roshi yesterday about Master Nagarjuna's book the *Mulamadhymakakarika*, and he explained that we usually think that when we look at the external world we see objects, but in one of the verses Master Nagarjuna says that when the external world appears in front of us, it appears in front of us nameless, and the objects, the objectification, comes afterwards—which I think is probably acceptable to psychologists. In other words, what we see outside is always nameless, but when we’re not in the state where we have no time to think or perceive, when we're not in that state, then we think or perceive and reflect on the namelessness.

And the language that is fixed in our brain gives the world a name or a structure and so the world becomes a familiar world—chair, table, Jeremy, Yoko, Denis, window. But when we’re acting, there is no time and no place for thought or reflective perception, and so what is in front of us remains as it is, nameless. And when it remains as it is, nameless, it is entirely and completely outside of the objective area—so science can never touch it. And so we have to say that science is a pair of glasses, and it can never get to the state where there are no glasses. However, somebody who has got to the state where there are no glasses can put on the glasses of science.

I’m trying to make the point that most ordinary people do not notice how immersed we are in a world view which is so commonly shared that it’s much, much, much stronger than the differences.

Of course there are differences, like in Serbia at the moment. In Serbia, for example, NATO thinks one way and Milosovic and his group think another way—so that's a completely different point of view. But that different point of view is incredibly small when compared with the shared point of view between the whole of modern civilization. And that point of view is based largely on the material view of the world, embedded in the language and embedded in our brain cells. And to get free from it we put ourselves in a state where although our brain cells contain language there's no time for them to work. And then what is in front of us becomes whole and undivided and nameless.

I've reached the end. If you have any questions or comments please go ahead.

*Talking about scientific objectivity, I'm a scientist and in science if we have one scientific theory applied by two different scientists it is very common to have two different results. For example, if an earthquake occurs scientists will use theory to estimate the location of the earthquake, and if two different scientists try to estimate the location using the same theory they will often find two different locations, which shouldn't be the case theoretically. And what we call a good scientist is one who is supposed to be as objective as possible, but this is not possible I think, because reality is different. So I guess science cannot be objective. We try to be objective, but the human being is always there. So because of the way of applying, the way of looking with the same theory, two scientists will often see something differently. So it's not very encouraging, because for a long time we used to say that science should be objective, but I guess it isn't, at least much less than we suppose.*

And the other thing is, we were always thought that to be objective was to be true, to be objective was to be right and balanced, but what Buddhism says is that to be objective or to be subjective are both not true. And I think there is more than one way to objectify—because that's what happens between cultures. For example, if a Japanese person looks at a situation and objectifies it and a Western person looks at the same situation and objectifies it, if you ask the two people to describe the situation objectively their objective descriptions will probably be different, which is the same as what you're saying.

*I guess objectivity doesn't exist. We just say something is objective or subjective.*

Well, it exists, but it doesn't have the meaning that we've given to it. Because "objectivity" sounds like it means "truth."

*Or independent of the person, which means reality as it is.*

But it doesn't. Objectivity means giving names to objects, I would suggest. But we've lost that meaning. So to "objectize" the world is to be objective. And if you say 'to objectize the world,' it doesn't have any feeling of "to be correct," at least in English; it means to cut the world up into objects, to objectize the world. But if you say "objectivity" in English, immediately it puts my glasses on, and it means some kind of truth, which I know now is impossible, as you were saying.

*That reminds me of George Orwell who took part in and recorded much about the Spanish Civil War. It affected him greatly in terms of when he analyzed afterwards how the war was reported on*

*different sides, and how totally distorted it was and how propaganda takes over, his comment was that he feared that objective truth was disappearing from the world.*

Yes. And in Kosova now you can see the kind of propaganda war between the two sides. But the interesting thing for me about Buddhism is that it says it's not necessary to objectify the world. Of course we do it, we can't help it because otherwise we'd have no civilization and I couldn't possibly talk, but it's not necessary to objectify the world to see the way things are. Because the way things are are not exactly objectifying the world. Or, the way it is is not necessarily in the objects. So we notice a state which is so simple that we wonder if that could possibly be what Buddhism is talking about. And we notice a state that seems to be mindless, non-intellectual, and therefore stupid in Western terms; and we notice a state which is without any kind of analysis. But it's very difficult for us to believe that that state is the state that Nishijima Roshi calls the Buddhist state. Because we're so used to thinking, 'Well, a state that describes the truth of the world must be something to do with desks and chairs and analysis'—because that's the way we've been brought up.

And indeed it has to do with analysis, which is why Nishijima Roshi says that we have to learn Buddhist theory, because when we're practicing Zazen or when we're acting there is no time for theory. But as soon as we stop our social glasses clamp down on our eyes. So the only way we have of understanding is by analysis, which includes objectification with all its problems. Which I suppose is why in the *Shobogenzo* Master Dogen has so many rich and different ways of describing reality—many, many, different points of view, as if he's trying to be all the scientists who possibly could say something about reality.

*We live in the modern world and if we look at North America and Europe we can see a fairly similar kind of standard of living. But I guess only about fifty percent of the population of the world lives in this modern state. So there must be a whole host of different kinds of objectifications going on all over the world. And, for example, tribespeople in Africa or South America seem to have a much simpler lifestyle. So could we say from that, that the thickness of their glasses was less, that they were seeing the world more simply, more clearly?*

We could guess that the thickness of their objective glasses is less if they don't come from a part of Western civilization with its heavy scientific overlay, but they may have other glasses—and I can't guess what kind. I guess an anthropologist would be able to say something about what kind of world a very primitive person, a tribesperson, lives in. But the point is, it's impossible for us to return to a pre-scientific time, and that's why Nishijima Roshi insists that Buddhism embraces science—we cannot go back. And we cannot go back to the state of a person in Papua New Guinea who lives in some kind of world of spirits, or maybe a world without spirits or science.

However, the thing is, human beings have a brain, and it's very unlikely that people exist who don't have either spiritual glasses or scientific glasses, in other words, who are like natural animals. It is very, very unlikely that they exist. So we could say that probably people who are outside of modern scientific society have some kind of more spiritual view of the world, or maybe a mixed view of the world.

*Personally we cannot go back to pre-scientific society, however we can meet people who live in South America or the Himalayas or somewhere. And contact with those people can be very interesting because we realize just how much we wear modern glasses.*

The other interesting thing is that the way of life of those people is probably not as comfortable as ours. The only evidence I have for that is that in the case of most primitive societies, if you show them a camera or if you show them some kind of modern thing they want to get it. And primitive societies slowly move to become more civilized societies. So it would seem that people in primitive societies generally want to move into more civilized societies. For example, look at Thailand or Cambodia or any of the countries of South East Asia.

*But we force them to, we oblige them to, so sometimes they have no choice. They have to accept. For example, I once spent some time in Bolivia and it was clear that most of the people there don't want to change, but they have to change because of the pressure of the United States and so on. Because, in a way, we impose our way of living and we impose our economics and we think we are right, so we want to impose what we think is right on the primitive societies. And it's so strong that a lot of people can not do anything, just accept it, even if they don't like it.*

Do you know why the situation is like that? It's because when the first person from civilization comes to a group of people who are not civilized, the only thing that determines whether the people let the person into their land or not is which side is stronger. And the civilized side is stronger, so the uncivilized side always loses. So therefore you are able to go to Bolivia. If the other side was stronger you couldn't even go to Bolivia. So the battle is won on the basis of the strength of the different societies.

And for me, this is one of the reasons why I wonder whether Tibetan Buddhism has such a strong truth, as is the popular perception in the world now. It's very, very popular. But my question is, 'If Tibetan Buddhism is so popular and if it contains real truth, why has Tibet been such a weak country?' And the answer is, 'Well, it was China you know, what could they do?' Yes, but they were defeated, that's a fact. So if two things fight, the one that wins is better than the one that loses in some way.

*You told the story about searching for a name for the brown thing; do you mean that knowing what that thing is, is the same as knowing what it's called?*

No, not normally. But knowing what it is must be the same as knowing what it's called. Because I can't dissociate an object from some word that goes with it, and if I have no word for an object then I search for it. It's as if the two have to go together.

*I think in that situation we're looking for a pattern in our brain, not particularly a word, but something that that image will connect with. And then we say, 'Oh, it's a bat,' for example. But initially we're looking for a shape or something.*

Okay. Yes, so maybe "methods of representation" would be better than "language," because I

mean things like mathematics. So, yes, I think probably recognizing the pattern is a kind of first step, isn't it.

*The other day I found a flower and I thought, 'What is that?' so I looked in a flower book and then I was looking for a name, because I already had the first step. So recognising it as a kind of flower was a first step, before I applied a name?*

Well, no, because you've applied a name "flower" to it. So it's very difficult to actually see something without giving it any kind of name. If we don't know specifically we give a group name to it, we give a generic name to it. It's a "what's it." But "what's it" is a name. In other words, it's separated it from everything else. It's separated it out from the unseparated. So we're doing it all the time, unless we're in the state where there's no time to do it—then we don't do it.

*Talking about the different definitions of words we use, a lot of the time when we speak the meaning of each word is different from one person to another, and because of this you can have a very big problem—like the discussion between Nishijima Roshi and his student. They discuss about thinking, but what each one means by thinking is not so clear. So they should try to define what they mean by thinking and after that they can debate, but not before.*

Yes, maybe a more constructive direction would be, 'What is thinking?' Not whether we are thinking or not, but what is it? And it doesn't seem to be very easy to define what thinking is.

*When Nishijima Roshi's student says we are thinking in Zazen, sometimes I think it's true. But after thinking a little I say, 'What is thinking?' 'What are we speaking about?' It is not so clear. So for me thinking is sometimes a feeling, it's like glasses we cannot take off. But if Nishijima Roshi says the state in Zazen is kind of like not having glasses, it seems limited.*

Well, he means the *essential* state in Zazen. Of course thinking comes and goes, and even Nishijima Roshi says he has thinking in Zazen, but he means the essential state. And thinking is a process-based definition. Without time we cannot have thinking—it's impossible to have a thought at the moment of the present; the word doesn't make any sense. But the state in Zazen is at the moment of the present, and because it's at the moment of the present the process called "thinking" cannot exist—that's what Nishijima Roshi means. If we think in terms of process, then our brain is following some train of thought, sometimes. But then when we sit and we return to the balanced state, we lose that process of thinking.

Perhaps we should finish now. Thank you very much.