

Winter Sesshin 2004

Talk number 5

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I love very stubborn people, because without very stubborn people Buddhism could never have survived for two and a half thousand years. And when very stubborn people meet the truth, they never let go of it. One description of Buddhists, is that they are like pebbles on the bottom of the stream banging against each other as the water flows over the top. That's all.

Then Master Dogen said in his rules for the temple, that we should blend as milk and water. When you mix milk and water together, they become something which you can't separate again.

Shall we finish off the chapter? There's just one more story, then Master Dogen's own poem.

Master Kisho from the Sho region is a descendant of Master Rinzai and the successor to Master Shuzan Shonen.

If you want the details on these masters you can find them in the original text, in the footnotes.

On one occasion he preaches to the assembly:

At one time-present will is present but words are absent.

At one time-present words are present but will is absent.

At one time-present both will and words are present.

At one time-present both will and words are absent.

Sometimes we want to say something but it doesn't come out. Sometimes we say something and it comes out before we want to say it. And sometimes we don't say anything even though we don't want to. And sometimes we want to say something and we say it. Is that right? So the poem describes a situation which we experience in our normal lives. Will is present means we have the will, we want to, we have something pushing us to. And words are absent means we don't say anything. Words are present suggests that the words are somewhere in our mind, but will is absent suggests that whatever it is that makes us speak isn't there. And the third line – when both will and words are present we speak. And when both will and words are absent we don't. Then Master Dogen makes his own commentary on this poem.

Both will and words are time-present. Both presence and absence are time-present. Before the moment of absence has ended, the moment of presence has come.

We can find in this, descriptions of our real situations. For instance, sometimes we have something floating around our consciousness that we want to say, and we kind of think that we'll wait for a time to say it then it says itself. And it's quite interesting, in the vast amount of research into human consciousness that's been

going on in the last few years, that it's very difficult for scientists to come up with a model for how we produce speech, how we actually form what we want to say. Because although sometimes we think up a sentence in our mind then we put it into words, there are many situations which don't fit into that category and it seems to be a bit of a puzzle for these scientists. They haven't yet found a model or a mechanism for how human beings speak. There are all kinds of different theories. We feel ourselves sometimes we want to say something and we kind of have it floating around, and we look for a time to speak then we speak. But at other times just we speak, it comes out. There is a kind of state in which things happen naturally, and there is a state in which sometimes we feel things are forced. Sometimes we feel forced to be quiet even though we want to say something, and sometimes we feel forced to speak even though we want to keep quiet. But there is a situation where things happen naturally. And we can find that kind of situation in the words of the poem. And Master Dogen says, it's OK, all of those situations happen at time-present.

Before the moment of absence has ended, the moment of presence has come.

In the original, he illustrates that with a story about a donkey and a horse. Donkey and horses were used in medieval China for conveying goods, so they were like cars, vans and trucks. And he says in the original that the donkey hasn't left yet but the horse has come. If we put that into modern language we could say that this truck hasn't gone yet but the next one is waiting to come in, something like that. It doesn't have any kind of mystical significance, just donkeys and horses are beasts of burden. If we translate it the way I have, "before the moment of absence has ended the moment of presence has come", this suggests that moment where we just spontaneously speak the words, we're not quite ready, but we've done it.

Before the will has left, the words arrive. To be present does not mean that something has arrived. To be absent does not mean that something has left.

Again he's denying the process view that we hold. We can think in the process view – "I have words in my head, I want to speak them, so now I speak them". But in fact he's suggesting that another way to look at it is just now we are quiet, just now we speak, the time to speak doesn't arrive from somewhere, just now spontaneously we start to speak, just now spontaneously we stop speaking. That's the image he's creating.

Time-present is like this. Presence is just being present, it is not being absent. Absence is just being absent, it is not being present.

This is a similar kind of description to his description about Spring – just today it's Spring, not a process of Spring coming and leaving, but just Spring here and now.

The word "will" describes will itself, and depicts will as an object. The word "words" describes words themselves, and depicts words as an object. The word "description" describes description itself and depicts description as an object in time-present.

Here he's..... I'm lost for words. When we describe something we use a word, and when we describe something with a word, that word doesn't exactly fit that object, in some way it restricts the object. And the original chapter uses the Japanese word for restrict. When we describe something – "Mike", I restrict or

limit you. And in doing that, I don't describe you. So, "'Will' describes will itself", in other words, the concept "will" describes something which is real, and it also makes it into an object – will. So then it's separate. This is what words do. The word "words" we use to describe words, but when we describe words we somehow restrict, because our definition only goes to a certain limit, it has an edge to it, we restrict what words are, and that makes them into an object. And he says that the same thing is true of the word "describes" and description itself.

Descriptions describe things, but a description of a thing is never the thing itself.

Then he gives an example of a meeting:

When I meet a person, a "person" meets another "person".

That's an objective picture or image – an objective person meets an objective person.

When I meet myself, a manifestation meets a manifestation.

We can't objectify meeting ourselves, just something meets something.

If there were no time-present none of this could happen. In summary, will is one time-present that makes the Universe real. Words are one time-present in the balanced state. Being present is just the time when everything is just here and now. Being absent is just the time when everything when a fact is not here and now. This is how we should understand and make ourselves real.

And then, at the end of the chapter, he adds his own poem:

Although this poem is how one master of the past expressed himself, I feel moved to express my own understanding:

And his own poem is based on Master Kisho's poem:

***Will and words half-present is also at time-present.
Will and words being half absent is also at time-present.***

By using "half" here he wants to break our perfect picture.

We can study the situation like this:

Then he puts his own version of Master Baso Doitsu's poem which he quoted in the middle of the chapter, using words which break our images:

He was moved

That means Master Bodhidharma

***to raise an eyebrow and wink in half of time-present.
He was moved to raise his eyebrow and wink in the jumble that is time-present.
He was moved not to raise his eyebrow and wink in half of time-present.
He was moved not to raise his eyebrow and wink in the jumble that is time-present.***

Very similar to Master Baso's original poem, but somehow he wants to break the perfection of our thoughts and images. Then his last sentence:

**To experience arriving and leaving like this is to experience time-present.
To experience being present and being absent like this is to experience time-present.**

Shobogenzo Uji

Dogen wrote this chapter at Kosho-horin Temple on the first day of winter in 1240.

Ejo copied this chapter during the summer sesshin in 1243.

Eido wrote this interpretation for the winter sesshin 2004.

Jikido transcribed this talk on January 16, 2005.

He wrote the chapter in 1240, when he was 40 years old.

The end.

If you read the original, you might find that it creates clearer images for you, I don't know, this is only my interpretation. When I wrote the interpretation, it's clearer to me, but the original may somehow create clearer images.

This idea we have of thinking of something, then we speak it, that is intimately connected with this process view that we've been talking about. My real experience isn't that at all. There's a kind of speaking that goes on internally, and there's something else there. But that actual speaking isn't following from.....

From your internal conversation?

Yes, there's not a cause and an effect, there's just two separate things. And often in court, they write the whole thing out, describing what happens, and that behaviour is entirely different, it's two different things. So it's kind of like.....just kind of speaking is ineffable.

Yes, I think actors know that you don't just learn your lines, you learn them then you make the character your own. If you just recite what you've learned it doesn't work, it doesn't become vital. But we do plan, and we write down and think what we're going to say but it doesn't actually come out like that, it's a kind of guideline. My experience is the same. We think that we think about what to say and then say it.

It's just not true.

I think we do sometimes. Particularly in that moment where you think you could have wished you could have said something.....

If it's true that we construct what we say while we say it, we're much cleverer than we thought. It means there's somebody shaping the sentences and somebody else shaping the words, but it does seem like that.

But if we're thinking and typing (inaudible) we're think and our fingers are moving and putting the words on the screen.

It would seem like that, and that's the way we describe it, but there are several books around now, one of which I have read by Daniel Dennett who is a professor of artificial intelligence in the States, he's done a lot of research into this, and he says that it doesn't.....that they can't find a model that works if they calculate the

time that nerve transmission take to get from brain to mouth and those kind of things. They can't make a model that fits the way that we think.

Does that mean it's too quick?

Yes. So as people study more and more these very simple things that we do, and a lot of the research comes out of efforts to make automata, or to make computers that speak. One of the spin-offs from that research is that human beings are looking very closely at very simple things, and they find that these very simple things aren't quite what they thought they were. We can hope that in ten or twenty years, thirty years, that all of this will be much clearer. We were talking yesterday about vision, we think we know what vision is, but as it turns out it's little bit different. We think we know what thinking then speaking is, but we haven't worked out how it works just yet. Buddhism doesn't preempt what science is discovering, but it says that actually our real experience is often.....nothing come out, or something comes out, or something comes out that was different to what we thought, and so it's a much more unusual, surprising situation than the way that we're taught to think about it.

It's just that we think conscious experience is the boss, rather than the consequence.

Oh yes.

That's why we're confused.

Yes. If we think that we have to think what we say before we say it, we sometimes don't say things. If we just let the words come if they are there, and not come if they're not there then it's a simpler situation.

If they can't work out a model of human speech because of the time, you know, dinosaurs we're told, you could whack them on the tail and two years later the signal would reach the head. Meanwhile they go on feeding somewhere else as something is eating their tail. It's like turning supertankers isn't it? To think that humans work like that is quite easy to conceive of.

But is it only time that makes it difficult for us to understand? Isn't there something else apart from time, what we say comes out of nothing rather than...?

Yes that's the point, yes.

So it's impossible for a scientist to read that.....

To read it? Yes, that's really the direction that Daniel Dennett's research is going in, but scientists can't say that it's impossible. They will look at it more closely and see a more detailed picture. If we say that it's impossible for science then progress stops. They are still looking at it.

So are they looking at it as a theory that it's coming from nothing?

No, they want to find out where it comes from.

But maybe something which comes out of nothing could still be looked at scientifically?

If they could.

It doesn't look as though it's from the point of view of scientific measurement, that there is something recordable phenomenologically, it's nothing. Inaudible.

Isn't like what David Bohm was getting at here, his model of the Universe?

Is it?

I think so, he was looking scientifically at something coming out of nothing.

No, something which comes out of nothing we don't need to worry about at all. If it just comes out of nothing, it can just come out of nothing. And this is Master Dogen's point, that although we have a process view and human beings want to understand what they're doing, actually, now I'm speaking.

What would be your.....I understand that recently the theory is that children don't learn (inaudible), it's genetic.....

Oh really?

Some people say that. That's Chomsky's theory.

Do you not agree with it?

No.

Well I was going to ask, suppose for a minute that it is the case, that it's possible that we as human beings have a genetic ability to do Zazen, in the sense that.....

Yes, all of these things are possible, so as we make sincere efforts to understand life, we do understand it. But it seems an endless journey. And what Master Dogen says is, understanding is great, we should try to understand, but don't forget we're doing it, so let's do it. We can think about talking or not talking or where the words come from, but we're doing it while we're thinking about it, and doing it is a kind of miracle. We can say it comes out of nothing, we can't say that scientifically, but we can say it.

What do scientists say about the big bang, because that came out of nothing?

Don't get him going!

Gautama Buddha said, according to Master Nagarjuna, the world has no beginning and no end. We may have to revise him.

Is that the Universe or....

The Universe. And what he means by that is that the present is always here. To posit a time when there isn't a present is to somehow deny time-present. If time-present is always time-present, time-present is always time-present; it's infinite. Time-present never disappears; time-present is never not here, so time-present continues for ever.

They haven't been able to make the Universe disappear into the big bang, they can't account for the point where there's nothing, they can only get it down to like a billionth of a second of something.

I think that scientific achievement is absolutely amazing, but we should always remember that many of the theories, especially these days, which are huge and

detailed, started because a little line on a spectrogram moved one millimetre to the right, and some scientist said, "right, that means.....that the Universe is getting bigger", but all we've actually seen is a line moving one millimetre to the right. I don't mean that this is wrong, but that we should notice the basis of the theories. Not that the theories are wrong but that we should notice the basis of the theory.

I think that in the big bang theory for example, science has come up against its own limitations, it can't explain everything, it's only a certain way of looking at things.

So what can't it explain then?

It can't explain the start of the Universe. It can't account for the physical Universe, the start of the physical Universe. That's a metaphysical notion, not for modern Physics.

Except that in Physics it doesn't actually start in the sense that (inaudible)

So they posit the idea of the big bang in order to try and map that, but it's out of their grasp because it's in the realm of Metaphysics.

In terms of Master Dogen's philosophy, it's an inappropriate pursuit, because he says just here, time is just present. The Universe is here, this is reality. And what we create as the time line going back the beginning of the Universe only exists as a creation in all of our minds at this moment. However, because it exists in all of our minds at this moment it has tremendous power. We create a whole history, as if it's there. And he says it's not, it's all here, it's all here, and shared. But that's not a very popular thing to say.

But even if time-present doesn't exist then it's still another time-present.

You could say so yes.

So it's not to do with it not happening?

Well fortunately, whether we can find the answer or not, we're all here. And this is what Master Dogen wants to say, people who think about previous lives or the past of the Universe, people who think about where humanity is going, the future of the Universe, what they want to become, people who think about other worlds, other universes, all of these have always, without any exception, done it from the present. If someone tells you that they have absolute proof that they have lived before, what they are telling you is coming out of this time now. We can never escape the present is what Dogen is saying. That's all he's saying.

So if that's the case, the motivating force of the Universe is me getting up and sitting down again?

Yes.

Mike, why does he explain what you've said, which is quite a simple statement in such a massive tangle of knots? Is it because it would be wasted if he just said "you can't escape the present"?

Well the only reason that I can say this simple sentence is because I looked at everything he said.

So you have to go through this massive tangle of knots before you really....

It seems like that's what we're kind of stuck with. Some people are stupid, and they're very lucky, because they often see things very simply and straightforwardly. But us poor people who are clever have to go through the tangle, on and on, until we can see something which points us out of the tangle into this place here and now.

And the essence is what you've just said, you can't escape....

You can't escape. All the ideas that human-kind have ever had, have been from people in the present. It's not a view that explains the whole of science and society, it's just a view that explains something very fundamental. And something that we need because we have such a strong society, civilization, technology, we're all moving forward somewhere in a shared constructed world, that puts a lot of pressure on us. Buddhism comes in and says that we're making the pressure up, and we can continue to make all that pressure up, but let's not forget that we're just sitting here making up all this pressure, so let's return to this ground where we are and take the pressure off. Then we go back in again. The constructed world is vital, we can't live in youth hostels without a shared, constructed world. But Buddhism says there's a more fundamental basis, and that is to notice where we are and what we're doing, in a very simple way. And we do, all the time through our lives. But we don't notice it, so we keep returning to the ground right through our day. We spend hours on the computer or whatever in realms of thought, then we get up and walk down the corridor, make a cup of tea and come back. We don't notice that this action of getting up and making a cup of tea saves us, our action through the day saves us and brings us back to reality. We don't notice it, and society tends to devalue it. Society says the most important thing is to hammer away at the computer and get the thing done. Buddhism says, yes that's important, but just as important is to go to the toilet.

That in a way supports workers' rights, and it's true, it is important to have a tea break, not just because we should by rights, but it's more fundamental than that. Those actions save us, having lunch in the middle of the day rather than working through saves us. If we don't, we're on the conveyor belt which sweeps us away from the present.

Do you think there's a relationship between the amount of depression, and the general sense that people have in our society of not knowing who they are or if they belong, and between the fact that we live in a world that tells us that the next thing is going to be the good thing, we're surrounded by this.....

Surrounded by it, yes.

So actually the last thing we're encouraged to do is to think about whether we are here now and valued.....

To *be* what we are, and to value what we're doing. And society has this hierarchy of values, so the guy in the big office typing numbers in is far more valuable than the person sweeping out the toilets. But Buddhism says no, it's the same thing – press the key, press the key, push the broom. Buddhism supports total equality. All of our simple actions are the grounds of our lives and we should notice that fact and give value to all the things we do, within the constraints of society.

It seems to me that children seem to be much more in the present.

Yes, we can say that little children, as long as they haven't been disturbed by their parents and people around them too much, are buddhas. And therefore parents who look after little children are very realistic, because their children hold them in the present.

Why when we get older, at what point does it change?

I don't know. When we grow up? Well society needs us to share its values, so everybody teaches us. Like the little girl at the front desk was drawing circles, the warden's daughter, Megan – she was drawing little circles happily and showing me, and I'm saying, you know, "is that an eye, is that a pair of glasses?" – I'm teaching her to interpret in a certain way, and we do it all the time. Then we're socialised, and without being socialised we can't fit in. But there's a price to pay for fitting in, and we all pay that price. Some people have a lot to drink at the weekends to get rid of the stress of fitting in, some people do sports, we all find a way. But no-one fits in perfectly, because we're taught to interpret little circles with dots in to be eyes, what? Or is it a fried egg? It could be a fried egg.

Any more questions or answers?

There's an advert in the underground which really illustrates this business of not respecting resting, or stopping work, I think it's for Anadin or something, it says you must take it with you when you're ill, because work never stops.

There's one for Pro Plus, and it's got a picture of a woman or a man with bags under the eyes, and it says you know, take this. Because life never stops, you know.

Ah yes, and there's one for.... Lemsip, that you can rip the top off when you're coming out of your business meeting and whack it down. Keep going on the conveyor belt.

But there's another way, actually if we feel ill, or if we notice that sometimes although we feel ill doing something might make us feel better, than we don't shut ourselves away so much. But it doesn't always work. We can regulate our lives, some people can go without a break morning tonight until they drive themselves into the ground and have to have six months off for a heart attack. And we're free to do it, really. But there is some kind of.....tendency for human beings to regulate themselves so that they can keep going. And this is one of the biggest tasks in our lives – how to regulate ourselves so we don't do too much. When we do too much we get ill and tired, and we don't do enough we don't feel satisfied either. What is it, how much can we do? We spend our whole lives trying to do that in one way.

Self-regulation is another word for Zazen I think. If we practice Zazen every day, if only for a short time it acts as a regulating mechanism.

If you are doing sport to the extent that you are in the zone, it has a regulating effect.

Yes sport does yes, all the activities – Yoga. But there's something different about Zazen because it's stripped of all the extras, that's why lots of people think it's not interesting. It's the kind of essential sport, the essence of activity. Most people can't make any sense of that, but if you do it and continue to do it, then for me that makes complete sense. For me it is the essence of all activity.

You could, presumably that could apply to anything.

Yes.

Can you get into that same state with something intellectual?

No I don't think you can, because we have such developed brains, and we can create so much from our intellect, but it's very difficult to be balanced just by using our intellect, so we need something to counter-balance it. Lots of very intellectual people also do something to counter-balance it, and those that don't sometimes become rather unbalanced. I think it's very difficult to just do intellectual pursuit to stay grounded. But I can't give you a complete answer. There might be lots of grounded people who just sit and think, but I don't think so, because we're more than just thinking.

But we ground ourselves in thousands of different ways, Master Dogen says in the first chapter of the Shobogenzo, that Zazen is not the only way to become balanced but it's the standard traditional way of Buddhists. We can say people who pursue their own field in a balanced way, very sincerely, are buddhas, but they don't know they're buddhas and they don't have any way to find out or explanation. What Buddhism has is a way of teaching what it is that we're doing.

This is when you are so absorbed in whatever it is that you are no longer constructing this personality as the most primary thing, and you could....

Yes, or Dogen says dropping off body and mind, so whenever we drop off body and mind we're in the balanced state. It doesn't matter whether we drop off body and mind when we wipe the toilet bowl, or whether we drop off body and mind when we leap over the high jump, or whatever it is, dropping off body and mind is dropping off body and mind. Zazen has something special about it I believe, since I started doing it. People who do Zazen and learn about what Buddhism says can decide to follow that way, or if they don't like sitting they can go off and do something else, we're all free to choose. We can only decide on our experience.

What's the difference between that and a realised buddha, or is it the same thing?

The same thing. Realised in English means something different to the way it was meant in medieval..... well certainly in Master Dogen's writings. I usually translate it, or change it to "made real". Realised to us means something in our minds usually – "oh I suddenly realised". But in Master Dogen's writing it means to act, to make real. To realise yourself means to make yourself real, to make yourself real means to do something.

Yet is there not a priority in that in the (main part of Fukuan-zazengi? Can't hear) (inaudible) remain perfectly real, isn't that a priority. There's something else he says, about.... (inaudible)

Well no, it's trying to describe a situation, sometimes we really want to make ourselves balanced, we feel tense or uptight and we really want to do something to make ourselves feel contented, where we are. And at other times we don't particularly want to, but we're in a situation that does it to us. For instance we might not want particularly to practice Zazen, but now it's time to sit for 2 ½ hours again so we feel dragged to do it. Of course it's us who is doing it but it feels like the situation is dragging us in. In the first case we actively want to, and in the second case the situation wants us to, Master Dogen says there's another case, and that's suddenly spontaneously, we suddenly feel contented, and it's

true. We can become real just out of nowhere. We can wander down to the lakeside and sit and be completely contented, sometimes. That's the Universe making the Universe real, there's not an intention from the inside, or something imposed from the outside, but the two things meet. It's difficult to explain, but we do experience things like that.

So the nowhere comes from when things drop away?

Yes, things drop away sometimes, they just drop away.

Then what you experience you could say....it comes from nowhere or you could say....is nothing, but in a way..."nothing" implies something materialistic, or what you are describing is a kind of primal state for which there isn't a ready vocabulary.

Yes.

When you say do something, I could do many things couldn't I? Do you mean do something intellectual like reading, or something simple like making tea?

Yes it's very difficult, yes you're right. And the problem is language. We could say do something means enter the state where we drop off body and mind. Anything where when we do it, we're not separating mind and body, is what is meant.

Which is anything, sincerely?

Yes. Shall we stop there.

Thank you.