

## **Action as the Center of Buddhism**

*[This is the transcript of a talk given by Eido Michael Luetchford as one of a series of lectures to people interested in Buddhism in Miami in March 2001.]*

Action is a translation of GYO in Japanese. The character 行 in Japanese and Chinese means deed, action, conduct. But the meaning of GYO in Buddhism is wider and deeper than just the meaning of “doing something.”

The center of Buddhism is the practice of Zazen. And in the practice of Zazen, we sit in the state called “action.” We are acting. We are conducting ourselves. So the meaning of action in Buddhism is centered on the state in Zazen. When we sit in Zazen, we neither concentrate on our thoughts, nor on our perceptions of the external world. We sit in a state that is in the middle between thinking and feeling. This is why Buddhism is called the Middle Way.

And in the state of action, we are whole; our body and mind are one at the moment of the present. This means that there is no separate body and no separate mind. Only something that is both body-and-mind at the same time. You could call it “unbroken wholeness” as David Bohm did. When we are in the state of action, there is nothing separate, and we are not aware of “me” or “mind” or “body” or “pain.”

In past ages, this state has been described as “Ineffable” or “Ungraspable” or “Empty.” meaning that we cannot see it with our mind. We can only be in it. And this state is rather peculiar because it is always right here at this moment, just in this place. But as soon as we think about it, we miss it. Because to think about action is to take it for a concept. It is not a concept; it is a real state at the moment of the present.

So working from this rather strange definition we have something called action. Rather wider, but including, the sort of action we would normally associate with the word.

Master Dogen says that when we are in the state of action, when we are acting, we are free. Because we are not bound by our thinking about the world. We take off the glasses of civilized knowledge and belief, and experience the world as it is. Although we are bound by the limits of who and where we are, we are free in the present moment.

Now I want to look at this state called action from a physiological point of view. The physiology of Zazen is not completely known, but we can get some way towards it.

As many of you know, most of the body’s unconscious functions are regulated by the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). It is formed of two antagonistic parts; the sympathetic system and the parasympathetic system. These two systems work against each other to prepare the body for fight or for flight.

The sympathetic system causes the organs to prepare for fight. It makes us feel aggressive. Increased heart rate, dilated pupils, relaxed lungs, dry mouth and so on.

The parasympathetic system causes the body to prepare for flight. It makes us feel passive. The heart slows, the pupils contract, the body relaxes.

The body seems to function most effectively when these two systems balance each other, when the ANS is in balance. Then we are neither too aggressive nor too passive.

When we sit with our legs crossed and our spine naturally straight, with the head balanced on the neck, the ANS is encouraged to come into a state of balance, and in that state of balance we feel peaceful. Not unduly troubled by thoughts, and not caught by our senses. Somewhere in the middle.

So the state that Buddhism calls action can be identified with the state when our ANS is balanced. It seems strange to say that the center of Buddhism is a physical state, and not some special spiritual state. But this is the fact. Although many people insist that Buddhist practice will allow us to achieve some special state, which they sometimes call “enlightenment,” the masters of the past have without exception insisted that the Buddhist state is not a special state, but our normal balanced state. When we enter the normal balanced state we become fully human beings. And we see the world in front of us as it is. We are awake to reality. We are buddha.

But of course there are many other actions in our daily lives besides sitting in Zazen. We can say that any time we are in a state where we are fully immersed in the present, not aware of ourselves as separate from what we are doing, not reflecting on ourselves, or monitoring our own state, then we are acting in the Buddhist sense. So action occurs in all the activities of day-to-day life. We are always acting. From moment to moment.

But the strange fact is, because we have such powerful intellects, our mind covers up the simple nature of what we are doing in the present with interpretations, judgments, intentions, hopes, fears, and so on. And so we miss the fact that is in front of us.

Buddhism teaches us that to notice the simple fact in front of us – that we are acting in a state of oneness in the present moment – is to realize what reality is, or to be awake to reality. And it says that when we throw ourselves into what we are doing in the moment of the present, we make ourselves balanced too. We can recognize this fact in other people. Many of the kinds of people we call “great human beings” lead lives of simple action: the musician, the sculptor, the athlete. All of these people lead lives based on simple action in the present.

To practice Zazen every day is to make action the center of our life. Because the state of action is also a physical balance in the ANS, the state stays with us, whether we

want it or not. So we can say that Zazen stays with us throughout the day, enabling us to stay in the present, not to be distracted by thoughts, dreams, strong intentions. Nor to be caught by our senses. To be in this state, Master Dogen says is to be a “great human being.” Not a god, not someone above others, not someone special, but a normal human being, immersed in the activities of everyday life.

There is a story from ancient China about a Buddhism called Ho-on. He was a layman, studying Buddhism while working in society. This is what he said:

The mystical power and wondrous function,  
Carrying water and collecting firewood.

This says that the essence of Buddhism is contained in simple everyday tasks. And those simple actions are mystical and wondrous.

So practicing Zazen is our standard of action. But action itself permeates our life. Without acting, there is no life.

And action is always in the present moment. It is impossible to act in the past. The past has already gone. It is impossible to act in the future. It has not yet arrived. We act in the present.

And concrete action is always at this place. The only person who can act is myself. The only place I can actually act is here. Although I may have many ideas about what I want other people to do, the only influence I have on the world is my action here and now. This is the fact.

To act is to be happy, to be free in the present. It is our life itself.