

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2007
Talks on Master Dogen's Kuge
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Talk number 2

Earlier, we only finished the first paragraph. Let's go over where we got to:

The "self" of "itself" means you, made of the same basic materials that make up the Universe. Master Rinzai used "the true person without position," to express this kind of self, because it is not an "I" or a "someone." "By itself" means just as it is.

What Master Dogen's doing there – and it doesn't work in English as it works in the Japanese, because it's a kind of play on Chinese characters – but what he's doing there is explaining that although we say "itself," "a fruit ripens by itself," it's not by itself, it's in everything. When we say, "I went for a walk on my own," we're not on our own. And when I say "I", I don't exist separate from everything else. And he explains that "by itself" means just as it is.

"Ripens by itself" is just the moment in which flowers open and fruit ripens, in which Bodhidharma teaches reality and liberates deluded people.

As those of you who have studied Dogen's writings know, he teaches the Buddhist view of reality being this moment, the present moment. And here he refers to "ripening by itself" being just in the moment. And "Bodhidharma teaches reality and liberates deluded people" just in the moment. So, what he's doing there is taking us out of our normal view, which is a view of process-time, a historical view, and putting us into the view of reality here and now. And now, from the next sentence, he switches to talk about the example of the blue lotus flower. So let's look at what he says, and then try and work out what he's talking about.

For example, blue lotus (utpala) flowers

- in Sanskrit, they're *utpala*, and they're mentioned in lots of the old Sanskrit sutras as a symbol of something -

open and spread by themselves in places and in seasons that are stiflingly hot – on fire.

I don't know whether (inaudible) ... or from wider writings, but there's an image in ancient Buddhism of the centre of extreme heat being cool. And that may be true. In the centre of heat is coolness. And they symbolised that by saying "blue lotus flowers," which symbolise something very cool, "open in the middle of heat, or in the middle of fire." It's a strange image, but what could it possibly mean?

So all stifling heat, all flames and fire, exist at places and seasons in which blue lotus flowers open and spread. In one single flame there are hundreds and thousands of blue lotus flowers; they open and spread in space, they open and spread on the earth, they open and spread in the past, and they open and spread in the present. To experience the time and place of this fire is to experience blue lotus flowers. We should not drift by the time and place of blue lotus flowers.

(Inaudible comment)

That's true, yes, a gas flame...

So the picture is of the blue actually right in the centre (inaudible).

Being right there, yes.

(Inaudible comment)

That's one way to look at it. There's a maybe more simple and real experience. For instance, if you've been to a very hot country, on a very hot day in a hot country - for instance I lived in Japan for a long time and in the height of summer it was really, really hot and humid, and it's stiflingly hot - and if you say, 'Ahh, it's hot!' and you kind of move your body and all your clothes are sticking to you, you're in the middle of heat. But if you sit in Zazen, for example, in those conditions, without moving, and without saying to yourself, 'Oh God, it's hot!'; and if we take that example and compare it with sports in which you experience pain - lots of sports experience pain, running, and climbing mountains, all kinds, even sports like tennis, and I suppose even golf, there's pain involved because you're pushing yourself - and if you concentrate on the pain, 'Ah, it's hurting, it's hurting!', it hurts, you're in the middle of pain. But right in the middle of the pain there is an area where there's no pain, and that's what you try and find in order to keep going, especially long-distance runners, marathon runners. So, in the middle of something we can find, often, something different, or even opposite. So that's another way to look at that. In the middle of heat, literally, there is cool. And we create heat, we create something by our thinking or perceiving or the way we react to our senses. Pain control is all about, 'in the middle, it's cool.' So what's he talking about it here for?

Is he saying don't try and avoid it? "You should not drift off the time and place of blue lotus flowers," in other words, if you constantly give up because it's too much, you never get to that. (Inaudible) Is he basically saying, keep practicing, keep trying, keep going on, don't drift by, don't try and skirt round it or avoid it?

Maybe not 'Keep going, don't skirt round it'; but, the coolness in the centre of fire is in the moment, so don't pass by that moment. And, for instance in Zazen, if we've got pain in our legs, it hurts; and if we keep thinking about the pain or listening for signs of somebody rustling to ring the bell or something, if we think about it then we miss the fact that right at that moment we can sit without pain. And we find that again sometimes. So, you know, we have periods where we're desperate for the bell to ring, and then we stop and we're in the moment, we don't drift by that moment in which there is no pain. So this state in which there's coolness in the centre of heat, or no pain in the middle of pain (inaudible) ... thoughts, or our feelings, or our interpretations, drag us forward.

(Inaudible comment about chakras)

That's interesting. Dogen never talks about chakras, but it's one way to look at the way that the body functions, is it? I don't know anything about them.

(Inaudible comment about the blue chakra)

Oh, I see, the "blue" is catching you. I think, here, Master Dogen is not so much talking about the way to interpret, but actual experience. So, actually, in the middle of heat we find this coolness. It's talking about it symbolically - "they open and spread in space, they open and spread on the earth, in the past, and in the present." This is symbolism for 'coolness in the centre of heat, we can find at all times and all places.' So it's very symbolic sometimes, the way he writes. "When we experience blue lotus flowers we experience the time and place of fire."

And “the time and place of fire” is the present moment and this place here. So, if we think of, again, Zazen, which is our standard, when we experience the stillness within movement, or the painless state within pain, it means we’re here, at this moment, in this place. ‘The present moment,’ ‘being here and now,’ and all these phrases, are “the time and place of blue lotus flowers,” because the blue lotus flower symbolises that present. Does that make sense?

I think I can relate to that from my experience - when I go sea-kayaking, when the waves are the most wavy is when you feel the most still. And I’ve noticed that that’s when I’ve got (inaudible).

At the still-point.

Yes. The easiest time, for me, when I’m paddling, to keep still, is when the sea is really wavy.

That’s “the time and place of blue lotus flowers” in this symbolism. So, in the centre of all movement is stillness. And T.S. Eliot – I brought a book of his poems up with me on the plane, because I like to just look now and again – and in one of his “Four Quartets” he writes about the stillness of the turning point. I can’t remember, I’m very bad at remembering. Anybody remember the line?

‘The still point of a turning world.’

Yes, that sounds familiar. And you can find it in all action, for example in dance, and we can call it “blue lotus flowers.” So it’s a symbol of the present moment. Now he goes on to actually quote two lines of a poem from which the symbolism comes. I don’t know who said this - let me look in the original book ... Oh, it is known - “the second line of an eight-line verse by Master Do-an Josatsu,” and it’s quoted in a book called *Keitoku-dento-roku*, chapter 29. Unfortunately, there’s no English translation of that book. So, he said:

***Blue lotus flowers
Open inside fire.***

And we know what that symbolism means.

So blue lotus flowers always open and spread inside fire.

And we can take that to mean, for example, there is always stillness at the centre of movement.

To understand “inside fire,” we must find the place where the blue lotus flower opens and spreads.

That’s interesting. Where is “the place where the blue lotus flowers open and spread”? We must find it.

(Inaudible question)

Yes, we can only experience it. We can think about it, and we’re thinking about it now, but we can only really, fully experience and understand it when you’re kayaking on the waves, or whatever. So, “the place where blue lotus flowers open and spread” is always this place.

We should not stay caught up in the ordinary person’s viewpoint or the idealistic viewpoint, or we will not understand what “inside fire” means.

Well, I suppose (inaudible) ... "the ordinary person's viewpoint or the idealistic viewpoint" wouldn't be able to take in the present moment, because the present moment is not part of the process, it's a real experience.

If you doubt this, you might also doubt the fact that lotus flowers actually grow in water,

"This," in the phrase "If you doubt this," doesn't refer to the viewpoint, it refers to "lotus flowers opening inside fire." So, "If you doubt that lotus flowers open inside fire, you might also doubt the fact that lotus flowers actually grow in water,"

or your might doubt the fact that flowers actually grow on stems. If we want to doubt, we could doubt the fact that a stable physical world exists in front of us here and now. But we do not doubt the fact.

I wonder why he introduces doubt here? So we doubt; and he's saying, "Well, if we doubt it, we could also doubt other things which we believe to be very true, for instance, lotus flowers grow in water, or flowers grow on stems, or this world around us, in front of us here and now, is something stable and real." So he's introducing the fact that all the solid things that we don't doubt are in fact some kind of belief. I think when we were talking about Kant somebody said that we can't actually prove that there's a reality. We're in reality, but it's very difficult to prove it. And physicists are not quite sure what it's made up of yet. But as it's been only three and a half thousand years that they've been looking, it may take a little longer. So, when he says "if we doubt the fact that a stable physical world exists here and now in front of us, but we do not doubt it," he's suggesting that we could doubt it. Now he goes on to (inaudible) ... In Dogen's time, in the thirteenth century, there was no science. People who studied what reality is, in those days, to him, were Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks, or nuns, left ordinary life, where they were trapped in the ordinary viewpoint, ordinary work, ordinary living, and they took themselves away and tried to work out what it was all about. And if you stayed at home you didn't have any time to try and work out what it's all about – just as you were about to sit down and think, 'What's it all about?', you had to get up and do something, because productivity was very low, and so people had to work from dawn to dusk just to feed themselves. But now, we can sit here and think, 'Mm, I wonder if that's true or not.' (Laughs) 'Ah, I think I'll do some more Zazen and see.' So, Master Dogen says,

Only those in the line of the Buddha's truth know that a flower opening is the world manifesting itself.

But who, these days, is "in the line of the Buddha's truth"? Anybody who is pursuing reality. So, if you're pursuing the truth, trying to understand what is real, "you know that a flower opening is the world manifesting itself." Is that true? "A flower opening is the world manifesting itself"? How can that be? What do you think? Is it likely that "a flower opening is the world manifesting itself"?

(Inaudible comment)

The world can manifest itself in many different ways. In the past, when I used to spend a lot of time in the pub, if you look at a glass of beer, you get a string of bubbles in the middle of the beer. And they still can't today, figure out why it appears in there, why the gas comes out that way first. (Inaudible) It's always puzzled me, and I've never known the answer.

(Laughter)

Things can manifest themselves, and you can never get close enough through investigation to realise how they do appear the way they do, where they do.

(Inaudible)

Oh, that's true, yes – back to the coolness within fire. Yes, but how can a flower opening be the world manifesting itself?

Because we were saying earlier that, even though every flower opens by itself, it's not alone, it's dependant on the Universe around it, (inaudible). It's not a flower in space, it's not separate.

But we don't have any flowers, but the world is manifesting itself here. Are there any flowers here?

I suppose ...

Oh, there's one!

... I suppose if you were to take what's happening here with a flower (inaudible).

Yes, I agree. So, this is very symbolic. We can say, according to Master Dogen, at the moment that a flower opens, at the moment my mouth opens (inaudible) ... everybody's thinking, but if one of you speaks, at the moment you speak, you join reality.

That's what I was saying about the blue chakra, which is at the throat and relates to expression (inaudible).

But not blue chakra – you now is the flower opening!

(Inaudible)

Right. I think it's a little different. I think what Master Dogen's saying is a bit more stupid. He's saying every act – when you spoke then, you are a flower opening. When you spoke, when I'm speaking now, the world is manifesting itself.

Is that as opposed to delusion?

It means, really, that human beings spend a lot of time thinking. But when a human being acts they join the Universe. Can anybody put it ...?

When we hear the phrase "the world," usually we imagine something like vast space, a vast Universe, so we think, 'Oh, I don't understand this, we have to understand how big the world is.' I think here it means, basically, reality - the world, or the truth, or reality. So it's not a planet, it's not like a galaxy, or a solar system, or ... It's a world (inaudible), in the sense of something basic. So I think it's necessary to not take it for granted what "the world" means here.

Ah yes, (inaudible).

(Inaudible)

(Inaudible) ... So it's impossible for us to imagine that something small, like a flower, or like my opening my mouth, could be the whole world. It's not about how big it is. It's something other than space.

Now, at the time when you're talking....

When I'm talking...

You, as a flower, manifest the whole world. And that means that, when we act, we find (inaudible).

(Inaudible) ... The Universe is almost impossible to conceive, which is, to sum up the world in any other way, you know, other than saying everything that's happening in the world is the world, but actually the world itself, by definition, is the sum of all its parts, so any one part of it is equal to the whole. (Inaudible) as a real phenomenon, you know, like chaos theory talks about a butterfly in South Africa affecting a wave in the Atlantic, you know. Each individual element of what we call the world is equally real to each other element, so if you're in a real moment of being whatever it is you're being, then equivalently you're equal to the rest of the world.

Not what you're saying, not the content of what you just said, but *in your speaking* you are manifesting the world. It's very simple and direct.

Is it saying that the whole of human evolution, the whole of planetary evolution, is necessary in order for me to speak now?

It's all *in your speaking* now. It's a very strange view.

Does that make it inescapable, because there's no point in trying ...

Yes, it's inescapable, yes.

... because there's nothing outside ...

It's inescapable, but human beings make their efforts to escape it.

(Inaudible)

Yes, that's what he means.

Can I just ask why do you have to speak in order to join reality? Are we not in it anyway?

Yes, we are. So we could stop speaking and acting!

(Laughter)

So why ... I just wondered why you say that?

Yes ... I don't know how to get out of the trap I've laid for myself!

(Laughter)

I wasn't trying to set a trap, I just wondered whether it was an essential, whether there was a prerequisite for some form of action, for being (inaudible).

By being, we're already there. We're already here. And yet we open our mouths and make noises, and close our mouths and sit in silence ... So we're acting all the time, doing very strange things.

Is thinking an action?

Ah ... (Laughs) Well, we can never escape reality, we can never escape the blue lotus flowers inside fire; but, human beings have the ability to carry themselves past the fact. So, because we think, we carry ourselves past, we convey ourselves past the moment. And when we do that, we do things like trip over a stone, or forget to do something, or, if it's a very simple thing, we might be drying up in the kitchen having a conversation, and our thinking carries us somewhere else, and the thing that we're drying up stays suspended in our hand. This is peculiarly human. Plants and animals don't seem to do that. But we have the ability to carry ourselves out of reality. We can't take ourselves out of reality, but we kind of make ourselves not notice where we are by our excellent ability to think.

He talks about delusion all the time, and in the Zen literature that I've read, which is not much, delusion is a subject that comes up again and again and again. And one gets the sense that the whole practice is to get rid of delusion.

Yes, but my problem is that if thinking is delusion, then I'm deluded now, so I can't answer whether ... I'm a deluded person, I can't answer your question in an un-deluded way.

But, on the other hand, we jump into the moment (inaudible). We suddenly know exactly what it means, and you know exactly where you are, and what's going on, and you don't have to explain anything. And then it goes, and then it comes back, and then it goes. Is that what he's talking about?

Yes.

Is the poem not about that thinking is acting, but we misunderstand it as creating an alternative world?

Yes.

So there is delusion in thinking, loads of ideas, loads of stuff jumping around; but it's sort of misunderstanding that.

Yes. So all these things that you're saying now are all included in a symbolic way in the following couple of pages.

I had an experience the other week, on a day off I was just going to get out of bed and then I thought, 'Well, I don't really need to get out of bed.' Not because I wanted to lie in, but I was just that way where I could sort of do either. And there was something vanishing when I looked into it. I was wondering, where does the intent come from when you're not really able to find any source for it?

Yes, that's decision. We think decision comes from some intellectual effort; but it may not, it may come from something else. What is it? (Inaudible). So we've got lots of things that we're talking about coming out of this chapter, and, to me, it's like we're unfolding something. Something's unfolding, but I'm not sure what! (Inaudible.) "Only those in the line of the Buddha's truth know that a flower opening *is* the world manifesting itself."

And a flower opening

- simple -

is each of the many and varied real phenomena. The Universe is a complete collection of these individual phenomena gathered together to form something bright.

Ah. He's saying there's all these little flowers opening, and all these flowers opening are all collected together and they form something bright, and that's what the Universe is.

(Inaudible)

Lots of flowers opening.

Mike, would the word "bright" there be the same as the word "bright" that Dogen used in the chapter "One Bright Pearl"?

Yes, the same. And that "bright", he uses it to mean the clarity of the world, when we're in it. We're always in it, but when we're in it but being somewhere else, it's not clear. Our eyes glaze over, the world dulls. And when we're in this world at this moment, the world is clear, and he calls that "bright". And it's true. It's very subtle, but even with our eyes, when we are in what we are doing.

I was once in a motorbike accident and nearly died and, in a split second, I was lying on the side of the road and watching the motorbike, that I'd just left at a ridiculous speed, disintegrating. And it all took place within probably a microsecond, but I have a memory of the whole event, and watching it like an acrobat listening to the particles descending and feeling the reality of the world. In a split second I was equal to me. You know, it was a split second and then it was gone, but it was like it was real, I was real, the road was real, and there was no problem with anything.

So you could say that's the still-point at the centre of the accident.

Yes, but the ego was out of the way, you know, because it was booted out.

Ah yes, in that sense, yes. The ego separates us, so when we stop separating ourselves then the world is bright.

I've also ridden motorbikes and had accidents in my time. I think that's also a function of the traditional view of time being a process. In reality, when things like that happen, you realise that it's not a process, time is something very individual and ...

Concrete.

... flexible and concrete.

And contains everything, yes. So if you read lines that say, you know, 'time is only here and now, it contains everything, it's bright, it's flexible,' it sounds very poetic and you think, 'Oh, yes.' But not poetic; real. And that's the nature of our real experience. In dangerous situations, we often notice the real nature of the instant.

We're trying to do it in a less dangerous way! Here, I mean.

Are you?

Well, I don't know. I hope so.

Right.

Having understood this concept, we can look at spring and autumn.

Now, Master Dogen often talks about spring and autumn. And, for him, it's a symbol of the process or historical view of time. Traditionally, you know, spring changes into summer, and summer changes into autumn, and autumn changes into winter. And then we've got all these different flowers that come in spring, and then they blossom, and then they fruit. So, "spring and autumn", for him, means the natural process that we move through, the world moves through, our lives move through, and that we see as a process.

It is not only in spring and autumn that there are flowers and fruit; time-present is always flowering and fruiting.

What a phrase! "Time-present" is the same Japanese phrase as in the chapter "Uji", which I think we did last year, here.

The first year here.

Oh, the first year, right, OK. In that chapter, Master Dogen discusses the indivisible nature of place and time. Space and time are not separate but one. So this phrase "time-present" he's using again here. "It's not only in spring and autumn that there are flowers and fruit," refers to the fact that in our normal lives we think of flowers flowering in spring, and then the fruit ripening in autumn, you know, grain ripening in autumn. But he's saying, "time-present is always flowering and fruiting," or, "all time-presents are flowering and fruiting." And this is moving on to the symbolic again. Flowers appear at every moment, and produce their fruit at every moment.

Flowers and fruit are always sustaining and being sustained by their own time-presents, and each time-present is always sustaining and being sustained by flowers and fruit.

So now this phrase "flowers and fruit" is taking on a different kind of symbolism. Every time-present, every existent moment, is producing (inaudible). So they're indivisible: one is the result of the other, and the other is the result of the first. They're supporting each other.

(Inaudible comment about T.S. Eliot's "Four Quartets")

Yes, he does yes. I wonder if he read Dogen. I wonder if the "Four Quartets" are a flower or a fruit. So, lots of symbolism here, and very difficult to grasp it concretely. But there's something that we can see in this very strong imagery - of flowers popping out at every moment; the appearance of the world; every moment produces a flower; a flower produces a fruit. We usually think of the moment as, 'in a moment, at a time, something happens.' But what he's suggesting is the flower produces the time as well as the time producing the flower. The moment produces the event as well as the event producing the moment. (Inaudible)

We usually think of time as a forward measurement, i.e. the earth round the sun, or the dials of a clock, or the time it takes me to get from A to B, or a million other ways of measuring it. But what it is in itself, separate from my measurements, is a different thing altogether.

Yes, that's the point. So, Master Dogen says there is no time in itself separate from existence, separate from here and now, yes. How are we doing for time?

(Bell rings)

(Laughter)

(End of talk)