

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2005
Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho
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We're going to carry on studying Bussho, Chapter 22 of Master Dogen's 95 chapters of the Shobogenzo which we started at the Summer Sesshin in Glastonbury last September. We are going to be working from my modern interpretation of the chapter. As I've said to quite a few of you, the chapters translated in our four volume Shobogenzo are in some ways quite opaque, difficult to understand without someone explaining them. I don't think that's something necessarily wrong with the books. I think it's quite unusual in the West for us to find a book that we can't understand just by reading. I think that's a particularly western phenomenon, that we should be able to pick up a book and understand everything that's written in it using the power of our intellect; if we can't, we feel puzzled. But the Shobogenzo was not written as a book as such, it is Master Dogen's lifetime of teaching, though he did write the text of his talks before he gave them, or sometimes his students wrote down his talks as he delivered them, so that is how these chapters were produced. And of course the 13th century is a long way from the present day, and the paradigms and symbolism used by Master Dogen are quite opaque to us in some ways. We just can't get our head around them. So it turns out that the Shobogenzo is not a book that we can buy, take home and study, and then understand clearly. It's interactive teaching material. And I think it will always be. But I wanted to try and take a step nearer to making it less opaque. Because it's a bit less opaque to me, and that's because I studied it for so many years with Nishijima Roshi, so I wanted to make it less opaque to others.

So I've been producing these modern interpretations which I hope will help. I think we got to page 4 in the summer. This is probably one of the most, if not the most difficult chapter to understand in the Shobogenzo. In the chapter, Master Dogen discusses one of the most misunderstood terms in Buddhism, and that is the term Bussho (Bu-ssho) or buddha-nature.

In those first 4 pages, Master Dogen starts to explain that buddha-nature is something very fundamental and so very difficult to put into words, and he points out that it's something to do with manifesting our existence, "fully manifesting our existence", and this term appears throughout the chapter. And by "fully manifesting existence", Master Dogen wants to catch the reality of a real person here, or a real living being here, separate from the filter, or the coloured spectacles we wear when we look at each other normally. If I look over there, I see Paul, "Paul", this word "Paul, I transpose on to that shape there, and with that come all the associations I have to do with Paul and his and my life – he's from Bristol; his wife is called Elspeth; Paul who practices karate. All this comes in and I put them over this human being in front of me. We are before each other as real, living, "somethings", which are beyond the glasses we wear when we look at each other. That's not to say that we should attempt to relate to one another without names, and not remember where we come from and so on, but simply that we can recognise that there is a kind of layer which we put onto reality which is necessary for us to live in a sophisticated human society. Just seeing that fact is important. And in this chapter Master Dogen is talking about something which is there, without glasses. The glasses contain our language, so taking the glasses

off and talking about something is a kind of contradiction, what do I call you if not Paul? This kind of problem comes up in the chapter, what do I call someone if not by their name?

The last paragraph which we studied also talks about the immediacy of real existence. We think that we exist from the past through the present and into the future, and this is the subject of the chapter Uji which we studied last year. We think that we are a continuing person, and therefore we think that all attributes continue, so something like buddha-nature must be something that we have, we had, and we will have, or if we haven't got it now we're going to get it. So always in this time sequence. Master Dogen talks about this in the final paragraph which we studied in the summer, ending with the sentence:

This means that the time that is here and now is the only time there is, and the buddha-nature that is here and now is the only buddha-nature there is.

So he wants to describe the immediacy of real existence, separate from the way that we look at it through the spectacles of our conditioning – not to remove that conditioning, that's impossible. Master Dogen is writing in words, and words mislead us just as much as anything else, but to point out the fact is the thing. So let's begin with the next paragraph:

Asvaghosa, who was the twelfth descendent from Gautama Buddha, taught his disciple Kapimala about the ocean which is buddha-nature with a poem:

The word ocean here wants to suggest that buddha-nature is unbounded, not fixed, fluid, like a vast ocean.

***The mountains, rivers and the Earth
Are all constructed out of buddha-nature.
The state in Zazen and the six powers
Are produced from it.***

This is the poem which was originally written in Sanskrit, so it's been through two or three translations. The phrase "mountains, river, and the Earth" we find many times in the Shobogenzo; it was a common Chinese phrase to mean everything, the whole lot. The poem says that everything is constructed out of buddha-nature, even "Zazen and the six powers are produced from it". These six powers are traditional Buddhist categories. And they're mentioned particularly in the Agama Sutra, and they're listed a bit later as the powers of free activity; seeing everything; hearing everything; insight into others' thinking; seeing one's own and others' past conduct; and transcending secular attachments. This is just towards the end of the same paragraph. The power of free activity means the power to do what we want, and not to do what we don't want. To act freely. The power of seeing everything means not to be narrow sighted. It doesn't mean having super powers. To see everything is to notice something over there is happening, and not trip over what is in front of you. Hearing everything means the same. Often when we are locked into very abstract conversation with somebody we don't hear them saying "excuse me, your hat's on fire". Insight into others' thinking means intuition, to see what someone else might be thinking. Seeing one's own and others' past conduct means seeing realistically what it is we and other people have done. Transcending secular attachments means not being too caught up with things that catch us in everyday life.

These are very ancient categories and in fact master Dogen doesn't give them very much value. Yes, he says, they are part of Buddhism and they describe something, but the problem with these categories is that people start thinking they are some kind of mystical state that people have in which they can see everything and hear everything and all this kind of stuff, which is complete rubbish. Anyway, in the poem the state in Zazen and the six powers are produced from buddha-nature, then master Dogen makes his commentary.

He is saying that these mountains, rivers, and Earth in front of us *are* buddha-nature. When he says that they are all constructed out of it, he means just at the moment that buddha-nature is created, it *is* mountains, rivers, and the Earth. As he said, they are all constructed out of buddha-nature, so we should recognise that the form of the natural world is just as we see it: mountains, rivers, and the Earth.

Now, words are a problem for us, although without words we can't talk about anything. So he's commenting on the phrase "constructed out of buddha-nature". When the poem says they're constructed out of buddha-nature, it means that buddha-nature *is* them. To have a phrase "something is constructed out of something" introduces a kind of dualism – the "something" and the "something else" constructed out of it. Ginger and lemon tea is made out of ginger and lemons and water. Master Dogen wants to say ginger and lemon tea *is* ginger and lemons and water. It's not made out of it. And there's something subtly different in saying that. He's saying mountains, rivers, the earth *are* buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is the mountains, rivers, and the earth. That's the meaning of "constructed out of it". It doesn't mean there's something called buddha-nature, somebody came along with a hacksaw and cut out a few mountains.

It is beyond description by the discriminating mind.

We cannot grasp it with our intellect.

To look at mountains, rivers, and the Earth is to look at buddha-nature, which is to look at something real in front of us in everyday life.

To look at mountains, rivers, and the earth is to look at buddha-nature. We might think that means that buddha-nature is connected with things out there, so we haven't got it. But to look at the external world is to look at ourselves, in Master Dogen's terms. He doesn't mean that therefore buddha-nature is something which we can see in mountains, in rivers, and in the earth, but not in other places. That's a one sided view.

To move beyond a one-sided view, the phrase "*are all constructed out of it*" can be looked at two ways: all are constructed out of it, and it is constructed out of all.

This is one of his favourite techniques. If we turn the sentence around, so that we get presented with something in a completely different way that we don't think of normally. Everything is constructed out of buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is constructed out of everything. And that suggests an identity between the two.

He goes on to say that the state in Zazen and the six mystical powers are also produced from it. We should recognise that the manifestation – the appearance of the present – of many kinds of balanced and harmonised states also relies completely on buddha-nature.

The appearance and the presence of many kinds of balanced and harmonised states suggests that in addition to Zazen, there are lots of states which give us balance and harmony, and he says so in the first chapter of the Shobogenzo, Bendowa. He says there are myriad ways to obtain the balanced state, but Zazen is its standard. There are many kinds of balanced and harmonised states, but they all rely completely on buddha-nature. Though buddha-nature is something fundamental to balance and harmony.

Both having and not having the six powers also relies totally on Buddha-nature. And not just the six powers described in the Agama Sutra (the powers of free activity, seeing everything, hearing everything, insight into others' thinking, seeing one's own and others' past conduct, transcending secular attachments). This "six" is not an abstract number unrelated to concrete things. It describes six real things in the past or in the present.

Master Dogen is emphasising that six powers doesn't mean six abstract things. They're real things. And we often use numbers to abstract. If we say there are twenty sheets of paper, we have an abstract image of how many sheets of paper there are. But he wants to say each one of these is a real sheet of paper. Each one of the six powers is something real. Concrete, not generalisation.

These six powers should not be thought of in the same way as the principle that the miscellaneous things in front of us are the teaching of the Buddha. Although these six powers don't help things much, we don't need to deny them; they are still part of the ocean that is buddha-nature.

First of all he says that the six powers are different to the principle in Buddhism that everything in front of us is teaching us Buddhism. All things in the Universe are the teachings of Buddha. But the six powers are slightly different, he says. They don't help us very much. He doesn't think so much of them. But on the other hand, we don't need to deny them. They're part of Buddhism.

Why are they referred to as mystical powers?

I guess because people thought that they must be characteristics of mystical beings called buddhas. Soon after Gautama Buddha died they made him into a god, and they said that he lived in Nirvana. And then they started embellishing him with mystical powers, and a few other people said "yes, I've got those same powers". And so the embellishment started. You can say they're mystical in the sense that you can't understand them. But they're not really mystical. He now goes on to tell us a story about Master Daiman Konin, whose childhood and subsequent life in which he became a Buddhist master are rather unusual. Whether the facts are accurate or whether it's a kind of story, I'm not sure. But there must be some accuracy in the facts that master Dogen talks about.

Master Daiman Konin (who was later to become Bodhidharma's fifth descendent in China) lived in Obai in east central China. He was born to a single mother and realised the true nature of things while he was still a child. As an adult he lived his life firmly rooted in reality by planting pine trees, originally in the Seizan hills in the area where he lived.

So that suggests he was an ordinary person, his mother wasn't married. While he was still a child he could see things very naturally. He had a very natural undisturbed childhood. When he grew up he became a tree planter. So he led a very simple, natural life.

By chance, Master Dai-I Doshin, who was Bodhidharma's fourth descendent and who was visiting the area, happened to meet him while out walking.

This was when master Konin was already old, and working in the forests in the Seizan hills planting pine trees, when by chance along comes master Dai-I, who was a forth descendent from Bodhidharma. He was walking round the area and he bumped into this old man planting pine trees.

Master Dai-I said to him *"I would like to give you the Dharma transmission, but you are already too old. If you return to the world again, I will wait for you"*.

Sounds a bit mystical. That's what he was recorded as saying. And of course there must have been some other interaction between them before he said that. He met this old man in the hills living a very natural life and rooted in reality, and he recognised something in him. So he said "I'd like to give you the Dharma transmission, but it's too late, wait for the next time round."

Daiman Konin agreed. According to the story, eventually he is conceived by a daughter of the Shu family, who abandons the baby in the dirty waters of a harbour. But the baby is mysteriously protected, and remains there unharmed for seven days.

We can see a kind of fable aspect to the story. We can say a baby was born to the Shu family, and the baby was left in the water in the harbour, and nothing happened to it in seven days. But if we write it with a bit more embroidery, we can say that the baby was mysteriously protected.

Seeing this, the family retrieves the baby and accepts him back into the family.

So I guess the family expected the baby to die, or to be washed away. But when they saw after seven days it was still there, they thought "oh, something must be protecting this child, we'll take it back in."

When the boy reaches the age of seven, he bumps into Master Dai-I in the street in Obai. Looking at the young boy, Master Dai-I realises that there is something exceptional about him; he has an unusually shaped head.

It doesn't say what shape the head was, it may have been rather big, or pear-shaped or something.

Is that why the family abandoned him?

It may have been, yes. Could have been. He may have had a really strange shaped head.

Looking at the young child, he asks, *"What is your name?"*

The child answers, *"I have a name, (Lit.: the name exists) but it is not an ordinary name."*

Master Dai-I says, *"What is it?"*

The child answers, *"It is buddha-nature"*

Master Dai-I says, "You are without buddha-nature."

The child replies, "Yes, buddha-nature is sunya (without anything), so we say 'being without'".

Master Dai-I recognises the child has the truth of Buddhism already, and so appoints him as his assistant. Some years later, Master Dai-I gives him the Dharma transmission, and he becomes his successor, living in the hills to the east of Obai and teaching Buddhism with great vigour.

We've got this story which sounds like a nice example of reincarnation, the master meets the old man planting pine trees, and then agrees to meet him again in the next life, and when he bumps into a little boy with a strange shaped head, the story suggests the little boy is the same as the old man planting pine trees. That's the story as it was passed down. In the child's answer "I have a name", in the Chinese there's no subject. The same in Japanese. So it doesn't actually say "I have a name", it says "name exists", which we can't say in English (or we can say it but it sounds incomplete). So: "name exists, but not an ordinary name". Master Dai-I asks what the name is, and the child says buddha-nature, which must have been quite surprising from a small child. Master Dai-I says "You are without buddha-nature". There's lots of discussion of whether we have buddha-nature or are without it later in the chapter. But what Master Dai-I is suggesting is you're not caught up in concepts, you are a very pure little child. So you don't have anything called buddha-nature. And the child agrees, he says: "yes, buddha-nature is when we don't have anything. So we say being without". The sense in which we say "being without", or "without anything" or not "having anything" is the same sense in which when we practice Zazen, our problems, tensions, worries drop away. Master Dogen talks about Zazen as "the body and mind dropping off" . If body and mind drop off in Zazen, if we are fortunate and everything drops away and we sit peacefully, the state in which we sit is "without anything". Being without anything is very happy. And in Sanskrit "sunya" means "without anything", although it's often translated as "empty" and the noun from that, "sunyata" means "emptiness". So the child must have known something about Buddhism, and of course China was Buddhist at that time so it's no surprise but he must have been quite on the ball.

Actually, when master Daiman Konin became a successor of master Dai-I, there are even more stories about him. He went to work at a temple as a labourer, and he was very natural. So by his natural behaviour he was able to teach people in the temple something beyond their intellectual understandings of Buddhism. There are lots of example of being beyond the "conceptual cage". Master Dogen calls it the "conceptual cage", which means all the things in our mind that hold us in, imprison us.

Was the old man he met before a real person?

Without the first part of the story there's no suggestion of past and future lives, just the boy. But with the first part there's the suggestion that it's that same guy.

There was that point about the boy having a funny shaped head.

Yes, often the things that we think are burdens are actually gifts. For instance – it's only very minor, but – I could never drink alcohol. I tried and tried for years to train myself to drink with my friends, but I would always be the one in the corner puking up, and I thought it was a terrible disadvantage. I couldn't go to

parties and relax like everybody else, and everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves, and I'd just be sitting there sober. But now, looking back I'm very grateful for that. I see it as something that kept me out of an area that I could easily have got lost in. So I think things that may appear burdens or peculiarities are often advantages too.

What is the significance of the fact that in his previous life he was thought to be too old? Why should he be too old to receive transmission?

I don't think it's of any significance, I just think it's part of the story. Master Dai-I met this very old tree planter up in the hills and he must have been old and gnarled up there for years planting trees. And he said: "oh, I don't think I can give you the Dharma, you realistic old man! You're too old, wait for me and when I come round again I'll catch you next time."

That's interesting because it implies that it's possible to live in a state of realised innocence without having received the formal...

Oh yes, people who live planting trees up a mountain don't need Buddhism! It's only us, with our complicated lives and minds. So if you can find somebody planting trees up in the hills you can go and learn from them.

You can see the connection between these two characters, the child and the old man, and he's sort of inspired by this. And maybe it's romantic or whatever but he's inspired by the old man and it's...his starting point...

Master Dai-I is saying: "I'm without anything, I'm natural". And that's the essence of why we practice Zazen. Not to get some natural state we don't have, but to drop off everything that's hanging onto ourselves, and to become our natural selves again. And that's what we do when we practice Zazen. I'm dropping off my cough, and you might be dropping off lots of other things.

Do you have to spend your whole life getting to that state?

For me it's a lifetime's work! So we should recognise the difference between people. I was brought up in a very intellectual abstract-based society, so it's taken me a long long time to come back to my simple peaceful self.

It's an interesting story, and master Dogen comments on it:

If we examine the words of these two ancestral masters in detail,

- one was his master, the other became his successor. So we call them both ancestral masters -

we can find meaning in Master Dai-I saying "What is your name." We can find examples in the past of people being asked "What is your country?" or "What is your name?" We can also express statements like "Your name is what", suggesting that a name does not express what we truly are. Master Daikan Eno simply said "This is how I am, this is how you are."

In this paragraph, Master Dogen is looking at the question that the master asks the child: "what is your name, what is it?", and there are lots of examples of people asking that kind of question. If you meet someone you ask, "what is your name, where do you come from?" and so on. But those questions at a fundamental level are statements. So when we say to someone, "what is your

name?" it's a statement as well as a question. And the statement is "you are something I don't know". And if we say "what" we call it a question, but it's already a statement. In Chinese it's easier to see that the statement and the question is the same expression. But what he's suggestion is that the master's question, "what is your name?" is also a kind of statement: " 'What' is your name". And to say to somebody " 'What' is your name" is to say "I don't know who you are. And master Daikan Eno's reply, which was quoted from somewhere else was, "I'm just who I am. This is me. This is you." So he's trying to suggest a dialogue on a different level, which is not concerned with...for example, "you're Paul from Bristol", but: "who are you, I don't know. Who am I? I don't know. Where are you? You're there. Where am I? I'm here." This kind of simple, rather existential statement.

The child says, "The name exists, but it is not an ordinary name."

In other words, the name is "exists", which is certainly not an ordinary name.

He's playing with words there. The name exists but it's not an ordinary name. Master Dogen says "ah yes, the name is exists." The young boy is saying just "I'm here", just "I'm existing."

No ordinary name would be adequate to describe existence here and now! hen Master Dai-I says "What is it?", his "what" means the situation here and now; expressed by the name but beyond words. In other words, "What" is "it" and "it" is reality here and now, beyond description. These situations which are beyond description occur every day when we drink tea and eat meals.

In this rather peculiar kind of commentary, Master Dogen deconstructs the layer that we put over real situations by using names and questions and so on, and suggesting something real really existed. That's what he wants to do. When Master Dai-I says "what is it?", again it's not a question. "What is it?" means "it is what?" and "what" and "it" both mean reality, and reality is beyond description. And we're in reality every day when we drink tea and eat meals. He's pointing out the difference between thinking and acting or doing. Now we're thinking and talking. But if I pick up a cup of tea – it's empty! – and drink some ginger tea, then I'm beyond words, I'm in reality. So he says to act in everyday situations is to be real. But to discuss and think is to be abstract, and those two situations are different. More deconstruction about to come:

When the child replies "It is buddha-nature" he means that "it" – the situation here and now – is buddha-nature. Because people in the here and now are named "what" – inexpressible in words – they are called buddhas. But being here and now is not limited by using "what" to describe "it"; even if "it" is "not-it", it is already buddha-nature! So "it" equals "what" equals "buddha-nature". But when we throw away these concepts, and then get rid of throwing away these concepts, there are concrete names, and Shu is one of them.

He's leading us round in circles. He starts by saying the child's reply "it is buddha-nature" is a statement of reality. "It", the situation here and now is buddha-nature. But people who are in the here and now can't be described in words, so we use the word "buddha" to describe them. But these are all concepts, so we should throw them away. And then you should get rid of throwing them away, and then we come back to the fact that people have names. So he leads us round in a big circle, and he says everybody has a name, and Shu is a name.

(Shu is the child's actual name. If you read back in the story, he was conceived by the daughter of the Shu family.)

The child didn't receive buddha-nature from his father or from his grandfather, and neither did he just take it as his mother's maiden name. He was completely different from the person next to him.

So he says: in the end we live in society, and in society we use names. So what he's suggesting here is that there are two levels. At one level we can try and we can notice that there's something that exists beyond our concepts. There's something real that exists beyond the names we use for things. And there's a real person in front of me beyond the name "Paul". My mental description or verbal description of you in front of me doesn't describe you. It describes some of you. But there's a kind of "box" I put round you. But you are not that box. In this last paragraph he closes the circle by saying: but, we are all human beings and we all talk, and we all have families and we have names. His object is to accept both the conceptual and beyond the conceptual.

I'll stop there. Does anyone have anything to add? It is a difficult chapter. I think it's much easier in my interpretation than in the book. I might be able to make it clearer. This is only my first draft. But a lot of master Dogen's way of looking at language is very very difficult.

It's quite funny that he's a kind of proto-post-structuralist. I wonder whether post-structuralists will ever get to where Dogen is.

Oh I hope so!

I struggle with this word "algebra". $X=Y$ although $Y=2X$. I could never understand that...

He wants to say that in our minds we have different words and concepts, and we think that those concepts correspond to actual things in reality. But in reality there is only one. So all the "things" point to the same inexpressible one, so "it", or "not it", or "buddha-nature", or "what", are all talking about the same inexpressible something; that's what I should have written.

So when Master Dai-I says "what is it?" you could remove the question mark and have "what is it!"

In classical Japanese there aren't question marks, and in Chinese, it's the context which decides whether something looks like a question or not. In Chinese it's even more difficult, or even more easy to look at a question as a statement. But only context determines this.

Is there a differentiation between a request for a response and making a statement?

Yes I guess intonation makes this clear.

We'll end there.

Thank you.