

The Nature of Experience — Lecture 1

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The theme I want to talk about in this series of lectures is what I have entitled “the nature of experience.” I have tried to make each talk complete in itself because, otherwise, if people come to one lecture who haven’t been to a previous one it’d be a little bit difficult to pick up. But although I hope the talks will be independent in themselves, I’m following a kind of theme on the nature of experience. I chose the title because I think that although we have a problem with words, the word “experience” for me describes something which is at the heart of Buddhism.

However, if we look in the dictionary there’s various meanings given for “experience.” I got the following meanings from a Collins dictionary. One meaning is “direct, personal participation or observation, actual knowledge or contact.” So, to experience something, to experience a pop festival—direct personal participation or observation. Then another meaning is “a particular incident, a feeling that the person has undergone”—‘I experienced depression,’ something like that. “A particular incident, a feeling that the person has undergone.” Then a third definition is “accumulated knowledge, especially of practical matters.” ‘He has experience in repairing cars’—accumulated knowledge, especially of practical matters. Then the next meaning is “to participate or undergo.” To participate in something or undergo something is to experience it. The last meaning in the dictionary is “to be emotionally or aesthetically moved by something or to feel something”—to experience pain, to experience pleasure, we say.

So that’s quite a wide range of meanings, but the meaning I want to concentrate on is probably best summed up in the second to last definition—to participate in or undergo something, to be part of something. In that meaning, which is the simplest meaning actually, we’re always experiencing something. At the most exciting level we might be experiencing something which is new and wonderful, so we say, ‘What a wonderful experience.’ Or we may be experiencing a kind of humdrum repetition of everyday life, and we might say, ‘Oh how boring, what a boring experience.’ So we put a judgment on the experience very often: ‘it was a nice experience,’ ‘it was a nasty experience,’ ‘it was a boring experience’ and so on. But no matter how we describe the experience, we never stop experiencing. That’s the meaning of experience that I mean. That which we never stop, is the meaning of experience.

So my talks are going to center on what it is we are experiencing. Sounds a bit stupid really: ‘What are we experiencing?’ Well, everybody knows what they’re experiencing—or do they? I want to suggest that it is very rare for us to notice what it is we’re experiencing at the simple and fundamental level. Because we’re carried away, we’re influenced by excitement, by boredom, by some value judgment, and we don’t notice what it is we are in fact experiencing much of the time.

Now that might be difficult to accept for some people; but if you think for a moment, there are activities where what we are doing is so repetitive that we can’t fail to notice what we are doing—very repetitive things. Maybe the easiest example is, for instance, walking, if we’re walking for some distance. Or other examples might be jogging, running, or swimming—mostly long-distance events or grueling events like a marathon where we’re doing the same thing over and over again. And that’s the reason: in these activities we’re doing something simple over and over and over

again—put your right foot forward, put your left foot forward, now put your right foot forward, now put your left foot forward. And if you're swimming, it's your right arm, then your left arm, then your right arm, then your left arm—very, very repetitive.

And everybody experiences these repetitive activities; and when we're repeating them we experience them. And what kind of experiences do we have? Well, based on my own experiences, I would like to suggest some things which we experience when we're doing some repetitive activity. For instance, from my own experience, sometimes I feel I'm in the same place but my legs are moving, but I'm not moving anywhere, just my legs are moving. Or another feeling, and this is quite common if you've been walking or running for a very long time, you feel suspended in some kind of world which is timeless and placeless, you're just doing your activity. Another impression is that I can't find any difference between me and the outside world; I'm wrapped up in doing what I'm doing and the world that's going past and the me that's being gone past don't seem to be separated so clearly. And another rather strange feeling I've often had when walking or climbing is that I'm standing still and the world is going backwards past me.

Now all these experiences sound a bit stupid if you write them down, but if you think about your own experience, like the last time you went for a walk or the last time you went for a swim, imagine or remember what kind of feelings there are; for example, a feeling of contentment. But those feelings are very, very simple, and it takes some kind of repetitive activity for us to notice. If we're doing something like using the computer or going shopping, that very simple repetitive activity, the state that we notice, is covered up by lots of other factors. But when we're walking for a long distance, swimming for a long distance, or playing a sport which continues for a long time, we can't help but notice. And these are the experiences that I want to talk about and around because they're so simple, and they're actually at the heart of what Buddhism calls "action."

Now, let me switch for a minute to look at some of the fundamental assertions of Buddhism, as we have learned from Master Dogen and Nishijima Roshi. First of all I want to look at what kind of assertions Buddhism makes. Then I want to show that the assertions that Buddhism makes and the very simple experiences that we don't usually notice are in fact rather similar. Buddhism says:

"Real is only what is here in this place and now at this time." Real is only what is here in this place and now at this time. Past and future don't exist. Real is only here and now. Past and future do not exist, they're not real.

"Body and mind are two faces of the same thing." I'm going to call that same thing "something," and the something that body and mind are two faces of we usually call "me" or "myself."

"The world that we live in is not the same as the world of our thoughts."

"Action is the key to our health and happiness."

And one more, "There is no good and bad in reality."

Now, if we think back to our memory of what we experience when we're engaged in a simple repetitive activity, like walking or swimming or running, "real is only here and now" is actually the very simple feeling we have when, for example, we are walking through the countryside. Of course, sometimes we are caught up in thoughts and we're riveted to something, but when we're actually

moving along rhythmically we don't feel there's any other place, there's no necessity to feel that there's any other place, there doesn't seem to be any other place. It's a very, very simple feeling.

And we don't usually, although we do sometimes, keep thinking about the past or the future. If we're reasonably healthy and happy and we're doing some kind of repetitive action or sport, we don't feel strongly about the past or the future. At least, if we go for a walk for a few hours and we spend the whole time thinking about the future, it means that we're worried. But when we're relaxed and normally enjoying ourselves, we don't think so much about the past and the future.

And I would suggest that we don't see anything clearly different which is called a body or a mind. It's a funny experience, but even just walking along is a very, very strange experience if we look at it very basically. There's something walking along and there is thoughts coming and going and there's a world going past, but we tend not to separate ourselves from the external world. Of course if we're walking through a crowd with lots of other people this may change, somebody might walk into us and then we may have to change our direction because somebody else is coming in our way. But if, for example, we're walking out in the countryside alone where there are no distractions like that, then there's no room to make a distinction between something called body and something called mind.

And we can see very clearly, using the example of walking because it's most familiar to me, that when we are walking we do have thoughts and they catch us and we spend a few seconds or minutes thinking about something. But then we notice, 'Oh, there's a stone there' or 'The scenery's changed,' and we clearly notice that we're thinking. So when we're walking along we can see that there is something that is our thoughts and then there's also the place in front of us, and we can see quite clearly that they're different.

People who do sports usually say that doing sports keeps them healthy. And the reason that sports are so popular recently is simply that people want to be healthy. Exercise means health, and health means happiness. So I think in the modern world people generally accept that some kind of activity, some kind of exercise or sport, does make us feel relaxed or healthy, and therefore happy.

And the last one, "there is no good and bad in reality." When we're engaged in some kind of activity like walking, running, swimming or whatever, we don't usually get wrapped up with issues of good or bad. If we are with a partner and we come to a fork in the road and the partner wants to go one way and you want to go the other way, you could well have an argument: 'No, I'm right, you're wrong, that's the way,' 'No, no, this is the way.' But that's not the activity of walking; you stop walking and you have a little discussion about right and wrong. But while you're walking you can't find anything called "right" or "wrong." And as most people here tonight know, what I'm talking about is the same simple state that we experience in Zazen.

Now what I'm trying to get at is that the very simple state which Buddhism is talking about is present in all activity, but it's overlaid by our feelings and our impressions and social conventions so that we don't notice it. But although we don't notice it, it's still present. So even though we may not feel any of those particular feelings when we walk across the road outside here to the

station—waiting for the traffic light, crossing the road, stepping aside because somebody's in the middle of the path, going around the corner by the shop and so on, we may not have any period during that time when we feel any of those things, but what I'm suggesting is that actually all those things are present.

So if they're all present, and we can notice this quite clearly when we do something which is of a very repetitive nature in terms of the activity, if they're present why don't we notice them? Well, I'm suggesting that the reason we don't notice them is because we live in society, and society is a construction which we all agree on, which is not based on those simple factors which I've mentioned. We don't have any rule in society that says, "there's no good and bad." There's no teaching in school and you can't find any companies who say, "only here and now is real." No, schools and companies and society at large are concerned with the past and the future—last year's sales figures, last term's exam results, tomorrow's sales figures, next year's exam results. Past and future are very, very important to society.

So we have some very simple experiences which everybody notices in certain situations, but which are almost impossible to notice when we are in normal everyday life in a modern city. And what I am interested in is the way that modern society and modern civilization trains us to cover up the very simple experiences which are at the heart of Buddhist belief, and which we know exist from the practice of Zazen. And I want to examine this by looking at the way that social institutions, for example, cover up our simple experiences, the way that language helps us to look at the world in a certain kind of way and sometimes to miss the very simple nature of what's in front of us, and so on.

So over the weeks, if I can manage it, I want to look at lots of different facets, lots of different ways how a very, very simple and natural experience which is always present gets kind of covered up. And also, why Buddhism says that that experience is important and what Buddhism says about experiencing that simple state. And I thought that the best place to start is to think about babies, because when a baby is born it doesn't have any social training, it doesn't have any education, and it doesn't have any language. And because of those facts babies have no option but just to be as they are; there's nothing else they can be. So if you look at a little baby you'll see that a little baby is very simple, it doesn't have any ambitions, ideas, intentions or anything. It's just there. And that very simple state might be a good starting point to talk about the simple nature of experience.

So I thought I'd start next week's lecture with a talk about babies and some of the things that scientists have discovered or guessed about what it's like to be a baby, and then what happens when the baby gets a bit older, and what Buddhism might say about those kind of experiences. But I'll stop talking now and if we've got any questions we can have a discussion.

Do you think the state we are in in simple movement might be similar to the state of a baby?

I think it might be, however, I can't prove it at all. And even psychologists who are studying babies behavior and who draw conclusions, although they can prove scientifically by tests whether a baby recognizes a baby or not, for example, there's no fundamental way to know. But we can

believe it. We can say, 'Well it seems to be acceptable, yes I believe it.' In the same way that recently John Glenn and the other astronauts who had been up circling around the world came to Japan and described their experiences to the schoolchildren here and showed them pictures and the children believed it. Although the children themselves have never been up in the space shuttle and have never looked out of the space shuttle's window, and nor have we, we believe it.

We believe it because belief also has a social component. We are taught, because we grow up in society, that certain things are necessary for belief. For instance, scientific belief: as long as we can see something which people accept called a photograph, then we can believe something. So for example, if my brother shows me a photograph of himself with the Sultan of Brunei, then I believe he met the Sultan of Brunei, because of a photograph. But in fact, if we look at the real situation, all we're looking at is a piece of paper with colors on it and shapes, but we accept that as a proof, so we believe.

And nothing I am saying is a criticism of our social structures, because that is the way things are. But I want to try and show in these talks that the social structures make up a kind of reality, a social reality, which we all accept and live in. But the Buddhist meaning of reality is far more basic and much closer to what I was talking about earlier. But it doesn't reject some kind of social reality that we learn and that we live in.

What do you mean by the statement 'there is no good and bad in reality,' and how does that relate to morals?

I would like to talk about that in more detail later, but the statement 'there is no good and bad in reality' sounds like it means anything goes, anything is okay. However, it doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean there is nothing called "right action." It simply means that "good" and "bad" are concepts. We give a kind of judgment to things in our minds as being good or bad, or right or wrong, but in the real situation we can't find any concepts. And the best way to think about it, to be simple, is if you are wholeheartedly doing something.

For example, if you're wholeheartedly running down the street to help somebody who fell over, and in that situation other people are also doing something to help, then there's no room while you're acting to see anything called "good" or anything called "bad." Afterwards you might say, 'Oh that guy who came to help did the wrong thing,' or 'Oh, I shouldn't have done that, I should have done this.' That's afterwards. But in the moment when you're acting, there is no time, there is no room, to make any kind of judgment called "good" or "bad." So in a very simple fact, in the moment, concepts don't exist, or when we're actually acting or doing something wholeheartedly we can't think about good or bad. That's the meaning.

But as we've heard at Nishijima Roshi's lectures, the question of morality needs a lot of discussion, so I'd like to discuss it at much more detail later.

Talking about repetitive action, I had a job a long time ago where one of my functions was to put letters into envelopes for a big mailing list. It was almost like a production line, and I quite enjoyed

the kind of repetitive nature of it, fold and put in, fold and put in. And at the same time I found it quite enjoyable because in many ways everything kind of disappeared except this action. However, I didn't always feel I was just doing this action nice and sincerely and, you know, right here. I could go off into this other world of thinking about something which was much more interesting than the job, and I was gone. Of course, my body was still actually doing this folding. So there's a vast kind of power of that mental area to take over a situation.

That's right, and we can notice it very clearly when we do repetitive things. Depending on how fully we are involved, we can notice that we drift off—even when we're walking we can do it. But I think that when we feel healthy and happy and we are putting all our effort into something, then we don't drift off. I don't mean to suggest that drifting off means you're not healthy or happy, but simply that you don't seem to do it. And then of course there are different kinds of activities. So when you're putting letters into envelopes you are not involved with your whole self, the same with word processing or something like that. But if you're doing something like hiking or running or swimming, it's much more involving, it's a much more complete experience.

Why is that? What is the difference between simple walking and stuffing letters into envelopes?

Well, physically you're moving more of your body and you're moving along from one place to another place so you're balancing, and balance, for instance, requires all of your muscles to move—the human balance is incredible. So if you're walking you're constantly balancing. Your eyes and your head are part of the balance, and your arms and legs are all involved in it. But if you're sitting like I am and you're just moving bits of paper, then it doesn't require so much of your body. So that's a physical difference.

So the human being, or any animal but especially humans, walking on two legs is an incredibly complex and all-encompassing activity. Just walking. We think walking is just, you know, walking. So I walk down the street and think about other things, which is possible. But if you really walk you tend not to think. If you play soccer or something like that there's not much time for thinking. You think when you stop, then you're off again. You can't say there's no thinking, but the thinking doesn't seem to be separate from what you're experiencing.

So I suppose we have to say that there are degrees of activity. Not degrees of action, but degrees of activity. And actually, although I don't think anyone has done any research on it, if you think about when we practice Zazen, sitting in that posture with our legs crossed and our arms like this and keeping our head still, you can notice that we are in fact involving all of our body all of the time, although not necessarily consciously. But we are moving from side to side and our head is moving like this and we adjust our arms from time to time and we straighten our posture, and it's quite an all-involving activity.

And I feel that's why Zazen can be the kind of standard activity, the standard repetitive activity. And it feels to me just like the same all-encompassing repetitive activity of walking in the hills—I can't find so much difference. I don't mean that we can walk in the hills instead of practicing Zazen, but I did lots of walking for many years and then when I started practicing Zazen I found that

similarity. Nishijima Roshi said that Zazen is the essence of action, and I have to say I agree with him. It's the same essential action that you get in swimming or other all-encompassing sports, like walking for example.

But, like anything, you can sit in Zazen and if you don't stop yourself you can get wrapped up in your thoughts. That's why Nishijima Roshi says that if we start thinking and notice it, we should stop. So we can change even Zazen itself into something which involves a lot of thinking unless we keep our posture, so it's no different to doing any other kind of activity. We have to put ourselves into it, as it were.

I think me describing this simple experience sounds almost too simple. But although it sounds almost too simple, I think it's the heart of Buddhism. But, based on that very simple experience Buddhism then goes on to theoretically explain why it is we live in a society, and what we should do, and how we should act, and so on. So just because the heart of Buddhism is a very simple activity, it doesn't mean that the whole of Buddhism is very simple. It's very simple and very complex too.

And I would like to point out one thing regarding all the activities I mentioned. You might have been imagining what it was like to do those activities, at least I was, but we should notice that imagining what it is like to do those activities is completely and utterly different from doing them. And this is the reason why we practice Zazen, and why we practiced Zazen before the talk tonight, because actual experience is completely different from talking about the experience—so my talk about experience is completely different from what I'm trying to say. And we should remember that, and if we notice that fact then Buddhism immediately becomes much more complicated than it seems when we think about, 'Oh, I see, it's just a simple feeling, I go walking and I get this simple experience, and that's Buddhism, oh yes, yes. Body and mind are the same.' Wait! Wait!! We're only talking about it, and talking about it is not the same as doing it.

So we practice Zazen, and then we talk about it, then we practice Zazen again, and then we talk about it. And we can never close the gap between talking about it and doing it, but we keep on talking about it and then doing it and then talking about it and then doing it. And in doing that, as we can see from Nishijima Roshi's lectures, we can kind of approach a description of what this simple experience is. But if we don't practice Zazen, I can write on the board and talk about it all night and then we can say, 'Oh yes, we've done it! We've described what experience is,' but we haven't at all—it's impossible.

Sometimes I hear the expression from Nishijima Roshi or from yourself about "sincere action" or "wholehearted action" or "mindfulness," which is used in many Buddhist books. How would you define "sincere action"?

If we go backwards and say, 'When we are in the state where there is no place or time to think, when we are in the state where we don't notice the past or the future, when we are in a state where we can't see ourselves separate from the external world,' then at that time we are acting fully—which is the opposite way around. So, in a way, we need to see what it is that action is by our own experience; so we can have some kind of set of criteria and then we can lead our lives, and then we can say, 'Oh,

I notice that I wasn't... what was I doing then?' And sometimes we can't remember clearly what we were doing but we were doing something; and if we keep on watching ourselves and thinking about it we can catch something which we are doing which might be called action. Because that which we are doing which might be called action doesn't have a separation between us and the world, is not in any time or place, is not in the future or in the past, but is only here. 'Ah, that might have been action'—too late, it's gone, do it again.

So I think that's why Nishijima Roshi always says that the most important thing is to practice Zazen regularly. Not to sit down necessarily, you know, for eight hours a day for five days one time each year, but to practice everyday. Because in practicing everyday we get some kind of "Ah, uh huh, I see." But we can't kind of catch it. We can try and talk about it and say, 'Ah yes, I see, that's action'; not, 'Action is a, b, c, d,' but, 'I see, that's action.'

But we can only notice it after the fact, so what we notice is a kind of idea. So it's kind of amusing really, we can notice after the fact but then it's kind of too late because it's become an abstract thing. So we're in this amusing situation where in order to look at something which is not abstract, we abstract it. In order to look at something which is not an idea, we make an idea. And I think the reason is, is that there's no other way for human beings. A baby might be existing in unconditioned reality, but it can't say anything about it.

Perhaps we should finish there. Thank you very much for listening to me.