

## Summer Sesshin 2003

### Talk number 4

By Eido Mike Luetchford.

9<sup>th</sup> August 2003

We are always balanced; the thing is, we sway from side to side. We do things which pull us to one side or the other, and Zazen is just practicing very simple balance. Practicing simple walking in the middle is the basis of everything else – we are always on the road.

Q: *Is it possible to get along by not wobbling?*

If we don't wobble we'll crash.

Q: *To quit the metaphor, one way to express these things is to be stuck in ku.*

Stuck in *ku*? (*Ku* means emptiness).

(Inaudible)

Did other people say you were nuts?

Q: *Yes*

And did you feel nuts?

Q: *Well there was great clarity, but what I was saying to people wasn't making much sense. And it came and went.*

Right, well if we say things that people don't understand for a few days then they'll say we're a bit nuts. So it depends what you were practicing.

Q: *Zazen, it was after sitting.*

So what kind of sesshin was it?

Q: *It was an AZI one.*

Well I've heard people in the AZI say that if you practice a sesshin, at the end you get this special state, and I heard a leader of an AZI sesshin say that you should be careful when you go off home because you'll be really high, things like that. I think that that is nothing like the Buddhist state. So they may get some state, but it's not the Buddhist state; it's a kind of euphoric state, not a normal state. A normal state when we leave a sesshin – we feel quite peaceful, perhaps a little frightened to see the world again, because we've been away from it. And we just think "oh I've got to get back to things now". So not a euphoric state at all.

Q: *But it's the same practice.*

I wonder. I wonder, because *we* practice, so *we* create our state, so if the state we create is different, then what we are doing must be different. Certainly I create my own state, so I think there must be something different.

Q: *Couldn't we be affected in different ways by Zazen?*

Yes that's true, but a state where we feel very sure and clear, and we feel that we've grasped everything, Master Dogen says that we are very far from the truth.

**When the truth has not yet satisfied the body-and-mind we feel already replete with the truth. When the truth fills the body-and-mind we feel one side to be lacking.**

So what he's saying in that sentence is, when we feel like, "yes, I've got it all, it's all clear", then actually we are far from what he's talking about. And when we say "I wonder if I've got it, I wonder whether this is right or not", then maybe....

Inaudible comments

So on some retreats, people like to get kind of higher and higher, and one way to do it is to have very strict rules about Zazen. So people force themselves and if we force ourselves it creates a spiritual state – this is called asceticism, and it's very well known. So many spiritual people in the past have done very painful things, and they achieved a spiritual state, in all religions. If you take that approach to Zazen, you'll create a nice spiritual state and you'll feel wonderful. But that's not the Buddhist state.

Q: *It's an intoxicated state – your body is putting out extra endorphins.*

OK.

Q: *(Inaudible) ...is it the moment that you realize it that you've actually lost it anyway?*

It can be, but I mean, we have a simple natural state when we feel clear, but we're not clear about anything, we're just clear. But there's another clear, where we're just kind of hyper, we feel we've got something, and that's a spiritual state of clearness. The simple more stupid state of clearness is the one I'm talking about – where there's nothing really bothering us. We become bothered again, we're walking along the tightrope and a gust of wind comes and makes us less stable, that's life yes. So if we look for a life which matches Zazen, we'll never find it, Zazen is part of our life, a steadying influence. But we can't make our life into Zazen, that's only an idea. So to make a perfect clear balanced enlightened life is only an idea in our brain. Our real life is like it is. But we can learn, we can practice how to walk slowly on the rope, in a quiet room, then we can go out and dance around on Monday morning, but because we've practiced how to walk, we can do that.

Shall we go on? Chapter 9 of the Shobogenzo is a very famous chapter which is called Keisei-sanshiki – The Voices of the River-Valley and the Form of the Mountains. The title suggests nature, the natural environment. And as the introduction explains:

**In Buddhism, this world is the truth, so nature is a face of the truth. Nature is the material side of the real world, so it's always speaking the truth, and manifesting the law of the Universe every day. This is why it has been said since ancient times that sounds of rivers are the preaching**

**of Gautama Buddha and forms of mountains are the body of Gautama Buddha. In this chapter, Master Dogen preaches to us the meaning of nature in Buddhism.**

So when we hear a river flowing, we feel something grounded and stable, peaceful, because the river never lies, it's just doing what it's doing, the water finds its way naturally. And the forms of the mountains are always showing us the real world. There are many stories of Buddhist monks who were striving to understand what Buddhism is, sometimes very intellectually or spiritually, and then they get frustrated and go off into the mountains and feel "wow, all that's stopped now, my mind is quiet", then they realize that this is what it's talking about. If we go into nature we can experience the truth simply; it preaches the truth to us, the sounds of the rivers and the shapes of the mountains are teaching us that this is reality, not another world, not another reality, not a parallel universe, just this. Just this here. And Master Dogen quotes some of these stories in this chapter.

Then we move onto Chapter 10 which is a very important chapter, but somewhat difficult because it deals with Buddhist morals. The Buddhist idea of morals is rather different from that of a spiritual religion, not completely different, but there is something importantly different. The chapter begins with a very ancient poem which was originally written in Pali, I don't think the origin is known clearly, but was written by one of the ancient buddhas. The poem goes:

**Not to produce wrongs  
To practice the many kinds of right,  
Naturally purifies the mind  
This is the teaching of the buddhas.**

Master Dogen stresses that not doing wrong, which is the title of the chapter, doing right, is important. Not what is right, then do it, or what is wrong, and then don't do it, but just don't do wrong. It's in a different dimension from spiritual religions, which have a more abstract set of morals which we then try and follow. Buddhism says that there is right, and there is wrong, and right is part of our action at this moment, it's not separate from it. And wrong is part of our action at this moment, it's not separate from it. So if we have a very rigid set of abstract morals, we lose our freedom to act in the present moment. And if we have no freedom to act in the present moment, since human beings cannot possibly imagine what every situation will involve, we can't follow the right action in that moment, we can only follow what we thought might be the right action in what we thought might be the situation. And human beings are not capable of seeing exactly what something is going to be like. Everything that we imagine actually turns out a little different. So we need freedom in the present to act. In the present, Buddhism throws away the precepts, if we hold on to the precepts which tell us not to kill, get angry, get drunk and so on, if we hold on to them intentionally we lose our freedom. In the story I quoted about the master killing the snake, if the master is about to kill the snake and he thinks "don't kill", he might get bitten. Buddhism insists that we need freedom to act. And acting freely without a strong intention is the definition of right action, or acting in a balanced way is the definition of right action in Buddhism. In that way it sounds like you can do anything, well you can, yes, but we seem to have some kind of common desire to do things that work, we all want to do what works and to avoid what doesn't.

*Q: So what is the definition of doing wrong? Purposely setting out to do what doesn't work?*

In the story yesterday, the master demonstrated by taking his sickle and sticking in the ground handle first. That's something nonsensical. Or if you go over and pick up that pint of milk and start pouring it over the carpet.....

Q: *A lot of people think that George Bush liberating Iraq was wrong (Inaudible)...what the situation calls for.....*

What does it call for?

Q: *If he hadn't invaded Iraq.....he would have liked that analogy of the snake.*

Buddhism says that this conversation can't get anywhere, I've never been to Iraq, and what would have happened if we hadn't invaded it is hypothetical because we did. We can talk about it all day, but what is important is to act right now. Who can act right now? Only me – I can't influence somebody else's action so much, and usually my influence is of a nature which is unknown to me. And we know this because if we try to please somebody intentionally, we can upset them. It's very difficult for us to know the influence of our actions on others, but we can try to act right now. And the discussion about morality is important, because without discussing morality society can't form its laws. But the Buddhist concept of right is much narrower – just what we can do now will create the next moment, or this moment, and what has happened in the past we can't change. Sounds very narrow minded, but that's the view it is.

Inaudible question

I'm not aware of my conditioning, I know I have it, but I can't see where it is.

Q: *Even when you choose to act in the situation which....*

No time. There's never any time for me to look at anything when acting, just I've got to do something.

Q: *So what it's saying is.....freedom....*

The title of the chapter is interesting, it says Not Doing Wrong, not Doing Right. "Not doing wrong" suggests avoiding a state where we're not acting fully. It doesn't suggest how we should act, but it suggest we shouldn't to do wrong. So if we don't know what wrong is, it's impossible to avoid it. And if we don't know what right is, it's impossible to do it. And if we create an image of what is right, then try to do that image, if we're very clever we may be able to create the right image to suit a situation, but it's almost impossible. In small ways, for instance, I'm going for an interview for a job next week, so I make all this preparation to present myself in the right way. I can spend hours and hours on it, but when I get in there the situation is completely different, the people are not like I imagined, they might be similar but they are never the same. I need to throw away my plan and present myself, if I only present my plan, then I'm not going to be so successful.

Q: *Presenting yourself, we never do (consciously?) we do it somehow else, it's not something we are aware of when we do it.....*

No, and in fact sometimes we do it and afterwards we feel a bit embarrassed. I know someone who went for an interview and felt afterwards that it was terrible and that he'd made a terrible mess of it, but they accepted him. And that's very common.

Inaudible question

Mike Cross's explanation is nice, and I understand that the Alexander Technique says that in order to act naturally we need to stop our habits. I think consciously in Alexander, you inhibit yourself. And Mike used to do this. And it's right what he says. But it doesn't always work, we can't go through life not doing anything, waiting for the right thing to happen, it doesn't work like that. Zazen is sitting in balance, we can call it not doing or we can call it doing, it doesn't really matter, it's sitting in balance. Whether it's doing or not doing, it's difficult to know.

*Q: If you're sitting stiffly and you're ordering yourself all of the time – push your knees down to the ground, stretch the back of your neck, pull in the chin, and someone is talking to you all of the time whilst you're sitting...*

Oh you mean in kusen, yes it creates tension doesn't it?

*Q: So when you leave the sesshin it's a release of that tension.*

Yes, that's asceticism, stand under a waterfall for 12 hours and you come out and you feel that you've entered heaven.

Inaudible question

We do get the results of our action without any gap, so we always receive the results of our actions and we always will. If we do something wrong we get the result of it, and if we do right we get the result of that. There is something called wrong and right, it exists in reality. And of course society has to make its rules so we have laws to live by, but those rules are abstracted. They are like our precepts, our precepts are rules, that's fine, that makes sense. So we shouldn't say that society's rules are no good – "I'm a Buddhist, I find out what's right in the moment", but when we act in the moment we are free to act. Now that doesn't mean chuck away the rules and grab the jewels, it simply means that acting in this moment we need freedom. To find what's right we need freedom, without freedom we can't find what's right, and so we act, throwing away the precepts.

Inaudible question

Yes, but it's a very complicated chapter, it's a very complicated subject. So in the moment we're always choosing, intuitively, subliminally, we choose to continue what we're doing or to stop it. We do this based on some kind of feedback or intuition, we're always doing that. You might be talking to someone and suddenly feel something strange, and want to walk away, or you cross the road and stop, so we're always choosing in the moment. But some people have a very strong set of abstract rules in their head which they want to impose on reality. And those people lose their intuition because they want to impose their abstract view. So very spiritual people try to impose abstract reality on reality, which is always fluid and changing. The Buddhist way is to let our intuition be free so that we can choose. But it doesn't mean to disobey the rules of society, it simply means to notice the difference between abstract right and wrong and real right and wrong. And real right and wrong exists in the situation at every moment. We can follow it only intuitively if you like.

*Q: Isn't that the basis of conditioning, we've been conditioned throughout history to look for someone to tell us what to do, what is right and what is wrong, but Buddhism is saying find out for yourself (inaudible).*

Yes, it's a celebration of humanity, that in fact if people are free they will do the right thing, I'm sure some philosopher talked about this though I can't remember who, was it Locke? Rousseau? OK we'll settle for Rousseau.

Inaudible comment

But if we think about or discuss right and wrong, we say, you know, that we need to avoid our conditioning. But actually this is impossible; we don't know what our conditioning is. My conditioning may be to try and get rid of my conditioning; I don't know how to get rid of my conditioning. I spent 20 years in Japan, and I realized that I'm this tall lanky English person, I'll always be English, I can't get rid of it. How do I get rid of my conditioning? I've no idea.

Q: *That's what we are really isn't it?* (Inaudible)

Inaudible comment

Yes but Buddhist right is not to stretch out on the cushion, Buddhist right is what you do, yourself, at that moment. So you didn't, because that's not you.

Q: *So that's right for her?*

Is it right for you too? Who knows? We're always trying to decide what's right and what's wrong. And we do it on a mental level, because of our conditioning and our religious background, but we can also do it on a simpler level which is intuitive. If we hold on to abstract morals too strongly, we lose the freedom to follow the situation. And in following the situation, we can avoid wrong and do right.

Q: *And part of the situation is what's in you?*

Yes it is, yes.

Inaudible comment

There are lots of different aspects to this, we can approach it from the aspect which Peter talked about, and we can approach it from the aspect of spiritual religions. But what the chapter is about is not doing wrong, but doing right. And that's what we all want to do. And we know there's something right and something wrong because when we do something wrong, we get the result of it, and we intuitively feel that what we did, somehow didn't go in the right direction or with the flow, or something.

Inaudible question

We all try to do right and not to do wrong, the question is, what is the most successful way of doing this? And Buddhism says if we do right and don't do wrong then our mind becomes pure and peaceful. We should avoid doing wrong and do right. But Master Dogen explains that right doesn't exist somewhere else waiting for us to do it, or in other words abstract right is not the same as real right, and abstract wrong is not the same as real wrong. Any other questions? Right let's move on to the next one.

The next chapter is also quite difficult, because it deals with the Buddhist view of time and existence. Uji is two Chinese characters sitting together, so written in Chinese or Japanese it's a single image – existence-time. But if we put it in English we have a tendency to want to put something in between it like

“existence is time” or “existence and time”, or “existence or time”. But in Japanese it creates one concept which is existence-time, and the only way we can represent that in English is to put a hyphen between the two words. So the hyphen between existence and time suggests something which is both put together; the identity of existence and time. It sounds a bit similar to Heidegger, and it is similar except that Heidegger didn't identify the two as one in quite the same way that Buddhism does. In Buddhism we say that although human beings live in time, and we think of time in terms of past, present and future, and this way of viewing the world is so important to us that we believe it's the way things are, there is another view which says that time is just the present moment. To say that time is just the present moment is rather difficult to grasp, we can say it, but it doesn't really make sense, because we feel time passing, we feel that the past is back there and the future is before us. And Master Dogen doesn't deny that normal view of time, but he says that in Buddhism we say that time is just this moment now, so it's instantaneous or immediate. And just this moment now and what is here now, are therefore inseparable, so what is here now is existence, and now is time now. He says that the two things are the same, so what is here and now, and time here and now, are pointing to the same thing, which is all this. And he puts the view that reality is always now, always now, always now. And as I said this morning, sometimes when we're walking around in *kinhin* we might get just a flash of, “oh, hmm, uh” – because we're doing something very simple and we notice the very simple nature of what we're doing is just now, just now. He explains those two views in this chapter, but philosophically speaking it's quite complicated.

Q: (inaudible).... *time and infinity*...

Yes it is infinity and it's infinitely short. If we read something like the chapter *Uji*, it's easy to say “well, so what? It's all very philosophical about time being here and now and so on, but what's the point?” And I think that one very important product of this Buddhist view is that we can realize that the past has disappeared. How ever much we may want it back or regret it, we can never go back into the past; it's gone forever. And the future, how ever much we're waiting for it or fearing it, hasn't come yet. So waiting for it or fearing it is just happening in the present. If we understand the Buddhist view of time, we can in some way be more comfortable in the present, because human beings live in a kind of process view of society where we're always thinking about yesterday and tomorrow, we worry or get excited and so on. And in Buddhism we say that what's gone is gone, and what hasn't come yet hasn't come. And of course we can say it, but to actually live it is almost impossible. But although it's almost impossible, we can move a little but towards it.

There's the story which I'm sure I've told before, of the monk who is running through the jungle being pursued by a tiger. So he's running for his life, and suddenly the trees end and he's at the edge of a cliff, so he jumps over. Half way down he gets caught in a tree or a bush, and as he's hanging there he sees these lovely berries in front of him. He pops one in his mouth – delicious. It's just a story, but it suggests that even in the most severe situations when our life is about to disappear, we can find something in this moment. And I think, I don't know but I feel that many people who are terminally ill realize that fact. People who know that they're not going to live for very long have an ability to enjoy where they are a little bit more. Of course my explanation is too simple – some terminally ill people have a great deal of pain and so on. But even in that terrible situation, some people seem to live more easily in the present, than me who thinks he's going to live for another thirty years, and is worrying about his pension.

Inaudible question

May well be yes. Even in a practical sense, I foolishly made a telephone call yesterday to check whether a laptop computer is going to arrive before I leave for Japan, and if it doesn't arrive I don't know what I can do about it. I got very annoyed, and that annoyance I created myself because I'm thinking about next week. But after practicing Zazen a few times yesterday, I've come back to this place and in this place next week hasn't come yet. So my annoyance has disappeared and I don't have to think about it. I can't do anything about it anyway. In a very practical sense, coming back to here and now does help us. That's because Buddhism has a view of time being here and now.

*Q: Here and now doesn't mean to say that you can't plan for the future?*

No we can plan for the future yes, but your plans are being made now.

Thank you very much

End of talk.