

## **Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin at Earth Spirit, Somerset September 2008**

### **Talk Number 4: Chapters 13 - 21 By Eido Mike Luetchford**

Chapter 13 is called 'Examination of Formation'; the word in Sanskrit is '*samskara*' and we have to guess: 'formation' of what? It's clear from the chapter that he means the world that we think we live in, in other words the conceptual entities that surround us.

He starts off by quoting the Buddha who said that if something is a misrepresentation of reality, then it is false. He says that in that case the world that we think we live in, the world that we form in our consciousness is made up of misrepresentations. So they're untrue. But he does not mean we live in an illusion. He means that human beings construct a world and share it. There is an American philosopher called John Searle (some of you may have heard of him) He has written a very nice book even though it is a bit heavy in parts, called "The Construction of Social Reality" and it is exactly this subject that Nagarjuna is talking about. If you say to a cat 'How much have you got in the bank?', it won't understand the word 'bank'. It may understand 'How much have you got?', but it won't understand what a bank is because a bank is something that we human beings have constructed. If you say to a squirrel 'What's the time?', it won't be able to answer you, because time is something we constructed.

The world we have constructed is the world we inhabit. But although we inhabit the constructed world, in fact we live in reality. But the constructed world is different from reality in the sense that it is only shared by human beings or at least pretty much so; some dogs come into it a bit, because they think they are members of the family and the family is a construction. Marriage is a construction and Buddhism is a construction, a retreat is a construction, and so on. We have constructed a very sophisticated world which is a real construction but the fact that it is a construction means that it is not real in the sense that Nagarjuna means; and a lot of the constructions we make and share in our daily life are capable of making us unhappy, very wound up, very tense, very worried, and lots of things like that because we forget that they are just constructions and that they aren't real. On the other hand because we live in society, we need to affirm this constructed world that we live in.

Nagarjuna discusses the formation of the constructed world and it's interesting to read John Searle's book because although some of the chapters are very, very heavily philosophical, others are very nice to read and easy to understand.

Chapter 14 is called 'Examination of Combining' and in this chapter which is also short as the previous one, Nagarjuna discusses the tendency we have of believing that things are separate and then putting them together to make something which is one. For instance, Buddhism says 'body and mind are one'; so we can think that there is something called 'body' and there is something

called 'mind', but that they are somehow joined together. Then we can start making links between them – and we do, of course, – to make one out of two separate things. But what Nagarjuna wants to point out is that something which is one is not two. Combining is a kind of false act, if you combine two things to make one. It's rather that that something was not two in the beginning and of course, this comes back to his discussion about subject and object, action and the actor, emotion and the person who is feeling emotion. In our heads we want to think 'Ok, he says the emotion and the person feeling the emotion are one'. So we try to combine them. But he wants to point out that something that is *one* doesn't need combining; there are not two things to be combined; it's undivided - if you can catch what I mean. That's the subject of that chapter.

Dogen touches on the same kind of theme when he says things like 'Buddhism is beyond sameness and difference'. Two things which are the same and two things which are different – the difference is the act of differentiating. But he says that Buddhism is beyond sameness and difference, which means it's not things made into one or combined; it's something which has never been divided.

Chapter 15 is quite a difficult chapter about 'Examination of Self Nature or Innate Existence' and this is heavily tied up again with *Abhidharma*, which defines different substances, matters and states with either being innate (which means they are kind of eternal properties) or not innate. In this chapter Nagarjuna discusses the difference between something which is said to have its own innate self-nature which in his time suggested something like a permanent entity that exists forever. Applied to the human being it meant, of course, that you had a soul, something which is unchanging and continuing on and on, forever. Something which is not innate applied to a human being suggested the opposite to having a soul, which was a kind of nihilist view, an annihilationist view which holds that when the body dies, everything dies and that there is nothing separate from the body; the body is the basis of everything. He discusses that dualism between the two.

*When the body dies, the mind dies?*

Yes, that sounds quite reasonable, I suppose, in this day and age; but it had ramifications in that the people who believed in annihilationism in the Buddha's time held that you didn't therefore need to be responsible for your actions because there was no follow-up. So it's not just a simple materialist view, it was a bit more than that.

Chapter 16 is 'Examination of Bondage and Freedom'. This refers to a widely held view in ancient India that we have an eternal soul, that it passes through a succession of states or lives which was referred to using the word '*samsara*' which is the same word that Nagarjuna uses to refer to daily life. Sometimes the same words are used with different senses by different groups of Buddhists. In ancient India before Buddhism *samsara* was used to mean 'passing through different lives again and again'. You're dead and then you live another life and then you are dead and then you are born again and so on, whereas Nagarjuna uses it to refer to passing through the cycle of living every day, every day, every day. In the ancient view, the eternal soul passes through a succession of lives because it is bound by suffering and ignorance and things like that and grasping, but eventually escapes into freedom which is a kind of *nirvana* or in Brahmanism

becoming one with *Atman*. It's that view which he refutes. He says that things can't pass from this life to another life, either as permanent things or as non-permanent things; the same is also true for living beings. He denies reincarnation - which is quite a major statement in the second century when there were no tools to look at the nature of life and death and they knew very little about biology and that kind of thing. Belief in life and after-life was quite natural, but Nagarjuna denies it, because, he says, body and mind are one. If the mind is eternal and passes on somewhere else, there must be a body that passes with it; you can't have one without the other. You can't have matter without spirit; you can't have spirit without matter. They're both two halves of one thing; so, you can't have this 'soul' going off to another place because it must be accompanied by matter and we can't see it by looking in any of the five ways, he means by looking at the five skandas. So this is quite an important chapter, quite an important refutation in his time: No reincarnation, either for things or for people.

*What happens now?*

What happens now? I go on to Chapter 17.

*No reincarnation – what happens?*

When you die? The Buddha was silent, so who am I to speak? (Chuckles)

*I think some Buddhists believe that the five skandas fall apart and then they are recombined...*

Ah...?

*...and that is how they explain reincarnation; not one which reincarnates but it's all the different elements and they recombine...*

Rather like a transporter?

*Something like that and then you get a new identity which appears somewhere.*

Right.

*I think, it's quite a nice way around this.*

Yes, it is a way around it, not a way through it, yes. Well, they may be right; we have to wait and see. Unfortunately, in the history of human civilisation, which is quite short, maybe four thousand years, there is absolutely nobody who has been dead and come back and talked about it, who has actually given a talk about it and said 'Look, I've actually been dead'. People have seen tunnels of light and been on operating tables and have seen things and have then been brought back but there has actually been nobody who has died quite clearly, died and then come back again – so what can we say about it?

*The Dalai Lama would argue with that and Jesus would as well...*

They might argue with it; but they argue while they are alive.

*I don't think the Dalai Lama would argue with it. (Inaudible)*

Well, Nagarjuna says 'no' and Dogen also says 'no' because it denies the Buddhist belief in the oneness of body and mind which if understood simply and directly means no spirit without matter, no mental without physical because they're not separate things, they are one thing. There isn't one thing which is mental and physical put together; that's what the chapter on combining is talking about. There aren't two things put together; there not glued together with *Araldite*. There is only one thing; so, how can one half of it pass on without the other half? That is the basis of their very clear, almost dogmatic statement. That's why they can make the statement because they believe absolutely that physical matter and form and the mental or spiritual side of things are two sides of one thing.

Chapter 17: 'Examination of Action and its Effect'. This is a quite interesting chapter; it's quite a long chapter and it's a kind of denial of process, which is a big thing to deny. Nagarjuna starts off by giving an example of the accepted way of describing how actions generate an effect and that effect generates the cause; the cause produces something else and therefore life goes on as a process.

How can he deny process? Well, he doesn't deny cause and effect *per se* but he says there is an experiential point of view which holds that reality is just here and now, and in being just here and now, process is not an appropriate description of an existential state. He suggests that process is in fact an explanation, a human explanation for reality and that we can never actually pin down a process because we say a cause has an effect. But if we want to explain how a cause has an effect, all we do is break the link between that cause and effect into smaller causes and effects. That's what science does: A goes 'bang' and B shoots off there – so how does that work? Well, it works because A does this and then B does this and you get smaller and smaller explanations of smaller and smaller gaps in timing, if you like. But at the smallest gap in time – this may not be up-to-date information, Barbara is suggesting that there are new theories – for instance, in traditional quantum physics an electron moves from one energy level to another, yet how it gets from A to B, nobody knows. There have been lots of discussions and theories: people like David Bohm have suggested there is something else deep underneath and that these electrons are just tips of some underlying flux which is reality in order to try and explain how this particle affects that particle; nobody has got the answer. We actually don't know how something causes something else at the ultimate level. Is it reasonable to say that? (*turning to Barbara who is a physicist*)

*It's also a different way of description because you can sometimes select a particle which is at a different point, very small but as a point or as a wave which is energy and I think people use it at their convenience. Sometimes it is more convenient to see the particle and sometimes it's more convenient to see the energy wave as it is...(inaudible)*

But nobody knows how non-local events happen.

(Comment inaudible)

So, at the fundamental level we don't know how A gets to B.

At the normal level of understanding A causes B by this process. But that process is a kind of invention, we can suggest, or a kind of human way of giving a reasoned explanation for how things happen, although at the fundamental level it doesn't work yet. Does that make sense?

*It's our way of thinking...*

Yes, and it suggests that what we call 'process' is a way of explaining what we experience, what we remember as against what we experience now, as against what we anticipate, past present and future. Buddhism says present is real; past and future are not real in the sense that they are not here: We can't act in the past, we can't act in the future, we can only act now. So, process, including all scientific description and all our ways of describing the world, are steps that go from the unreal past through the real present to the unreal future.

*How does 'here and now' differ as a construct from 'past' and 'future'?*

It's a construct.

Yeah.

*Time bends with gravity, as I understand it. So if there is enough gravity we can go back. So it's all... Stop right there! It does strike me that the 'here and now' is as much a construct as anything else we are talking about.*

*(Throws the questioner a book.)*

Did you grab that in the past, in the present or in the future?

*I didn't, I missed it. (Laughter)*

*(The book is thrown back to ML; he only just catches it.)*

I got this in the present; and it hurts in the present where it hit me. So you can't do that with the past or future. One thing you can do in the present: you can act. You can't do that...

*But where is the present?*

It's gone. It's here.

*But it wasn't an instantaneous act*

You're right.

*I mean, is that not his point, that instantaneousness is a construct as well?*

Yes.

*The experience isn't a construct. It's just the instance of talking about it is a construct.*

Yes.

*And it's almost like language is a meta-construct. So all these things are made possible because written language exists.*

Yes.

*We should stop talking then.*

Yes.

*Steady on! (Laughter).*

It is difficult to talk about these issues and there are lots and lots to say if we want to go into them deeply. I agree with what was said.

Chapter 18 'Examination of Self': Nagarjuna discusses belief in a permanent self. This is linked to one of the previous chapters, whether there is a self or no self. This is indeed quite a widely discussed topic.

Chapter 19 'Examination of Time' and the content of this chapter parallels what Dogen writes in the *Shobogenzo* in the chapter called 'Uji – Existent Time' and of course, Nagarjuna points towards 'all is in the present'. So the past is in fact in the present.

*In Dogen's time, did they have clocks?*

I don't think so, probably candles with rings round the edges, water wheels, incense...

*What about Nagarjuna?*

You've got me there.

*I didn't think we discussed time until fairly recently. In the eighteenth century... when was it when the chronograph was invented? Fairly recently?*

Yes, I am sure.

*(Comments inaudible)*

But even in ancient Buddhist sutras they write things like 'one instant in reality is four hundred and eighty thousand *ksanas*' or similar things, *ksanas* being subdivisions of time. Obviously people have been thinking about time for a long while.

*Man invented time, didn't he?*

Well, that's the question, yes.

*Started measuring things...*

Time is certainly very deep-rooted in our way of life. As we have developed ways of measuring it, it has become more important to us. But the point of view that's presented by both Nagarjuna and Dogen is a kind of existential point of view that time is a construct because 'now' is always here. We talk about the passing of time but in fact the main characteristic of the present is that it is always present. So Dogen says that time is existence itself. If you read T.S. Elliot, in some of his poems, particularly in the 'Four Quartets', his verse sounds almost like Nagarjuna's, almost word for word. I wonder if T.S. Elliott read Nagarjuna.

*Dogen's work very closely seems to mirror clearly so many of the concepts...*

Yes, but is that because he read him or was it because he was doing the same experiment?

Yes.

*Experiment?*

The experiment being sitting in the dojo.

*Are there any other patriarchs that you are aware of who have made such a coherent attempt...?*

No, unfortunately not because I am not a scholar. In the thirty years that I have been studying Buddhism I studied Dogen, on and on and on. Then Nagarjuna popped up because my teacher studied Nagarjuna. So I studied him, on and on and on, and that's about all I know. So there are huge gaps in what I know and I can't give you a scholarly answer. But I'm sure there must have been because the Buddha, Nagarjuna, and Dogen are in the same line of transmission.

*But the direct correlation of their investigation of reality is quite striking.*

Ah, yes, because they were both excellent teachers, I suppose. And they both cut through all the crap and if you cut through the crap, what's left is pretty well the same.

Chapter 20 is entitled 'Examination of Synthesis', but the subject matter is the relationship between the cause and its effect, how a cause produces an effect. Some of the chapters overlap and in some cases although the title says one thing, the chapter talks about something else.

I read somewhere that it's possible that Nagarjuna wrote the MMK, not as series of titled chapters, but as a series of blocks of verse and somebody put in the titles for the chapters at a later date. It certainly seems reasonable to me, because in at least one chapter the title is not what the content is about.

Chapter 21 is about the *Abhidharman* theory that matter or fundamental particles come into existence, stay in existence and then come out of existence. Its title is 'Coming into Existence and Passing out of Existence'. The *Abhidharma* says that reality is a continual flow of conditioned *dharmas* (*dharmas* meaning things or particles here), coming in and going out, everything is arising and

ceasing and that's what we see in front of us. But Nagarjuna denies that. Again it seems like he is denying process and when he denies process in this chapter and in other chapters, he is doing so in order to put into the fore the existential viewpoint of reality being immediate, here and now. In order to put that forward he denies that process is real, existent. That doesn't mean that there is no cause and effect or that science is untrue or the way we talk about our lives is untrue, but simply that his definition of 'real' is something which is here and now. So in the 'here and now' you cannot talk about process. Well, you can utter one word of a sentence about process.

*Could you say it's all in the words again? Because we know we can reduce the fractional series to zero. In other words you shoot an arrow at something you can show that the arrow actually never hits whatever you are shooting at because it gets halfway round, it gets a quarter way round because of this fractional series to zero. But that's a word game because the arrow does get there.*

Yes.

*So aren't you just saying that it is a restriction of language that there is no process?*

Ah, no. He means that there actually is no process. So he is saying that process is a language construct, a construction of language.

*Yes, but saying that 'there is no process' is a language construct.*

Ah, yes, saying anything is a language construct. (*Laughter*). Well, yes, in a way you are right, so how do you get out of that? You don't write anything.

*We know it happened; the arrow does get there (inaudible); there is a cause and effect.*

But it might miss.

*(Inaudible comment)*

Right. So from our normal point of view, the arrow hits the target and that's an accepted point of view but what the Buddhist teaching tries to put forward is another point of view and that other point of view has value.

*The arrow and the target are one thing; they are undifferentiated reality.*

The arrow and the target?

In reality, the instant the person fires the arrow at the target, there is only one thing: person/arrow/fire/target. But then in the next instant there is something else.

So, it sounds bizarre to think like that and we can't see any value in thinking like that.



*Like freeze-frame the lot of it.*

*Sachs, the man who wrote 'The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat' wrote also a fable called 'The river of consciousness' that deals with this, and he quotes your favourite philosopher Dan Dennett talking about looking back. In the instant we also have a memory to look back to which we bring in our consciousness into the present. So the present moment is, if you like, drawing from a memory and Sachs says this is so. He quotes that the human brain experiences stillness in a moment and closes off, then opens and closes off. So that's the way it can take in all the data in front of it. It doesn't take in data that flows; it takes in data that is instant, then it closes and it opens, like a shutter. But it seems like a flow because there is also the element of memory which brings in the previous moment and brings it into the present and the memory comes into the perception of the moment as well and that's how we function as living organisms. It's the intrinsic sort of way we function.*

Yes, so the memory of the past and the present event at the moment we construct them into a process...

*Yes, into a flow.*

But there is actually only the memory present.

*I think this supports your text.*

*Vision works the same way. So we think we got stereoscopic vision; we don't have anything like that.*

No, we don't update the peripheral vision very often unless something moves there.

So it's not a kind of philosophical idea that the reality is the present moment and so on; they mean it as a real statement of real fact. And it's so unusual to us to think like that that it feels very bizarre and we wonder 'What's it all about?'. We are sitting in a room moving our hands round, that's real isn't it? But investigations into psychology and various sciences are not disproving these kinds of statements.

*Now we know that, what's changed? How is that going to change things? Or is it going to change anything?*

You mean what does knowledge change?

*No, knowing this, that there is no past and no future, there is only a present...*

Well, for instance, you're discussing what will change if we know that. You're discussing an abstract idea, aren't you, what will change if we know that the present is all that exists, so you are generalising. You are not just saying for yourself what is changing in my life if I realise that this moment is the only moment there is; you're making a construct: What will change for us if we know that the present is all there is? All abstract, right?

What I am saying is that their teaching is not what you are saying, which is abstract, but that this moment, here and now, is all there is. That's concrete. Your question is completely abstract. It's an abstraction of the present; it's an abstraction of 'you' into 'us' as a generalisation. You can't get an answer to your abstract question in the abstract. The answer is this moment, here and now, *right now*, is all there is. And if it makes a difference, I can't tell you what the difference is.

*I take your point.*

*Could you rephrase that 'it is all we can know'?*

We don't need to know it. It's not necessary to know it. Do you know this moment? No. (Pause) How about this one?

*In fact it's not necessary to know it; in fact it's impossible to know it. Could you say that?*

I can't keep up with it; it keeps changing.

*Doesn't that undermine all action though?*

You're doing exactly what Rory is doing, you moved from this concrete reality into an abstract generalisation. But what they're talking about is not the abstract generalisation, but this moment, here and now, is all there is. *This moment, here and now, is all there is.* Is there another moment which is not here and now for you? Are you somewhere else other than here, now? Are you at some other time other than here?

*No.*

No. That's all they're saying. So if we think about it, immediately we think about it, there is an abstract concept, we have missed what they are saying. Because what they're saying is not an abstract concept. Now is now, this 'now'.

*It's all really understandable as a form of experience, isn't it?*

Yes.

*But is the value of the truth that it refutes false doctrine? So you were talking about the Abhidharma – Dogen, I think, was a master of the Abhidharma - and doctrines, ideas can be very powerful in motivating us; what people believe in causes them to fly aeroplanes into tower buildings or to mutilate their daughters whereas the truth can help us to refute false notions. It's not necessary that truth is something that we do live by, whatever, but it helps us in itself to refute something that is false. For instance, if I do say, I'm actually also in Chiswick that is a false notion, isn't it? People do believe that there are ethereal bodies, for instance, that they have astral travel. I am sure lots of people who come here, probably the next group, believe that and that would condition the way they behave.*

*(Inaudible comment)*

*Now* is important, yes; so what is the effect of realising that fact? Well, for instance, and this is not a criticism, when I went to get coffee this morning, you were serving coffee but you were actually talking about how to practise *kinhin* with somebody over here. So I said to you 'Coffee, please!' and then you suddenly realised that *now* you were supposed to be serving the coffee. That's the thing you get from realising that reality is here and now. That's all; there isn't anything more complicated. It's very, very simple but very difficult to keep ourselves in the present. See where your feet are; don't trip over your shoe laces. Don't get lost in generalisations – and that's very difficult because we go off into generalisations without realising it. We take something real and we abstract it and we are talking about something else, something that's not real, immediately. We talk about something that's not real and we don't realise it. What's real? Ten past six.

*So that's how we put it into our practice?*

Yes.

But if you try and put it into practice and 'be mindful' like lots of people suggest these days, if we try and do it consciously, what we tend to do is try and watch ourselves and that's an intellectual exercise too. How to get into the present is the problem. What Dogen says is that it's not an effort of intention. It depends on the state of your body and mind. To remain in the present and not to drift off too much we practise Zazen. Because practising Zazen stops the habit of drifting off into thoughts, because we keep drifting off and bringing ourselves back. We might do it a hundred times during half an hour of Zazen. But if we carry on doing that every day, every day, year after year, we slowly get used to bringing ourselves back from what we are drifting off to.

*But, Mike, you say 'bringing ourselves back', but that implies that it is an intentional thing.*

Yes, yes, yes. I agree. (Chuckles).

*But it's a bit like the learning of the truth that you were talking about. It's the body knowing it; the body does it.*

Yes, you can say so.

*Something does it.*

Yes. Saying 'the body does it' is the opposite of saying 'the mind is doing it'. Actually both do it; we do it; life does it.

*It's like learning an instrument.*

It is done.

*Isn't it that the purpose is essentially humanistic, that is to say to help us in our lives? It's not to challenge us so we get disturbed like the idea of an arrow*

*disappearing halfway between the bow and hitting the target. It's actually to help us live.*

The practice is to help us live; the theory is to calm our minds about how it all works. It doesn't seem to do that but it will if you keep on. Buddhist theory disturbs us when we first come across it. When we come across some of the bizarre teachings of Buddhism which are so foreign to our normal ways of thinking it's quite disturbing. But if you carry on studying and carry on practising, then the teachings of Buddhism are not disturbing, they are quietening.

*But our suffering, well, my suffering comes so much from memories, from projections, from constructs,...*

Yes, mine too.

*...from something that happened twenty years ago...*

Yes!

*...and it is for a momentary state as if it is actually happening, but it's not. And this is the thing, you can go round in circles, discussing abstractions but when you actually sense that their purpose is to help you to grow beyond that kind of living, where you are totally caught up in mental constructs and you are suffering as a result; then it makes sense. If it is an examination of arrows in space, you can just drive yourself nuts thinking about it.*

Yes, that's true.

*I can feel that only this present moment exists, yet memories from the past that I know are just images in my mind do affect me in this present moment though.*

Yes, they do. But if we notice again and again that they are only memories in our brain, we get used to these kinds of things floating around. Some people are so possessed by their memories that they can't function – and sometimes I'm possessed by my memories so I can't function. But at times like that if I practise Zazen, I realise that the memories that are possessing me are just memories in the present and they are memories of things that have already gone and then I feel peaceful again.

*Memories have a physical base in the brain; so for example with Alzheimer's part of the brain is destroyed. There are synaptic pathways which are almost infinite in the brain and they can be activated just by a molecule, a smell and bring back a memory involuntarily; it's not something we do, it happens, we don't know why they emerge. I don't know why I said that... Oh, yes, I was talking about memory; we can't evade memory, it just happens.*

Buddhism is not a process to make ourselves peaceful without memories, without disturbances, in some kind of bliss. It's not; it's so that we can see ourselves more clearly, warts and all. To know yourself is not to know the perfect self you would like to be, but to know the self that you actually are, and that is often the self we actually don't want to know, isn't it?

*(Inaudible) ... and sometimes in Zazen you face it and it's difficult not to run away from the cushion.*

Yes, it's true.

*And it's ok, I think.*

Yes, it's ok.

*But that's not really true, is it, because if a child is doing something we disagree with we say 'You naughty boy, but he's not really naughty; but in some way it upsets us and we label him: 'naughty boy'. And that 'naughty boy' echoes throughout the day, 'That's the naughty boy'. But the next moment he might be doing something that really is laudable.*

There is a suggestion here that modern parents shouldn't say 'You are a naughty boy' but you say 'What you did was naughty'. 'Your action was not in harmony with the universe' you could say to your child. (Laughter)

They're not naughty; it's what they have done that is unacceptable or has consequences we disagree with. We are training them to live together in society because we all have to live with each other and it's quite difficult. We are all human beings and are stubborn. Even the quietest persons have their own strong opinions and feelings and we have live together, and so there is a lot of bumping and bashing around. We have to train ourselves.

*So when we are sitting in Zazen, we are not being naughty are we? (Laughter)*

It is impossible to be naughty when you are sitting in Zazen, absolutely impossible.

*You should sit in it all the time then, shouldn't you?*

*You should! (Laughter).*

Thank you very much.