

Summer Sesshin 2003
Talk number 2
By Eido Mike Luetchford

This morning we finished talking about Genjo-koan, or the The Realised Universe. This phrase sounds like it might mean something intellectual – “oh, I realise”, but it doesn’t. What Master Dogen means by “the realised universe” is the state in which we make everything real, which is the state which is different from thinking about things. So it can be the instant that we pick up a cup of tea to drink, it can be cycling happily along the road, or playing a game of tennis. It’s a state in which we’re whole, and when we’re whole, we don’t separate ourselves from what we’re doing, whether that’s in sport, in daily life, playing a musical instrument or whatever. In that state of wholeness we make the universe real. It sounds a strange thing to say but that’s what Master Dogen says. So everything is here.

Q: Is that the same as Nagarjuna's pratitya samutpada?

Yes.

Q: It means it's real for you doesn't it?

It means it's real. We say habitually “my reality must be different to yours”, and then we create a separate idea of reality. But what Buddhism says is that there is one reality, and that one reality encompasses all our subjective views and all our objective views. So it's not subjective or objective, but real. When we think about it, we can't get our minds around it, because surely, as Peter was saying this morning, I can't see my own face but I can see his face, so we're all looking out of our little windows. And that's true, but at the same time there is a state where we're not looking out of our window, us and the window are both part of something. And we experience that state all the time. If we don't experience it, we die. We enter and leave that state all through our lives, but momentarily. So we might be working hard on the computer, thinking and moving and so on, and our brain gets very active, so we get up, walk down the corridor, have a cup of tea. And in doing that, we enter a state of wholeness or oneness, just momentarily. And that state sustains us or maintains us. So the reason that sport is so popular in modern times is because it's a wonderful antidote to our very intellectual civilisation. We get tense and irritated and exasperated sometimes with intellectual work so we need something to balance it. So Buddhist theory doesn't teach about something out of the ordinary, it teaches about that simple state which we all experience momentarily, and it says that when we practice Zazen, we can ground ourselves in that state, so that we notice its value. Whereas in everyday life, we pull ourselves to one side or the other; we pull ourselves out of the simple state of wholeness into a state where we're very worried, or where we're trapped by our feelings or our sense perceptions.

So this is what Master Dogen teaches, and Zazen is the standard. Zazen is the standard of the state which is everywhere, not the standard of the state which is special, which only special people get and after long special practices, they get it and then they keep it, but the fleeting state which we enter and leave all the time. And that's the state he describes as Genjo-koan, or as Master Nagarjuna does, pratitya samutpada.

Then in the next chapter, Master Dogen talks about the words of an ancient Buddhist master in China called Gensa Shibi. There are lots of stories about him in the Shobogenzo. The chapter title, One Bright Pearl, is a quotation from Master Gensa Shibi. The story is that the master says one day, "the whole universe is one bright pearl". Master Dogen picks up those words and tries to explain what they mean, what Gensa Shibi was trying to express with these words. Nick gave a good comment on this a few weeks ago; you were sewing your kesa, and after concentrating on a lot of sewing.....

Nick: *Do you want me to tell the story? Ok, well I'd been sewing, I've made now five robes, and I was trying to make each one better than the one before. Anyway, it occurred to me just before I'd finished the fourth one, that the perfect robe was only in my head, and in fact all the robes I'd made were perfect anyway, they were just as they should be. So it occurred to me that everything was in fact just as it should be, just because my mind might now approve of how it is, or wanted it to be different, it made no difference, it is how it is. And that's life.*

So that's a simple experience, which we all have from time to time, but very important. And it's exactly the meaning of "one bright pearl". Sometimes we notice the world is not as we think it is, but just as it is, and we get a kind of acceptance of it, acceptance of the fact. This acceptance might only last a few minutes or a few seconds, but it's something real. So lots of people when they sew their rakusus, they say, "oh my stitching is not so good", you said it this morning John. But what you made is perfect, it's just that our idea of perfect is different to *real* perfect. Sometimes we let go of our idea of perfection, and just notice something real. And Master Gensa expresses it as one bright pearl. He means the whole universe is bright and perfect, but not ideally perfect, not the kind of perfection of a spiritual religion which says that everything is good and there's no bad. Because in reality, good and bad are mixed together.

Q: Inaudible. (about the actions of the Soto Sect in Japan in the Second World War)

Did you read about it in Daizen Victoria's book?

Q: Yes.

Have you any experience of it other than in his book? I have spoken to lots of people who have read his book, and they all express a view similar to yours, and all I would like to say is that reading a book is different to experiencing something. And it does seem that the Soto Sect during the war did certain things which judged from now, were terrible, but living in Japan during the war, was a very different experience from being a westerner looking at Japan in retrospect. And I don't mean that therefore there was nothing wrong, at all, just simply that fact.

Q: Inaudible.

Yes but we can't make ethical decisions about the Second World War because it's been finished for 50 years. The only ethical decisions we can make now are in this room, about our own conduct. And unfortunately, although we would like to go back into all those situations which we've thought about and put our own ethical decisions on to them, it's absolutely impossible. So Buddhism says yes, ethical decisions are the most important thing, but we make them here and now. The ones that have been made in the past can never be changed. The ones that we make now create the future. And we only have a limited sphere of action

which is here and now. But we can make historical judgments and so on, but even our historical judgments are sometimes quite far from the real situation.

Q: Inaudible.

No, not that kind of perfect....not being able to do what we like here and now, is perfect. Being able to do what we like here and now is perfect. Things as they are, the world as it is, the things which limit us, and the things that free us, are all encompassed in the Buddhist meaning, or Master Gensa's meaning of the word perfect. So it's really a re-definition of the word *perfect*, not saying that there's something called perfect then fitting the world into it, but saying that us agreeing, disagreeing, getting hot, getting sleepy, *that* situation is real, everything else is just a memory from the past or an idea of the future. This alone is real, and that's what the meaning of *perfect* is; the only thing that is real is here. So it feels rather narrow and simple, even stupid, but that's the view that Master Dogen expresses, and which Master Gensa Shibi expresses. I know there's a tremendous amount of discussion about the Soto Sect and the war.

Q: Inaudible.

Q: *But morality seems to be so extremely relative, I don't think we can generalise....*

Well, we can. We can generalise and argue, and agree and disagree, but we can't change the past.

Q: Inaudible.

That's right, that's the problem, perfect is not ideal in the sense that's expressed here. So Master Dogen says in a later chapter that wrong is perfect as it is, right is perfect as it is. And that means what happened just happened, and whether we love it or hate it, it did happen, and it's gone. And our sphere of action, our sphere or whether we can act right or wrong, is right now – we can't act in the future or in the past, we can only act now. So it's a very simple view in that sense.

Q: *Emily said to me the other day that she wasn't clear about the difference between right and wrong and good and bad.*

Me neither. Oh you mean between "right and wrong" as a pair, and "good and bad"?

(Emily): No, between wrong and bad, and good and right.

Ok. I can say in that in the way that Buddhist writings use the words, Master Dogen wrote a chapter, which we'll come to fairly soon which is about right and wrong – Chapter Ten. And he uses "right" to mean doing something which obeys the laws of how things are – the law of the universe.

Q: *It could be bad couldn't it?*

It could be judged as bad or good, but it goes with the flow. Now what do we mean by that? Well, it's difficult to know, we can't possibly know before we do it. But when we do some things, we get a feeling that they're out of tune, and we get the result of that. And sometimes we feel things we do are in tune, and we get the result of that. So it's quite an important subject, and Master Dogen uses right and wrong to indicate what's in tune with the universe if you like – it sounds

a bit grand, and out of tune with the universe. Then good and bad he says, are idealistic concepts.

Q: *As Shakespeare said – “nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so”*

Yes that’s right yes. And Master Dogen says, if we think there’s something called “good” existing somewhere and waiting for us to go and do it, then we’re wrong. So good exists *in* what we’re doing and not separately from it. We tend to imagine something called good, then try and make that real; to create our idea in reality.

Q: *I haven’t read this book about the Soto Sect; I can imagine what it has. It’s almost like wanting to belong to an idealised perfect tradition that’s never done anything disagreed with, or in retrospect would not agree with. And that’s an idea that’s not real. It would be....well I don’t know...*

If you don’t know, just...

Q: *I mean Catholic people have to look back at what the Pope did in the last war, Jewish people have to look at what Zionism is doing now, and Germans have to think about....*

Ah, no. The comments I made to Harriett were.... as I’ve lived in Japan for 25 years, I have some kind of feeling for something about Japanese society, which is very different from western society, which caused the situation in the war, and which they never express. They don’t verbalise it or express it so well. And I don’t mean it’s good or bad, but it’s something different. So I’ve read the book, and that side is missing from the book, I feel. So that’s all I meant to say.

Q: *Still I guess, if we’re looking for a truth or a right that’s never done any wrong, then we’re not looking for Buddhism, because Buddhism is right and wrong, it’s everything.*

Ah, no, they did wrong. It’s quite clear they did wrong. But there’s something unexpressed in that book, and about that situation I feel. So I want to say to people if you’ve read the book, there’s something that’s not in the book. And I can’t really express it very well, but I feel it from living in Japan.

Q: *But don’t we just say that something is wrong from our contemporary agenda, I mean 1000 years ago, looking back on societies now, we would think they were brutal and totalitarian or whatever. Whereas, you know, they were doing what they thought was right. Can we judge?*

Well we can judge.

Q: *Well we can, but I think it’s kind of meaningless. I don’t think it makes sense.*

Q: *Well I thought it was a very boring book, it wasn’t gruesome as I’d been led to believe and I was a bit disappointed!*

(laughter)

Q: *Societies now are just as bad as they were 1000 years ago.*

They may well be.

Q: *And there may have been some really good societies...*

They didn't have cameras, or computers. But anyway, coming back to Master Dogen's chapters, *One Bright Pearl*, to express the fact that things are as they are, just from our discussions now we can see it's a very complicated subject if we think about it, because to say things are OK as they are suggests that it doesn't matter – but it doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean that things don't matter, it doesn't mean that there's no right behaviour and no wrong behaviour. It just means there is an experience which we have, where we notice what reality is, and when we notice what reality is, we can't.....we don't refuse it. And it happens to us in little moments; we might go for a hike, sit down and unwrap our sandwiches at lunch time, not "oh, look at this lovely view", not that, but something more simple and inclusive. Just a feeling of satisfaction or completeness. And that feeling of completeness is what he's writing about.

Then the next chapter is just a set of rules which Master Dogen wrote for his Zazen hall. He built a Zazen hall for his temple, and it was the first one in Japan. Although Buddhism had been in Japan since something like the 9th century, and he lived in the 13th, these were esoteric forms of Buddhism which were rather spiritual and which didn't involve the practice of Zazen. So Master Dogen built a Zazen hall as part of his temple, and he and his students practiced Zazen. He built it exactly as the hall which he'd visited in China, and he wrote the rules about the practice down. So they are simple rules, they say for example, "we should whole-heartedly promote each other's practice of the truth", that means Zazen. He says, "we should not be fond of going out, if it's absolutely necessary, once a month is permissible". He's talking about a small community a long way from the big cities in the 13th century, and the fact that to go out is very often for them, to lose their stability. So to stay in the temple and to practice was for him the most important thing. He says we shouldn't read texts, even Zen texts when we're in the Zazen hall. He says that if we're going out we should tell the leader of the hall where we're going. We shouldn't hit other people when they make mistakes. These are very important rules for a community of people living together; there are often frustrations and little things that boil up between people. So don't hit someone if they've made a mistake. They are very practical rules.

Q: Inaudible.

I think this is quite specific about someone who wants to discipline another adult. "We should practice our own virtue". In other words, we should look after our own conduct, not the conduct of others. "We should not hold counting beads". "We shouldn't blow our nose loudly, or hack and spit". "We shouldn't come into the hall drunk" and so on. So here are some very practical rules for his Zazen hall, to make it run smoothly. And that's what the chapter is, just a list of these rules, with his comments on each of them.

Q: *A lot of those rules have been incorporated into society.*

Yes, and in a further chapter, Master Dogen gives what are instructions for washing. And we do this now of course, we clean our teeth. But in those days people didn't as a rule. So they are rules of hygiene, but he introduced them as Buddhist rules which he'd learned in China in a Buddhist temple. Now we think it's normal.

Chapter Six is quite a difficult chapter. It's commenting on a Chinese phrase which had been very common in the Buddhist societies which Master Dogen had been associated with. People said, "mind here and now is Buddha". This was a kind of catch phrase to describe what buddha means. And people interpreted it to

mean something like, when our mind is present then we're buddha, or when we're fully conscious of what we're doing then we're buddha. But he explained it in a very different way. There's a problem in translating this into English; in Japanese and Chinese, *shin* doesn't mean exactly the same as *mind*, it's something between mind and heart. We tend to use the word *mind* in rather an intellectual sense, but the word *shin* in Japanese and Chinese, doesn't have such a narrow meaning. So although we've translated it as "mind here and now is buddha", it may be clearer to translate this as "total consciousness here and now is buddha", or something like that. And Master Dogen comments that we shouldn't understand this from an intellectual point of view. So we shouldn't think that it's something to do with our mind which makes us into a buddha, but we should interpret it to mean that being fully in the present moment is buddha. And being fully in the present moment is not to be abstracted, not to be following our thoughts, and not to be following our physical perceptions, but to be doing something fully. In fact we can say it's the same state that he's describing in Chapter Three. So all these chapters are describing some kind of indescribable state, and because it's indescribable we tend to think that it must be something special or spiritual. But he doesn't mean that, he means something real and simple.

So the chapter itself is quite difficult, because he writes in a very complicated way, criticising wrong interpretations of the phrase, and trying to explain the simplicity of it - that when we're fully involved in what we're doing, that state is buddha. And we say that when we sit in Zazen we don't have an intention to do anything else but what we're doing. We don't have an intention to think, or to concentrate on our breathing, or anything physical. We just are sitting. And of course we wander off into the mental and physical realms, but sometimes we come back to a simple state where we're just sitting or fully sitting. And that is Master Dogen's standard of the meaning of buddha.

Then Chapter Seven goes on to a very practical subject – washing. And he describes, as I've just said, lots of practices which we now take as basic hygiene. But he also describes simple rules for washing and going to the toilet for his monks. So he says we should take the rakusu or kesa off before using the toilet and fold it up, and he even gives instructions for folding it up and where to hang it. And when you're in the toilet don't talk to the person in the cubicle next door, and don't write your name on the walls. And he means these things seriously. And of course they didn't have toilet paper, so he gives instructions on how to clean yourself, then how to wash the face. And they didn't have soap, so he gives instructions on how to use the kind of purified ash which they had in those days. And he describes how to chew the end of a willow twig to make a kind of brush to clean the teeth. So in very great detail he describes personal hygiene, and it's very relevant, though we do all that now. So his writing is sometimes very practical and sometimes quite complicated, talking about difficult Buddhist concepts which have been misunderstood in his opinion.

The next chapter is called Raihai-Tokuzui, which translates as "prostrating to attainment of the marrow", which is a very peculiar expression. The marrow, is used in the sense of the centre or essence of everything. And he uses it to mean that somebody who has attained or realised the essence of something, we should revere them or prostrate to them. He doesn't just mean a person, he says anything that teaches us the truth, we should revere, whether it's a cat or a tree, or child, or a woman, or whatever. So he has a view that life is always teaching us; we run up against life, and it teaches us. Things in our life teach us, and when they do, or when somebody teaches us, we should revere them. We shouldn't think that only our great teachers can teach us, and that we can't learn from anybody who's not as good as we are. So he denies that there is any kind of

hierarchy. Also in this chapter he talks about equality between monks and nuns in his day. There was then in Japan, and still is now, gender discrimination between monks and nuns; monks can get good temples, and nuns can get the second rate temples. Some Buddhist sects would not admit women and so on. So he says this is all wrong, in Buddhism, men and women are equal, and he gives examples of great Buddhist masters who are women, and who had reputations, and who were great teachers. So the chapter is quite interesting, and even in the 13th century you can see he has quite an open view.

Q: *Does he say you should literally prostrate yourself.*

No he doesn't say that. But in Japan today people bow to show some kind of respect. And a prostration is a kind of full ceremonial bow if you like.

Q: *So why aren't we bowing down to you, if you teach us the truth?*

Well why aren't I bowing down to you if you teach me the truth?

Q: Inaudible.

When you take the precepts you bow to the person you take the precepts from. And the person you take the precepts from bows back to you.

Q: *But we don't do it as a sort of prostration....*

Well there's no need is there? Although I'm describing Buddhism to you in words, it's very difficult for me to keep the words that I say. So one reason I like to teach Buddhism is that it teaches me. So if I teach you something which is valuable and which you think is true, you respect me, and if I learn something from you which is valuable and true, I respect you. So it's nothing to do with..... you are the teacher or you are the student, it's to do with whether the person or thing in front of you teaches you something that you notice. And when you do, there's a natural feeling of reverence, which he expresses as prostration, but we don't have to go down on our knees, I mean, people wouldn't understand. Children teach us, if we're parents we know how much you learn from your children. But if you prostrated to your child every time you learned something, your knees would be sore.

Q: *The Japanese welcome (inaudible) always bow to each other? (talking about putting the hands in gassho)*

I wonder, do you know Tony? They do this in India too. Not generally in Japan, but in Buddhist societies they do this. But this is called in Sanskrit *anjali*, and I think it has some connection with balance between opposites; it's a meeting (Mike puts his hands together in gassho). So that kind of greeting was around in ancient India and was adopted by Buddhists, I don't think it was invented by Buddhists. It's a kind of equal pressure. When we put our hands together and bow in Buddhism, Master Dogen explains that we're not expressing a reverence for something separate from us, we're just acting. So to simply act makes us whole and in that moment of being whole, we express something sacred. So "sacred" is expressed in ordinary acts.

Q: *So when we bow to the Buddha, it's not prostrating to....*

Well, we say bowing *to* the Buddha, as if we kind of project something forward. But we don't, what we do is we act sincerely in a traditional form. And when we act sincerely there's no need for us to try and project something spiritual in front

of us – just do it. And in doing it, we express our sacredness as human beings. So for instance, in high church in Christianity, there's a kind of bowing that's somehow projecting something spiritual to God. But we don't do it like that with that intention, it's just a simple act. It's not focused outside of ourselves, we bow to the Buddha image, but we bow to ourselves at the same time – both. So this is the prostrating that Master Dogen means.

Q: *Historically prostrating in western culture is implying submission isn't it?*

Maybe yes. So not that.

Q: Inaudible

Yes, so we can say exactly that, we're expressing gratitude, but to what? We just express it, we don't direct it outside to something, we just express it.

Q: *Is it more than just the practice, is that ritual more than just the practice?*

No we don't continue a ritual outside of a ritual, and we don't practice Zazen outside of Zazen. People often ask how can they take Zazen into their lives, it's absolutely impossible to do it, and it's absolutely impossible not to. The reason it's impossible to do it is that we can't practice Zazen while we're riding a bike. The reason that we can't avoid taking Zazen into our life is because when we sit like this for 30 minutes, the fact that we're sitting straight changes our physiological state. So when we return home after a retreat, we have the benefit of Zazen whether we want it or not. We can then choose to keep it or throw it away. We can say "oh thank god that's over" and go down the pub and get drunk and lose it quite quickly; maybe in a day and a half. But if we don't do that it stays with us. So we feel something more settled or balanced. But we can't actually do Zazen at any other time other than when we are doing Zazen.

Maybe I didn't catch your question properly, my answer was different to your question.

Q: *I think I meant, what I was referring to more was the kind of overall way of looking at Zazen, you know, oh it doesn't matter.....*

Ok. So in Chapter Eight Master Dogen talks about prostrating and we can say yes, we can do it physically, or we can do it mentally, it can express gratitude, it can express respect, it can express lots of things. And all of this is included in his meaning, as some kind of expression to something which has the essence, and so has attained the marrow. And this might be anything, it doesn't mean somebody who is better than you or someone who is lower than you. It can be anything or anybody in the world.

Now I hope my explanations are sounding reasonably clear, but when you actually read the chapters you might feel, "it's nothing like what he was saying" – the chapters themselves can be complicated. But the only reason I can give a summary like this is because I keep reading them again and again. They do have a kind of essential meaning, which is sometimes difficult to extract from the quaint English translation from medieval Japanese. But if we make an effort, we can see what Master Dogen is talking about in a simpler way. And that's what I'm trying to do.

But hopefully in the future, we can write what Master Dogen has written here in simpler English. These books are the first time that the Shobogenzo has been translated into English completely, it's not the first translation, but it's the first

complete one. And it's not easy to read, it's not perfect, and hopefully in future years, we can write more simple summaries and commentaries and reach the essence of what he's trying to say.

Q: Can I just ask you about that? Some of the other translations which are available at the moment, bits of them maybe read better. Do you think that by trying to make it read better there is a less accurate proximity to what it is actually saying?

Sometimes, there are different situations; sometimes it sounds better, but it's not what he said, he said something more subtle or something stranger. Often Master Dogen says something which is quite strange. And if you make it un-strange then you miss the point. Sometimes though we can put it in smoother English. I have seen recently some nice translations of chapters, but there's no complete translation other than ours, and ours needs lots more work. So hopefully in future years we'll produce easier versions. Shall we stop there? Thank you.

End of talk.