

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2005

Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

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After the talk I gave this morning, I felt that I cast a cloud over Master Nagarjuna's full moon. I'm quite tired, part of that is jet lag because I came back from Japan last week. I'm wondering if I'm doing justice to this text, but maybe Master Dogen will say that even not doing justice to the text is doing justice to the text, if we read it. So let's do that.

We're on page 10.

Do not understand the words "*buddha-nature is neither big nor small...*" in the everyday sense, or according to the teachings of intellectual or materialistic Buddhists. One-sided and stubborn people who believe that buddha-nature must be vast and great are holding on to the wrong idea. Instead, consider the idea that buddha-nature can be expressed in words just at the present moment, as Master Nagarjuna did when he said "*...neither big nor small...*" Because just at the present moment, there is no separation between hearing and understanding.

This is quite an interesting comment. Just in the present moment if we fully understand something, hearing it is understanding it. Often our understanding is a kind of intellectual recognition of something, we sort out what we hear and add it to the knowledge that we already have – we fit something in to our existing structure of knowledge. We call that "ah, I understand". But the kind of understanding that he's talking about here is hearing as understanding. That's something we don't normally call understanding. We can call it "immediate understanding", or "present understanding". Many of Master Dogen's comments are about present understanding. For instance, if we look at his comment: "Do not understand the words *buddha-nature is neither big nor small...* in the everyday sense or according to the teachings of intellectual or materialistic Buddhists", he means don't understand it in the sense of what the words say. "Buddha-nature is neither big nor small"... don't think that buddha-nature is neither big nor small so you can fit it in to the structure in the brain which has big and small in it. It means something else, it means some kind of simple recognition that buddha-nature is outside of our discriminating mind. If we think about it we can't understand it, but we can have some present understanding, sometimes.

It goes back to what you were saying before about how you can come to a talk and you don't always have to understand it.

That's right, sometimes we understand when we think we don't understand. It's rather like the difference between looking at something directly and looking at it out of your peripheral vision. Intellectual people especially, want to get something directly, pin-pointed. The understanding that Master Dogen is talking about is something broader and not pointed. In that sense we can compare the Shobogenzo not as a philosophical logical work, but as a vast picture; we scan our eyes over the picture, and out of the corner of our eye we see something. If we look at it directly we can't see what it is. He's suggesting that if we don't peer

so sharply at the sentences then there's some kind of present understanding that we get, and we wonder if we got it or not. But if we go through the Shobogenzo over and over again we realise..."oh, I see, that makes sense". It's a kind of gentle understanding in a way.

Just at the present moment we can hear-and-understand the verse that Master Nagarjuna recites: "my body manifests the full moon to show you what a buddha is." There is no set way to teach the truth, and the efficacy of these teachings is beyond words and images.

That's his poem. Master Nagarjuna is saying the same thing in his poem. Then Master Dogen comments:

His physical body appeared full, like the round moon, showing them the fullness of a buddha. His manifesting his body fully can teach us what long, short, square and round really mean. People who do not understand the relationship between his *body* and him *manifesting* it cannot understand what is meant by the *fullness of the moon* or *what a buddha is*.

So he suggests again a kind of understanding that is different from intellectual understanding. Intellectually we understand the relationship between his body and him manifesting it as some kind of causal relationship – I have a body, and I'm doing something with it. So there's me, and there's what I'm doing with it. So "body" is the object and "manifesting it" is the verb. But Master Dogen is suggesting oneness in Master Nagarjuna manifesting himself in front of the audience. His body and him manifesting, are one. Because we don't see Master Nagarjuna in a discriminating way, we are looking at him, not analysing him, there's just Master Nagarjuna. So body, manifesting, are there in the fullness of Master Nagarjuna in front of his audience. That suggests that the audience or the person looking at Master Nagarjuna is not intellectually examining Master Nagarjuna, and not intellectually examining what Master Nagarjuna said, but hearing and understanding, or seeing and understanding, or listening and understanding. That sounds very strange, but it's true.

He's just talking about not being split.

Yes, that's right. Hearing and understanding means hearing and understanding as one act. And just like Master Dogen, we have to struggle with the words, because the actual experience in the present we can't describe exactly in words. It's easy to talk about intellectual understanding in the way that we learn knowledge, we read a book and after we've read it we think we understand the book. And when we understand it we think the knowledge that we got from the book is real, it's ours, we know it. We can read a book about apple-growing in Pretoria, and after we've finished it we know all about apple-growing in Pretoria, we may never have been to Pretoria and we've may never have grown apples but we can have a nice conversation with someone the next day as an authority on the subject. We do this all the time, we talk about subjects that really we know nothing about experientially, but which we've read about. So we claim that knowledge as somehow part of us, but it's not really, it's just facts stored in our brain that we've remembered from a book. Real understanding is deeper, we all have it, but we don't get it from books, or we don't get it only from books.

Newspapers are a prime example of that.

Yes, and there are foreign correspondents, who go to a country for a couple of weeks and write an in-depth article about what's happening there. I have a friend

who's British and has lived in Japan for more than thirty years, he's a freelance correspondent. His big headache is when newspapers send journalists over, they spend a couple of weeks or months in Japan, they read up on the country and talk to a few people then they write these authoritative articles or make long television programmes. But they don't know, they don't know themselves, they know somebody who knows. We have different kinds of understanding and knowledge.

We believe what they tell us. We base our judgments on what they tell us.

When do you know when you know?

You know when you know when you know. When you know that you know, then you know. So for instance, if you've never had rooibosh tea, but you've read about tea, you can discuss teas with someone. But if you've drunk rooibosh tea, you know it.

So you develop experience such as being in a foreign country over time. How do you know when you're qualified to discuss it?

Good question. You never do really. But you can pick out someone who doesn't know. So my friend in Japan can pick out people who don't know just like that. And you can pick out people who do know. This is true with everything, if we have experience of something and talk about it with someone else, we can tell more or less if they know, more or less, underneath our pride or anything else, we can tell that they know what they're talking about somehow on a kind of intuitive level.

The news is quite a good example, sometimes you watch it and think that these foreign correspondents could have said exactly the same stuff in the studio without ever having gone there. What is there to gain by them standing on a beach in Thailand?

Mike, how does that work with philosophy?

Good question. Philosophy is based on experience we suppose, though lots of philosophy is based on thought. So we can say that in many ways the area of philosophy is not experiential but a product of human thought. But actually our thought must be experiential. So Descartes must have looked at his own life in order to say "I am because I think". But different philosophers are more or less abstract. Some of them take a little bit of reality and write reams of analysis about it. Some take a lot of reality and write a little bit about it. But generally, what we know as philosophy is actually abstract and theoretical, which doesn't tie back to our experience. The philosophy of science is a growing field. I think that this is a much more realistic area than that of the intellectual philosophers, although they've produced great works. Science comes back to the material world to check that what has been said makes sense.

So we should do the same thing with philosophy?

I hope so yes. I hope philosophers come back to reality to see whether what they have said makes sense or not.

It's not some of the experiential basis that philosophers live on, they're engaged with other philosophers in argumentation. Whereas a scientist who doesn't do experiments is...it's hard to imagine a philosopher who doesn't argue with other philosophers. That might be their grounding.

Yes, but unfortunately, they've made a club which has strict rules, if you break the rules nobody talks to you. So that's a problem. For instance you mustn't contradict yourself. If you write that A is B, then you write that B is A, all the other philosophers will say "oh look, he's contradicted himself!". It's a no-no. So we can build up abstract knowledge, but abstract knowledge is abstract knowledge, I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't do it, we do it all the time. I'm not suggesting it doesn't have any value, all the news reports we hear by people who've never been to places have great value. But we should notice the difference between someone who has not experienced something and someone who has. It's a very important difference.

Do you think that's why it's important when studying Buddhism that you don't just do it from books?

That's why Master Dogen says we have to practice Zazen. Anyway, Master Nagarjuna is talking about something immediate, some kind of immediate understanding, and Master Dogen is suggesting that we can hear and understand what Master Nagarjuna said in this paragraph.

Stupid people who have not realised the truth of the Buddha think that his body was transformed into a full moon, but this is wrong.

They did think that. And that's sounds stupid doesn't it? But there are many such stupid things now in the area of religious and spiritual life in the modern day. Maybe far more stupid than that.

How could he manifest a different body in the same place and at the same time as he is sitting in his seat in the lecture hall? His body manifested itself in exactly the same way as anyone sitting here and now in this hall. We are all manifesting the fullness of the moon too! The body manifesting itself cannot be completely represented with descriptions like square or round, existing or not existing, visible or invisible, or even using a limitless number of characteristics; it is just the body manifesting itself.

Master Dogen means in a very simple sense that if you try and describe the person you're looking at, you can't. Because you're looking at that person, you can try some phrases to describe them, but the description doesn't capture fully the person in front of you. You can't do it. And this is the task of writers. How does a writer describe something to someone who's not seen it? They use many descriptive devices and images to try and evoke the subject. But the image evoked in one reader and an image evoked in another, I wonder how accurate or different they are.

The moon is a very symbolic image isn't it?

Yes.

Can you say something about that?

No. If you go outside and look at the moon, you don't see any symbolic loading. When you come back and it's no longer visible, then you load it with symbolism. Although the moon when we see it really, is...it eats us, embraces us. So that's why people go outside and look at the moon. When we see the moon in a clear dark sky, we're at one with it. Not metaphorically but actually, the situation of us looking at the moon is oneness.

In Dogen's poetry he uses the moon a lot. And he uses it...

Symbolically.

Well no, it has connotations of...

The moon is very powerful, so is the sun but you can't look at the sun. you can't stare at it. We can feel the fullness of the sun but we don't see it. But we can embrace the moon, or let it embrace us. It has that fullness about it. Really, we do it.

Buddhist philosophy is like that isn't it, it's like art, a representation of reality, like taking a photograph.

The phrase "*the fullness of the moon*" means the same as what Master Fuke said to Master Rinzai: "*What exists right here is indescribable, whether you try to describe it in detail or try to describe it roughly.*"

This is a quotation which Master Dogen has pulled in from one of the koans that he collected. The story is of two Buddhist masters, Master Fuke and Master Rinzai. Incidentally, Master Rinzai wasn't a member of the Rinzai Sect so we can admit him into the Shobogenzo. What Master Fuke said to Master Rinzai is true, but we don't often notice it – what exists right here in front of us is actually indescribable. That doesn't mean we shouldn't or can't try to describe it, it's simply the fact.

Because Master Nagarjuna had got rid of selfish pride, in manifesting his own body, he showed them what a buddha is. The act of showing revealed the body of a buddha, something that is completely different from our concept of what a buddha is.

That's very true. Master Dogen is suggesting that selfish pride somehow inhibits us manifesting our own body. So someone who has selfish pride puts something on in front of them, a mask, maybe sometimes an arrogant or overconfident mask. They want to create an image of themselves which is different from how they really are. And of course we all do that, whether we want to or not, but wanting to do it is different to not wanting to do it. So he's suggesting that Master Nagarjuna didn't want to sit at the front of the room and create a kind of image of himself as a proud teacher of the truth. So he manifested himself just as he was, and to manifest ourselves just as we are is to be a buddha. To be a buddha is completely different from our concept of what a buddha is. Buddhas are real, we have ideas of buddhas, pictures of buddhas and descriptions of buddhas, but they are all complete fabrications, the only real buddhas are sitting here in this room, but they don't always fit into our picture or match up to our standards. We hesitate to think that we might be a buddha because we feel we don't quite come up to scratch. To realise that we don't quite match up is to be a buddha, to accept ourselves as we are.

Although we describe buddha-nature with words like *clear* and *bright* like the full moon, this does not mean that he turned into a full moon! And since he says *the efficacy of these teachings is beyond words and images*"

(That's Master Nagarjuna's poem...)

we can conclude that the body he showed them was more than just the physical body they could see and describe. Although it seemed to be just

a physical body, it was the body of a buddha fully manifested. These are the characteristics of teaching the truth, which has no set way.

The body he showed them, according to Master Dogen, was more than just a physical body, and of course it's true we're not only physical animals, we have minds and thoughts. We can say we have a mental or spiritual body and a physical body, but they're not different. Or we can say that our real selves have two sides, the abstract or mental side and the concrete or physical side. But they are not separable, it just depends on which one we're looking at or happen to be showing. So Master Dogen is saying that Master Nagarjuna fully manifesting his body doesn't just mean physical, it means total, physical and mental or physical and spiritual. Even looking at the full moon, when we actually stand in the dark and look at the moon, it's not just physical, it's something total, we can feel its presence, we can feel the mind of the moon, the spirit of the moon. So there you go. Of course, as it says in the last sentence it "has no set way", of course it has no set way, reality is always changing. So there is a set way, it's to follow reality, but reality is not set. Or as Nishijima Roshi would often say "our aim is to have no aim", our set way is to have no set way.

Kanadeva described Master Nagarjuna's not manifesting himself in a set way as "the immanent and balanced state of a buddha." Although the audience described his body as being like the full moon viewed from a distance, in fact they encountered something that they had not experienced before: the dynamic nature of someone teaching the truth which they experienced in the momentary state where they were not aware of any separation between what they saw and what they heard. And as they continued listening to his teaching, at times they were aware of him manifested fully like the moon, at which moments his body seemingly disappeared and they were only aware of him teaching the truth, and at other times this state of fullness dissolved and his normal body came back into their awareness.

That's a long sentence, can you catch the drift? They were listening to Master Nagarjuna teaching, and as they listened, on occasion they became one. They were listening to him, but their listening and understanding and then him, all became one. Then sometimes they drifted out of that state, and there would be Master Nagarjuna sitting in front of them, then they would drift into the state again, this happens. It's a normal situation. But the story which was passed down suggested rather simplistically that Master Nagarjuna had somehow changed into a round moon, and they painted pictures of this. Nobody in the temples in which these pictures hung could explain what they really meant, and actually, as we see later in the chapter, this infuriated Master Dogen, he had quite an argumentative visit to one temple where he asked everyone what the picture was doing there but no-one could give a satisfactory answer.

I'm going to stop reading there, it's ok to keep talking from your side though.

Mike can you say more about the moon having a spiritual side?

Yes, don't you feel it?

I don't know.

Well, if you go out and look at the moon, do you feel just a kind of material...

It depends...on me.

Ah yes, it depends on you.

If I'm absorbed then there is that sense of ...

Well there's a difficulty, there are two words, mental and spiritual. We use mental to mean something to do with mind, and spiritual to mean something rather vaguer and more wonderful usually. The mind is full of complicated and sometimes dirty facts, but spiritual areas are full of something rather nice and ...wavy. But in Buddhism mental and spiritual mean the same thing. There is one area which is physical, which is matter, and another area which is the mental or spiritual which is non-matter. We can call it mental or spiritual, it's all the same.

Is it not coming from us...from our side?

Yes it is, but Buddhism says that all living beings have a body and mind as one. So the mental and physical in all living beings is one thing. But that also says that every living being has a mental and spiritual aspect, even stones. And the remnant of that for example in Japanese gardens, in the so-called Zen gardens in Japan, they sex the stones, there are female stones and male stones. Don't ask me what the difference is. "You two been at it again?" That's why they rake the gravel.

There is a physical sense in which we are connected with the moon which is, as a physical organism, the way the moon actually pulls...and does affect micro organisms.

It seemed that Mike was saying that the moon had a mind.

Yes, the moon has a mind. It's not that the moon has a mind, it's that the moon is real, everything has two sides, everything real has two sides. Everything in the Universe has two sides, but those two sides are not separate. In order to talk about it we make a split into two sides. So when you go and look at the moon it's impossible to see it just as a physical object, as a human being we respond to something else there, we can't not do that, because it's something real. If we read about the moon in a book we can correspond just to the physical side of it, we can say it's 248,000 miles from the Earth or whatever it is, its diameter is so and so etc. But that's not the real moon, we can look at it as a physical object or as an object of our knowledge, but when we actually look at the moon we look at the real moon, and that reality of the moon contains what we say is two sides, mental and physical, that's the way we look at things. They're not separate, so we can't say there's the moon and there's its mind, it means there is a real moon there which is rock-moon-and-mind-moon, it's all there.

It's just the same when we look at a person, we see their shape and we sense them, we intuit the person. And of course it depends on our state, but it's also the state of the other. And the state of the moon is like that, that's called real. When something has two sides, it's real. When we take away one side it's not real. So all of the knowledge which we read in books has one side missing. When the two sides are put together then it's real. So experience is real because it always has two sides, the moon in the sky is real because it has two sides, you're real because you have two sides, my thought about something is not real because it is missing one side. My thought of Yoko in Tokyo is not real Yoko, it's only an image, there's no physical side. But if I put the physical and image together I have to be in Tokyo, then she would be real.

It's difficult to talk about, it doesn't mean that the moon has a mind, it doesn't mean that the moon doesn't have a mind, it means the reality of the moon is...

Our own connection with the moon...

Our physical response to the other's physical, our spiritual response to the other's spiritual, our wholeness or our fullness responds to the other's fullness. So the audience in the story responded to Master Nagarjuna's fullness. Because he was full, real, they became full, real. And if we look at the moon, because it is full and real it makes us full and real. Or maybe we make it full and real, or both.

I don't know if this is the same kind of experience or not, but sometimes I feel like a tree or a ...sometimes as an object. And other times it's as if, treesfully exerting oneself, mountainsfully exerting oneself. I wouldn't describe it as being spiritual or mental, but it's different.

Yes it's different or it's real. Or it's the brightness of the present. In the Shobogenzo Master Dogen talks about the brightness of the present, that brightness is actually real.

It does seem like, in that..

When we respond fully reality has a brightness to it.

Yes things become very vivid.

We categorise nature, we reduce it to facts so that we can control it and learn how it works. But what we learn, what we categorise is not real nature. So it doesn't mean we should only have real things and no facts about nature at all. It's not a criticism. Simply, we have facts about reality which are very useful to us, but we must differentiate between facts which we hold about reality and real reality, which is always different, because we're not yet clever enough to describe reality perfectly.

And we're never going to be clever enough to describe it.

Aren't you? Master Dogen would agree. That's why he kept trying for so long.

There can be no such thing as describing it completely because isn't what you mean by that somehow catching the reality in your description?

Yes, but you know there are lots of efforts in the artificial intelligence, and I've heard people on the radio saying for example that computer simulation is becoming so sophisticated now that we'll be able to create worlds which are virtually real. And I've heard long and complex programmes suggesting that, they think, we will be able to create virtual worlds which human beings will feel real in. To me that's absolute twaddle.

Why? It's about creating a feeling, there are movies that can make you feel sad...

Is feeling the same as reality?

No but they talked about creating the feeling that is real...

Yes ok. If that's what they say, as long as they don't say it's going to be real. Like that film with Keanu Reeves, The Matrix. A brain in a bath.

Go back to the question of the moon and stuff. The Universe is supposed to expand out from a big bang from one source. So that means that everything that

exists now, the whole mental and physical continuum or whatever, all came from one source, so it's not surprising that the moon will empathise with us.

You mean from the same source? As long as the Big Bang theory is right but it's toppling at the moment isn't it? You'll have to move on Ralph. It does seem so.

Science and philosophy have a ...when you get involved with sub atomic, I don't know anything about this by the way...I'm doing what Mike says we do when we read something and think you know about it.

Some things we can only know about from reading. Yes, they're merging. But the problem with the Big Bang theory is what happened before the Big Bang. They haven't worked that out yet.

Isn't that the same question as what is beyond the edge of the world? Time and the Universe began because time began, there is no before.

Oh right, so Buddhism can't agree with the Big Bang theory because Gautama Buddha says the world has no beginning and no end. And by that, he meant that it's always now. So now is eternal.

Isn't it also...he refused to entertain questions about the beginning of the world at one point. Rather than...

That's kind of closer to home the way he described that story drifting in and out has an echo for me of sitting in Zazen. I don't need the corroboration of the Big Bang theory or anything

Because we practice Zazen we can understand the stories in the Shobogenzo yes. Master Dogen said that the Shobogenzo comes out of his practice of Zazen. Just like the atomic physicist, the Big Bang theorist studies patterns of molecules, then tries to describe them, we sit and study reality and then try to describe it. So we're kind of scientists.

Let's stop there, thank you.