

The Nature of Experience—Lecture 8

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The last time we had a talk I talked about the nature of science and how science depends on language to create an objective model of the world, following on with my theme of “the nature of experience.” And I said that this scientific model depends on words or objects and concepts in order that we create a model that is as close as possible to our actual experience.

Then I went on to say that there’s another area which is outside of this objective model of the world, which is called in Buddhism “the area of action” or “reality.” That is, when we are acting, when we are in the state where there is no time to think and no time to perceive and reflect, we do not give names or concepts to things, but we grasp them as they are. For instance, if somebody throws a ball to you, you don’t have time to see it as a ball; you simply catch. And in catching you experience the nature of the ball and you experience the nature of catching and you experience the nature of everything, in that moment.

And in his book, the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Master Nagarjuna says that we actually experience that unnamed something which is in front of us before we conceptualize it—we experience it first. And what we perceive as an unnamed something is referred to as “real existence.” And he says that real existence is the state in which the concept of what is in front of us and the perception of what is in front of us are merged into oneness. And this is the state that Nishijima Roshi refers to as “action”—when the concept of what is in front of us and our physical perception of what is in front of us are merged into oneness; that is, they’re not separated out.

So as I said before, somebody throws a ball to you, and in the moment of catching you just catch. You don’t see *a* ball, and your hand catching *a* ball, although you may after the moment say, ‘Oh, I caught the ball, my hand went around the ball,’ but in that instant of catching you don’t separate out. And we can think of lots of other examples, in sports and everyday life, of this state, a very simple, unconceptual, undivided state which Nishijima Roshi calls “action.”

And we should define the meaning of this state of action from our experience, not from some kind of intellectual desire to grasp it, which we certainly have. But if we try and define it in our minds, ‘Oh, what was it now, action. Yes, now what was action?’ and try and grasp it in our mind, we can’t. Because it doesn’t exist in our mind, it exists in the moment of the present. So we define action from our real experience. We’d say, ‘*This* is action,’ or ‘*That* is action.’ And that’s more or less what I said last week.

This week I want to go on to look at the difference between science and religion from a specific aspect, and that is “doubt.” There are two reasons why I have chosen doubt. One reason is that doubt is fundamental to the scientific view while, on the other hand, absence of doubt is fundamental to the religious view, to religious faith. So between science and religion we have a basic contradiction or opposition; that is, one needs doubt and the other one needs not to have doubt. That’s the first reason I want to look at doubt.

The other reason is that I’m just reading a book by a physicist called Richard Feynman. He died in 1988, but he was renowned for being able to explain very complex conceptual ideas in rather simple

language. And the title of the book is amusing, it's called *The meaning of it all*; but it's actually a series of lectures. And in the book he talks about the uncertainty of science, and so it's a good starting point for a comparison between science and religious thought. Reading the book made me think about "doubt."

In most religions, and I'll take Christianity as an example because I know something about Christianity, faith is central to happiness, I would say. If we believe in God absolutely and trust him, then all is well with the world and we can lead our lives following the will of God. But if our faith, our belief, wavers or shakes a little, even just a little, we become troubled and disturbed and make efforts to be reunited with God once again. And there are many examples in the past of very strong Christian believers who went through periods where they lost their faith, and to lose your faith in Christianity, for example, is a terrible thing because you lose the source of your happiness. And therefore you have to make efforts to be reunited with God again.

This bond between the believer and God is central to spiritual religions and they can't function without it. But with it, with faith, with absolute belief, believers can do anything, as history has witnessed. There are many examples of great acts of compassion and love, which are usually symbolized in Christianity by Christ dying on the cross, "for you and me" is what Christians say, he died for you and me. But there are also examples of equally great acts of cruelty and conflict. For instance, the Crusades in the Middle Ages, where Christians, with the power of belief, were driven across Europe and the Middle East to save The Holy Land from the non-Christians; and there are many stories about the terrible things that happened and the terrible acts that they performed.

So faith, or absolute belief in God, gives the believer the power to do good or evil—to do what they want. So it's really, really central. And I suppose, if I remember when I was younger, the reason I never became a Christian was because I couldn't believe. And I remember once I was hitchhiking in England and a man picked me up who was a very, very strong believer in Christianity, and he talked to me about it and he said, 'We'll just pull into this rest area and I want you to pray with me.' And we stopped at a rest area—of course I was quite willing to pray as long as he took me where I wanted to go—and he was praying for me to be converted, but nothing happened—I couldn't find any faith. So without this mysterious thing called "faith" or "belief," which I suppose kind of descended on you out of somewhere, I didn't believe, so I didn't call myself a Christian. So I wandered around, not believing. So to come back to the point, at least in Christianity, and I would suggest in spiritual religions in general, faith or absence of doubt in the existence of God is the centre of the religion.

Now in science, that sort of faith doesn't work. If scientists had that sort of unconditional faith in their theories then they wouldn't need any experiments. They could just say, 'Oh here's a theory. God gave it to me, so it's true,' end of the story. But science doesn't work like that. Science starts off by saying that we must test what we believe to be true and try to disprove it. Note that we don't try to prove that it's true, we try to prove that it's not true. This is important, and there's a reason for it. Let me take an example out of Richard Feynman's colourful book:

A man tells me that he can influence physical events with his mind, I think it's called "telekinesis." Yuri Geller is one great example who is said to be able to do things with his mind like bend spoons and so on. But I don't believe in mind reading or mind control so I say to this guy, 'Rubbish, I don't

believe it, prove it to me.' I think to myself, 'Oh, it couldn't possibly be true. But how do I know? But the chances must be about ten million to one.' So I leave a tiny little gap, because who knows, Yuri Geller can bend spoons—people turn on the television to watch him because they have that tiny little part of them that says, 'Well, I want to see.'

So anyway this man takes me to a casino in order to prove to me that he can control things with his mind, and we stand in front of the roulette wheel which has red and black little places for the ball to fall into. You spin the wheel, throw the ball in, and the ball falls into either a red or black hole. So the people at the wheel spin the wheel and throw in the ball, and this guy says to me it's going to be black. It stops, and there it is, black. He said it's going to be black and it's black. Did it change my mind? Do I believe in mind control now? No, I think it's just luck, I think nothing's changed at all, just he was lucky; he said it was going to be black and it's black, well it's a fifty-fifty chance. So off we go again, spin the wheel again and they throw the ball in and he says it's going to be red. The wheel stops, and it's red. Do I believe in mind control now? No, I think he was just doubly lucky, just a fluke, just happened twice, because I don't believe in mind control, so it couldn't have been.

Anyway, this carries on for ten or fifteen throws and every time the colour he says comes up. But in my mind I start to think that maybe he has a secret liaison with the people in the casino, and I'm thinking of a way that it can't be true, so I say, 'Let's go to another casino, and I'll choose the casino.' So off we go to another casino and we start again. Spin the wheel, throw in the ball, and he says it's going to be black, and it's black. And this happens several hundred times in several different casinos and so on, and every time he's right. So in the end I have to say, 'Well, it looks like there is mind control.'—I start to believe in it. I can't say he was lucky. I can't say that he's colluding with the casino. I can't find a reason, so I keep thinking of ways that he might be influencing it. So I look around him to see if he's wearing an electronic transmitter or something like that. But in the end the more he does it the more he gets right, so in the end I have to say, 'Yes, I agree, it's true.'

Well of course this is only a story. But the important thing about it is that I'm trying to prove that he's wrong all the time. And it's important for me to try to prove that he's wrong in order for me to say in the end that he's right.

So we normally think that belief is founded on somebody being right, but in science belief is very firmly founded on somebody not being able to be proved wrong enough times to make any difference. However, in my story I made up that the guy was always right, but in real trials or experiments, of course, sometimes the experiment works and sometimes it doesn't work. So you perform a lot of experiments and try to think up many different types of experiments that will prove you are wrong, then you add up all the results and see how many times you were right and how many times you were wrong. Based on this you decide whether the theory you were testing is acceptably right or not, and statistics come into it here.

So in scientific experiments we say that the theory has been proved, for example, to the statistical probability of one in a hundred billion. But, we can never say that statistically the experiment proved it was right absolutely one hundred percent, because we can never do enough experiments. And because we can never do enough experiments there's always the possibility that if we did a few more it wouldn't work, so there's always an element of doubt.

So the important thing about science is that we're not trying to prove that something works, we're

trying to prove that it doesn't work; and this is the way that science works. And if we find that in all the experiments we can't find a single instance of the theory not working, we conclude that it's probably true. And if we find a lot of instances of it not working, we conclude that it's probably not true. But the most important thing is: in the process doubt is central. Uncertainty about the result is fundamentally important. If we weren't uncertain about the result there would be no point in carrying out the experiments.

Now, what has Buddhism got to say about these two completely different approaches to describing reality? On one hand, spiritual religion says absolute faith is the key to happiness, absolute faith in God is the truth and if our faith wavers then we must make a fast effort to re-establish it, perfect faith. On the other hand, science says we must always doubt, we must always try and disprove something and only when we can't disprove it a significant number of times can we say that it's probably true. And these two ways of looking at the world are, I think you would agree, fundamentally opposed—at least as far as doubt is concerned.

So what has Buddhism got to say about these two approaches? Well, interestingly enough, although the attitudes of faith in religion and doubt in science are opposite, Buddhism adopts both of them, without batting an eyelid. It adopts both, it says both are okay. But there's a reason for this. First, Buddhism says that everything is a matter of belief, even science, because you have to believe in the reality of matter to believe in science. And we only need to look at some accepted facts of science to see how near they are to belief.

For instance, in some ancient time, somewhere in India I think, they believed that the world was a kind of huge disk on the back of an elephant, and the elephant was standing on the back of a turtle and the turtle was swimming in an infinite sea. That is what they believed. Today, we believe that we all exist on a round sphere that is spinning round and round, and all the people are stuck onto it, even the people underneath, and we don't fall off. And this spinning globe with the people stuck onto it, even though they're upside down going round and round, is floating in an infinite space which goes on forever in all directions and is not filled with anything.

Well if you compare the two, in one way, they're not really so different, except we believe one is more realistic than the other. But, you know, hanging off the bottom of the earth as it spins round in an infinite space that is full of nothing—it's hard to accept really. I guess it's true, but it must have been an awful lot easier before people knew about gravity to believe, and this is the important thing, to believe in the world being a big flat disk on the back of something. And why not an elephant, it would need to be a pretty strong animal. And the elephant's got to be standing on something, and the something couldn't be solid because it's part of the world, so it's got to be standing on something that floats. "A turtle?" "Just the thing!" And what's the turtle swimming in? Well, it's some kind of sea...

So that's quite believable really—if you don't have any idea of gravity or curvature or centripetal force and so on. But we choose now to believe a much stranger picture really, although of course science, by sending rockets out into space, has given us an image to believe in too.

So talking about belief, Buddhism says that everything is belief, including science in a way—we

have to believe in the reality of matter in order to believe in science. But the central belief in Buddhism is only what is here and now, which we call reality. If it's not here and now, we don't believe it; we say it may be true. So the only thing which we can be sure of is whatever is here and now. That which appears here and now is what we can be sure of, and that which appears here and now is what Buddhism believes in.

And Buddhism also follows the same kind of method of experimentation as science does. For instance, for everyone in society, day after day we get up, we spend our day in society, and we go to bed. And we notice after many, many experiments with this routine that if we go to bed late, the next morning we can't get up early. So after many, many experiments testing this out, we notice that whenever we go to bed late it's difficult to get up and whenever we don't go to bed late it's not difficult to get up. So the more sincere among us, those who are real scientists and want to find out the truth, go to bed as late as possible to try and disprove the theory. But they always find that when they go to bed late it's difficult to get up the next morning. But some of these people are so sincere that they carry on for years and years, still testing out the theory and they haven't reached a conclusion yet. But Buddhists are not so sincere, as Nishijima Roshi would say, 'Not so difficult, not so easy,' and we conclude about halfway through our lives, 'Oh it's probably true, the scientific evidence is probably true.' So we try and lead a regular life.

And another example, we notice after many trials in our life everyday that if we act right and freely at the moment of the present our life appears to be happy. But we only notice it by continual trial and error—we're conducting experiments in our life everyday. Of course, we don't do it as a conscious thing, but I think we do do it, and we notice or we don't notice depending on how much we're looking. But what we do this moment, how we act in this moment, actually determines whether we're happy or not. And after some time we reach some kind of conclusion and that conclusion then becomes a kind of fact. We call it a belief, but in fact it's a very similar process to the scientific process. So the results of these repeated experiments with conduct at the moment of the present form the basis of the Buddhist belief that conduct at the moment of the present makes us happy or unhappy.

So there we have it. On the one hand Buddhism has a kind of spiritual kind of direct belief just as Christians have a belief in God, but our belief is in what is here and now. If you like, the Buddhist God is everything that's here and now. So, as Nishijima Roshi sometimes says, 'God is the universe itself.' God's not controlling it—God and the universe are identical. So we believe in it, and what we believe in is what is in front of us. And what is not in front of us we say may be true. And on the other hand, we continue the experiment from day to day with our conduct and the result of our conduct. And after these experiments we usually conclude that our conduct in the moment of the present has some kind of connection with our happiness or otherwise—which is a kind of scientific experiment.

So Buddhism accepts both views: that doubt is very important and that no doubt is very important. It embraces both of them, although they're opposite and we would normally think they don't go together. Buddhism sticks them both in the same box; it says they're both okay. But we always have a little bit of doubt. Practicing Zazen gives us the balanced state, and when we act in the balanced state our action is right, our conduct is right, it's balanced. But still we doubt; we have a little bit of doubt.

So that's really what I wanted to say. It was interesting for me to realize that doubt plays a kind of fundamental role in almost everything, I think. If you have any questions or comments, please go ahead.

You described the Buddhist state as the state where we don't have time to think or perceive and reflect, like catching a ball. How does that relate to another description of the state? For instance, Nishijima Roshi often describes the state as the balance of the autonomic nervous system. How do those two aspects of it relate together?

They're kind of two different points of view of the same fact. So when we say that the autonomic nervous system being in balance means that our body is in balance and our body and mind become one, it's a physical view, a physiological view of something which is both physiological and psychological. But we can't get a view which embraces both that we can talk about. We can get a view which embraces both that we can experience, which we call Zazen or action. But we can't get a view that we can talk about which embraces both the physical point of view and the psychological point of view at the same time.

So we either have to sit in the physical chair and say, 'When we practice Zazen or when we act, our autonomic nervous system becomes balanced. That is, our parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems are in balance, and in that state we're not overly intellectual or overly sensual, we're not overly thinking or overly feeling sensations, and in that state we have some kind of unity between the two faces: thinking and feeling.' Then we have to run round to the other chair and sit in that chair and say, 'When we practice Zazen, what we think and what we feel are not divided—there's no time to think and there's no time to feel, just to act. And when we're just acting we're in a state where nothing is separated out from a nameless something which we call reality.' That description is more a kind of psychological description, whereas the autonomic nervous system is a physical description. So we can't pin them together because one chair's looking at it this way and the other chair's round over there looking at it a different way and we have to run from one chair to the other. But we can sit in Zazen and experience both views, but not as intellectual discussable views, but simply as experience.

We could go on in great detail to explain how the autonomic nervous system works and how the physiological details are not absolutely clear, but we can say that our parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems control opposite parts of the organs. So one makes our heart rate increase and the other makes our heart rate drop, one makes our pupils dilate and the other makes our pupils contract, and so on. But when they are working together in a balanced way, we don't get too much one way or the other—too much in the fighting mood or too much in the flighting mood. And in that state we are physically natural and so we're not worried and at the same time we're not passive or frightened, and so that state is a kind of happiness in the present moment, physically. So it's the state we can say we get when we're involved in sport, especially some kind of long drawn out sport like jogging or a marathon or playing tennis or something, something that goes on for some time, where we can experience a nice balanced state. And that nice balanced state is the Buddhist balanced state; but now we're only talking about it from the physical point of view. Then we have to drop all those words and talk about things like "not thinking," which talks about it from the mental side.

What part does promise play in faith or belief? Is it the same as faith or belief?

Well, for instance in Christianity the idea of the Promised Land is used to give a person an image of a perfect place that is waiting for them, which may be heaven. Or, in the Old Testament the Jews were running away to find God's chosen land for them, the land which God had promised them, and they were searching for it. And in modern Christianity, people have a pact with God that if they behave well they will then go to this perfect place, and I guess that's a kind of promise.

And in that sense, in Buddhism there is a promise that that land—that perfect land, and the opposite land—the terrible hell, both of those lands exist here and now, in the moment. In fact, what Buddhism promises is that both of them are part of reality and because they're part of reality they're not divided into a very perfect place and a very imperfect place, but they're together as this place. And this place is very perfect or very imperfect depending on how you feel. You might wake up in the morning with a hangover because you were sincerely experimenting with going to bed late and feel that this place is hell; but you might wake up in the morning and feel that this place is wonderful. This place is still this place; but what happens is that we see this place as heaven or we see it as hell. So Buddhism promises that this place is both, or neither. And in the *Shobogenzo* it says that this place is a beautiful pearl. So that's the promise of Buddhism. The promise of Buddhism is: 'You have it already.' Not, 'You'll get it'; but, 'I promise you have it already.'

Action and the balanced state are important concepts in Buddhism, but you use the word "experience" in the title of your talks. What do you mean when you use the word "experience"?

I use experience in the same meaning as action. But I use the word "experience" because when we are experiencing the world we are acting. But if you say, 'we are acting,' we can't get a feeling for what it is. So I chose the title "The nature of experience" in the same meaning as "the nature of action"—but to point us towards the kind of very simple nature of our experience of existing. We're existing, so we're experiencing existing. But our actual experience of existing is very, very simple, and it's before concepts and it doesn't involve all the kind of social structure that we learn as we become adults. Our actual experience itself is very, very simple, and because it's very simple we don't notice it. That's the reason I use the word "experience"; but it means the same as action. I mean it in the same way that Nishijima Roshi says "action."

Does action depend on the balanced state?

Action doesn't depend on the balanced state, but when we act the balanced state is there. So, we can say that action and the balanced state are the same thing.

In the *Shobogenzo*, there's a phrase, *shuusho*, which is translated as "practice and experience are one," but I don't mean experience in that meaning. And in fact, to me the phrase "practice and experience are one," in English, is a little strange, because my meaning of experience is more direct. So I always feel that *shuusho* means something more like "practice and the result of practicing," but I'm not sure because it's very difficult for me to grasp the best way to translate *shuusho*. But I don't mean the *shuusho* experience, I mean the experience which is closer to the meaning of action. I'm

not so fond of the phrase “practice and experience”; for me it doesn’t catch the meaning of *shuusho*.

I think what Master Dogen means when he says that, and it was a very long-held Buddhist insistence and still is, is that when we do something, what we’re doing and what we get from what we’re doing both appear at the same time. And this is specifically meant, because lots of people, even in mediaeval China, believed that you could get enlightenment by practicing Zazen—so you practiced Zazen and by practicing Zazen you got some kind of result called enlightenment. And what Master Dogen is doing is denying that there is one thing that you do and then another thing you get. There’s not. There’s the same one thing. Doing it and getting it are the same thing. So practicing Zazen itself *is* what is meant by enlightenment—not the idea that we have in our minds, but the experience itself.

I think in this case the word for “your own experience” in Japanese is “sho.” So “shuusho” means “what you experienced you experienced by acting.” So action and experience are together—oneness.

But in English the word “experience” can be used in subtly different ways. It can be used to mean a kind of result, like ‘I went to the theatre and I experienced something wonderful’—as a result. But I don’t mean it as a result; I mean it as a fact at the present moment. But in English the meaning of the word embraces both something which you get after you do something and something you get at the same time. So it’s very difficult.

I think Master Dogen used “shuusho” specially.

I take the meaning of “practice and experience are not separate” to mean that we shouldn’t think that we do something and get the result of doing it afterwards, but that doing something is the result itself. So right conduct in the moment of the present is happiness itself.

“Shuusho” doesn’t mean the result of your experience or your action; it just means that practicing Zazen you notice something, you experience something.

The English is a little different, so I feel it’s a quite difficult problem. But the Buddhist insistence is always that what we are doing, the experience of what we are doing, and the result of what we are doing, are all one thing at this time in this place. So in that sense, we don’t have a cause and an effect later, although Buddhism doesn’t deny cause and effect; Buddhism says cause and effect is a way of explaining the world, a scientific way, and it’s a true way of explaining the world, but it’s not a total way of explaining the world. But the total way of explaining the world can’t be said in words; but we can try by saying that cause and effect, practice and experience, doing something and the result, are the same thing. And the fact that we separate them is because our mind separates, and our mind separates because it’s the only way we can understand the world.

You said that acting and the balanced state is the same thing. In that case, how can we have action that seems to be wrong or not right? I can understand if I sit in Zazen I feel my action and the balanced state are the same thing, or maybe even catching a cricket ball or something it’s happening

there. But if I stand at a bar and drink three pints of beer I'm acting, but how can I say I'm in a balanced state?

When I say that action and the balanced state are one, it doesn't mean that all actions you can think of and all balanced states you can think of are the same. It means *action*. Now, what is *action*? We can't put it into words from an idea, but we can say, 'That's action.' When we are in a position where there's no time to think, reflect, or perceive, where we're wholly involved in the present moment to the exclusion of even noticing what we're doing, that's *action*. Particularly in sport we can find many examples, and there are examples all the time. Even we might put ten yen in the ticket machine to buy a ticket and in the flash of a moment the world disappears—there is no ticket machine, no ten yen, no me putting ten yen in the machine. In that moment there's just the undivided action. And that state of undividedness is called "action." And that state of undividedness is always balanced—it's the same, it's the definition. The definition of balance is that state.

But we can divide ourselves, by an act of will. We can divide ourselves by our own will, in splitting up and reflecting and all kinds of things like that.

But if reality is just here and now, whatever we experience we can't explain it with words at that moment. No matter the state, when we think about it, it's conceptualized. And in the scientific view we can't talk about anything without conceptualizing it, so how can we prove that state is really there?

That's the thousand-dollar question—we can't. This is why we practice everyday. I mean we act everyday, everybody acts everyday, and we all act fully in one moment or another moment. But we can't catch ourselves. So the Buddhist practice of Zazen is a kind of standard, so we do it again and again and again. It's a kind of standard, and if we do it again and again and again throughout our lives it leaves a kind of taste. And even though it leaves a taste, when we talk about it, somewhere in our minds we wonder, 'Is that true?' It's a kind of a doubt inside the taste, but it's the best we can do—the taste or kind of sense of Zazen. And we say, 'Zazen is this' and 'Zazen is that.' And then when we say the words at that moment, 'Zazen is this' or "Zazen is that," afterwards if we think about it we think "Ummhh..." So we practice again and then we say something again. So this is our experiment.

So isn't it a kind of rather blind belief in sitting?

Blind belief in sitting. Yes.

So in that way is Buddhism religion?

Yes, it contains religion and science mixed. But it contains neither religion or science.

I guess we better finish now. Thank you very much.