

Summer Sesshin 2003

Talk number 1

By Eido Mike Luetchford.

I thought that in the six talks we have between now and Sunday, we could go through the chapters of the Shobogenzo in a rather general fashion. But before that, one of the koan stories came into my mind this morning, so I wanted to just talk about that.

I think it's very important that we have a sense of what is worth preserving and what is not worth preserving in Buddhism. Nearly all schools of Buddhism have come from ancient origins, and many of the traditions and habits are very old, and frankly we don't know the origin of many of them, but some of them make sense to us, some of them we just do. But one difficulty is, as Buddhism moves between different cultures, we don't.... it's not very easy to see what is a tradition from another culture, and what is from Buddhism, and this is quite a problem. If we want to find out what's worth preserving and what can disappear, this is a problem. And that's all connected really with how we obey rules in Buddhism. Gautama Buddha himself made precepts and rules which people tried to follow. And the reason they tried to follow them is because it made their lives less disturbed, or undisturbed. But whenever there are rules which we follow for a reason, after a while we forget what the clear reason was and just follow the rule. This story is about that kind of situation. The story is number 43 in Book One of the Shinji Shobogenzo, and it's about Master Kiso Chijo, who was a Buddhist master in China in about the 9th or 10th century. Master Chijo was cutting grass outside the temple. The master of another temple arrived, so you can imagine it; he is out cutting grass like we were this morning; he looks up and there's a master from another temple there, who comes up to him and greets him. Just then, Master Chijo notices a snake nearby, and without hesitating, Master Chijo who is holding a sickle to cut the grass, cuts the snake in half. The master of the other temple then says to him, "I've heard about you, you've got quite a reputation, but now I just see that you're a very rough Buddhist monk". So that was a kind of criticism; the master felt that Master Chijo's behaviour was rough or uncouth or violating the rules of Buddhism which say you shouldn't kill. But Master Chijo says back to him, "am I the one who is rough or is it you?" So this made the other master think a bit, so he says, "Oh, what do you mean by rough then?" Or, "What does the word 'rough' mean?" So to demonstrate Master Chijo's own understanding of the word "rough", he takes hold of the sickle and sticks it in the ground handle first. Now that's a stupid thing to do, so he was demonstrating by sticking the sickle in the ground handle first, something which was purposeless or stupid, or not practical. And the other master says, "Ok, if that's what you mean by rough, what's not rough?" And Master Chijo pretended to kill the snake again. So then the other master said to him, " Hmmm, maybe you're right, I'll follow your example". And Master Chijo replied to him, "I'll let you follow my example for a while if you like, but do you understand why I killed the snake?" And the other master didn't say anything. That's the end of this simple story. It demonstrates something very important, and that is, that even Buddhist rules - we can't hold to them in real situations all the time; we have to be free to act according to the situation. So although there is a Buddhist precept which says

refrain from taking life, Master Chijo, without any hesitation, cut a snake in half. The other monk was thinking the master had broken a precept but didn't notice the reason why he had done it – the snake was coming up to them and was dangerous. So he acted intuitively without thinking, in a dangerous situation. And in doing so he broke a precept. And although he explained this to the other master, the master didn't really click – he kind of agreed and said, "Well ok, if you say so". He didn't see that there was a real, vital situation there which needed some kind of action. Of course, this is a somewhat extreme example, but what it illustrates is that if we just keep thinking, you know, "I must be balanced", or "I must obey Buddhist precepts" or "I must be mindful" or something like that, this actually makes us stuff or rigid, and unable to respond to reality. And reality is always changing, and we never know what it is before it happens. So we have to be prepared to throw away even the Buddhist precepts in the real situation. And there are other examples in the Shobogenzo which illustrate the same point. The reason there are so many examples and stories, is because we have a tendency, once we have a set of rules or traditions, to follow them very carefully, and we don't want to let go of them. But this makes us stiff and a little rigid. So we shouldn't be afraid to simply act – not to worry about rules. But at the same time, the rules are there. So there's a Buddhist precept which says don't get angry, but sometimes we can't avoid getting angry. There's a Buddhist precept which says don't take life unnecessarily, but sometimes we can't avoid it. So to act in accordance with the situation in Buddhist behaviour, and breaking the precepts is not such a huge thing compared with our freedom to act in the circumstances.

I just remembered that story, and somehow I wanted to talk about it.

If anyone wants to say something, or join in, as most of you know, it's better to say it when you want to say it; if you wait till the end you've usually forgotten what you want to say. This document I have given to you is a printout of the introductions to all of the chapters of the Shobogenzo. The document can be found on our website. That's why it says "return to TOC" – this is not some mystical instruction, it means return to the Table Of Contents. The reason we study the Shobogenzo is because at the moment it's one of the very few books which set out the whole of Buddhism in all its facets. For example, what the difference is between the precepts and reality and so on. But unfortunately it's not so easy to read. And those of you who have studied it a bit, or a lot, can realise that even our translation into English is quite difficult to understand. However, if we persevere for a few months or a few years, we can find a kind of pattern in the rather quaint English translation of the medieval Japanese, and it becomes much easier. So for a while it's very difficult and seems like a load of rubbish sometimes, but if you persevere, it becomes easier, because there is a pattern in the way that Master Dogen writes. He didn't write these as chapters, though they are chapters in our translation, they were written, or given, as talks. So each one is on a different subject. They are in chronological order, so as far as historians can find out, the first chapter, which is called Bendowa, was the first written talk which survives from Master Dogen's time, and the last in the book is the last one he wrote before he died.

The difficulty with the Shobogenzo is to extract from it the simple realistic subject that Master Dogen is talking about. Bendowa is one of the more straightforward chapters and is a very nice start to the book. If we just read the introduction, which was written by Nishijima Roshi, who translated the Shobogenzo into modern Japanese, and with the help of his students, into English. First of all he

always explains the meaning of the title of the chapter, because just translating the titles is quite difficult sometimes:

***Ben* means “to make an effort” or “to pursue”, *do* means “the truth” and *wa* means “a talk” or “story”. Master Dogen usually used the word *bendo* to indicate the practice of Zazen, so *Bendowa* means a talk about pursuing the truth, or a talk about the practice of Zazen.**

So to Master Dogen, pursuing the truth is the practice of Zazen. Then we have a bit of historical information:

This volume was not included in the first edition of the Shobogenzo. It was found in Kyoto in the Kanbun era (1661 – 1673), and added to the Shobogenzo when the 95 volume edition was edited by Master Hangyo Kozen in the Genroku era (1688 – 1704).

That information suggests that in fact all of Master Dogen’s talks weren’t collected together in one lump. First of all they compiled a few, and as the centuries passed, more and more were added. The 97-chapter version of the Shobogenzo that we have contains all of the formal lectures which survive. We can’t possibly know whether there are others out there, but it seems we have all of them which have survived. So there are various different editions. Bendowa, the chapter itself, is rather nice because Master Dogen came back from studying in China when he was 27, then soon afterwards he wrote this chapter. The chapter explains what he found in China, and what he wanted to do next. He explains that he found in China something that he’d been looking for for many years, which he calls the truth. He found it by studying with his Chinese master whom he met there, a man called Tendo Nyojo. He learned from Master Tendo Nyojo something that was very different from what he’d studied in Japan before he went to China. The monks with whom he had studied in Japan didn’t have a clear understanding of what Buddhism was; he had lots of questions which they couldn’t answer. And also, they were pursuing some kind of spiritual meaning of Buddhism. Master Dogen wasn’t satisfied with something that was only spiritual, he wanted something real. And he found it. And he found it in the practice of Zazen. So when he says truth – *do* in Bendowa, he doesn’t mean something abstract. We use the word in English to mean something....almost something in our mind, we want to *know* what the truth is. But Master Dogen’s truth is not something that you know, it’s something in the practice of Zazen. So in a way, to understand what he means, we have to redefine the meaning of the words. So instead of thinking, “ok I know what truth means, so what is there that matches my meaning, in Zazen?”, it’s more helpful to say, “well I know what Zazen is because I’ve been practicing it for so many months or years, and that’s what he means by truth.” Truth is not an abstract concept in master Dogen’s writing, it’s something real. It’s the way things are, or the way the universe is.

So already, even in the first chapter, we run into difficulties with the way we normally use language to refer to abstract concepts, and the way Master Dogen uses it to refer to real states.

So then, after describing how he’s found the truth in China, he then says that he’s now back in Japan, he’s a young man, he’s very enthusiastic and has a lot of energy, and he’s wondering what he should do. Should he just sit around and wait for something to happen that matches what he feels, or should he go and do something? So he decides, and he records in this chapter that if he just sits down and waits for something to happen, there may be lots of people in Japan who are

misunderstanding what Buddhism is. So he feels he should start to explain what he has learned.

Q: Didn't the Buddha do the same – he decided to share the truth rather than keep it to himself?

It says in the writings of early Buddhism, that he was worried that when he explained the truth to his five old friends, Ananda and the others, whether they'd be able to understand him, but that he wanted to try to explain anyway. And I think in that, we might see our own states, we might learn a bit about Buddhism and then we might think, "if I meet someone who wants to know, what should I say to them?" Well if we start speaking, then something happens. So we can start to explain Buddhism to people, if there's an opportunity, and if we want to. Master Dogen says in another part of the Shobogenzo, that if we wait until we understand something completely before we teach it, we never start, and anybody who is a teacher knows that. I taught Maths for nearly ten years, and I taught myself the whole of Mathematics for ten years; I don't know what my students thought about it. Teaching is learning. So Master Dogen says in Bendowa, that he's going to do something, that he's going to let people know what he's learned.

Then he goes on to try to explain what Zazen is. And to explain what Zazen is, is difficult, because we can't quite describe it in words. So he uses a peculiar technique, which he employs all the way through the Shobogenzo, which is much easier to do in Chinese and in Japanese than it is in English, and that is, to reverse the subject and the object in his language. So normally I would say that I'm sitting on this zafu. And with that phrase, already we've constructed a particular way of looking at the world – subject (me), is sitting on object (zafu). So we've separated the situation into two parts – there's me (I, ego) and zafu. So Master Dogen wants to shake us out of that one specific viewpoint. And he does it by saying the opposite to what we'd normally say. He would say the zafu is sitting on me, or under me. Then he'd say both of these are true, that the zafu is sitting on me and I am sitting on the zafu. Then he'd say, well that's two viewpoints, and those two viewpoints are kind of opposed, so to get us out of that opposition, he would also say the zafu is sitting on itself, and he ends up by saying that I'm sitting on myself. And the reason he uses this peculiar technique is that he wants to, in language, to posit something that is free from our construction. Of course this is impossible, but he can approach that with his technique. So in the Shobogenzo we find many peculiar statements which sound backwards, and in Bendowa he uses this technique for the first time to try and describe Zazen.

Then after that, he goes on to pose a series of questions that people tend to ask about Buddhism, then gives his answer. These questions include for example; "some people say that we all have a soul, and that our soul lasts forever. Even when we die, our soul goes on and then comes back into another body, what do you think of that?" And he answers – "that's rubbish, that's only the teachings of the Brahman priests before Gautama Buddha". Then he poses another question – "some people say that we live many lives before this one", and attacks this view also. So they are very useful questions, because they are the common questions that people who are studying have. His answers are a little different to many of the answers you can read in books on Buddhism around today. He denies for example that there's any life before this one, and he denies that there's any life after this one. He says "this is it, this is our life, so we'd better get on with it". And so on.

So it's a very nice chapter, and it sets out Master Dogen's feelings about what he found in China, his view on how he would proceed now he's back in Japan, a little explanation of the experience of Zazen, and then answers to a lot of questions from people who want to know about Buddhism. That's Bendowa.

Anybody got any questions?

Q: Do we know anything about who received these lectures?

We can only find out who they were given to by looking at what was written at the end of the talk, it usually says it was written in so-and-so temple, and the date. And from that, there are some records which suggest what kind of people were in that temple. When he came back from China, he set up a temple in Kyoto, he was there for some years, and a group of monks came to study with him from another sect – I guess they weren't very happy with the Buddhism they were following. So certainly, some of his audience would have been Buddhist monks who had come from slightly different schools of Buddhism and maybe had slightly different ideas, and he wanted to put them straight. But also, there would have been lay people coming in from the neighbourhood, just people coming onto the temple. More than that I don't know, it's not so clear. There's a certain amount of discussion between scholars as to whether a particular chapter was written for lay people or especially for his closest disciples etc. But I don't know how they can reach a conclusion.

Q: Did he respect different schools of Buddhism?

He knew that he understood Buddhism, because Buddhism is the truth. That sounds a very arrogant statement. But if we understand what Master Dogen means by truth, then we can understand why he had this confidence. If we think, "oh, I want to find out what the truth is" in normal speech, it sounds like we want to find out some kind of secret which somebody else has and we don't. But Master Dogen doesn't mean it like that, what he wanted to find out was how to live. We all want to find out how to live, everybody on this Earth is trying to find out how to live. Some people think the way to live is to earn a great deal of money, then they'll be happy and be able to control people with the power that money gives them. So they go after that. And on the way there, they feel they are getting there. But when they get there, sometimes they're very unhappy. Some people think the way to live is to go off and live in a little cottage out in the hills and live a very peaceful and isolated life. So they go there and some of them are happy, but some who do this miss the city. So as we search for our way to live, we find out whether it works for us or not. So if we find something works for us, we know that it works for us don't we? If you meet somebody that you like, and you have a relationship with them for some time, you know intuitively if it's working or not, we can tell without having to think about it.

Q: That's rather a subjective view...

We call it subjective, because we have an idea that there are two kinds of things; subjective things and objective things. So subjective things being those which we almost make up from our own point of view, and objective things being things like scientific laws.

Q: Or the universal.

Or the universal. But in Buddhism, subjective things can be wrong, and objective things can be wrong. So what Buddhism says is for instance what the philosopher Karl Popper says – that objective discoveries of science can never be proved absolutely, but that we can try and disprove them. So Buddhist truth is not something that we need to call subjective or objective....

Q: It's not a conceptual truth...

Exactly, it's something we find out and we know that it's true. How do we know? Well, we know. If you stick your finger in a cup of hot tea, it burns you – you don't need to discuss it. There's a story in a book about Wittgenstein I was reading the other day, about a furious argument that he had with the philosopher Bertrand Russell. The argument was about whether there could be an elephant in the room in which they were having their discussion. Wittgenstein said that there was a possibility that there could be an elephant behind the settee, and Russell said that there was no elephant there – go and look! So we have to choose sometimes to believe something, and if I say there's an elephant behind the settee, we don't need to discuss it, you feel the truth of that don't you? So Buddhism says that if we get angry we disturb ourselves, that's absolutely true for me, I know it's true. It says, if we go to bed late, we can't get up in the morning. It says if we use harsh words to somebody, they're not so friendly to us, yes that's true. It says if we act, we can get rid of our mental disturbance. So all of that collection of simple intuitive truths that we don't need to deny to ourselves, all that put together, is Buddhism. We don't need the word Buddhism, we could call it "spiritual-scientific-philosophical-truth" or something, or we can call it nothing. But when we find something that's true, we recognise it immediately. So everything that he found out, he recognised as true, not only for him, but true. So in that sense it's a belief, but the feeling is not one of belief. For instance we can believe that there may be a god in heaven, or a life after this one, but we don't see it in front of us. But there are things I can see in front of me which are true. So the simple order of truth, not the abstract order of truth.

Q: But isn't abstract scientific truth even more a matter of faith, because we can't see, if you're not a scientist and don't look through a microscope at molecules, you're taking it as a matter of faith from the scientist that this is the truth, because that is what fits in with the world when you break something or set fire to it or....

Well the structure of the atom is a good example. The atom was never put forward as an actual description of reality, but as a model to understand the structure of very small particles. But it very quickly became a belief. So we all kind of believe that there are these very small things called atoms, and that there are electrons going around them, and the atom has a nucleus, and we even see pictures in scientific books. But the man who made this theory didn't intend to describe actual little particles, it was a model, or a way to understand something. And if we move more towards the frontiers of science, with relativity and the probability and quantum theories which came later, that simple model of the atom doesn't work. So we have to make a more sophisticated model.

Q: So that's a greater leap of faith, than it is to believe in our simple truths that fit us, so called subjective truths.

They're not always subjective. If I believe I'm always right, that may be subjective, if I believe I'm always wrong, that may be subjective. But if I believe that I'm sometimes right and sometimes wrong; sometimes I'm right and I

believe I'm wrong; sometimes I'm wrong and I believe I'm right; sometimes I'm right and I believe I'm right; sometimes I'm wrong and I believe I'm wrong; sometimes I don't know, then we can say, yes that's true!

So that long and complicated explanation describes something very simple, it's a lot simpler than saying I'm always right, but we can't put it into words, it says I'm complicated, or it says I'm a human being, or it says I'm this way and that way....

Q: *So it includes all possibilities?*

Of course, but not only does it include all possibilities, it describes the real situation, and the real situation is different to all possibilities. There are theories now about parallel universes, so we can say that there is a possibility that there are lots of universes and we are only in one of them. But I don't believe that, I think we're all in this room.

Q: *Inaudible*

Yes, It's true, how do we know? And if someone says, "well I know", we think – hmmm right. But if you feel you know and you don't say you know, that's not so helpful. If you feel you know and you say you know, people might feel you're being a bit arrogant or insistent. So in the end, to insist on the Buddhist truth is kind of dogmatic. So if I don't say what I believe, or what I think Master Dogen meant by truth, there's no possibility for anybody else to evaluate it. So I just say it, then people can make up their own minds. And Master Dogen does the same thing, he says what is true, from his mouth, then we can decide. And that's all that science does, and that's all that philosophy does. If you read a book about philosophy, there are many different philosophies through the centuries. Which one is right? Are they all right? Are none of them right? Who decides? Me. How do I decide? Well unfortunately, I just have to decide.

Q: *So in the end truths are subjective, we can't know, I mean...*

All ideas in our mind which we call truths are subjective, but there is something which we can call true, and that is the situation which exists now. So the situation which exists now, we can call true or real. And because there's a problem with words here, Buddhism uses the Sanskrit word Dharma, Dharma means; truth; law; custom; it has lots of meanings even in Sanskrit, but it means the way things are here, is definitely the way things are here. We can't deny that. The way things are here is no different from the way things are here is it?

Q: *No but Bertrand Russell and Wittgenstein can argue about them can't they?*

But Wittgenstein was saying that they *could* be different. Buddhism says that everything *could* be different, but what about, what is? Not "what *could* be", but WHAT IS.

Q: *But we can't know what is.*

We can't know what is, but we're in what is, and we act in what is.

Q: *It's a kind of faith.*

It has a faith-component, yes.

Q: *So I suppose that's the religious bit?*

You can say so.

Q: *A belief in Dharma isn't the same as our experience now.*

Yes, but we can't grasp our experience now intellectually.

Q: *Is it (inaudible) who said we have the blind spot in our minds?*

Did he?

Q: *When you say, what is experienced now, do you mean what is now?*

What is now.

Q: *So is that the experience of Mike Luetchford, or is it the experience of Toby Morgan, or Andrew Deakin? They're all different experiences aren't they?*

So "what is" is very complex, and it's called in the chapter in the Shobogenzo, The Complicated. And another chapter in the Shobogenzo calls it The Ineffable, because, you're right. But all of those, what you see; what I see; what Toby sees; what Toby doesn't see; what you don't see; what I see of you; what you don't see of me, all of those together is "what is".

Q: *Like intertwined in a net?*

Yes. So if we try and grasp it, we get into very complex descriptions, because our mind is being here and there, and we construct our net. But there is no net. There's just something. The net we construct exists in order to look at what is, but whether we look at it or not, it's here.

Q: *So would you go as far to say that it's beyond our experience? Your conscious experience at this very moment is very different from everybody else's....*

Is it?

Q: *I can't see my face....*

Q: *Is that the division between reality and the truth isn't it?*

Is it?

Q: *If we can't experience reality....*

It's impossible not to experience reality. We're all stuck in it. Even if we want to step out of reality, we can never do it. But, we can think.....

Q: *I was talking about reality not being channelled through our own personal experience....*

If we look for reality through our thinking about our experience, our thoughts about our experience, then we can't see it wholly, because our thoughts about experience are partial. So if we think about reality, our view is always partial. But

we can be in, we can act in reality, so when we do something we are experiencing reality.

Q: But what about my non-thinking, and Peter's non-thinking?

When you're not thinking, there's no thinking. So what's the problem?

Q: So our experience will be different.

When you're not thinking, there's no words, there's no concept of experience, there's just something. And when we sit in Zazen, sometimes we're thinking, and we may be thinking about what experience is, and sometimes we're concentrating on our body, the pain distracts us or the fly distracts us, or the sun through the window. But separate from those two states, there's another state, and in that state we don't have a train of thought in our minds, we're not caught by our physical perceptions – where are we? And the problem is that because we're not thinking, we can't say where we are, because there's no "we".

Q: And we can't say whether it's the same for everyone or whether it isn't?

We don't need to. So when we're practicing Zazen we don't need to have this conversation. So it's a kind of relief!

So although our conversation now seems to have got away from Bendowa, if we go on to the next chapter and the one after that, we come back to our conversation now, because for example, Chapter Two is Master Dogen's explanation of the sutra which we chanted this morning. This sutra is about real wisdom, or intuitive reflection. But if we read the description or the translation, it's still talking about the same thing that we're talking about, which is a state where we're not analysing, where we're not thinking, where we're not dividing the world. So that experience, which we're always entering and leaving, is described by Master Dogen as the universe made real, or the realised universe, or Genjo-koan, which is the title of Chapter Three of the Shobogenzo. So when he writes Genjo-koan – the realised universe, he doesn't mean, "oh yes, I realised what the universe is", not that at all. It means to make everything real. And to make everything real means to be in everything, or part of everything, or unseparated from everything. And that describes again, the same simple state of acting, or doing something fully; not thinking about it but doing it. Chapter Three is a particularly nice chapter because it's very short, and yet it lays out Master Dogen's four viewpoints, which he uses to try and describe the truth or reality. And last year at this retreat, we went through Genjo-koan in our talks.

So just to finish, we've looked at three chapters, and it's very difficult I guess, just looking at the summaries, but if we go through the chapters, we can find a common theme, and this common theme is, "There Is Something Real and I'm Trying To Describe It Here". So every chapter looks at it from a slightly different angle. So it's as if the something real is this cup here, and we're all looking at it from different angles, and all our viewpoints on the cup have something to add. All viewpoints on this cup, put together, give some kind of picture of the cup itself. And this is what Master Dogen does in the Shobogenzo, all 97 chapters describing the same thing from a different point of view. So in that way, we can read the chapters of the Shobogenzo in any order – chapter 1 then chapter 76, as we like. And all the chapters describe the same something. But that something is ungraspable. But although it's ungraspable, we experience it all the time.

So I'll stop now. We practice Zazen in seven minutes.

End of talk.