

## The Nature of Experience—Lecture 9

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In my talks I have been following a theme based around the nature of experience, using the word experience to mean “that which is.” In other words, what is happening to us here and now. And in the *Shobogenzo* there are the two words “practice” and “experience,” which we touched on last week, and my meaning of experience includes both practice and experience.

I started off my talks by looking at a very simple experience that we have when we do some kind of very repetitive physical activity—like walking or running or swimming and so on. And anybody who’s had some experience in these kinds of repetitive activities or sports knows that we feel a very simple immediate feeling of being somewhere, and that somewhere is just here and now. If you’re jogging or if you’re swimming or if you’re running or if you’re walking in the hills, you exist just here and now—your arms and legs may be moving backwards and forwards, but that movement is a kind of activity. But whether the world is moving backwards past you or whether you are moving forward in a stationary world, nobody can say.

And anybody who’s done a lot of sport knows this feeling, but because it’s so simple, so basic, we don’t notice it. We never say, ‘Well, it’s kind of like being in the world but not being in the world, and the world is moving back past me and I’m moving forward through the world.’ We never talk about it in terms like that because it sounds ridiculous. But that very, very simple, primitive experience of activity is the centre of Buddhism. The centre of Buddhism is not, as many people would claim, some kind of special spiritual state which one attains by hard rigorous effort. It’s not some kind of state where you’re outside of your body and in some kind of perfect world. It’s not some kind of state called “enlightenment” where you are in the state of perfection. It’s the simple, basic state that we all experience but never notice. And because we don’t notice it, it passes by.

When we practice activities like those kinds of sports, they all, without exception, make us happy. That’s why people like doing sports. That’s why I go for a walk in the hills every couple of weeks. What I say is, ‘Oh I’m going for a walk because I need to exercise my body and I need to get rid of stress and I need to do this and I need to do that.’ But these are all kinds of explanations. What I actually do is, I go and I experience a very simple state, and that state is called “action.”

Then I moved on in my talks to talk about the state of a baby, which is a little bit of a guess or a projection, because I’m not a baby anymore. But I suggested that when a baby is very small the baby doesn’t have lots of social conventions that are pressing on top of it, that are standing in front of its eyes, and it sees the world very, very simply. So for example, a person is here; a person is not here. It doesn’t start off by seeing, ‘Oh, here comes my mother, and now she’s going off in the other direction,’ and then after ten minutes, ‘Oh, here she comes again.’ Research that has been done into the behaviour of babies suggests that babies see just the moment—‘here is a person,’ ‘the person is not here,’ ‘here is a person,’ ‘the person is not here.’ And the fact that the person who’s here now is the same as the person that was here in the other “now,” and may be the same person, is something that babies learn.

So, we *learn* continuation, we *learn* that the world is a continuum in time—we are not born with that experience, it would seem. But even though I say we’re not born with it and we learn it, it’s impossible

to escape learning it. When we come into the world we learn it—the world teaches it to us. But, nevertheless, very, very small babies see the world more as a series of moments, or not even a series of moments but just moments, moment by moment.

Then I went on to suggest that this kind of simple state of experience is rather pure and transparent. In Buddhism there is a term “Buddha-nature,” and “Buddha-nature” refers to that very simple transparent pure experience or nature that we have, if you like, underlying our social condition. And I suggested that even though many people suggest that lots of the terms in Buddhism have very complex or abstract meanings, such as Buddha-nature, enlightenment and so on, in fact, those abstract and complex meanings are misunderstandings, and the true meanings of the Buddhist concepts refer to this very, very simple, primitive, direct experience that we have.

And because all those terms refer to that simple and direct experience, we naturally want to practice that simple and direct experience so that we can get a clear idea of how to explain the terms. And Zazen is our standard for that simple direct experience—nothing could be simpler. There is no purpose in Zazen other than sitting. There is no place that we’re going in Zazen. There is no time in Zazen. We don’t try to think in Zazen or to analyze anything. Just we’re sitting on the zafu. We don’t consciously concentrate on our feelings or perceptions. Just we sit, like a baby, in order to notice the very simple direct nature of what Nishijima Roshi calls reality or Dharma.

And that simple reality, or Dharma, is the same simple reality or Dharma when we walk, run, swim or jog and so on, and it’s an experience that’s available to everybody at every moment. In fact, everybody does experience it at every moment. But, because we have an intellect we have the ability to drag ourselves over the moment, to pull ourselves out of the moment, if you like. And this ability to pull ourselves out of the moment and to create some abstraction is what we call “the intellect.” And that ability is the foundation of the whole of our civilization—all of our religions, all of science, and everything else. So we must say that it’s valuable. But although it’s valuable, we need to notice the very simple, direct experience which lies in front of it, before it, beyond it. So we practice Zazen.

Then for a few weeks I talked about science and the basis of science, and how it was that before the Middle Ages people’s ideas were very spiritual. They created a world in their mind which was an awful lot better than the world in which they lived, which may have been rather a good thing to do because living in the world hundreds of years ago was quite tough. So to have some kind of concept of a perfect, beautiful world which wasn’t tough must have given some kind of comfort to people. But at the same time as giving comfort to people it also gave them something which was in the way of illusion, because it doesn’t exist.

And around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, people started to notice that this spiritual world is not real, that it doesn’t exist. And then they started to notice that the world that does exist is right in front of them. And so people started to say things like, ‘Well, I’ve been looking at the sun and the stars through my telescope and it seems to me that we probably go round the sun. The earth probably goes round the sun. That’s the way it seems from observation.’ And everybody else became very shocked—which is what happened to Gallileo. What Gallileo did was, he started to notice, with his excellent ability, the world that is here; instead of the world which people had been believing in and

hoping for. And that was the start of science.

And then I went on to talk about science as a language. I said that in order to build up a view of the world, we have to describe it. Whether we describe it with mathematics or whether we describe it with French or whether we describe it in symbols, we need a language. But what that language does is, it divides the world up into things—because a language has words and words describe objects or concepts. So, one word describes one object, one word describes one concept. So as we developed the language of science, a language to talk about the world in front of us, we also started the belief that the objects which the words described were real.

And that's what science says—that the objects which its words describe are real objects. So we start to believe in objects. And it's difficult to disagree with that kind of belief. But, after hundreds of years with science spreading through society and through education, we have now reached the stage where people believe in the objective nature of the world in front of us using the words that describe the objects, completely. Which doesn't leave very much room for anything else.

Well, what else should it leave room for?

Well, this is the point. In Buddhism, when we sit in Zazen we notice that reality is not a collection of objects. We experience reality as something different from a collection of objects. When I sit here I can see you all, separate people and separate chairs, and a tape recorder and a watch and so on, and of course they're real. However, we have the strange experience that when we're in the state called action, which is the simple direct state before socialization, that state does not contain any objects.

When we sit in Zazen, the strange thing is there is no sensation of perception of separate objects. Of course, we may suddenly notice someone coming into the room and we may notice a spot on the wall or our foot and so on, so we drift in and out of objective and subjective states in Zazen, but the essential state does not separate the world into objects. And the same is true of action—if you're in a soccer match and somebody passes the ball to you and you race down the pitch towards the goal, in that action you don't separate the world into objects. Something is flowing, something altogether, unbroken, is there. And that's the experience that everybody has.

Now, because the experience we have of reality is unbroken and flowing, the picture that science gives of reality, which is objects separated, cannot be complete. A scientist would say, 'Well, it will be complete. We'll find more objects, so it will get smaller and smaller. So, the desk, and then parts of the desk, and then atoms in the desk, and then electrons in the desk, and then protons and neutrinos and small neutrinos—we better do some more research.' Then they research and find smaller and smaller and smaller objects. And the reason that science is searching and searching is because it wants to find more objects to fill its explanation of reality—it has to.

But what Buddhism says is, in our experience, when we notice it, the world is not objectified. It's a strange thing, but we do not perceive experience as objects, in Zazen or in action. So if science is describing the world as objects, it's got to go on and on and on and on getting smaller and smaller and smaller and more detailed. But how can it ever reach something which is not small little objects? We don't know. We hope that it will get there, but from our experience as Buddhists practicing Zazen we

have to say that science is not able to completely fill the description of a non-objective world.

And at the same time we know that spiritual religions can fill any size gap, in anything, with wonderful ideas. So in spiritual thinking we can create wonderful ideas to explain anything. But then we say ideas don't match reality if they're too wonderful. So religions have the problem that the ideas are beautiful and they expand inside our minds and our intellects, but they don't match the world either, they're too perfect.

So we have two ways of looking at the world in the history of civilization—one which is too good, spiritual, and the other which can't get enough objects to quite reach a perfect description.

So what do we do? Well, as I spoke about last week, it's a mixture between belief and doubt. In a way, Buddhism contains belief, and what we believe is that when we practice Zazen, the unbroken, non-objective experience that we have is real. There's no way we can prove that it's real, because we can't use science to prove that it's real, we can't use religions to prove that it's real, and if you've ever had an argument with anybody about Zazen you'll know that you can't prove to anybody that when you practice Zazen you're sitting in reality. But we believe it. And as Nishijima Roshi says, we believe it stupidly and we believe it blindly, based on our experience.

And then on the other hand, we constantly doubt. Master Dogen says that when we're sitting in Zazen we are Buddhas, when we are sitting in Zazen that is the state of enlightenment. And we want to believe it, but then next day, in our normal everyday life, something doesn't go so well and then afterwards reflecting on it we think, 'Oh, my behaviour wasn't so good, or such and such....' And then we ask a question to Nishijima Roshi in his lecture and he says 'If you practice Zazen your behaviour is always balanced,' and we think 'Mmm, mmhh....' So there's always doubt.

Last week Nishijima Roshi said to me that the reason that he persisted with studying Buddhism from the *Shobogenzo*, and now the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, for so many years without giving up is because he doubts everything. And stupidly he just follows onwards, trying to find something which is left after all his doubts. And what is left after all his doubts are thrown away, he says is reality. I feel that's very nice.

So in my talks, the nature of experience is belief, the nature of experience is doubt, the nature of experience is objects, the nature of experience is no objects, and in the end the nature of experience can only be experienced. And having experienced it, we try to grasp it but it slips away. But it leaves a kind of taste or a kind of scent. So although the reality that existed when we practiced Zazen before has gone and will never return, we have a taste of it. So tasting reality everyday by practicing Zazen we reconfirm that reality is simple, reality is direct, reality is not contaminated with any analysis, it's just here and just now.

And that's all I have to say. If anybody has any comments or questions, please go ahead.

*What did you say about contaminated?*

I said reality is not contaminated with analysis. “Contaminated” sounds a little strange; of course analysis is a very great skill, something which I love, but when we analyse reality we remove ourselves mentally from the present moment. Because when we analyse, we *think about* reality. And we only *think about* reality by mentally putting ourselves outside of it. So we are very strange creatures, we have this very refined skill: even though we’re here and now in this reality we take ourselves out of it mentally and then look back at it, and then describe it. But when we look back at reality and describe it, the reality that we are describing has gone already—the moment has gone already. So my words now are describing something which is dead.

So that’s what analysis does. And it does it in every field. Everybody knows you can do a wonderful cost analysis in business—you have a project and you want to find out how much it’s going to cost in the next three years, so you do a cost analysis. But the cost analysis is not the project, as everybody knows if they’ve done one. The cost analysis is based on what the project was. But what the project does from now is utterly different from the cost analysis, unless you’re quite lucky.

*I saw this amazing series of pictures taken as a camera in outer space came zooming in on the world. And it seemed that the deeper it came in the more empty space you find and the less material world there is.*

Yes. On the other hand, both empty space and the material world are kind of concepts. People thought that space was empty, but calculations in atomic physics on various voltages or energy levels that must exist in order to make sense of the latest theories suggest that empty space is full of something, energy. So even what we call “empty space” is full of energy. And objects are full of energy. So in the ultimate discussion we have to say, ‘Which is empty and which is full?’ But it does seem, from the visual point of view, that the world is lots of empty space and very few objects.

*But even when you say “empty” it is still at the stage of your definition. You can say what you like but you never know whether it’s empty or not.*

Yes. And, for instance, if we imagine space as a kind of flowing field, and then just as in a river there are little parts of water that spin round, like whirlpools, we can imagine that energy is flowing and little objects spin around and a little spin around of the field is nothing, it’s only energy, it’s only water—it looks like something, but if you put your finger in it, it’s gone. So, we can create many pictures. Because what it actually is we can’t grasp, yet. And we don’t know whether science can grasp it, though it can give us many pictures; but we can already experience it, and we do.

In the second century, the famous Buddhist philosopher Master Nagarjuna wrote a book called the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, which Nishijima Roshi is now translating and which I am studying with him. And one of the chapters, chapter 7, is about the nature of the world, the nature of the constructed world. And it seems to be his criticism of what people generally thought in philosophical terms about reality. And part of those philosophical thinkings were from Buddhists, because even in the second century there had been many different kinds of Buddhist thoughts which had developed, some of which were true and others which were more stiff or formal or inaccurate. And there developed a kind of very complex theory, which I don’t know exactly, that reality is a process of three things: reality rises or

appears somewhere, stays for a little while, and then disappears. So, constantly things are arising, staying, and being destroyed. So all the world is arising, staying, and being destroyed. And this was a very common belief, even in Buddhist circles.

But in the chapter we are studying, Master Nagarjuna says, 'That's rubbish.' And he goes through a series of complex arguments and refutings to say, 'The world doesn't arise and stay and then disappear at all. The world *is* here at this moment, and *is* here at this moment, and *is* here at this moment, and *is* here at this moment. It doesn't come from anywhere. It doesn't go to anywhere. It doesn't stay anywhere. It's constantly here, here, here, here.' And he makes a very strong point to refute and criticize the views which said that the world appears from somewhere, then it stays for a little while, and then it goes, and then it appears. In other words, that objects appear and then they stay and then they go.

And that was in the second century. But even today at the end of the twentieth century that argument is still valid, because if we go up to somebody and say, 'The world is just here, now!' they'll say 'Sorry, pardon?' 'The world is just here now! This world here won't be here in a minute, it wasn't here just now.' They'll say, 'Pardon, oh I see, one of those type of people'—people don't believe you, or they don't see the importance, or they don't think it's real. And especially with the strength that science has in modern society, we think in terms of process, very, very strongly—process of creation, process of maintenance, process of destruction. And this is what Master Nagarjuna was criticizing in the second century. We still haven't picked it up yet—because it's very difficult.

And the reason it's very difficult is because it's very simple. It's so simple that it's extremely difficult, because it's before, prior to, our conceptualization. It's comes before all the things we value—our intellect, our analysis, our perception, all the things which have created wonderful civilization. Before that is something simple, but in order to look at it we need to put aside all the things that we value. So in a way we can call Buddhism "throwing away everything." And Master Dogen said it was throwing away body and mind. Well, if we throw away body and mind there's nothing much left, I guess. *Shin Jin Datsu Raku*.

*I've got a very practical question. Is there an English translation of the Shobogenzo?*

Yes, we published it, four volumes. You can buy them here or order them from a bookshop. Nishijima Roshi started translating them in about 1975. When I met him in 1978 he had already started on the English translation, and myself and two other students started to help him to refine the English. And then after some years we were joined by another student who also helped. And, obviously, Nishijima Roshi's English was how he thought it was best to explain in English what had been written in medieval Japanese and Chinese. But one of our members noticed that there is a closer relationship grammatically between Chinese and English than between Chinese and Japanese. So he noticed that some of the Chinese expressions could be translated very directly into English, and when we did that it became much more powerful. So we started the translation with Nishijima Roshi again. And we finished the translating, editing and publishing in February 1999. So it took about twenty years.

We sell the book now in Europe, the United States, South America and on the Internet. It doesn't sell

fantastically well, but for a rather obscure Buddhist book it sells pretty well really. I guess we sell about a hundred books a month worldwide. So a hundred people are buying the *Shobogenzo* per month. So it's not too bad—not a best seller yet.

And then Nishijima Roshi has written many, many volumes of commentaries on the Japanese version of the *Shobogenzo*, which he translated into modern Japanese. We don't have a commentary yet of the English version, but we will in the future.

*What is that wooden piece you have in your hand?*

It's called a "Kotsu," and it's a symbol of the Buddhist lecture. It seems to me that the shape was originally a thighbone. In Tibetan Buddhism some masters carry a bone, a human thighbone, and the shape is very similar to this. So my guess is that maybe it was the symbol of the thighbone. And what is symbollic about the thighbone is that it's very severe and direct—it's a human leg, you know, it's real and it's serious. But that's only my guess, because I noticed the shape and I wondered why is the shape like this, and then I saw a Kotsu in Tibet which was a thighbone and it was a very similar shape to this. In any case, it's traditional as a symbol of the Buddha giving a lecture.

*What is the green cloth you're wearing?*

This is called a "Kasaya." It's made in a traditional shape with paddles, stripes and then panels. Our members make them if they want to, and if they have the time, and then we wear them when we practice. Anybody who studies Buddhism can wear one. It's a symbol of being Buddhist. And it's very nice to wear. It's kind of like a uniform in a way.

*Nishijima Roshi sometimes says that a Kasaya is a uniform for practicing Zazen.*

Yes. And it's more than a uniform, it's like a kind of protection, it's something more than just a uniform.

*And what's that little cloth?*

That's the "Rakusu," and it's actually a kind of symbollic Kasaya. I think that in some situations to wear a Kasaya was rather inconvenient so people wore a Rakusu instead.

*I think it's used when travelling. Instead of bringing the Kasaya you can bring the Rakusu.*

Yes, like a travelling Kasaya. If you look at the Rakusu you can see that it's constructed in the same way as the Kasaya, but in minitature and there are straps round your neck. In our group, when you receive the Buddhist precepts, which is the ceremony to become a Buddhist formally, you receive a Rakusu from your master. And that's a kind of symbol of your Buddhism. But it's actually a kind of miniture Kasaya. So, you never wear both together.

Shall we finish the lecture. Thank you very much.