

**Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin Czech Republic
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**Talk Number 4: Morality and Religion
By Eido Mike Luetchford**

(This talk was translated consecutively into Czech, and some of the questions were in Czech)

The first chant is Chinese; the second chant has got four lines of Japanese and four lines of Chinese. That is why the rhythm changes. So let's recite the first *Kai kyo ge*.

(Chanting of *Kai kyo ge*)

I don't mind what we talk about this afternoon but I'll start off talking about morality and religion.

People normally think of morality as a set of rules given by religion, a set of rules that we should follow to make our behaviour good. But in Buddhism morality is slightly different. First of all, I don't call Buddhism a religion because we don't have a belief in God. We believe in this world, this reality.

The question then is: Where does our moral code come from? In Christianity, for example, the moral code came from God, written on pieces of stone. In spiritual religions ideas of right and wrong are very clearly separated and very clearly defined: This is right and this is wrong.

But in Buddhism we say that right and wrong are part of what we do. That means that there isn't a concept of what is right waiting somewhere for us to do it. This is what Dogen writes in his teachings. It sounds quite a terrible thing to say, 'There is not a concept of right'. But he does not mean there is no right or no wrong; he means that right or wrong are not separate from our conduct. What we do is right or wrong in the doing of it. Buddhist morality is not separate from our behaviour. This sounds almost immoral. But actually, it's a nice way to live. Life is very complicated and we need freedom to act. If we act right, if our behaviour is right, then the result is good.

In Buddhism we concentrate on our actual behaviour, not on thinking what is right and then doing it but just on doing it. Many people think that is impossible: How can you stop doing what is wrong if you don't think first of all 'How can I do what is right?'. But Buddhism says whether we actually do right or do wrong, is not a question of thinking. It's a question of our whole body-mind or our action itself. When we are balanced, then our action is the best it can be and when we are unbalanced, our action may be wrong. In Buddhism we don't concentrate on thinking what is right and then try to do it, or thinking if something is wrong and then stop ourselves doing it, but on being balanced when we act. That is a very strange idea and for most people in countries with a Christian tradition it sounds like no morality. But actually, I think it is a more practical morality. For instance, in countries that have been governed by spiritual religions for hundreds of years, although those religions have very strict moral laws about right and wrong and

people argue about and discuss right and wrong, they *still* can't make their actions be right and make their actions not be wrong.

In Buddhism we focus on the state of our mind and then act freely. To make our state of body-and-mind the best we can, we practise Zazen. But there are many other ways to make our state of body-and-mind balanced. So when we are balanced, we can act without worrying about right or wrong. This is what Dogen taught and is very, very different from the concept of morality in normal society today. But we have large problems with morality in modern society because the power of religions is weaker. For instance, in the recent global financial crisis, the people involved had created their own right and wrong based on what the others were doing. 'This bank is doing it this way; so it's ok for me to do the same'. But what they did was immoral. I think the question of morality has become quite important in modern society.

That's all I am going to say and we can have a general discussion. If you don't want to talk about morality we can talk about something else.

Can one still make a judgement about a bad decision having been made? I am a bit confused because your last statement was that the banks are immoral but at the beginning what I understood was that you said there isn't a right or wrong.

Its not that there isn't a right or wrong but that the right or wrong is in what we do. We can't stop making judgements, but we should notice that if we make judgements about something that has already happened, it is too late. Because human beings can't stop judging things which have already finished, they say 'We can use it next time' or they say 'We can learn the lesson from this time'. So we must discuss whether it was right or wrong after it's finished and then next time we can prevent it. I don't think that is a waste of time but it doesn't work very well. I know this because it doesn't work very well for me. But we can't stop doing it.

If you say, when we are balanced, we do the right thing; does this mean that people in their nature are right, good? Does Buddhism believe that basically everyone is good? Can you comment on this?

The difficulty in your question is that right action and wrong action exist in reality but good and bad actually don't exist. So, for instance, only human beings make judgements about good or bad. The other problem is that we think in our mind, that if we are balanced, then according to Buddhism our behaviour is right and everything will be perfect and good. But it does not mean that. In reality, human beings can only do the best they can. In reality there is no 'right' separate from 'wrong'. Right and wrong exist mixed up together; good and bad exist together in everything; happiness and sadness are mixed up together in our lives and so on. Only we human beings with our ability to think separate reality into 'This is good, this is bad; this is right, this is wrong; this is happy, this is sad'. Actual experience of living has all those things mixed up together. Does that answer something?

Yes.

I have noticed a different approach, for instance, in the West which seems to be that if you cultivate loving kindness towards yourself and towards others that will then translate into more moral behaviour. Could you comment on that?

Yes. I have heard that. I think love and hate are two sides of the same thing. Love doesn't exist separate from hate, or like doesn't exist separate from dislike. If we love somebody very passionately, it can turn to hate very quickly if we have an argument. To cultivate loving kindness seems to me to cultivate one side of reality and ignore the other side. So I wonder if what they say works. I can't believe it works; but I never tried it. I don't want to be a 'loving, kind person' I want to be me!

(Laughter)

'Hello, I'm a Buddhist. Can I help you?' – The Christian Church and Christian Sunday school is the same: 'I'm your neighbour; I love you'.

(Laughter)

And Christianity preached loving kindness for many years. But if you look at the history of Christianity, it changed to the reverse many, many times. 'We want you to be loving and kind, and if you are not loving and kind we are going to kill you.'

So I didn't try it.

Actually, I tried something like that, really. I had a Buddhist teacher and he was very loving and kind. The whole group looked up to him as a role model of kindness and love. But it made me feel very bad about myself, because I felt very inferior. So when I met Mike, I relaxed.

(Laughter)

You think I'm an asshole sometimes.

Yes, exactly.

(Laughter)

Just sitting in front of an audience I can hide my other side.

Do you think we learn by experience, Mike?

I think we learn by experience through our body-and-mind. For instance, we learn to ride a bicycle by experience and our body-and-mind remembers. Or we learn some physical, mental skill and it stays with us. But the idea of analysing what we did and then saying 'Ah, yes, yes; next time I'm not going to do it', works in the area of intellectual activity. But if it really worked, surely we should have stopped making the big mistakes which we make. We don't seem to. If you look at yourself and also look at society, this approach doesn't seem to be very successful. Although we want to change and we can think how to change, we can't actually do it by thinking about it. Of course, you can notice that something

is wrong with the system and then you can change something about the system and make it work better. But personally, I have had no success with changing myself by thinking about it. Very disappointing.

Do you think we avoid unpleasant feelings? We avoid anything that is not pleasant and that is why our thoughts are so imbalanced? And society avoids unpleasantness; so it's got to be advertised as being good.

Ah, yes. But it's kind of natural.

That's why it doesn't work.

Well, it does work. But you don't like it.

But the banks, for example, haven't worked.

I have read that analysing sometimes or even often doesn't work, but I don't agree that it never works.

Yes, it's true.

So analysing is not worthless.

No, not worthless at all, no. But our state of body and mind when we are analysing is important to get a balanced analysis.

If we are angry, for example, the analysis might be difficult or wrong.

Yes. Or if we are very disappointed or we are disappointed with ourselves and we want to change something, we analyse it and say 'Next time I'm going to do this'; but it may not be realistic.

There seems to be a kind of conflict between what I say and what you say or there seem to be two different levels. It's true, and this is one of the difficult parts of the Buddhist view. Of course, our whole society is based on analysis and thinking. If we don't think, we can't open a new bank account just by practising Zazen or we can't decide the schedule for our future work just by practising balance. And we can't improve situations in society without thinking about social systems and then creating them and changing them. That's true and we live in that world. The Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna called this world in which we live and think and plan and so on the 'world of social reality' or *samsara*. But he said there is another level or – and this is very difficult to talk about because the words are misleading – there is another aspect because everything we do has a result. Every action we take at every moment has a result. So while we are proceeding in social reality to analyse or create some situation using our brain power at every moment, we are doing something, step by step. We might be sitting thinking and forgetting to eat, or working at our computer making our plan and forgetting to rest. At that level our balanced action is important and our thinking is not important.

Of these two aspects, one Nagarjuna calls 'social reality', *samsara* where we live and think and interact with each other and the other is ultimate reality or *nirvana*

which is just our action at this moment. Just our action at this moment creates our future whether we are thinking and forgetting to eat or working too hard while we are making our plan. At this ultimate reality level our balanced action will bring the best result. So there are these two aspects to our life. While we are walking towards our aim, we should watch where we put our feet at every moment because where we put our feet at every moment determines whether we get to our aim or not. Can you see that?

Yes, it means we should be balanced practising Zazen and at another time we might analyse and think and together it will work.

Yes. If we make efforts to balance our body and mind then we can take part in the normal social world freely and make our best efforts to think and to correct our mistakes or whatever. Does it sound very complicated?

Do you think we should try to make the world better?

Can we really do something actively for other people?

If we think about the situation, we say 'I am doing this for somebody else' or 'I am doing this for myself'. But in reality everything is both for ourselves and for somebody else at the same time. We can't separate it. There are always both sides; sometimes we only talk about one. But both sides always exist. We don't need to worry about being selfish or altruistic because we are always partly selfish in everything we do; even if we are altruistic, we get some selfish benefit.

My older sister was a Christian missionary and she loved to do things for other people. She spent her life working in Thailand doing things for other people and other people thought she was wonderful. When she came back from Thailand to England, she lost the ability to do things for other people and she was faced with the fact that she did not like herself. So in the end she killed herself because she loved other people but she didn't love herself. She was selfless and she wasn't selfish. What I learnt from that is that we should be a bit selfish and a bit selfless. She gave me a very clear lesson about Christian goodness. It was good for lots of people, but it wasn't good for her.

What was your original point?

Do you think we should make the world better?

No, we should try to make ourselves better but we shouldn't do that either. Who should we try to make better? Not the world, not ourselves. If we give up trying to be better, then the world becomes better. If we give up trying to make ourselves better, magically we become a little better because we let ourselves become naturally who we are. And that is the best we can be. We all have our own character, our own history and our own childhood background. So we should not try to be worse, not try to be better, just try to be normal. We should not hide the bad and promote the good but just be normal.

Christianity tries to promote the good and eliminate the bad, to get rid of evil and fill the world with good. The people who believe things like that then look around and ask 'Where is the good? – That's in me'. 'Where is the bad? – It must

be in you'. That separation has a very powerful and unhappy effect. Heaven and hell are here, unseparated. I'd like to be a bit better but it's only a dream.

I think the Buddhist teaching of being normal or balanced is quite different from spiritual teachings. Buddhist teachings of just doing the best you can, making your effort at the moment of the present is very different from the spiritual religions' belief to do good and make ourselves better day by day to become closer to God.

What is the function of the sangha? I don't remember you talking about the sangha. I thought this may be like collecting experience in Buddhist life; we can see what is happening in others' lives and we can learn from it. But I wonder now if you approve of talking about and analysing our own behaviour so we can somehow learn from this?

Sangha in Sanskrit means 'association' or 'group'. So people practising Buddhism together in a group we call '*sangha*'. When people practise together in a group, it's impossible not to learn from each other. Being together itself means we learn from each other whether we like it or not. On top of that we can discuss with each other and learn different ways of doing things; it's true. But the basic thing is just being together itself; just practising together itself already is learning from each other. It's not necessary to make a special effort to exchange experiences. We can do that, but it's not something we have to do actively. It happens. For instance, I don't ask a lot of questions of people in the *sangha* about how they do things, but I learn from everybody all the time. I notice your sincere behaviour and your very serious questions. So something comes from that, I learn something, I get something from that. Or sometimes, if I feel irritated at something and I notice that other people are very calm, then I learn something about myself and other people. It happens by being together, but sometimes we don't notice it. Or we don't know about it but still it happens. That's how I think about the *sangha*.

You rang the bell; so let's finish here.

(Chanting of *Fue-ko*)

I'm sorry, when I am talking, I look down here at the floor in front of me because I have to concentrate to explain what I want to say. But when I am looking down here I keep thinking 'Ah, I want to look at the people in front of me'. But when I look at you, I can't remember what to say. Actually, it's all written here (points at the floor – laughter). Some things are very difficult to talk about and I think we do very well talking between two languages about quite difficult topics and Roman (the interpreter) is quite exhausted.

Thank you very much.