

Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin 2005
Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho
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In Yesterday's talk, in the story of Nansen and Obaku I think it's ok, they are not the wrong way round after all. It's just that Nansen asks Obaku a question so it sounds like Obaku is the teacher but in fact it's the other way around.

We start a new story this morning. The next two stories are very famous koans about a dog. They were very much discussed in Chinese Buddhism and in Master Dogen's time.

A monk asked Master Joshu Jushin *"Would you tell me whether or not a dog (kushi) has buddha-nature?"*

Master Dogen's quotation of this story is in Chinese. So when he gave his talk, he would have read it out in Chinese, the monks could read and understand Chinese. In the next sentence he explains what the Chinese means.

Let's be clear on the meaning of this question. The word *kushi* in Chinese means dog. The monk was not asking whether a dog has buddha-nature or whether it doesn't have buddha-nature. He was asking whether Master Joshu really understood Buddhism or not.

Master Dogen is saying that behind the question, the monk who is asking Master Joshu it is trying to find out if the master knew what Buddhism was about or not. In a way that's behind all our questions.

So Master Joshu was confronted with a crucial question, but at the same time he was able to encounter an excellent questioner, of the calibre that he had been seeking for more than thirty years.

So Master Dogen thinks it's an excellent question: "would you tell me whether or not a dog has buddha-nature?" The master replied famously "mu". In Chinese mu means no; doesn't have; without; not; denial. I've translated it as "without".

The Master replied *"Without [any concept of buddha-nature]."*

It refers to, of course, whether the dog has buddha-nature or not. But the master isn't exactly saying no. So I've translated it, interpreted it as:

Without [any concept of buddha-nature]."

The dog is without any concept of buddha-nature, we hope. So it has a happy life.

There are many separate ways of studying his one-word answer. It might represent buddha-nature itself expressing that it exists *without [any concept of buddha-nature]*, or the dog expressing that it exists *without [any concept of buddha-nature]*, or an onlooker expressing that the dog exists *without [any concept of buddha-nature]*. It might take us until the day that a stone has been ground away to arrive at this *without [any concept of buddha-nature]*.

I've added words which are not in the original to try and explain it. Master Dogen is saying that the answer is ambiguous, because he only said mu, what is mu? His

answer has no subject. Master Dogen is saying that the subject could be buddha-nature; buddha-nature exists without buddha-nature. The subject could be the dog; the dog exists without buddha-nature. The subject could be an onlooker saying that the dog exists without buddha-nature. And it's a very difficult question which may take us a very long time, until a stone has been worn away, to catch the meaning of what this "without", or mu, means. But if we interpret mu as without, my interpretation is intending to convey the meaning that the master said, and here I'm interpreting this word mu into a whole sentence, the master said "no you stupid thing, the dog doesn't have any idea of buddha-nature it's just a dog". And "yes, because it has no idea of buddha-nature it's just a buddha, so it has buddha-nature". All wrapped up in one word.

He's also asking the question, "what is your understanding of buddha-nature?"

Master Joshu is?

He is expressing in one word what his understanding of what buddha-nature is.

So we can say buddha-nature is without, or being without. And I used the word "without" which is rather an unusual translation of mu because if we go back earlier in the chapter which we were working through last year, Master Dogen talks about buddha-nature as "being without", that is, buddha-nature is the state where we are without all the things we layer on top of each other and onto ourselves. So in other words a simple human being is one in its natural state, a baby, a dog. Without anything added we are buddha, so we have the nature of a buddha. That's one reason why I put without. I think that without is just about acceptable as the meaning of mu.

So sunyata is literally "without anything state".

We can say so yes. We can translate sunyata as "the state which is without". Literally it means empty; bare; barren; desolate; without anything extra. All of those describe something that's got nothing extra. So it's quite nice to use the word without. "Empty" conjures up all kinds of images. What is it empty of? But if someone says that they are without everything, we can puzzle about what they mean.

There are lots of similar koan stories where the teacher would point very directly to what's going on right now and that's the reason for, it seems like this is the one that opens up the whole core of philosophical discussion, it's the one that most people study.

I suppose it didn't open up so much philosophical discussion at the time. But when we read it we want to talk about it because it's so ambiguous, or it appears so.

There's a huge tradition of similar kind of not talking, conceptual stuff that just seems to go straight to directly here.

So these were real... we suppose that these we real stories about real conversations between real people, and that's what real conversations are like aren't they? Sometimes you answer in words, sometimes you might just walk off, sometimes you might say something else.

When he said mu, would it have had at that time the same sort of Zen cultural significance as it does for us now, or would it have had a fresh use of it.

That's a question. I've never lived in 11th century China and I don't speak medieval Chinese, but if someone said mu to me, I don't know how...

Well today, mu is synonymous with the culture of Zen, there are ...

Yes well that's all rubbish.

Well yes maybe, but was that rubbish still prevalent at that time?

Well this is the question, so what we have to ask is, was the master saying something deeply profound, and we waffle on about the nothingness of nothingness and so on, does that make sense to us? Or if it doesn't make sense to us, what could he have been saying? What could he have been saying about the dog and buddha-nature that can make sense to me? So that's why I wrote "without", because it makes sense to me. I made sense of it for myself, and you have to judge whether what I put makes sense to you, or whether you prefer something by some other person.

Not at all.

Well you can read lots of commentaries on this koan by people which will take you through realms unknown.

Dogen would have been aware of this kind of technique of drastically curtailing koan stories to these one word essences.

I think it was the nature of maybe Chinese teaching. I get that feel. They are quite abrupt.

It would diminish the meaning of it slightly if it were a stock phrase, like "katsu" or something like that, in the culture of Zen at the time, of course it wouldn't have the significance that you have put in.

He wasn't saying a meaningless word, you know... he wasn't saying "moo"! He wasn't saying, you know: "does a dog have buddha-nature?", "lanterns hanging on pine trees". He was saying something, so what was it? Was he saying "no", yes he was saying no. What else was he saying? What was he saying about the dog? Does a dog have buddha-nature? We have to read on a bit further.

I'm looking through the wrong end of the telescope, historically we impose all this significance. You've answered my question.

Oh, right. So let's go on a bit.

The monk asks "But it is said that all beings fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence, so why do you say that the dog is without?"

The monk is puzzled.

His question suggests that if human beings were without [any concept of buddha-nature], then it is clear that buddha-nature would also exist without [any concept], and so the dog could also exist without [any concept of buddha-nature].

In other words, if we weren't so conceptual, there wouldn't be any problem.

The monk continued, "What do you think of my idea? Why should a dog's buddha-nature be given the new name 'without'?"

Or why do you give the name without, why do you call a dog's buddha-nature "mu"? The monk's question is quite profound in a way.

Joshu replied, "Because we have a mental viewpoint that is formed from our past experiences."

That means exactly what it says, we have a mental viewpoint which is formed from our past experiences. So the way we think of things is formed from our past experience. We are all human beings and we are stuck thinking about whether or not a dog has buddha-nature, or if mu is the right word or not. This is the activity of human beings. But if we weren't like that then the dog could happily be without buddha-nature and buddha-nature wouldn't have to be conceptualised.

This expression means that the reason that we discuss whether it exists or not

That is buddha-nature...

is because we have a mental viewpoint that is formed from our past experiences,

So because we can't get rid of our thinking because it's been built up since childhood, we discuss whether or not a dog has buddha-nature.

but in spite of our viewpoint being like this, the dog exists *without* [any concept of buddha-nature] and buddha-nature exists *without* [any concept of buddha-nature].

So Master Dogen is trying to make it clear that it's all to do with our conceptualisation. Even though we can conceptualise whether or not the dog has buddha-nature, the dog exists without any concepts, and buddha-nature exists without any concepts. So in that he's saying that buddha-nature is not a concept. When we put a word on it, it becomes a concept, but it is something beyond concepts.

We can never use our mental viewpoint formed from past experiences to understand the nature of a dog, so how could we understand the buddha-nature of a dog?

And it's true, we tend to look at dogs and animals and say that they are sweet, it's cute, it's small, it's doing this action for this reason. You get nature programmes which describe the behaviour of animals, giving reasons for the behaviour: "and now the squirrel is running up the tree so as to store the nut which it will bring out later in the year". It makes it sound as if the squirrel is doing all this thinking. I don't think the squirrel is doing all this thinking. We say "oh that dog looks happy" and so on. But we can't describe the nature of an animal with our mental viewpoint.

Can we describe a human being?

Ah now that's a question.

It would appear that squirrels forget three quarters of their nuts anyway.

We can then say that squirrels are very forgetful animals, and impose something else on them. But they neither forget nor remember I suppose, they just dig up their nuts or don't dig them up.

The problem with being human is that our thinking operates in a disjointed way with how we operate. So we have a very subconsciously conditioning way we do things, with our heads.

And we try to tidy it all up, especially we try to tidy other people's behaviour up, try and make them consistent, make them have a consistent viewpoints and say consistent things, yes.

Whether we try to get rid of the inherent duality or whether we try to integrate the two sides, the human state is just the constant working of a mental viewpoint that is formed from our past experiences.

So Master Dogen says there is an inherent duality in the human state and we can try and get rid of it or integrate it, but that's the way we are. So if we have the idea that we can in our mind, integrate the two sides of our nature, we can never do it. Some people ask what is the point of discussing Buddhism on and on like this, why don't we just practice Zazen? That's a great idea, off you go then. But the people who say that find it very difficult just to practice Zazen, because they have a question. As long we have a question, we have a mental viewpoint. So we're stuck really. That's the end of that story.

The next story is the same Master Joshu and the same theme.

On another day, a monk said to Master Joshu, "Tell me finally, does a dog have buddha-nature or not?" This question seems to imply that the monk was having some kind of debate with Master Joshu, and from that we can see that assertions and questions about buddha-nature formed part of everyday life for our ancestors in their temples.

So we don't know whether it's the same monk or not, but Master Dogen is surmising that possibly the same monk was having an extended conversation about buddha-nature, and he is quite pleased that people were discussing things in detail. However, this time Joshu gives a different answer.

Joshu said, "It exists [just as it is]"

Exists is "u". U and mu are opposites. Again, u as a one-word answer is very vague. What exists? Where does it exist? We can interpret this as Joshu saying that yes, the dog does have buddha-nature, or the dog exists just as it is, nothing to do with buddha-nature, all kinds of things. If it was the same monk he must have been very puzzled.

The meaning of Joshu's "It exists" is not existence as described by scholars and theorists, and it is not philosophical existence as meant by sects who study existence.

There is a lot of Buddhist theory about existence, the Buddha was supposed to have said something about not existence or non-existence. But Master Dogen is saying that the existence that we discuss is not real existence, it's an idea in our heads. So we can say "exists" and we can discuss existence as an abstract concept, but not that. Joshu's "it exists" is not an abstract "it exists".

It is the existence that the Buddha taught. What the Buddha meant by existence is what Joshu meant by *"It exists"*. What Joshu meant by *"It exists"* is that the dog exists. And since the dog exists, buddha-nature exists.

So something real, there's a real dog here. The monk's question "does a dog have buddha-nature" is a kind of abstraction. Joshu is saying this time that it's a real dog here – "it's a real dog here, what are you talking about? Here is a real dog, a real dog exists!" And Master Dogen says that if a real dog exists then buddha-nature exists. Something exists beyond the concept, but the concept doesn't exist. Master Joshu is denying some kind of conceptualisation about the dog, but affirming something real about the dog.

The monk said *"It exists already. But why does buddha-nature need to enter into this animal form?"*

Another clever question: "all right so there's a dog, but why does buddha-nature have to come into it?"

The priest's words raise the question of what *exists already* means; whether it means the dog exists now, or that it existed from the past. Although *exists already* seems to mean the same as all other *exists*, it is clear and stands on its own. If it exists already, does it need to enter in from somewhere? It wasn't just careless thinking to ask why it needs to enter.

This is quite complicated. The monk wants to know if the dog exists already why does buddha-nature need to enter into animal form? So what he's saying is why does there need to be two things, buddha-nature and the animal, with buddha-nature coming into the animal. Master Dogen says we should look at what "exists" means. Does it mean that the dog exists here, or that it has existed from the past? This is a strange Buddhist way of looking at the world which says that reality or existence is only at the moment of the present. And we find that quite bizarre, even though we can say "oh, yes yes, I've read that, that's true", but actually to believe that existence is only at the moment of the present is very bizarre, because we've got a lot of investment in our selves and our past and our future. But where is my self, and where is my past, where is my future? It's a puzzle isn't it? We could say that all of my past is here in the present, that's why I can access memories of it, and certainly all of my future is here in the present because none of it has happened yet, it's thoughts and potentialities in the present. So in the Buddhist way of thinking, to say that the dog exists means the dog is just here, just real. And so if it's just here and just real, it's impossible for something called buddha-nature to come from somewhere else and come into the dog, this is what Master Dogen is saying.

Does a dead dog have buddha-nature?

Does a dead dog have dead buddha-nature? Let me think about it... Where is the dead dog? Oh that one doesn't, no. So it sounds very complicated and a very careful dissection of something very simple. And we can wonder why they were talking about the dog and buddha-nature anyway.

It's a very radical way of talking about koan stories isn't it, because usually the questioner is a bit of a patsy, he gets kind of biffed around. Whereas Master Dogen seems to be giving the questioner parity.

Yes that's right, he often does that. So what he is saying behind this is that this may sound like it's a much discussed and worn out subject, but there were two real people there discussing something real and important. And it might not seem so real and important to discuss whether a dog has something called buddha-nature or what buddha-nature is - is it here, now? did it come from somewhere else?. It all sounds like a very philosophical and tiring exercise. But on the other hand the intention of Buddhism is to construct a theory or philosophy that agrees with the way reality really is. And the way that reality really is, is not the way that we interpret the world. Although our way of interpreting the world works for us most of the time, actually some of the time it doesn't work, and we don't notice that. We are educated in society and we grow up to live in social groups with rules, values and morals, and we don't notice that they are all constructed by human beings and that actually sometimes they don't work, in very small ways. And all those small, subconscious ways in which we fit ourselves into a construction of our own making causes unhappiness, stress and puzzlement. So the Buddhist task is to find a way of talking about reality that matches reality. But first we don't know what reality is, when we practice Zazen we notice the bizarre nature of what reality is and who we are. Then we try and construct a theory.

Could they just as easily been discussing a stone as a dog?

Yes, in theory we can say that they could have been discussing a stone, but actually there were two real people and they discussed a dog. If there were two other real people discussing a stone, we could also talk about what they said.

At the beginning of this story, Master Dogen says that Master Joshu was pleased to find such a question. And stories of pupils going up to the teacher and knocking him off the seat, mounting the seat, is this an example of either a pupil demonstrating his understanding to a teacher, or a pupil trying to ascertain whether the teacher has understanding, questioning the teacher, rocking the teacher? Or is it both?

I guess it's both. The teaching situation is very interesting. Master Joshu was pleased because someone asked him a really good question and gave him the chance to speak about it. And in giving him the chance to speak about it he could explain it, not only to the person who asked but to himself. So to have a question from someone is nice, to have a question from someone who is really trying to work something out is very nice. To have a sincere question is great if you are a teacher, because without any questions you can't say anything.

Can I ask a question Mike? When you translated mu into without, and John made the link to sunyata, could the same be said looking at this story to do with form, and, I should know which sutra it is but...

We just chanted it, only we chanted it in medieval Japanese, so we can't understand what we were doing.

The two answers that have been given here, is that, am I right in thinking emptiness and form, they are the same thing, although they appear to be opposite?

We can say something which is neither emptiness nor form. So something which neither has nor doesn't have buddha-nature. Something in the middle. In Buddhism we're always in the middle, it's the middle way. So Master Joshu gives two, what are apparently opposite answers, and the reality is in the middle. Where did we get to?

Joshu said, "Because although we recognize it, we can't help mistaking our thoughts for the real situation."

Oh there you are, smack on. This is Joshu's continuing reply to the monk's question "why does buddha-nature need to enter into this animal form?" And Joshu's answer is, because although we know it, we can't help thinking, and thinking our thoughts are real.

This expression has been around in ordinary societies for a long time, but now Master Joshu uses it to express the true situation.

The Chinese that Master Joshu used was a common saying.

It says that although we can see the real situation, we cannot help misrepresenting reality. Very few people may believe this. It is difficult to understand how it can *enter*, and Master Joshu suggests that the word is not even necessary. If we want to achieve the simple balanced state, can we do it without our body at this moment? And although we cannot describe this balanced state with words, it is a state where we are in our body.

So he's talking about buddha-nature in the body of the dog.

If we mistake our thoughts for reality we are not usually fully in our body,

And when we are thinking and lost in our thoughts, the world in which we are thinking becomes real for us, and we don't notice the world in front of us.

and not being fully in our body usually means that we are mistaking our thoughts for reality. It would appear that recognising and mistaking are the same thing. Remember, recognising a mistake as we make it is a momentary action, and it is this momentary action that is described with the word *enter*.

These are very difficult sentences. What Master Dogen is suggesting is that there is a human condition and the human condition is that we mistake our thoughts for reality. But that human condition itself is momentary, and so we can be human, we don't need to try and find some state in which we don't mistake our thoughts for reality, all we need to do is to recognise what the human state is. If someone says we should get rid of thinking and we try never to think, we end up going bonkers. They do this in some training temples in Japan, they've learned that the state of Buddhism is not thinking so they have the monks jump out of bed at half past three, rush up and down the corridors with wet towels, then jump into Zazen, not think, then do something else, and the monks do this training trying to eliminate any time when they can think. And after two years they're so exhausted they leave the temple with their certificates and they go back to their temples which they've taken over from their fathers, they install a fridge and a TV, and fill the fridge with six packs and think "thank god all that training stuff is over, now I can get on with earning money from funerals". We can't stop thinking, we can't stop mistaking our thoughts for reality, that is the nature of thought, but we can notice it, we can recognise what the human condition is.

Can I just go back to that, we are in our body, how does he put that? That image, we are in...?

I'll have to look at the original to answer that.

I want to know how it was expressed.

You want to know the Japanese construction? We can't express it in words, this is why Master Dogen switched back to talking in an analytical way. We can get rid of that, we can switch backwards and forwards, like in Zazen, we can stop thinking and we can daydream, in life it's the same. We can't get rid of one state and always have another. He's describing "we are in our body" that's dualistic, but how else can we describe it? We-body-in.

It's the same as "does a dog have buddha-nature" it implies one thing having another. You could say a dog is buddha-nature, that's less dualistic.

That's right, he said that yesterday. You can go on, you know, you can say a dog is buddha-nature but that's still two things. So how do we get round it? Well what he's saying is let's...Master Joshu says that our mental viewpoints are always formed by our past experiences, this is it, this is the way I was brought up, to think dualistically.

Momentary action in the present unites both me and the world. At the same time, there is no avoiding the ordinary situations of everyday life.

So there we have it. Lots of people want to study Buddhism and attain enlightenment, they want to avoid the ordinary situations of everyday life, and enter nirvana. Good luck to them.

And more than that, our ancestor, Master Ungo said that even in starting to study things on the periphery of Buddhism, we have already adopted a mistaken approach.

We can't avoid our mistake.

We have been making the mistake of half-studying things on the periphery of Buddhism for a long time, and the days have lengthened into months. This may be the situation with the discussion of the dog entering into its animal form. Although we have a mental viewpoint that is formed from our past experiences, at this very moment we have buddha-nature.

So it's a real dichotomy. Master Dogen is insisting that we have buddha-nature in the middle of our mental experiences, mental viewpoints. We're trying to hold two things in our mind at the same time and we can't do it. How to find the middle way is the centre of Buddhism.

Is buddha-nature a concept to describe a concept-free situation?

Yes, we can say so.

A dog is chasing its tail.

Yes, we are chasing our tails. However, Master Dogen is always very supportive of that tail-chasing activity. That's the end of that particular story so I will stop.

He says something here which is very central to what you teach, and I haven't come across it in the Shobogenzo before: "momentary action in the present unites both me and the world"

I might have made it up.

Does Dogen say that elsewhere in the Shobogenzo?

Yes. But those are my words. If we look in Book Two, we can see what Mike Cross's words were and we can go back and see what Dogen wrote in Chinese. This quote you mean? "The action of getting free of the body and just the moment of containment, contains self and contains other people." That's what it says, I've interpreted it. So "contains self and contains other people" suggests a unity of me and the world. That's what he says to me.

He seems to be working hard at trying to work something out, the point is though that you're not going to work this out, you can't.

He's highlighting the human condition, the condition in which we all sit round and discuss something which puzzles us, then think "why are we doing this?" Then we go away, then you all come back! This is the fifth year we've been doing this. And I come back and do it. So you know, the human condition is very strange isn't it? All this complicated theory and we wonder what use it is, then we go and sit in there and try and stop thinking even though we do think. Then we rush around chopping and storing wood, then we eat meals together, go back to normal life, then we come here the following year... It's a bit bizarre isn't it, the human state? Human beings...we're just little animals with our little habits. I remember going for a walk in the mountains in Japan, I sat down on a little ledge for my lunch, and eating my sandwiches I noticed this ant. The ant picked up a crumb from my sandwich, put it on its back and went off on a long journey which I watched for minutes, it went all round the houses and came back almost to where it started from and went down a hole with the crumb from my sandwiches. I thought "I've got these sandwiches I'm carrying on my back, and I go from the train station and meander through the hills to return to the same place and get on the train again!"

What a strange world!

Thank you.