

## Summer Sesshin 2003

### Talk number 3

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Someone asked me to talk about posture in Zazen, this morning, and Nick asked me to talk about Kinhin. We've just chanted the Hannya-shingyo, and although we might not understand it as it's written in old Chinese and Japanese script transliterated into English, the most obvious thing is that there's lots of "mu's" in it. Yesterday I talked about *mu shin*, so there are lots of words or phrases in Japanese Buddhist terminology which begin with *mu*. *Mu* means not, or no, or without, or other than, or separate from. So it has rather a wide meaning. In the Hannya-shingyo, *mu* means not or without. The sutra says that we are without our senses, our thoughts, our perceptions and our sense organs. If you want a translation, Chapter Two in the Shobogenzo gives one. I also have a translation I made directly from the original Sanskrit, the other is translated from Sanskrit into Chinese around about the 6<sup>th</sup> century. So *mu* comes up so much in Buddhism that it must have a rather important meaning.

Yesterday I said that Zazen is without intention – *mu i*, and this is very important. When we sit in Zazen, we have no intention to get anything, and we have no intention to stop getting anything. This is a little bit difficult for us to think about, it's easy to do, or relatively easy to do. When we sit in Zazen, we sit in a straight posture, and when we notice that we're thinking, we stop thinking. But that's just talking about it, actually, what happens with me, is more like the moment I notice that I'm thinking, I've stopped – it's the same thing. So I might be following a train of thought in my mind, and I suddenly notice that I'm thinking about going to Japan next week or something, and at that moment of noticing what I'm doing, I'm back in the room again. So we stop thinking, or when we notice that we're thinking then we stop. And also we're aware of sounds; other people beside us; pain; all the kind of sensual and perceptual inputs of our body, and we try not to concentrate on the physical specifically. We know that if we concentrate on our pain in the knee, it becomes more intense, if we concentrate on the person next to us breathing, it irritates us more, and so on. So we don't focus concentration in the physical, and we don't focus concentration on the mental, we don't focus concentration on anything. But then there is a problem with talking about Zazen; after this talk we might go into the zendo thinking, "I'm not going to focus my concentration on anything". But Zazen is not purposely stopping focusing concentration on anything; it's *mu* everything. It's not thinking intentionally, and it's not stopping yourself thinking intentionally. It's not focusing on pain and noise, and it's not intentionally stopping yourself focusing on pain and noise. So it's a very peculiar situation, because it's *mu* everything, or *mu i*, without intentionally doing anything. And this is a very difficult state to describe, but a very pleasant state to be in.

Q: *Can you talk about effort and knowing?*

So without making an effort, we can't sit straight. Without having an intention to sit, we don't get on the zafu. Without having an intention to adjust our posture, we won't do it. However, when we find the balanced posture, where the weight of our head is balanced over the neck, and the weight of the upper body is balanced

over the pelvis, when we're in that position of balance, there's no effort needed. The effort is needed to pull us back to that. So physically, when we sway one way, our muscles need to pull us back. But when we're in the middle, and this is only an idea of course, we're like a pile of bricks or stones – very subtly and delicately balanced. And in that balance no effort is needed; we can take our hands away from the pile of stones and they stay there. But when we describe it we create an ideal picture, then when we go in and sit, it's nothing like that. So we have a problem; we have a picture or an ideal image of Zazen, then we have our real Zazen. It's quite a difficult problem for us, we want to go in and sit properly, but we don't know what properly is. So someone says "properly" is to not intentionally do anything, so then how do I get rid of my intention to not intentionally do anything? We're always trapped, and that very complicated mental situation is the other half of our very subtle physical situation. Our physical situation is that all of our muscles and bones are wobbling around this balance point, we go one way then pull ourselves back, then we go another way and we pull ourselves back. Lots of those movements come from the autonomic nervous system, or from the reflexes in the spine. We are self-righting in a way, we sense gravity and we find the position of least effort, which is when we're straight. So we have this very subtle machine – our body, adjusting itself to find the point where we can take our hands away from the stones. And mentally we have this very subtle process where we are thinking about not thinking, and we're thinking about not feeling our pain, and then we're not thinking then thinking again – wobbling about. So this is the state of Zazen.

We can see that if we talk about it, that Zazen is not rigid, not fixed in the same way that you can't balance a pile of stones by putting a ruler against them and lining them up, then taking the ruler away, you've got to balance them by balancing them, really. And when you balance them really, you have to adjust each stone as you place it. When we sit in Zazen, it's very important that we have some kind of awareness, but not a separate awareness. If we create a separate mental awareness of what we're doing which is a kind of thought, that's a counterpart of something physical, a tension. When we find the middle point, we don't need to do anything. But actually in our real Zazen the middle point is only an image; we just wobble around and enter it and leave it. We are always passing through the middle. That's our real Zazen. When we think about it, we don't realise that we are passing through that still point, we get that benefit, because after practicing Zazen for three days we feel settled and a little more peaceful. But we don't realise that this comes from our Zazen. We might say to ourselves that our Zazen isn't very good, we're thinking all the time, but actually we're getting the benefit from trying to sit in balance, or trying to stop everything – *mu* everything.

Master Dogen talks about Zazen as "dropping off", not getting something, not doing something, but stopping getting something, stopping doing something. However, we all have different bodies and different habits, and habits are ingrained in our muscles to some extent. So it's necessary for us to practice in order to drop off our habits. Our body has habits and we don't notice them, we might put our head on one side when we talk, our muscles get used to it and it feels comfortable like that. And when we sit straight and we're trying to balance our pile of stones, something tells us that it doesn't feel right. So we have to give ourselves time to settle, and for the habits and tensions in our muscles to drop away. That might take months or years, we're all different.

Q: Inaudible.

Yes, so if you remember *mu* everything. We can usually find two positions, a position when we're slumped and a position which we feel is too straight. The

balance is between those two. And if we hold our hands like this, we might find our shoulders are too tense, and if we let them go like this we feel it's too relaxed. And the same with the eyes; if we look at the wall as we're consciously looking at an object or shape on the wall, that's one extreme, to let the eyes go out of focus as if we're looking inside ourselves is the other extreme. Zazen is between the two. We can't though intentionally put ourselves between the two, intentionally we can only look at the wall or let the eyes go out of focus. When we give up our intention then our eyes settle somewhere in the middle, and that's true of everything in Zazen. But we can only get to that state when we stop trying. And that's the difficulty, because we're all trying. So we have to try not to try, it's a bit of a puzzle. But sitting we can find that state, it may take a few days if we have a busy, mentally active job, it often takes two or three days of practicing Zazen for us to start to settle, and feel settled. That's why coming on a retreat is very helpful. Even though we might notice that we're more settled after two or three days, just practicing Zazen at home in the evening or morning also has the same effect, though we may not notice it. If we do it every day, that effect accumulates in our body because we lose our muscular habits.

*Q: So even if one feels that the mind is wandering, and at the end of the session you feel that you haven't achieved anything, it still has a cumulative affect.*

Yes, if you didn't feel you achieved something, that's the right way. If you feel you've got something, I wonder what that is.

*Q: If you feel negative about it.*

Well if we feel negative we can't do anything about it really, just to carry on. It's a kind of training, and our body does need this training, and also our minds are very busy in modern society – our jobs create mental activity which is a kind of habit. If I feel negative about my Zazen I just forget about it.

*Q: You mean you don't do it?*

Oh I do it, and then I forget about it. Get on with the rest of the day. And sometimes, although my Zazen felt heavy, later in the day I start feeling cheerful, and I always think – Oh that's nice, I did Zazen.

*Q: What about making the effort to sit every day, I can't seem to do it (inaudible)*

Zazen is the state without intention, and yet it has an effect. And the effect we get from Zazen is when we practice Zazen. But it also changes our physiological state, it changes the way the two halves of our autonomic nervous system work. The parasympathetic and the sympathetic nerves control all of our organs and make them more passive or active and so on. That changes us, so Zazen stays with us. And besides that we don't need to do anything, if we try to make ourselves aware of what we're doing, that's a kind of mental activity. And lots of Buddhist schools teach mindfulness, but Nishijima Roshi doesn't like this word, he says that to do something fully is not to be mindful of it, but to be full of it...self. Maybe a word like activity-fullness, or consciousness-fullness, or everything-fullness, but not mindfulness. And I wonder, I don't know, whether the word mindfulness has the same problem in English as the word mind that we find in the Shobogenzo; that the concept of *shin* for example, is not the same as our concept of mind. So for instance, people say you should do things mindfully, so when you're cutting the vegetables you should...but if you're aware of yourself, you've created two selves – the one that's chopping and the one that's watching. But Buddhism quite clearly says that the Buddhist state is the state where there's not two, where there's only one, a state of wholeness. If we interpret mindfulness

to mean being fully involved in what we're doing then it agrees with Master Dogen's teaching. But if we interpret it to mean somehow watching ourselves, then it's different to what he teaches. And if we practice Zazen, we practice becoming whole. We don't need to try and practice becoming whole outside of Zazen.

Q: *Is an out of body experience an example of Zazen?*

No. An out of body experience is the opposite. Extreme separation of our mental self from the physical self is not Buddhist. Buddhism says to make ourselves one.

Q: *So the out of body is two separate things?*

Two separate things, so it's a kind of illusory state, or some kind of spiritual state.

Q: *But you do stop to chat while you're chopping the vegetables though, so you can move towards some kind of action outside of Zazen.*

But, we have to be a little careful in talking about it, if we choose not to chat, and we translate that into action, what we do is intentionally keep quiet. And that creates a kind of tension, both in us cutting, and in the person who wants to talk to us. Not that. We have to always find the middle ground. To intentionally say "I'm not going to chat, I'm going to be mindful" is not being mindful at all, it's concentrating on a very strong intention. So how to find the middle is always the right way. If you're chopping you can concentrate on that, and if someone says to you, is there enough yet? You say "perhaps a bit more" then go back to chopping. Flexibility. We all have a tendency to make a rule and to want to keep to it, and we think that this is the right way.

Q: Inaudible.

Well, physically, we have to keep moving around to find the middle, when we're riding a bike, if the handle bars are welded straight then you can't keep your balance. Or to walk on a tightrope you need to wobble to stay on. The same with the eyes, if we imagine that we can find some kind of middle state that Mike talked about, if we try and intentionally find it we never will, because we can only find it by wobbling between the two. The only way to find balance is between two opposites. We can notice those states, for instance our eyes do become dark, though we haven't got them shut, but they don't stay dark, it comes and goes. I suppose in future years science, physiological study may be able to explain all these human states.

Q: Inaudible

Who is between those two? Is the person who is between those two, two or one?

Q: *A balance between two beings.*

Not a balance between two imaginary things but a balance between two actual states. We have always roughly speaking two extremes; our language is full of opposites, - love hate; good bad; up down; big small; and the Buddhist state is between these, so it's called the middle way. But not between two imaginary things.

*Q: In the Fukan Zazengi, it recommends sitting in the lotus, but for those who can't sit in the lotus, it recommends the half lotus, and I've noticed that a lot of people put their foot on the calf.*

Well they would put it on the thigh if they could do it comfortably, they can't so...

*Q: The reason I mention this is that in some sanghas they say push the knees down. Going back to the position of the feet, Master Dogen says put the hands on the feet...*

Over the feet.

*Q: If you hold them hard, then you get a strain.*

I hold my hands like that because Nishijima Roshi taught me to. And I don't feel any strain at all here. I've been doing it for more than 25 years and I never get any strain in my shoulders or anything, I just feel it's natural to do that. The way I explain it is, because Zazen is very subtle balance, if we think of our pile of pebbles, you have to adjust very finely. If we touch our legs with our hands we lose that very subtle sensitivity, the balance.

*Q: It changes your centre of gravity as well.*

Everybody is different, the gap between here and here is different for everybody. For instance, most Japanese people have short legs and long bodies. I've sat on the train next to people who look taller than me sitting down, but much shorter than me standing up. If they sit, their hands seem to be very high. For instance when you saw Nishijima Roshi sitting in Brussels his hands were up here somewhere because his navel is up here, his body is much longer. If we rest our hands it's nice and comfortable, but we lose something subtle, that's all. If it's painful to do that then we can't do it, but in my case I don't feel any strain. Zazen is not a relaxed state, and it's not a tense state, but somewhere between the two. Our muscles have tonus don't they?

*Q: They work in opposition don't they?*

*Q: When playing an instrument, you're holding a violin like that, it's not a natural position but it becomes natural. So it is practice getting muscles to relax into an unusual position.*

Relax into an unusual position, that's very good yes.

*Q: When you're playing you can't be too relaxed or too tense.....*

*Q: A lot of musicians use the Alexander technique....*

Yes, Mike Cross who is from our sangha, who did a lot of the basic translation work on the Shobogenzo, is an Alexander teacher. He likes to use the Alexander technique to help people in practicing Zazen, and to explain Zazen. That's what he likes to do and I think it must be very helpful. There are many ways we can teach our body and mind where the middle is. Zazen is only a standard way, we do it with sport, you do it when playing your cello; you're teaching yourself balance. We do it when we go for a walk, we're always teaching ourselves balance, but we're always pulling ourselves off again. So we teach ourselves balance, then we come home, crack open a bottle of beer and slump on the sofa...

Q: *But you don't drink.*

That was the royal "we" – me and my brother Graham. I leave that side to him.

(Inaudible question)

If we sit one-sided and our muscles, knees and hips are not flexible, it turns us a little. If we alternate it gives some kind of opposite effect. But if we alternate too much, for instance if we change in the middle of Zazen, then sometimes we don't settle so well. We think we get rid of pain in one knee but it comes into the other. I think it's better to stay in the same posture if you can for one sitting. If it's too painful then you can rest for thirty seconds or so then start again. Long term I think it's good to change yes. But everybody is different. We can only do what we can do, so if we never try to sit half lotus we'll never do it, that's for sure. But if we force ourselves, and I've seen some people forcing themselves into the lotus position, and they're so tensed that their posture is pulled over to one side and hunched up. It's much better to sit in the half lotus or five eighths lotus and to be free and balanced.

Q: *On some retreats I've sat in the kneeling position, I wondered if that was alright?*

It's not Zazen, but you can sit like that if it's less painful.

Q: *If it's less painful then I'm much more relaxed....*

Not completely relaxed, there's always an effort.

Q: *Why is it not Zazen, just because of the posture?*

No, because I've never seen an explanation written anywhere which describes it like that.

Q: *But you're not saying it can't be or.....?*

If I come out with a pair of tennis shoes on and a beach ball and start kicking it around, it's not tennis is it?

Q: *But you can be in the same state?*

I don't actually know. Physiology is not so advanced in explaining how the body works, subtly, but I think Mike Cross has delved into this area with his Alexander studies; when you sit with your legs in the lotus, or how ever much you can manage, it activates some kind of deep reflexes in the spine which are called the cross-postural reflexes. And these are unconscious reflexes, they don't receive signals from the brain. The signals which come out of these reflexes tell the deep muscles in the spine to relax, so your spine lengthens. So that's all I can say, but it seems to be medically acceptable as an explanation, that if we sit with our legs crossed like that to the best of our ability, then it somehow releases our back.

Comment: *It opens up the big arteries in the hip as well – the value of this is appreciated in Yoga.*

Right, well the zazen posture came from Yoga originally, Gautama Buddha practiced with yogins in the forest for eight years, and that's why he adopted this posture.

(Inaudible question)

If people can get their knees on the ground they will. If they can't they must sit as best they can. We can only...we've got our own bodies and we have to sit with our own bodies. But sitting like this, in some way activates these reflexes. I can't tell you in medical detail, but all the descriptions about Zazen tell you to sit with the legs crossed. So we do – blindly.

*Q: Is there nothing special about sitting in seiza? In martial arts they sit like that.*

Well yes but, for instance tea ceremony masters sit in seiza. My friend's mother is a tea ceremony master and she has chronic back problems from sitting in seiza. It's quite well known actually that seiza is very poor as a way of sitting long term, for your back. I can't say any more than that. Seiza is just sitting on your heels, that's the formal position in Japan, the respectful position. Or if you're a samurai you would bend your toes under, so you could leap up. Everything is different if it's different. So if you sit with your legs under, it's different to sitting with them crossed. If you stand up it's different to sitting down. And the fact that it looks different mean there's some difference.

(Inaudible question)

I teach Zazen, and I say if you can, sit like that, if you can't, you might sit otherwise. One important thing is if you can sit in full lotus, it ceases to matter so much how high your cushion is, because the position rotates your pelvis forward so your centre of gravity is further in, so you can sit straight more easily. If you sit like that, your centre of gravity comes back. As your knees come up your centre of gravity goes back. You should compensate for that by raising your cushion. If you can't get your knees down then put two cushions there to bring your knees back up so that your back is straight. You can feel it.

*Q: Does the full lotus work without a cushion?*

No it doesn't work with no cushion at all, because it pushes you back, so your spine has to curve in order to keep your centre of gravity balanced. So we sit on a cushion. All descriptions available tell us to sit on a zafu, so we sit on a zafu. The most important thing is, if we have a strong intention to do the full lotus because we think it's the real thing, that's not good. We should look at our own bodies realistically and find a way to sit realistically that is reasonably comfortable. And at the same time, if we never try to move our legs towards the posture, we will never be able to do it. There are two requirements there and we have to balance them. But if we can sit like this then let's sit like this. And maybe after a few years we'll find our knees have dropped. I couldn't sit in full lotus for many years, I gave up trying. And then suddenly I found my legs are more flexible, I've no idea why. Whether it's age or whether my muscles are thinner as I'm older.

So kinhin: the same rule to kinhin, kinhin is walking round the dojo between Zazen sessions in order to stretch our legs, but trying to keep the state of Zazen. So *mu i*, or *mu* everything. We don't have an intention to do anything. However, if we walk around with no intention we'll keep bumping into each other. We have a kind of formal way of doing it, and this is to put our left thumb inside the fist, place the right hand on top and hold it level, put the shoulders relaxed, keep the head in the same position as in Zazen and the back straight, let the gaze fall downwards, and we walk half a step at a time. Roughly speaking one half step corresponds to one breath. But I say roughly speaking because everybody

breathes at different speeds, so if we actually try to time our step to a breath, we will end up bumping into each other.

I've been doing kinhin for about 25 years, and I've noticed that when I'm doing it, I'm not actually going anywhere; just round and round in circles. If the person in front of me doesn't feel like they are going fast enough, or they're going too fast, if they go faster I walk a little bit faster, if they don't move I move my legs on the spot. So I get what I want – I am walking, though not moving forward. So it's a bit of a stupid solution, but there again it's a bit of a stupid activity really. If the person in front is too slow then I just mark time. People can think that kinhin is some kind of special and particular exercise, and they teach a special way of treading and breathing, but in our group kinhin is the same as Zazen, so we don't intend to walk in a special way; we have a posture but no intention to walk in a particular way or to breathe in a special way. However, we follow a kind of simple rule, that is, roughly speaking our step corresponds to one breathing cycle. And if the person in front is going faster then we speed up, if the person in front is going slower then we slow down. Following that simple rule we can usually harmonise in the dojo, keeping our state of Zazen and not being trapped by the intention to do it properly, or not to do it properly, or to faster or slower, but to be free of any intention. To walk like a duck.

(Inaudible question)

Master Nagarjuna wrote a chapter about walking which is very difficult, because he tried to describe walking as an instantaneous action, but we can't ever see it like that. Sometime when we're doing kinhin, we kind of wonder what we're doing. That may be a kind of clear picture. If we have an image of walking, we impose that image on what we're doing, and make it into a process. But Buddhism says that there's another way of looking at things besides the process view, but it's rather bizarre. The other way is – “now I'm on my left leg, now I'm on my right leg, now I'm in between. So instant-instant-instant, and sometimes we catch that feeling in kinhin. But we cover that up in our lives with process. We live our lives by process, but we invent process, we can't live without it – the watch is moving, and now it's time to stop. Instantaneous action is something bizarrely different from the way we view the world, and we experience it sometimes in very simple things. I used to experience it in rock climbing, in climbing I was forced into a state of wholeness; if I think, I fall off. You can find lots of sports and activities like that. But when climbing up the rock, “I'm here, I'm here, how did I get from here to here?” That was a kind of flash. You can experience that. We say that it's subjective, you know, that it *felt* like that, but Buddhism says that this is another view, it's a valid view. We need more than one view to understand reality.

End of talk.