

Summer Sesshin 2003

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“Dogen Sangha” is a Japanese and Sanskrit word put together. Dogen, the name of the founder of the Buddhism that we follow, is made up of two Chinese characters; Do means way or truth, and gen means origin or source. So Dogen means origin of the truth, or source of the way, or any combinations you’d like to make. Sangha is a Sanskrit word, in Sanskrit an n with a dot underneath is pronounced mid-way between an n and an m, so it’s like saying n with your mouth closed. Sangha means community, association or group. So Dogen Sangha means the community of the origin of the truth. And Nishijima Roshi established Dogen Sangha, because after studying the Shobogenzo for 50 years and practicing Zazen for 50 years, he realized that the Shobogenzo teaches true Buddhism. He couldn’t find true Buddhism anywhere else in his search in Japan, he found that the temples in Japan were largely full of monks who didn’t really want to be there so much, they were carrying on the family tradition, and who often didn’t practice Zazen. And he found that the main school of Buddhism that he was associated with was quite political and the people were fighting each other for power. He stayed on the edge. He became a monk in the Soto School, because the master from whom he received the monk’s precepts was a master in that school, but he’s always remained on the edge. In a sense Dogen Sangha is a new school, but in another sense it’s the original school from Master Dogen’s teachings. And although that sounds rather a surprising thing, to establish a new Buddhist school, because there are so many powerful Buddhist groups in the world, I think it’s true – we’re establishing a new Buddhist school, and the teachings are not the same as many of the other teachings, although sometimes they are similar. But one thing that our group has, is an interest and an ability to explain Buddhism clearly in modern terms. And that explanation, although Buddhism is not intellectual pursuit, to have a clear explanation helps us to see what Zazen is. And helping us to see what Zazen is allows us to settle into a very simple practice with confidence. It’s important that we maintain it.

Q: I have a problem sitting regularly, I keep finding excuses why I shouldn’t sit, I don’t know what to do about it.

Nor do I. It’s completely up to you. If you keep making excuses you’ll never sit regularly, that’s a fact. We have to make our own choice, and sometimes it’s not so easy, but it’s never impossible, even if our life is very busy we can sit for five minutes, or two minutes. And if we start sitting for five minutes, if we establish a daily routine for five minutes, then we’ve got something to work on, five minutes can become six or ten minutes. But if we can’t sit then we can’t sit.

Inaudible question

I think that we can’t deal with people’s personal problems. They could get help by going to a counseling service, we can worry or be concerned, and wonder what to do, and if we can find something to do we can do it. But I don’t think Buddhism can solve people’s social problems in that way. If somebody is depressed, all we can really say is keep practicing. And they will probably think that’s not enough,

but actually if they do keep practicing, they can cure themselves. That's all we can say in the end – just keep practicing Zazen.

Inaudible question

There are lots of Buddhist groups in the States which integrate therapy with Buddhist teaching, but I don't think so, I don't think we should do that. There are many therapeutic counseling based services and techniques which are really helpful for people to solve their own social and personal problems. But the Buddhist way is very simple; it's just to practice Zazen. But it's very difficult for people to believe that just practicing Zazen will solve their problems, but it does. However, it takes 2,3,4,5, years. If somebody has a pressing problem it's difficult to find a way to help them. If someone is really clinically depressed, just to say practice Zazen is not going to help them, because they won't be able to sit still.

Q: Maybe we can help by creating an atmosphere where we can help to do that.

Yes, you can say honestly what you're doing, then they can see what you're doing, and just be honest really, and to be unsure as to whether you can help or not. Sometimes we're sure we can give good advice and sometimes we're unsure. If we're unsure, we can be unsure.

Q: Try to be welcoming.

Your group is very welcoming, I know, I've been there a few times. So trial and error. Buddhism itself is trial and error, because we don't know where reality is. At every moment we're looking for it, to move forward like that is the most practical way, step by step.

Chapter 12 – Kesa-kudoku, or The Merit of the Kasaya. Kasaya is a Sanskrit word for the Buddhist robe, which in Japanese is kesa. And Chapter 12 is quite a practical chapter, Master Dogen explains the different kinds of kasaya, and explains the merit of the kasaya. We don't usually think that an item of clothing has merit, but he says that it does. So as it says in the introduction:

Buddhism reveres our real life. In other words Buddhism esteems our real conduct in daily life

Because Buddhism values practical real action, then this action is in a sense sacred. Our ordinary actions are sacred, but they are also ordinary. In Buddhism, ordinary and sacred have the same meaning; they are two sides of one thing. And the wearing of the Buddhist robe is an important part of Buddhist life. How can we explain it? Well we can't, but if you wear a Buddhist robe and sit in Zazen, after a while it feels something safe. And yesterday I was joking, because when Nick puts his robe on he spreads it like a fishing net, so when you spread it round your shoulders it's as if you were catching yourself in the net. That sounds a bit strange but in a way it's true – when you put it on you catch yourself in it. And all sports and activities have a uniform, so the kasaya is the Buddhist uniform. I don't know why I keep putting this on but I do, it has a practical value as a uniform, but it also has some kind of other value which is difficult to put into words. But when I put it on I feel something. This is the kind of thing that Master Dogen explains in this chapter, and he also explains the different kinds of robe; how many stripes they have; what kind of material you can use to make them; what colours you should and shouldn't use; how to fold it up; how to wash it – a thorough explanation. In Dogen Sangha, we say that anybody who wants to make and wear a robe can make one, it doesn't signify rank, just if you want to make one, make one, and having made it, wear it, that's all.

Chapter 13 is again about the robe, but is worded a little differently. And it's possible that this chapter was a kind of draft which Master Dogen wrote for his lecture, but when he gave his lecture it came out differently. Chapters 12 and 13 are so closely linked it seems that one is a preliminary version of the other. But because they both exist as separate writings, they are both included. And they are a little different.

Q: The title of Chapter 13 is The Transmission of the Robe (Den-E), is this discussing the transmission also?

Yes, talking about the merit of the kasaya suggests some kind of value which the robe has, and the transmission suggests something passed on. But this doesn't mean something abstract or spiritual, just simply when you join a Buddhist group and you become a Buddhist, you wear a rakusu, then if you want to you can make and wear a robe. Why? Because the other people did, and your teacher does. So it's transmitted or passed on. That's all it means.

Chapter 14 – Sansuigyo, or The Sutra of Mountains and Water. It's rather a poetic chapter. In some ways it's quite similar to Chapter 9 – Keisei-sanshiki, in that it's about natural scenery or nature. Gyo means sutra, so it's the Sutra of Mountains and Waters, Master Dogen is suggesting that mountains and waters are like a book which is teaching us something. In this chapter, he concentrates on explaining that nature is teaching us like a book what reality is, and what the Buddhist truth is. It's a nice chapter. Everything is teaching us.

Q: Is this the chapter where he says that mountains are walking past us?

Yes, and he says other curious things:

Master Kai of Taiyo-zan mountain preaches to the assembly, "The Blue Mountains are constantly walking. The Stone Woman bears children by night."

That sounds very poetic but doesn't seem to have any clear meaning. "The blue mountains are constantly walking" suggests two things, one, that everything is relative, and when we walk through mountains, there is a state where you seem to be moving your legs but everything is going back past you, rather than you passing it. We normally feel that the mountains stand still and we walk through them, and I guess swimming is the same, when you settle down into swimming, you are moving in space, and the water is going past you. That's one way to understand the phrase "mountains are walking". The other way is that they're changing over time – rocks fall and slide, the shape of the land changes. And we know that's a fact now, though I guess Master Kai didn't know that for a fact, he wanted to suggest that things that are still may not be still; it's relative. And Einstein agreed with him.

Q: Einstein said when he was in a train, he asked his fellow passenger, "when does the next station stop at this train?"

That's exactly it. And I did a lot of mountaineering and you do actually often feel that the mountains are moving past you. And cycling is the same. We usually feel that this is just our imagination, but Master Kai suggests it as a view of reality, real experience.

Q: I was thinking about what you said the other night, that nature is a face of the truth. Does that mean that nature is the face of the truth? Or is it just one of the faces?

One of the faces. In Buddhism we say that reality, or Dharma, or the Truth, or the way things actually are...it's impossible for us to grasp an image in our minds. We can only grasp one view of it. So it's like a huge diamond and there are lots of facets, or faces, so we look at one face, then we look at another. And what usually happens is that one person looks at this face, another looks at that face, and they disagree. Do you know the story of the elephant, three blind men, one grabs the trunk and says it's a snake, another grabs the ear and says it's like a leaf, and another grabs the leg and says it's a tree. What normally happens is that we argue about the different faces, but Buddhism says we need many faces to look at reality, because we can't hold reality as an image. Nature, the external world as we see it and experience it, is one face.

Q: But everything that we do and think is a part of nature anyway...

If you spend all your week in London, then you go out for a cycle ride in Somerset you experience something welcoming or peaceful or warm in nature which you can't find in a city don't you? We can say that there's the natural world and the world that we construct, and of course in the end, even concrete is nature. It's true.

Q: So it depends on your definition of nature?

Yes, there are many definitions of nature. What's natural?

Q: When you use the word truth, is reality a different word?

It's a different word yes, but this is the problem with Buddhist theory, and with all theory; the word is not what it points to. If we stay in the area of language and the area of thought, we can only get the word. If what the word refers to is outside the area of thought, even if we keep thinking until we die, we can't understand any more than what the word tells us. So we say that reality is different from truth, because there are two words, but actually there is only one thing, reality is one way to look at it, truth is another way to look at it, peace is another way to look at it, happiness is another way, balance is another and so on. Master Dogen in the Shobogenzo is explaining one thing, or one not-thing, or something. And all the words are views on it. But different words have different nuances, and they suggest different things to us.

Q: I am not sure what you mean by nature is teaching us, isn't nature just itself, just as it is.

Yes, so something that is just as it is teaches us. For instance if we're a bit stressed and we visit a friend with a new baby, and the baby is sitting being very natural, we feel calmed. Or if we go for a walk through the fields when we're a bit up tight, the fields somehow calm us. You can say the fields are teaching us. So not teaching in the sense of instructing, but that we recognize something, so recognizing something you can say is being taught. That's the way he uses it, a two way thing.

Q: So aren't you teaching nature?

I can't ask nature whether I am or not. I've no idea.

Q: *So why is it a two way thing?*

In the sense of, when we walk across a field, we're walking on the field, and the field is letting us walk on it, only in that sense. Anything we do, me, as a subject, and the other, as an object, interact. We are always interacting. Because we think separately, we imagine, I always imagine that I exist separate from anything else, but if there's no world, there's certainly no me. I'm never without the world, I have never been isolated from the rest of the Universe. Whether I exist if the rest of the Universe is not there, or not, is a completely useless question. We think of ourselves as separate, as if we're self contained.

Inaudible comments

The Next chapter, Busso, is interesting. It's a list of all the Buddhist patriarchs from Gautama Buddha right up to Master Dogen's master. It's quite surprising because it means that Master Dogen had a list of all the people going right back to Gautama Buddha, so it's sometimes referred to as the lineage.

Q: *Do you have such a list?*

Yes I have a list of the patriarchs right back to Master Dogen and right back to the Buddha. Historians might say "ah yes but we can't prove that person existed", but to me it's just a simple fact.

Q: *Is this the transmission?*

Yes, but the transmission is a little bit misunderstood; what transmission means is that I meet somebody and teach them how to practice Zazen, and they make their practice their own, then later they meet someone and teach them how to practice Zazen etc. And in that way all skills are transmitted, so there used to be apprenticeships, you'd learn for example how to make cabinets from your master, and after fifteen years or so you'd become a cabinet maker and then teach the skill. That's the meaning of transmission. And of course in that transmission there's an abstract or spiritual part, and a physical practical part. So it's not something mysterious, it just means that Buddhism is taught from one person to another. You get a line, of course you gets lots of lines – trees. But going back from me, there's one line back, from Gautama Buddha there are many of lines. This is Master Dogen's list of the Buddhist patriarchs back from him to Gautama Buddha. In fact he goes back further than Gautama Buddha to the seven legendary buddhas. These are: Vipryasin Buddha, Sikhin Buddha, Visvabhu Buddha, Krakucchanda Buddha, Kanakamuni Buddha and Kasyapa Buddha. And the reason we have these is that early Buddhism wanted to explain that the truth wasn't invented by Gautama Buddha, it existed, and exists in all times. Reality is always here, even before Gautama Buddha, it was here. So it's a kind of legend.

Q: *So were they real people?*

No. But they are part of Buddhist tradition so he includes them. Then we go on through all the buddhas, all the masters in India, with Indian, Sanskrit sounding names. Master Nagarjuna is one of them. Then on into China, including Bodhidharma, and it stops with Master Tendo Nyojo, who is the master from whom Master Dogen learned Buddhism. It's a kind of historical list and we have notes about these. We can't find details about some of the masters, exactly where and when they lived and so on, but for most we have this information.

Q: *Is there any tradition of reincarnation in this lineage?*

No, none at all.

Q: *What did Master Dogen say about reincarnation?*

Master Dogen says there's no such thing. And Gautama Buddha said not eternal, not cut off, but in the middle. And by that statement he meant that we don't believe in an eternal soul, that is the Brahman belief that existed in India before him, that the soul is separate from the body and will carry on forever into another body. Not that, and not cut off means, when we die, that's it – finish, so we're just a physical body and nothing else. Not that, but in the middle between those, the Middle Way, the Doctrine of the Middle. In that statement he actually denies rebirth, because if we have no soul separate from the body and which is eternal, then it's impossible for anything to be reborn. And Master Nagarjuna also says, if there's no soul separate from the body as the Buddha says, then what is there which carries on after the body dies to get into another body? So he denies it too. And Master Dogen denies it in several places.

Q: *There are bits in the Pali Canon.....Inaudible*

Q: *We are reborn in every moment aren't we?*

Yes in a sense. All the masters in Master Dogen's lineage who have written, deny reincarnation. I have no evidence of it and no experience of it.

Q: *Why do you think so many of us have this interest. Why is this misconception there?*

If we give primary value to the spirit, that is the part of us which is not body, immediately we do that, we can imagine or posit kinds of existences which aren't actually here. We can't prove their existence but we can believe in them. It comes automatically from believing in spirit. Anybody that believes in spirit as being the centre of things, can believe that the spirit goes on. Where does it come from? Well, past lives – you can see how this comes quite naturally into our minds, we can invent then believe all sorts of things then look for evidence. People say something like, "that child could write when he was three years old – must have learned it in a past life."

Q: *When someone has died the bereaved want to believe that the departed is still there.*

Yes, we feel it don't we? We feel spiritual things, so we have a subjective side. But what Buddhism says is, we all feel it but if we come back to reality, we notice that it's a feeling or a spiritual thing. We can ignore it really.

Q: *So why use the story of the fox?*

To illustrate cause and effect, which is absolute. Why he chose that story I don't know.

Inaudible

The chapter in the Shobogenzo about cause and effect has a story about a master who when he was giving a talk, someone used to sit at the back who was a ghost of a wild fox, it's quite complicated. But he uses it to suggest that cause and effect can never be avoided. That's the point of him using the story.

Inaudible comments

Q: People did believe in spirits and things in the middle ages didn't they? But there's no reason why they should have looked at the world with our eyes.

No, they couldn't.

Q: We use mythology, particularly Greek mythology to illustrate states, and people don't question us about it or assume that we believe they are literally true.

Yes, and even though I'm teaching Buddhism, sometimes something happens to me and I find myself saying, "what have I done to....", as if it's some kind of spiritual retribution. But of course it's more simple than that. We all have that part, and Buddhism says, ok we have that part, but let's put our feet on the ground, where are we? We're here. When you have a bad night and you have a strange or ghostly dream, something forms in the psyche, and you wake up feeling like there's something in the room or something, then you get up in the morning and you realize it's just a dream and that feeling goes away.

Q: But I have had many experiences....

It's true we do have those, but if we try and follow them, we can't get anywhere.

Q: So you have just used a term from Greek mythology, Psyche – the last goddess to be created, and no-one is asking you now if you actually believe in the Pantheon because you used the term.

Right, let's stop talking and practice Zazen.

End of talk.