

The Nature of Experience—Lecture 6

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In the first of these talks, I spoke about the simple experience that we get when we are acting, and I said the experience is so simple that we don't notice it. Then another week, I talked about the development of science and how in the fifteenth century or thereabouts human beings, firstly in Europe, noticed that the world didn't work in a spiritual way. Up to that time people had thought that spiritual power could change physical things. So for instance, if you wanted to make the sun shine today, if you had some special spiritual power you could make it happen. And the head of the spiritual power was called God, so God could do everything. God controlled the world. God was spirit; the world that God controlled was matter. So the way to change things in the material world was to talk to God. If you talked to God, he then changed things in the material world because of some special spiritual power.

But then around the fifteenth century people noticed that this was not exactly true, that if you discovered how nature worked then you could make nature work for your benefit. And that process was the beginning of science—discovering how nature worked and then making nature work for you. For instance, and this is a very simple example, people discovered that if there is a river flowing and if they put a small piece of pipe in a certain place, then some of the river goes a certain way. And if they make a channel, then some of the water will come round to the place where they want it. Now, that's a very simple example which human beings discovered thousands of years ago. And if you look at the electronic device inside a tape recorder, this is the same principle exactly as the way the tape recorder is working. In order to make a tape recorder, human beings discovered that if you have not water but electrons flowing along, they flow inside a wire and you can make them flow, just like water, in many ways to do many different things.

So the principle of flowing water and flowing electricity is the same. But more important than the principle is that human beings discovered how to make water work for them, or how to make electricity work for them. And this process of discovering and then making something work for our benefit is called technology. And now in modern times science and technology are so pervasive that we don't notice. We don't notice that the way we think is connected with science, and the things we believe are connected with science.

Today I'd like to point out what the difference is between science and Buddhism, very simply. For instance, in the case of the tape recorder, in order to make science work we had to find out something called electrons. And discovering the electron has a very long history, but sometime about less than a hundred years ago an English scientist called Rutherford discovered the smallest particles of existence called atoms. He said that in the middle of the atom is something called a nucleus and around the nucleus there are some things called electrons, which are moving round just like the sun and the stars. And there are also other particles called neutrons moving around in a different way. So he discovered this fact, and we all learn it at school, so we know there are atoms. There is an atom, and inside the atom there is a nucleus and electrons and neutrons.

But actually, Rutherford didn't say that at all. He didn't say that reality is like this, he said that this kind of picture may be useful to think about reality. But after we think about this picture, it's too

difficult for us to think, 'Maybe it's true,' just we say 'Yes it's true. There's electrons, there's something called a nucleus, there's something called an atom.' But in fact it's not true. And if we look at many, many scientific facts we can find that actually they may not be facts—but we believe them.

So what do we believe? Do we believe there is an electron and a nucleus and an atom? Well, actually what we believe is the words—"Oh, electron," "Oh, atom." And sometimes we don't know clearly what it means, but the word we know. So, the word, 'Ah yes I know, atom, atom, atom,' 'Ah yes, electron, inside there, yes, yes I know, I know,' and we believe it, so we don't think too closely. So in science we believe many words which stand for something that are not so clear. And those words make some kind of picture in our brain; and that picture in our brain becomes reality for us.

So science has two parts: the subject part, which is us; and the object part, which is what we are believing in, what we are looking at, what we are touching. And the picture that we build up on one side is not from our own experience, but from teaching and learning and studying—'Ah, the earth moves around the sun,' 'The moon moves around the earth,' 'The distance from the earth to the moon is 525,200 kilometers,' 'The flu virus travels through the air to other people,' 'On my hand there may be germs from other people so I better wash them.' But none of these things can I see—none of them. But I believe them: they're facts. Of course, they're not wrong, I'm not saying that facts are wrong, but simply they're facts that we learn—we learn a world view.

So instead of science we can say "scientific world view"—a way to view the world. And that scientific world view has developed over more than four hundred years since the fifteenth century when human beings started to notice this world view. They built it slowly and slowly, then they taught their children, and then the children grew up into adults and then taught their children. So the whole of scientific knowledge has grown, slowly—but we don't notice. But that's the world we live in.

Now the reason that I called these talks "The nature of experience" is because Buddhism has a different view to the view of science, but it does not exclude science. Buddhism says that reality is not what we learned or what we saw on the television, but what we actually experience here and now. So, where do we put experience? There is the person, the subject; there is the world, the object. Experience is when the subject acts with the object—so, it's action.

When the subject acts on the object there is something called experience. As I hit the board I experience something. Before I hit the board I can think about the experience. After I hit the board I can remember the experience. But the experience itself is just here at this moment. So we can say action, which is real experience, is the subject acting on the object. So in that case, and this is the area of Buddhist belief or Buddhism, Buddhism needs a subject and an object, but it's not concerned with just the subject or just the object, it's concerned with the interface between the subject and the object.

So, whereas Buddhism agrees with the scientific world view, it says the scientific world view is looking at the world from another place. But Buddhism is the person who is looking at the world

interfacing with the world or acting. So we have to say that although science has given us a lot of information and produced many useful things, what is in front of us which may be due to science, a watch or a table and so on, are not the same as the scientific world view. The things which science produces are not science. The things which technology produces are not technology. But at the same time, Buddhism says that the scientific world view is a way of looking at the world. And the scientific way of looking at the world is so much of a habit for us that we don't notice that it's a way of looking at the world, and we think that it's the world itself.

One example of the type of result of that kind of mistake is a discussion that is going on at the moment between Nishijima Roshi and one of his students, concerning understanding of the human body and Zazen. If we use the scientific view, we can look at the human body, the spine, and the brain and so on, and scientifically or medically we can analyze how the brain sends a signal and the muscles work here and here and so on. And we can work out scientifically how the posture can be kept upright while we are practicing Zazen. And Nishijima Roshi's student is studying a scientific explanation of the balance we get when we practice Zazen. And his explanation about how the body works is very exact, and he has great confidence because the scientific explanation is very, very powerful. We feel that if the scientific explanation is perfect then it must be true.

But Nishijima Roshi wants to explain to him something which is beyond science. And that is that the state in Zazen when we are sitting is not only an explanation of how the body works, but a real experience at the present moment which is not only body and not only thinking—but body and mind together. But to catch that very simple experience in Zazen of body and mind together at the moment of the present, if we have a very strong belief in the scientific explanation and we think it is the only explanation, then we can never see the Buddhist explanation, which is beyond science.

We usually think that something which is beyond science may be untrue, something beyond science may be some kind of strange belief. But Buddhism insists that the actual reality in front of us is beyond science, but it does not deny science. So the discussion between Nishijima Roshi and his student is going on and on and on, because the student has a very clear scientific explanation and Nishijima Roshi keeps pointing to something which is beyond scientific explanation, but the student doesn't want to throw away the scientific explanation. And we can find this situation very often with very scientific logical people, because we are trained to have a very, very scientific view of the world at school and so on.

Another example, in the chapter of *Shobogenzo* entitled *Sansuigyo*, or in English “The mountains and rivers preach the Dharma,” Master Dogen makes many pictures with his words. For instance, ‘Here is a mountain and here are the clouds and the clouds are moving past the mountain very fast, so we look up from the mountain and we see the clouds and then we see the mountain moving backwards. So we can say the clouds are stationary and the mountain is moving backwards, or we can say the clouds are moving and the mountain is not moving.’ And there are many examples in this chapter about these kinds of situations.

Now, scientifically, the scientist says, ‘No, no, the mountain is stationary, because the mountain is on the earth and the earth is stationary and it's impossible for the mountain to move in a short time.

And the clouds are moving because we can put something in the air and we can measure the wind. The wind is blowing the clouds and the wind is blowing this way and the clouds are moving with the wind, and if the wind is very strong the clouds move very fast...' and so on. And we say, 'Yes, yes, yes.' But Master Dogen says, 'No, both are true, both are true! The clouds are moving and the mountain is still. The mountain is moving and the clouds are still. The river which is running beside the mountain is still and the mountain is moving. It depends on your point of view!'

But the scientific point of view is only half of this. The scientific point of view says, 'Well yes, yes, the mountains are moving if you think about the fact that the mountain is on the earth and the whole earth is moving around, of course. But the mountains actually are still, and the clouds are actually some kinds of small pieces of water inside the air and the air is moving...' and so on. So, very convincing. But Master Dogen insists that that's one point of view, and in our experience at the present moment we can find more than one point of view. So science can never exactly explain our real experience.

Of course, science is extremely powerful and using science we can make nature work for our benefit, but it's only one way to look at the world. And as most sincere scientists realize, the facts of science that we believe are true are not facts at all, but a kind of belief. So all the things which we were told when we were at school, scientific fact, whether they are fact or not is a problem. But of course it doesn't matter whether there is a real atom or not, we can still get up in the morning and we can still go to bed at night. But on a larger scale, the view of the world which we share from our education is very scientific although we don't realize it, and we accept that view as true and complete. But if we believe Master Dogen's teachings, that view is incomplete. And to get a complete view we practice Zazen, because in practicing Zazen, instead of learning what we are experiencing in the world we actually experience it for ourselves.

Are there any questions?

Buddhism sounds almost revolutionary...

Buddhism is learning a different world view to the one which we grew up with, to the one which our teachers and parents taught us. So it's kind of revolutionary.

I was a cancer patient and I spent a lot of time in hospital. The doctor's told me 'If you survive for the next three years, you're lucky.' Three years is only a thousand days. When I got out of hospital I was recuperating near the sea, and looking at the sea I could find God. I could see crabs going along the sand and fish moving in the ocean and the more I looked at it the more I thought it's a miracle. That's where I find there must be somebody, or some God, up there somewhere.

Well it's very tempting to think that there is somebody who made everything. Buddhism says the whole world is, as you say, a kind of miracle, and the whole world makes itself. So in that case, the whole world makes itself means the whole world is God itself. So in Buddhism, God and the universe are the same thing. So God is making himself at every moment.

Last night when I was doing Zazen a little cat came over beside me, and he was a work of art—he had eyebrows, and a nose and everything designed very nicely. I think someone special must have designed all the animals and so on.

In olden times to think that there was a special being outside of the universe was very sensible and people could believe it. But now many people say that if there is a God outside of the universe, then what kind of thing is outside of the universe that makes the universe? So, thinking logically, or scientifically, people find it impossible to imagine something outside of the universe that made the universe. If it's outside the universe it must be in another universe, so then there must be two universes: then, who made the second universe? And so on.

Scientific thought is very critical like that. If there's no scientific thought we can believe that kind of thinking very happily, and we can say God made everything and it's a miracle. But to solve the problem of the scientific criticism which says that the idea that God is outside the universe can't be true, Buddhism says, 'God *is* the universe, it's the same thing.' So the cat is a miracle, and the cat is God, and the miracle is God; so everything is God. So in that way Buddhism doesn't deny some kind of creation, but it insists that the creation is now, and it's a miracle. So every moment is a miracle, and you're quite right—we can notice it.

Buddhism says that God creates the whole world at the present moment and science is part of that, but we shouldn't mistake science for the whole of the world. And in order to notice the whole of the world we practice Zazen. Practicing Zazen we can notice the whole of the world, but we can't say what it's like—but we can try. Buddhism says that God is here, in this moment, here. And so every moment which is here contains the whole universe, and the whole universe is God. So the important thing in Buddhism is the universe is here and now at this moment, and in that universe we can find God.

Perhaps we should finish there. Thank you very much.