

## Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2005

### Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

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Bussho take two, scene one.

*Action.*

It's a strange chapter, why should we be studying obscure ways of talking about what is in front of us, which is beyond the words that we normally use to describe it? If we compare what we're studying in this rather strange way to what conventional religions study, we can clearly see the difference. Christianity, with which we are all somewhat familiar, doesn't study what is in front of us, it studies what is not here, and what is not here is God. Although God is here, he's not something we can see, and heaven is not a place we can get to yet. So a spiritual religion such as Christianity doesn't study what is in front of us but another world, a perfect world which they call heaven, and another perfect person called God. But in Buddhism we study this time and world here and now, and we call it reality. So it sounds strange and it is a very strange pursuit to study what is in front of us. So inevitably the discussions that Master Dogen has have a kind of "so what?" quality about them. So what?

**Master Dai-I said, "You are without buddha-nature." By this he meant "You are someone, but you can't be described in words; you are just as you are, and being without anything, you are just buddha-nature."**

So a simple interpretation of Master Dai-I's reply to the young child "you are without buddha-nature" sounds like he is saying to the child "oh, you are too young to have such a grand thing as buddha-nature". But according to Master Dogen's commentary, Master Dai-I means him to be saying "you, this child in front of me, is someone who can't be described in words, you are beyond any name, you are just as you are, and because you are just as you are without any pretensions, you are buddha-nature". So that suggests that Master Dai-I's use of the word "without" doesn't mean without the true buddha-nature, but without the concept "buddha-nature", without the idea of buddha-nature.

**Notice and remember when it is that we are without buddha-nature! Are we without buddha-nature when the shoots of buddhahood first appear, or after we have transcended the state of buddha? Don't try to stop it happening, and don't try to make it happen.**

His sentences here suggest that some people might think that when we first start to study Buddhism we are without buddha-nature, and then after we've studied a lot and have become a buddha, and transcended buddha, then we have buddha-nature. So he's questioning that understanding. Lots of people thought, and still do, that Buddhism is a way to achieve something, to get something, buddhahood, buddha-nature, nirvana, enlightenment, but Master Dogen denies all of that, and he praises being without. So to him, the Buddhist path is undoing everything, dropping off everything, becoming what we originally are by getting rid of all the stuff that we pile on top of ourselves. But if we intentionally try to do that, then we're trying to get something. So our problem as human beings is, someone says

to you that Buddhism is not getting anything, it's about not getting anything, letting go of everything, "yes I want that! I want to let go as soon as possible, how do I let go of everything?" He says don't try to stop it happening and don't try to make it happen, don't try and get it, don't try and throw it away, leave things as they are. To leave things as they are puts us in the state of buddha immediately.

**We can understand being without buddha-nature for example, as the balanced peaceful state at the moment of the present.**

By that he means that we've got rid of everything, if we're balanced and peaceful at the moment of the present, we don't need anything, we don't need buddha-nature, we don't need any ideas, concepts, things, things we can get or things we can get rid of.

**We might ask whether, when this buddha-nature turns into a real buddha, does that buddha have buddha-nature, and when this buddha-nature exhibits the will to the truth, is it without buddha-nature?**

This kind of questioning, these rhetorical questions he's asking here have a kind of humorous nature to them. He's asking what do these words actually mean, people talked for centuries before Master Dogen about buddha-nature – how do we get it, have we got it, are we with it, are we without it, but his questions are much more basic. What does it mean to have something, to be without something, what does it really mean?

**We should have something to say about this. Let's get that wooden pole to answer this question.**

I think a pillar would be a better translation here than a pole. He's giving a talk in a temple, and Japanese temples have tatami mats and great wooden pillars, outside in the corridor there would be wooden pillars supporting the roof. So he's asking these questions about buddha-nature, and saying "let's see what that wooden pillar thinks! Do you think we've got it or haven't got it?" ...No reply.

**Let's get buddha-nature to ask the question! Notice how the principle of "being without buddha-nature" echoing down the ages from Master Dai-I's room, has been discussed for many years. It reached Master Daiman Konin in Obai, Master Joshu Jushin heard about it, and Master Isan Reiu taught it energetically. So we too should study the principle of "being without buddha-nature" with great diligence, and without any hesitation. And although we can study the overall principle of "Being without buddha-nature" like this, in reality its criterion is "what" cannot be described in words, it is "you" that is without buddha-nature, "it" is here and now, and the name "Shu" is a common name. Buddha-nature is approaching directly.**

So he's making us look at the words that we use to describe things – what do you really mean? Who has got buddha-nature? What is buddha-nature? He then goes on with the story:

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

In Chinese, sunya is written "ku", and there were many misunderstandings about what the character "ku" meant, what emptiness meant, And Master Dogen here

clearly discusses the meaning of sunya or ku, as "being without", being without any trapping, being natural, rather than the traditional interpretation of emptiness which seems to be some kind of nihilistic state.

**This makes it clear that sunya, or "without anything" does not mean non-existent.**

Many people thought it meant non-existent.

**In order to express the fact that buddha-nature is *sunya*, he didn't describe it as a concrete quantity of something, he said that it is "being without".**

So he didn't say buddha-nature is not to have something, he said it's being without.

**He didn't use the word *sunya* to mean that there is no such thing as buddha-nature, he didn't say "being without" because buddha-nature doesn't exist; he called buddha-nature *sunya* because it is the state of being without. The criterion for the meaning of *sunyata***

*Sunyata* is just the noun form of *sunya*, the abstract noun.

**is the real state of being without. In this way *sunyata* is used to express the state in which we are without anything. This meaning of *sunya* is deeper than the meaning in the phrase "form is just emptiness" (*shiki soku ze ku, yad rupa sa sunyata*) from the Heart Sutra.**

He's trying to describe what being without is. And he's trying to explain that that is the meaning of the word *sunya* or *ku*.

**And at the same time, the phrase "form is just emptiness" does not describe the oneness of two different things; in this phrase, *sunyata* means the emptiness of being without anything.**

This sentence touches on quite an important point. For instance, in the Heart Sutra, where it says that form is just emptiness, you imagine something called form and something called emptiness and that they are the same; two things are the same. But it doesn't mean that; it doesn't mean there are two things and they are one, it means there is only one thing in the first place. So this is also very relevant to discussions about body and mind. We have lots of books being written recently about the connection between body and mind. Buddhism for thousands of years has said body and mind are one, so people imagine that this means there is a body and there is a mind and they are made into one. But this is not what Buddhism says, it says there is one thing, but we give it two names. So it's only one, but we have two names, when we look from one side we call it body, when we look from another side we call it mind. And the same here: "form is just emptiness", means there's one thing, from one side we call it form, from another we call it emptiness.

**When we are truly without anything, we move naturally through life. And it is just in this state that the questions and answers about buddha-nature being without, and buddha-nature being *sunya*, and buddha-nature existing at this moment took place.**

So he's saying that the young child and the Buddhist master were having their conversation in the state of being without; both of them were in the natural state, so they had a very natural and realistic conversation. The master said to the child, "what's your name? And the child replied, "well, a name is only a name isn't it?, there's something here beyond the name which is me, and I'm going to call it buddha-nature". And the master said, "you're a young simple child, you don't need a conceptual label like buddha-nature", and they both recognised that. So that is the essence of the story, and that's the end of his commentary on that little story. Shall I go on to the next one?

**When Master Daikan Eno, the sixth descendent from Bodhidharma, first went to meet Master Daiman Konin up in the hills near Obai, Master Daiman asked him, *"Where are you from?"***

You'll notice that we're moving through the descendants of Master Bodhidharma here, Master Dai-I was the fourth descendant, the child, Master Daiman Konin became the fifth, then Daikan Eno became the sixth. These are all masters and students in one line of the lineage, this story is about Master Daikan Eno, who is the successor of the child who became a Buddhist master.

**Daikan replied, *"I come from south of the five peaks."***

**Master Daiman said, *"What have you come here for?"***

**Daikan replied, *"I want to become buddha."***

**Master Daiman said, *"People from south of the five peaks are simple folk without buddha-nature, so why do you want to become a buddha?"***

Then Master Dogen comments on the story so far:

**When the master said *"People from south of the five peaks are simple folk without buddha-nature..."* he didn't mean that a person from south of the five peaks does not have buddha-nature, and neither did he mean that they have buddha-nature. He meant that since a person south of the peaks is without any idealistic pretensions, they are buddha-nature.**

The emphasis there is on "are" buddha-nature rather than "have" it, or "does not have" it. What he means by that is that it is a real state. So we have a real state, really, and to discuss whether we have it or not is just an intellectual discussion.

**And with the words *"...so why do you want to become a buddha?"* he meant *"Why do you need to become a buddha?"* On the whole there have been few masters who have understood this basic principle of buddha-nature.**

If we go back to the story, Master Daiman says to Master Daikan, "where are you from?" Daikan says "I come from south of the five peaks". Daiman says, "what have you come here for?" Daikan replies very honestly, "I want to become a buddha". Daiman says "people from your area are simple folk without any pretensions, they don't wonder whether they have the buddha-nature or not. They are simple and direct, they are buddhas, so why do you want to become a buddha when you're already a buddha?" That's the essence of Master Dogen's interpretation of the story.

**You cannot learn it from the Agama Sutras, and people who teach sutras and commentaries don't know about it. It is passed down from one real**

**person to another real person directly from the Buddha. In fact, we do not possess buddha-nature before we are buddha, but we do possess it when we are buddha. Being a buddha and buddha-nature go together; they are the same state. We need to study this principle in detail, and learn it in practice for twenty or thirty years. People studying Buddhism as the attainment of various stages on the path to enlightenment don't realise this.**

He's saying buddha-nature is the same as buddha. If we talk about a person we say buddha, if we talk about a person's attribute, we say buddha-nature. But something real is neither buddha nor buddha-nature, or is both buddha and buddha-nature. The person and their attributes are not separate. I can say "I am British", and that suggests there is a "me", and an attribute "British", and that these two things exist separately. But in fact I'm just me. So he's emphasising that buddha-nature and buddha go together, they are the same state. And he says that some people study Buddhism as attaining various stages on the path to enlightenment. Many people were doing that and are doing that, but they don't realise that there is no path to enlightenment, there is no attainment. When we practice Zazen, we drop off all our aims and attainments, and we return to the simple state of balanced body and mind. And sitting in that simple state we are buddha, so we are buddha-nature. If we say that we have buddha-nature, it suggests that there's something that we have, then someone thinks we've got it because we practice Zazen. It's not something you get, it's something which appears when you get rid of other things.

**When we have gained a true understanding of buddha-nature, we can assert both that living beings have buddha-nature and that living beings are without buddha-nature.**

We can assert both of these things.

**Learning in practice that buddha-nature goes with the state of buddha is exactly right. If it were not learned in this way, it would not be a Buddhist principle.**

I.e. if it were not learned in practice.

**Buddhism would not have survived until today if it were not like this. Without clarifying this, we cannot realise what a buddha is. This is why Master Daiman said to people when he discussed buddha-nature, "*People from south of the five peaks are...without buddha-nature.*" When we first encounter buddha, and the Buddha's teachings it is extremely difficult to hear this principle that all living beings are without buddha-nature. People who have not realised that all living beings are without buddha-nature have yet to realise what buddha-nature is.**

And the problem is that buddha-nature is not buddha-nature, buddha-nature is something real. So if you're describing the state which is what is left when everything else is taken away, how do you describe it? Everything else is taken away, what's left? Buddha-nature is, so take buddha-nature away as well, and what is left is buddha-nature. So take buddha-nature away again. He's trying to describe in words the state of being without, the state of dropping off. Then what we drop of is our conceptual interpretation of reality.

**When Master Daikan was sincerely seeking to become buddha, Master Daiman was able to make him into a buddha without using any other expression or technique other than saying "*People from south of the five***

***peaks are without buddha-nature.” So remember, a direct way to become a buddha is to hear and say the words “being without buddha-nature.”***

It reminds me of Ralph’s poem – “I am not a Buddhist”.

**Just at this moment, being without buddha-nature, we are buddhas. People who have not digested the phrase “being without buddha-nature” can never become buddhas.**

Strange isn’t it?

The conversation between Master Daikan and Master Daiman continues.

**Master Daikan continued, “People give meaning to terms like ‘south’ and ‘north’. But concepts like ‘south’ and ‘north’ are not part of buddha-nature.”**

So Master Daikan is replying to Master Daiman’s statement that “people from south of the five peaks are simple folk without buddha-nature, why do you want to become a buddha?”.

**What does he mean exactly? Getting rid of all conceptions, what are ‘south’ and ‘north’?**

So he’s suggesting that south and north are just what we define them to be, they are concepts. Of course we can get a compass out and all agree which is south and which is north, but that again relies on a shared conceptual understanding. Without any conceptual interpretation, south and north have no meaning.

**In stating something true here, Master Daikan is also suggesting that although people can become buddhas, buddha-nature is already the nature of buddha. I wonder if Master Daikan noticed this. The phrase “being without buddha-nature” described in the story about Master Daiman and Master Dai-I caught Kasyapa Buddha, Gautama Buddha, and the other buddhas with its power, giving them the ability to become buddha, preach Buddhism, and insist that all living beings “fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence”. The phrase, “fully manifesting buddha-nature” must be directly connected to being without buddha-nature, a phrase which has echoed down the ages to us from Master Daiman and Master Dai-I.**

Here he’s jumping back to the original poem by Gautama Buddha which says “all living beings fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence”. And that seems to suggest that we all have buddha-nature and he’s comparing it with this story, which suggests that none of us have buddha-nature. And he’s saying to “fully manifest buddha-nature is surely intimately connected with the meaning of being without buddha-nature”. He’s suggesting that manifesting it and being without it are pointing to the same thing. Both of the masters who said that we fully manifest buddha-nature and the masters who said we are without buddha-nature, are preaching Buddhism. Work that one out.

**And Master Daikan too must have thought about the meaning of “being without buddha-nature”. Separate from whether we manifest it, or are without it, he should ask what is buddha-nature. He should find out exactly what it is in fact. These days too, rather than asking what it is, people ask whether it exists or not, and whether we have it or not. They should not be in such a hurry. We should look at the meaning of “being**

***without (sunya)*** not in the sense of not existing, but in the sense meant in the phrase *“being without buddha-nature.”* We should go over Master Daikan’s words that *“People give meaning to terms like ‘south’ and ‘north’, but concepts like ‘south’ and north’ are not part of buddha-nature”* several times, over a long period. We can benefit just from this effort itself. We should quietly both try to understand his words, and give up understanding them.

That’s a very important sentence. I guess I’m reading this and trying to explain it, and some of you are desperately trying to catch some understanding, and some of you have given up. And we should do both. We don’t need to think that listening to someone talking means that we should understand everything that they say. We don’t need to think that listening to someone talking means that we shouldn’t make any effort to understand. Both are true. So we quietly try to understand, and we should give up understanding. You can choose which to do at this moment, and which to do at the next moment.

*We do study, we do try to understand, and at the same time we emphasise without concepts as well. It’s a paradox.*

Yes, it’s all a paradox. We’re trying to get the state which is not getting, that’s what we do in Zazen. And we study Buddhism, we try to understand what is not understandable. But if we then think there’s no point to it all then... you can say that, but it’s not true, there is a point to it. The point to it is that Buddhism teaches reality, and reality is outside of our conceptual understanding and recognition. Of course our conceptual understanding and recognition is real and very valuable, our whole human society is founded on it. But where our conceptual understanding does not match reality, we have huge problems, and that’s never so clear as when we have conflicts between people with different beliefs.

If we have a conceptual or spiritual belief about the way in which reality works, and we believe it very strongly, then we order our lives to act according to that belief. And if someone else has a different conceptual understanding of the way that reality works or a different spiritual understanding and they base their actions on their beliefs, then we have conflict. All wars are based on that. All wars are based on the fact that human beings are able to conceptualise the way in which reality works to an extent, and then believe that what they have conceptualised is true and fixed. We all conceptualise the world, it’s impossible to live without doing it. When we conceptualise the world we make a structure and we try and live by our structure, then we believe that the structure is true. Then someone says that their structure is true – “not it’s not”, “yes it is!” Bang! You have a war. So our greatest strengths are sometimes our greatest weaknesses at the same time. Our ability to understand the world, which a cat or dog can’t do in the same way, is human beings’ greatest achievement and strength and has created our world around us. We can even make noises at each other and not only can we understand what the noises mean, we can have metal boxes into which the sound goes, and remains inside, and we can listen to it again. These are miraculous and fantastic achievements. But there’s a price to pay for them. The price is that we believe our concepts of reality are reality. And of course to some extent we can never get out of that difficulty. But there is a difference; if we understand that our concepts of reality are just concepts, then we feel easier to change, when reality shows us that it is not quite like that we can adjust our understanding. But if we make our concepts very strong and powerful, and fix them, then we try to make the world fit in with our concepts. We try to make reality fit in with our ideas, and it rarely does.

**Stupid people think that the phrase means that the world of human beings has south and north because we live in the material world, but not buddha-nature, because it is beyond all physical limitations.**

They think buddha-nature is an ideal concept, or something to get.

**People who think that this is what Master Daikan said, do not have the power to see what he really meant. We should throw away these kinds of wrong interpretations and use the practice of Zazen as our reference.**

So always we come back to the practice of Zazen as our reference. The reason we come back to Zazen, is that we can study reality intellectually, philosophically, but it's not a philosophical or an intellectual thing, reality is outside of philosophy or intellect. We need another way to study it, and that way is to sit in it – the simplest most stupid way we could study anything. If you want to find out what water is, sit in it. If you want to find out what reality is, sit in it. So unfortunately we're so clever that it takes us years of sitting in reality, it slowly dawns on us – "I see, I'm just sitting here".

*Can you explain a bit how that helps you when you come out of Zazen, and you again face the real world of all your concepts and stuff.*

It doesn't help at all.

*OK, can we just do Zazen on something with wheels on then, so we can spend our whole lives in Zazen.*

Yes that's right, that's what it sounds like we should do doesn't it? In fact it does help, but not in a way that we can grasp. Because in Zazen, we sit in a physical posture, Zazen changes our psycho-physical state, it changes our physical state. So for instance if we feel irritable and we practice Zazen, we usually calm down. If we feel depressed and we practice Zazen, we usually cheer up a bit. And that's because the posture itself changes our physical state, and the physical state of the human body stays with us. If we get drunk it takes a few hours or days to come back to normal. If we get very excited or angry it takes hours or days to calm down. If we practice Zazen, it takes hours or days to leave the balanced state. So if we want to leave that balanced state which we get in Zazen we have to work quite hard at it. We could go and drink a lot or go to a wild party and we can get rid of the nice state. But if we make no effort to get rid of it, it stays. Master Dogen describes that as like the ringing of a bell, it resonates but it doesn't stay for ever, so we keep practicing Zazen, every day. We ring the bell, just as it dies away we ring it again. If we practice every day, we are in fact maintaining the state. In fact that is maintaining the state and there is nothing else we need to do, but we can't believe that. It's so simple and stupid to sit facing the wall every day and then say that this is all we need to do with our lives, that can't be enough. And also it can't be quick enough. Well it does take a long time for us to return to our simple state that all human beings possess.

It must be more than 30 years.

So you can't get off your Zazen trolley Nick. You wish it would be a bit quicker though.

We're on to another story now, this next one is Master Daikan teaching his student, so we've moved along the line of transmission.

**Master Daikan taught his student Gyosho: *“Buddha-nature exists just at the present moment, but the mind, which categorises all things into good and bad, creates an enduring image.”***

That's true, everything exists just at the moment of the present, but our mind creates an image of it. Reality is just at the moment of the present, but our mind creates an image of reality – yesterday, tomorrow – but today is the only place that we can ever be. Nobody has ever been any other place than today, which is quite startling really. I have never been in any other time or place than here and now, in my life. But that sounds quite a bizarre statement, but it's true, because I am always here and now. Ask me again later.

**Non-Buddhists, Buddhists who study only theories or who study only the physical can never imagine this *“just at the present moment”* that Master Daikan talks about.**

These three categories: Non-Buddhists; Buddhists who study theories; and Buddhists who study only the physical – Master Dogen often criticises these. Some Buddhist groups tend to concentrate on the form of Buddhism and don't study any theory, these are those Buddhists who only study the physical. Physical form - what to wear, how your hands move, without thinking that theory has any value. And there are Buddhists who study only theory, they think that physical form has no value. So we have two opposites. Master Dogen's Buddhism includes both of these – study and physical form are important.

*Does physical form include Zazen?*

Yes.

*So if you only did Zazen it would be only following the physical?*

Yes, if you only do Zazen, then it's almost impossible to practice peacefully. Everyone has questions, and in Zazen questions arise. And if no one answers these questions then we can't feel peaceful. I've never met anyone who practices Zazen without ever studying some Buddhist theory who is happy.

*What about the tree planter, he was happy. He was just planting trees.*

Was he practicing Zazen?

*No but it's a physical thing, to plant trees. And he was in the lineage.*

Ah yes, did he not study?

*Don't think so.*

Right, did he practice Zazen?

*No.*

No?

*He did only physical things.*

How do you know all this?

*I'm trying to think what the story said.*

I don't think it meant that he didn't do anything other than plant trees, it just meant that he had a very natural life. So for instance, John there works as a lawyer, he practices Zazen, and he dances, and he studies Buddhist theory. Master Daikan planted trees, and he practiced Zazen, and he studied.

*OK, it doesn't say that in the story. We don't know that.*

No, it doesn't say that he practiced Zazen does it? But he was a Buddhist master. So if he was a Buddhist master do you think he practiced Zazen.

*Not necessarily.*

I see, so you think that the fact that he planted trees made him into a Buddhist master?

*The fact that he planted trees when he planted trees, eat rice when you eat rice.*

Oh I see. No I don't think so. I think that it would have been impossible for Master Dogen to say that anyone could be a Buddhist master who didn't practice Zazen. He says many, many times that Zazen *is* Buddhism. So without Zazen there is no Buddhism. All the masters that he talks about all practiced Zazen. So although the story only refers to the old man who plants trees, when he became... I see what you mean, you mean that at the end of his life before he became a young child, when he was up in the mountains... That's a bit of a tricky one, but that's kind of a part of a fable, a story. If we believe the story as it stands, there's this old man in the mountains who is then born as a little child. That child grew up and became a successor, and that successor must have practiced Zazen, mustn't he? So if he practiced Zazen after he grew up, did he practice Zazen when he was an old man? Which old man, the old man before or after?

*I was thinking of the first one.*

Yes, but the story itself we have to look at as a whole, we can't just take this old man out of the story.

*Maybe he was saying that he wasn't quite ready in some sense.*

No, it's only a story.

*Perhaps the old man in the story wasn't a Buddhist. He didn't practice Zazen, and actually was someone totally different.*

*Perhaps he recognised a quality in him.*

*Yeah, he recognised a quality of a particular old man he saw cutting wood...*

It's impossible to only think about Buddhism and to only practice Zazen, it's absolutely impossible. The question is, do we look for answers or do we hide them away and pretend we know the answers. But this is only a story. Master Dogen never says that there's only one way to the truth, he says there's only one truth, but there's not only one way to it. He says there are myriad ways to find the balanced and peaceful state. However, those other ways are not Buddhism, but the state is the same. So we can take examples – very great athletes, people who dedicate their lives to attaining a physical balance which they need to perfect their sport, we can say that they are buddhas, but they don't know it. And because they don't have the same understanding, we don't say they are

Buddhists. In a sense we can say that they are buddhas, and in a sense they are buddhas, buy they are not Buddhists. So this is the path that we take – practicing Zazen and studying Buddhist theory. If we practice Zazen, we need to study Buddhist theory too, because we can't get rid of the thinking, it's impossible to just sit in Zazen and never have any thoughts.

Thank you.