

**Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin at Earth Spirit, Somerset
September 2009**

Talk Number 1

By Eido Mike Luetchford

As usual I would first like to talk about or answer any questions about Zazen because Zazen is really the centre of what we do. So, if anybody has any questions, comments, suggestions about Zazen itself, speak up.

Could you say something about closing your eyes during Zazen?

If you close your eyes during Zazen on purpose, usually you end up in an internal world. For that reason we keep them open naturally. But if they suddenly close, (Laughter) ...if you close them, there is no problem, just keep them closed for a bit. But if you keep them closed all the time on purpose, you will end up in an internal world.

But if they do fall closed and it feels nice, should you be trying to open them and waken yourself up?

If you need to wake yourself up, open your eyes and wake yourself up.

Couldn't you indulge yourself for a couple of minutes? (Laughter)

No. Well, I can but you can't. (Laughter). Sometimes we are practising and our eyes close quite naturally and that's fine; just don't intentionally keep your eyes closed all the time. There are lots of meditation practices which involve you concentrating on your inner state. Zazen is not that; for that reason we start with our eyes open and generally keep them open. If our eyes glaze over, we are usually concentrating on an internal state or sometimes we catch the cat running across the lawn or a shape on the wall and we are concentrating on the external world. But Zazen is between those two states, between internal and external. When your gaze is just falling on the wall or on the garden but you are not looking at something purposefully and you are not concentrating on your internal conversations, that is the right state. It's between external and internal.

Can you say something about movement or stillness during Zazen?

Yes, it is not necessary to keep rigidly still. If you try to keep still, it creates tension. However, when we find a nice balanced posture, that means when our weight is over our sacrum, and our head is nicely balanced over our shoulders, then we don't need to move. So it's just sitting like a pile of bricks one on top of the other. If you get them balanced, then you can take your hand away.

But it's almost impossible to sit without moving. We are always wobbling a little bit and I like to explain that by saying that balance is wobbling. When you ride a bike, you have to wobble from side to side to balance, or if you happen to walk

along a tightrope, it's the same. The idea of perfect balance which is some kind of middle state where you don't move is just a dream; it's not real. Also, we have all got different tensions in our bodies and when we practise Zazen, sometimes we notice them. We might notice that our shoulders are tensed in a certain way after twenty minutes and we release them and feel the relief. Gradually we drop off tensions and that is a kind of movement.

So it's ok to move but we don't intentionally do a particular movement. Our intention is just to sit in balance; but to sit in balance we need to seek balance so to speak. Actually, for me, Zazen is not still. It is a kind of activity; but the centre of this activity is stillness. Just in the same way as it is at the centre of all simple activities: dance, yoga and lots of others. Stillness does not always mean physically not moving, but that something is still and at the centre of it.

So if we have to scratch or we have something in our eye, you know, these are very simple questions...

Yes, if I have a scratch, I put my hand up slowly, not as normally. So if during Zazen my head itches, I kind of go like this. (Lifts his hand very slowly to his head).

Mike, do you have any guidelines for the duration and frequency of Zazen?

My teacher always said, an hour a day. You can do half an hour in the morning and half an hour in the evening, or forty minutes/twenty minutes. However, that hour a day is a kind of advice for somebody who wants to practise Zazen every day as a life practice. But if you are just starting or haven't made it into a regular practice, then it is quite difficult to do an hour. In that case, do fifteen minutes in the morning and ten minutes at night. If you can't do an hour, it doesn't matter. But just like any practice, if you practise, then you know that you practised regularly and if you don't practise, you know that you haven't practised regularly. It is a practice.

That is what I always remember: an hour a day. Sometimes I don't do an hour a day; sometimes I do two hours a day. But I never do nothing. I never do no Zazen a day. Sometimes when I have jetlag from having been to Japan and back, I even sit for only five minutes, just in case.

Do you have any advice for when one gets into an uncomfortable position and there is pain, how not to end up focussed on the pain?

If you can change your position so that it is not painful, it's good. We all have our own problems with our bodies, especially as we get older. I have a problem with my hip which I have had for five or six years now and I have had to adjust slightly the way I sit because if I sit like I used to sit ten years ago, it bloody well hurts. I used to sit very upright and keep very straight but I found that if I drop my pelvis a little bit, I can still keep my upper body straight and it doesn't hurt so much. So it's ok to do that and it's most important that we see Zazen as a practice which is sometimes uncomfortable, as any sport is. Anybody who trains knows that pain is involved and to be able to cope with pain sensibly is a very, very valuable thing. We can't live without pain and Zazen can teach us how to manage pain to some extent. When I heard some people say: 'Break through the

barriers of pain' I thought 'crap'. But it is true that if you force yourself, you can get through some quite severe pain and you enter some kind of a strange state; but it's not necessary to behave like that. It's more important to practise, say twenty minutes a day every day, or a few times a week than it is to practise five hours a day for five days on a session and then do nothing. It's much more important to do just a few minutes a day even if it is just fifteen minutes. Zazen is very simple, an almost stupid activity, but it is very powerful. We don't notice; we only notice if we keep doing it for a long time. Then we notice that it does actually have a big effect on us.

Any other questions?

I sit in half lotus and I always sit with my left leg on top of my right thigh because I find the other way quite uncomfortable. Is it important to try and switch over regularly?

I asked my teacher that about twenty years ago and he said: 'No, it's not important. You can keep sitting in the same way for a long time. But he was wrong. (Laughs). The reason he was wrong is that he never had any problems; he has very short legs, he's Japanese, so he was familiar with sitting on the floor since he was a child.

I followed his advice and after sitting in the same way for about fifteen years I developed this hip problem which is without any doubt the result of me sitting one way without changing for a long time. So I would say, change even if it is uncomfortable. You could say, one day sit one way and one day sit the other way. Or, in the morning sit one way, in the evening sit the other way. If it is really uncomfortable the way you don't like, have a bath and then do it that way. One way would be to practice twenty minutes/half an hour in the morning in the way that it is most comfortable to you and then in the evening have a bath and do ten minutes in the way that you don't like. Slowly it will become easier, because otherwise our pelvis gets twisted and over a long period there might be problems.

I started to move from quarter lotus to half lotus and I have really noticed a strengthening of my posture. I wonder if you have any comments on quarter, half, full lotus and its relation to the sitting.

It's difficult to explain but it's obvious when you do it. If you can sit in full lotus, i.e. if you can sit in full lotus reasonably comfortably, you notice immediately that it is very stable and strong. It feels like you are locked onto the floor in three points. It feels rock solid whereas if you sit in half lotus, sometimes it feels like you are going to one side and that's a fact. So there are differences.

You can also sit in the Burmese position which I haven't done; it is quite uncomfortable for me as I have long legs, it opens my hips more than if I sit in half lotus. So you can feel the difference. However, if we try intentionally to sit like this: very straight and stiff – I knew somebody who used to sit like this intentionally – his back was all curved and you could see the tension in the back of his neck.

Do what's comfortable. If you never sit in half lotus because it's painful, you never will. If you try to sit in half lotus now and again, you might find it gets easier. But it's not about attaining the posture of the Buddha; it's not a competition. People have different flexibility; work it out for yourself and if you can sit with your legs in half or full lotus, you will feel a lot more solid. But you have to deal with your own body.

Alright, I'll start with what I was going to talk about. I'm not sure how this is going to go.

This is the ninth retreat at Earth Spirit but it's actually the tenth anniversary of me coming back to England from Japan. When Yoko and I came back, we didn't have any intention to form a group as such. It wasn't until a year after we came back that we started having people to sit at Somerset Street – some of you will remember – and from there things slowly developed.

During the ten years I have given lots of talks about different things, most of which I can't remember but one thing I do remember. In all the talks I have given I am always searching for what it is I want to talk about. I am searching for it before I start talking and I am also searching for it, as I am talking, as if there is something I want to talk about, but I have got to find what it is. That has become very clear to me this last year; I don't know why something kind of emerged. My first talk this year was in the Czech Republic in the winter retreat in February where I think I said something like 'There is a crisis in Buddhism'. I want to enlarge on that theme.

Up to now I haven't really outlined in detail what I think that crisis is because Buddhism comes in lots of different shapes and sizes. As some of you know, at the end of my street there are two different Buddhist groups; they are both large and one of them has got a peace café which makes really nice food. And John's group in Glasgow practises in a Tibetan centre which is very big, well organised, well run; a vigorous group of people. And here am I, I have been back in England for ten years and we haven't got a big vigorous group of people; we are a straggly bunch spread out through the country.

Yet nevertheless I always felt from the beginning that what I learned in Japan and the only thing that I can teach is different from all these other groups. So I have never gone along to other groups and I have never joined in with other groups. That's partly because of my character: I have always been a bit of an outsider, a lone wolf. But it is also because I think that what I learned in Japan and what Nishijima's other students learned from him is very, very different from other forms of Buddhism. I almost don't like saying this, you know. 'Different from other forms of Buddhism? – Surely, you are not going to go round criticising other forms of Buddhism?!' You know there is a precept which says you should

not criticise other Buddhists, and so on. Well, I am not really criticising, I just want to explain. Some of you heard of Brad Warner and his books; he recently came to give a talk in London and he stayed in Bristol for a few days and gave a talk. He reminded me again of how differently he and I and other people in the group that we call Dogen Sangha see Buddhism.

It has become important to me to say very clearly what that difference is and that is what I want to do in these talks. My aim is not to criticise other groups and say 'Oh, what they are doing, is wrong' – I might do this from time to time, but I usually do it in private (Laughter) – but to point out something which I think is very important because it is the only viewpoint on Buddhism that I can teach. As I say, it has been ten years now and I don't think I am going to be able to integrate with all the other kinds of Buddhism and the other kinds of belief. That's not to say they don't have value – I think all human activity has value and all human activity contributes in different ways to society, so I think, that's good.

But I feel that more than a crisis in Buddhism there is a revolution happening in Buddhism, yet that revolution is only happening with me. That sounds arrogant – I don't mean a revolution that is going to succeed or a huge revolution, I mean a small overturning, revolving – is that the root of the word? - of what Buddhism is about and so I'd like to call it a revolution. But it may not be successful.

However, if I compare what I am teaching with all the other teachings that I can read about or hear about, I think they are completely different. I also feel that Buddhism as I see it has been hijacked by two groups. One group is the scholastics, the academics. They have hijacked Buddhism, so that if you go into a bookshop and buy a book about Buddhism, it will often tell you about a Buddhist, usually in the past, what that Buddhist said, did, where he lived and what he thought, and so on. To me that is talking about something else, it is not talking about what Buddhism is now, in my life, in this area.

For instance, you can read many books about Dogen and the Shobogenzo and when he wrote it, how he wrote it, what it means, analysing the sentences and so on, but this doesn't tell me anything about what is here and now. I think that is a kind of hijacking of Buddhism. It's taking Buddhism out of something real and useful into an area of discussion about what Buddhists did or are doing. You can find many excellent books on the subject. If, for instance, you want to read about what Dogen did in China in 1227, there are some great books that will tell you. But when you read them, you know what Dogen did in 1227, but what will that do for you? Do you buy this book or not? So I think, one group that has hijacked Buddhism is the scholastics.

The other group is the 'monastics' or the 'religious, I don't know what to call them, the group of people who think that Buddhism is a spiritual religion leading to bliss or happiness. They have hijacked Buddhism in a very powerful way and there are a lot of them. Usually they have somebody at their head and that somebody is always smiling because they know the truth: 'If you come and study with me, I will tell you what it is...' and almost all of those sort of groups are founded on spiritual hierarchy just like Christian churches. Somebody knows better than anybody else what the secret is; so you go and try and get it for yourself.

But if you join a group like this, what tends to happen is that you give up your own responsibility to find out what your life is about to this perfect individual who is up there somewhere. You try and get what they have got, which I think is quite dangerous. It is possible to read these days about many charlatans and people who set themselves up to be some kind of spiritual leader and then turn out to have lots of dirty secrets on the side. The more spiritual these leaders are, the more they have to hide their humanity, the other side of their personality away. You can read lots of examples in all different kinds of religions and lots in Buddhism, different Buddhist centres, different Buddhist teachers. They have their problems because they are human and actually they aren't gods. They have to hide all the imperfect things away and find a secret outlet for them. That's true of everybody, actually; we all have to hide away and find secret outlets but part of that is the result of living in society.

Anyway, I wanted to emphasise that I think that these two groups, the academics and the religious have hijacked Buddhism, so that instead of becoming a way to live or a real practical look at how we should live involving all the different aspects of modern life, it has become just like any other spiritual religion or any other theology, really.

What I want to do and what I hope I have been doing over the last ten years is to talk about Buddhism separate from those two camps. The reason I want to do that is because this is what Dogen teaches and the name of our group is Dogen Sangha, because it's based on the teachings of this thirteenth century monk. But as this thirteenth century monk was talking about everyday life, people have even hijacked what he wrote about, what he taught. For instance there are groups in France that try to live according to the thirteenth century rules he wrote down for how to live in a temple. Without any imagination they think they can take a book written in the thirteenth century and reproduce that kind of life today and if they do that, they will get some kind of special spiritual reward.

So it's necessary for us to look very critically even at what Dogen wrote. The thirteenth century is a very long time ago. He was a poet and his language is wonderful even after having been translated from Chinese and Japanese into English; what he says still has great power and great depth. But he was a person of his time. For example, he had a group of men, no women, all in a little temple out in the sticks north of Kyoto in Japan. He wasn't well liked by the other Buddhist temples in Kyoto because he had gone off to China and came back and started teaching these weird things; so they all pushed him out. He then built this temple up in the sticks; he got these young men who came to live with him to be monks. But what do you think those people might have been like, where would they have come from? Well, they certainly weren't all refined, educated nobility; some of them were probably farmers, tradesmen's sons and so on who had all come from different directions and decided to come and live in this community with Dogen. A rough lot: they didn't know how to interact with each other probably; they were very likely rather strong-minded. This made it necessary for Dogen to create rules for a community, quite strict rules: how to cook, how to wash the rice and so on. But although he wrote all these things with a practical purpose in mind, you can buy books these days that take Dogen's rules for how to conduct yourself in the kitchen and kind of theorise as to how these can be applied to our lives in other forms. Cooking the rice can be a kind of metaphor for washing the car or I don't know what. But they miss the

point. Dogen didn't write things as a metaphor for life, he wrote them to teach his ragged bunch of monks how to live together. That's one example of what I think is hijacking Dogen's teachings.

Again, if you read the Shobogenzo, it is all very difficult to understand because it is all written in thirteenth century Japanese and Chinese and it sounds very flowery and he talks about the gods in heaven. So people say, 'gods in heaven': that must mean he did believe in gods. And things like that without realising that in the thirteenth century life was very different. Nobody studied psychology. The concepts didn't exist to talk about our internal states and the kind of problems human beings have in the way that we can today. He wrote using a completely different paradigm. If we are not aware of that, we are likely to try and get from Dogen's writings something which is not there. It may appear as if he were some kind of god who attained some sort of super special state and that if we make great efforts and imagine what he might have meant, we too can get that state. But I think that's a mistake. I think that the main thing that we can get from studying Dogen's writings is the realisation that this guy lived in a different age, but although he lived in a different age, now and again we can see a faint trace of what he was talking about. And what he was talking about was his age and his life in front of him. If we study his works and try and put ourselves into his life, we are making a mistake because we have to put ourselves into our life in front of us, using our terms and our concepts.

There are lots of ceremonies in Buddhism and this is another problem because ceremonies are very nice and they are very comforting and if we join a group and do ceremonies together it makes us feel secure; it makes us feel a member of the group and that's nice and quite important, of course. But lots of people in Buddhism mistake the ceremony for what Buddhism is about. So they concentrate on the form of the ceremony and give it sometimes undue importance. They think that everything has got to be exactly right so that you can perform the ceremony exactly right and then you get some kind of merit from the ceremony itself. Of course, we do get merit from doing ceremonies just the same as at the start of a football match all the players line up and sing the national anthem or whatever. So that ceremony has value. In the same way, when joining the scouts there is a little ceremony and so on. But to give those ceremonies in Buddhism some kind of special sacred meaning is a mistake, I think. What the ceremonies in Buddhism help us to see is the value of other ceremonies in our ordinary life and there are lots of them, like sitting down to eat together or - can anyone think of another one?

Doing Zazen together..

Cooking...

Doing Zazen together, cooking... They are all kind of ceremonies. They are rituals, aren't they? And ritual plays a very important part in human society. But many people perform Buddhist ceremonies and then when they get back to their ordinary lives, they ignore their own ceremonies. I think that is a mistake. So really what I am trying to do, and it is the only thing I can do, is to say that we have to find a Buddhism which is free from 'Buddhism'. We have to find how Zazen as a practice and the other things that go with Zazen can work in the modern world, in modern life, with modern people. And to do that I feel is a kind

of revolution because it means sweeping away lots of things that people think are important in Buddhism. To say then that they are not important in Buddhism is not to reject them as valueless. But if we see for example that chanting the Hannya Shingyo is not so important, but it is very nice to do, it is a unifying thing and it has its own value, then we can do it happily, and if we don't do it, it's ok too. In the same way we can see that entering the dojo and bowing towards the Buddha is not an act of sacred contrition or something to the Buddha statue, but is just a simple ritual – it's a simple action. Putting your hands together and bowing is a simple action to do and if we see that and throw away the rest, then we can happily go in and bow, and if we forget to bow, we don't beat ourselves up. I think this attitude is very important. Otherwise Buddhism will continue to be hijacked by people who want to make it some kind of way to a special spiritual state and all that goes with that, or a field of knowledge to be analysed academically.

I am going to stop talking here and I hope you can disagree with me.

I wonder where the sacred is in your perspective.

Yes, I wonder. I feel the sacred and the ordinary, or sacred and secular are two sides of one thing. Everything has a sacred side and everything has an ordinary side; if we separate them, we can say, something is sacred or we can say something is ordinary. But if we don't separate them, then the sacred side and the ordinary are still there but they are whole; so then we can just live with the sacred and the ordinary together. Nagarjuna who lived in the second century wrote about this and he used two Sanskrit words '*nirvana*' - which actually people interpret as meaning a kind of blissful state but we can take it as a metaphor for sacred things - and '*samsara*' - which means the daily round of ordinary life, and we can take that as a metaphor for the ordinary - are the same. What he meant is that everything is sacred *and* ordinary and we can notice sometimes one side sometimes the other. The other morning when I was feeling a bit fed up I looked out of the window and there were these little birds; I hadn't seen so many birds in my garden and they were all talking and jumping about and I felt something very sacred and wonderful. At the same time we can feel that things that other people treat as sacred are just ordinary. You can go into a big cathedral with a camera and snap around. So, I think not to separate the sacred and the ordinary is quite a nice way to live.

So then the focus of attention is being present?

Yes, being present or doing, acting is a way of unifying the sacred and the ordinary. Or if you like, when we are actually doing something there is no feeling of sacred or ordinary, or rather there is a feeling of both sacred and ordinary but not separated. Does that make sense?

So you spotted yourself having a sacred experience spotting these birds...

It just felt wonderful – so that I thought 'Oh, birds are incredible, aren't they?'

Christianity likes to divide the sacred and the ordinary, body and mind.

Yes, that's right. Our excellent ability to think has built our excellent civilisation. But it has also led us habitually to separate body and mind, sacred and ordinary, good and bad. In some ways we can't stop doing that; whenever we think or analyse, we always do it in that way. But when we stop thinking and we are just present, then there is no sacred and ordinary, no good and bad, no right and wrong...

So, that's like an attainment there, isn't it?

You could say it is an attainment or you could say it is a 'dropping off'. You could call it 'getting somewhere' or you could say 'giving up everything'.

Because I spot a nice sky and that's a nice sky, I think to myself but it's just the sky, but obviously there are two things happening: I am spotting myself seeing that it is a nice sky, and I am spotting myself noting that it is a nice sky. So there are two separate things.

Ah, yes, but if you then jump on your bike and cycle along with the sky above you that is a third experience, isn't it?

I suppose, it's time, isn't it?

Mike, I absolutely agree with you. I am not going to argue with you.

Oh.

In fact I am getting to the point of almost becoming agnostic. I am sort of rejecting this paraphernalia and the sort of things you described – this is a personal view – and I'm not saying I don't take on what I have learnt and tested for my own life of Buddhism, from what I understand as Buddhism. I absolutely know that there is something concrete and profound about this simple teaching, but equally I do not believe in latching onto anything really, just in trying to live my life and conduct myself in a way that doesn't create lots of hassle for everyone else and that's it.

... and make sure the lines are straight.

Absolutely.

What about all this 'doing good' business in Buddhism, you know?

I think it is a load of crap. However, it is also in me because we have lived in Christendom for a very long time. I would like to do good actually, but I am saved from that tendency by Buddhism.

What I mean is like this extremely wonderful, even more saintly than saintly good, this wanting to exist in the realms of hell to save the lost souls. I don't know, it seems we have got to really be very ...

I think we don't have to, and to really realise that is quite liberating. We don't have to be good. But if we balance ourselves, if we live a balanced life, then what

we do is OK, it's the best we can do. It's enough. The best we can do in this life is enough. We don't have to try to be, you know, 'good'. I don't mean we have to try *not* to be good, that's different again.

No, no, I was thinking more of the 'helping everybody' thing.

Oh, it's always nice to help people.

I was thinking more of the necessity of helping somebody. You must be helping somebody in order to be on the right road to wherever you are supposed to be going.

It's the bodhisattva idea, isn't?

Yes, you have to save the world before you save yourself.

Ah, that's misunderstood.

Yes, it is pushed quite hard by some Buddhist groups.

That's a misunderstood phrase, not 'save the world in order to save yourself' but 'saving the world *is* saving yourself'. I think, this must have been a mistranslation thousands of years ago. 'Saving yourself is saving the world, saving the world is saving yourself'. It's impossible to do something only for other people. Altruistic behaviour and self-centred behaviour as extremes we avoid. But there is another kind of behaviour which is neither altruistic nor selfish – it is both. We can act; so we don't know whether we are doing it for ourselves or for others.

Isn't that a bit wishy-washy?

It might be, yes.

I just find that whole area a bit... I'll think about it.

(The bell rings)

Right.

Thank you very much.