

## Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin at Earth Spirit, Somerset September 2008

### Talk Number 5: Chapters 22 - 27 By Eido Mike Luetchford

I will just skim through the subjects of the remaining chapters of the MMK and then I want to discuss the verse he writes at the very beginning of the book and which I didn't mention, and the verse he writes at the end of the book, because they are both rather nice.

Chapter 22 is the chapter on 'The Examination of Buddha-Nature', actually in Sanskrit it is 'Examination of Tathagata'. 'Tathagata' is a Sanskrit word which means 'Buddha'. 'Tatha' means 'here' or 'just as it is'. 'Agata' means 'gone'; 'a' is a negation; 'gam' is the verb 'to come', so 'gata' is its past participle, i.e. 'come' and 'a-gata' is 'gone'. With 'tatha' and 'agata' the two a's in the middle become long so *Tath-aa-gata*.

So '*Tatha-agata*' means 'gone just like that'; it sounds terrible as a translation. But it is used to describe the Buddha and that is the title of the chapter. The chapter is actually talking about the nature of a Buddha, the nature of a *Tathagata*. This is because the Buddha was very soon after his death elevated to the stature of a god. He is perfect, he had all these special characteristics and after he died, of course, he went to *nirvana*, which is a kind of Buddhist heaven. So he became a god after he died. And therefore *nirvana* became a special heavenly kind of state.

What Nagarjuna does in this chapter is talk about Buddha-nature in a real sense, i.e. the nature of somebody who is awakened. The word 'Buddha' comes from the verb 'budh' which means 'to wake up', not anything of a spiritual awakening but simply just 'to wake up'. So 'Buddha' which is the past participle of the verb 'budh' means 'awoken' or 'woken up'. So Buddha is somebody who has woken up.

*Mike, in what sense would they have understood 'Thus gone' and 'Thus come'? What does that mean? Why was that used as an epithet for the Buddha? What does it say about him?*

There is some controversy over whether it is actually 'thus come' or 'thus gone'. Maybe 'thus come' is easier to understand: 'thus' or 'as it is' or 'just like this', i.e. 'come into the present just like this', somebody who is here just like this, who has arrived in the present 'just like this', somebody who is himself. That is how I understand it.

'Tatha-agata', 'thus gone' people have suggested means 'gone to the other shore' because there is this poetic rendering of becoming enlightened as crossing over to the other shore. I'm not sure as to where all this came from. But it is in the Heart Sutra which we chanted just now, the last line: "Gatei, gatei,

paragatei, parasamgatei, bodi sowaha" which means 'Gone, gone, gone to the other shore' and that was used as a kind of metaphor for crossing over to this other state. Actually, although this metaphor is very widely used, it doesn't make any sense to me and 'thus come', in other words, 'arriving in the present as you are' is much easier to understand as something real that makes sense now. Thank you.

So, people thought *nirvana* is somewhere on the other shore, really heaven, somewhere you go to where everything is perfect and the Buddha is there. It is interesting that in Japan where Buddhism has been part of society since the ninth century, i.e. a very deep part of the social structure, everybody becomes a Buddha after they die. The polite way of referring to a dead person is 'Hotokesama' and hotoke means the same as '*Tathagata*' and 'sama' is the polite form of 'san', just an honorific suffix. If you want to refer to a dead person in Japanese, you say 'Hotokesama', 'the honourable Buddha'. So all Japanese people become Buddhas after they die, which is a bit sad really because they never get to wake up until after they die. They have gone to the other shore, they have gone to *nirvana*.

So this kind of idea comes from the early interpretation of '*Tathagata*' as being a god, a perfect, supra-human being existing in a super state. If you want to, you can imagine that there are people like that. I have heard of people like that, actually, and I have heard that there are Buddhist masters, Zen masters who can remember past lives and who can remember their previous lives – so it may be true I've heard. It's easy to hear about superhuman people. I have never met one; so I don't believe it. I only really believe what I have experienced in that kind of area. All these tales about 'Oh there is this Tibetan master who remembers who he was two hundred years ago...' – I don't believe them. I think, it is all imagination. However, if somebody has met a superhuman being, really actually met one and noticed that they are superhuman, then speak up now, please.

*My wife!*

Your wife?! Yes, yes. (Laughter)

*Does Nagarjuna continue to refute standards, concepts of his time regarding Buddha nature?*

Yes, he does. But it is very difficult for me to go into the details of the chapters at the same time as talking about them generally. I seem to need a different part of my brain. But, yes he does. For example, he says in the last line of the chapter: 'However, Buddha nature is not innate and neither is this world'. 'Innate' means 'possessing of a permanent soul-like essence'. So in just that last line he is refuting the belief in soul, the belief that Buddha-nature is a kind of innate essence or quality and it passes on as you are going into *nirvana*. Yes, he keeps refuting it all the time.

Chapter 23 'Examination of Opposites': In this chapter he points out that our categorisation of opposites 'good and bad', 'right and wrong', 'like and dislike' depend on each other. You can't have 'good' unless you have 'bad'; you can't

have 'heaven' unless you have 'hell'. You can't have 'high' unless you have 'low' because they define each other. Therefore they are constructs.

Dogen says in the Shobogenzo that 'good' is a construct. That almost sounds immoral. However, it doesn't mean that there is no such thing as right conduct but it means that there is no such thing as 'good' existing separate from any conduct waiting for the conduct to find it. 'Good' doesn't exist on its own, 'bad' doesn't exist on its own. This denies, for instance, the existence of evil. There can be evil conduct, but evil does not exist without conduct. And good conduct does not exist without its opposite. So here we have not a denial of morality but a pointing out of the way that we form opposites.

Chapter 24 is 'Examination of the Four Noble Truths'. However, the main content of the chapter doesn't discuss the four noble truths; it discusses emptiness.

Emptiness is one of his core themes in the book. It is a very difficult theme and I am quite unhappy with this chapter. If you read this chapter and it doesn't make sense it is because it doesn't make sense, not because you don't understand it. It is a very difficult chapter because in the first six verses he gives a kind of normal interpretation of emptiness that was around in his time and then from verse 7 onwards he says all that is wrong. But the way he talks about it and the word 'emptiness' itself makes the chapter very, very difficult to translate into English.

'Emptiness' in Sanskrit is the word '*sunyata*' and '*sunyata*' is an abstract noun formed from the adjective '*sunya*' which means 'empty'. But '*sunya*' doesn't only mean 'empty' it means 'bare', 'desolate', 'alone', 'without anything' and it also means 'zero' or 'not plus and not minus' if you like. Quite interestingly, it is related according to etymologists to the Arabic word 'chifra'. This gave rise to the Latin 'zephyrum' which is the root of the English word 'cipher'. 'Cipher' was used to represent zero until a couple of hundred years ago. So '*sunya*' has also the meaning of the zero point between plus and minus, zero on a graph or zero on scales, i.e. we can say it is related to balance. '*Sunya*' doesn't simply mean 'empty' in the sense of a box that is empty (looks inside the one in his hand) – Oh, it's not empty – (laughter). We don't really know the way it was used, but in Buddhism '*sunyata*' is used to describe some kind of quality. Whether that quality referred to things or to people, to conscious states is not very clear. So there are a tremendous number of different renderings of emptiness. *Sunyata* was translated into Chinese as 'ku' which means 'empty' but also means 'sky' or 'space'. So there is another confusion: Is space empty? Another character was also used, namely 'mu'. 'Mu' is a kind of negation.

The whole area around 'emptiness', the words used in English, the words used in Chinese and Japanese, the word used originally in Sanskrit, is very confused. There are lots of different ways in which you can translate 'emptiness' and in this chapter I haven't really found the right way to do it. But basically Nagarjuna uses the word 'emptiness', to put it simply, to describe the state where our conscious awareness is empty of the discriminating conceptual entities.

*So, similar to Dogen in that sense?*

Yes.

*Does everything relate in the same way Dogen's writing does to Zazen and the life that grows from the practice?*

Well, Dogen talks about Zazen. He has written chapters about Zazen but Nagarjuna doesn't mention Zazen or *Dhyana* in his MMK at all.

*So it's not really known as to what extent he practised Zazen?*

No. However, he is down as one of the patriarchs. We practise Zazen because Dogen teaches Zazen and Dogen's master taught him Zazen and Dogen's master's master must have taught Zazen and so back to Nagarjuna. If you believe that - and it is a kind of belief - you can convince yourself that he must have practised *Dhyana* or *Jhana* in Pali.

*Do you sense it through the writing, basically?*

Yes, yes.

*So if you read that chapter on emptiness and you think about a word to mean 'zero, balance, base' then it might be easier to understand maybe?*

I wish that were true. If you think of the word 'emptiness' or 'empty' as having a whole range of meanings... The thing is I don't think one word will work through the whole chapter, although I have done so. However, to use different words in different verses is very difficult. So I am not sure how to do that, really.

I am not happy with that chapter, but he does discuss the meaning of 'emptiness' and he says that the empty state is the basis of the world which to me says that reality is not conceptual, it is real. We have concepts, but reality doesn't have concepts. A tree grows whether we call it an oak, an elm, an ash or even a tree. It doesn't need a name in order to exist. But we need a name in order to talk about it.

*Is that Buddha-nature, a tree growing?*

A tree growing, Buddha-nature? A tree is Buddha because it is not worrying about anything.

*So growing is its nature?*

But to grow is our nature...I don't quite follow you.

*But a tree growing is Buddha-nature?*

No. A tree growing is a tree growing. It's not anything else; it's just a tree that's growing.

*Can you explain Buddha-nature then?*

Yes. Buddha-nature is our natural state when we are fully in the present. If somebody is fully in the present or awake he is called a Buddha and their nature

is called Buddha-nature. For instance, when you practise Zazen, you balance yourself and you keep discarding your various fragmented images and thoughts coming and going in your mind and you become more aware of where you are and what you are doing. Then you have Buddha-nature. But you can't find it because it doesn't exist. So you don't have anything really.

*There is this koan. A monk asked Joshu 'Has a dog got Buddha nature?' And Joshu said 'mu'.*

Yes. I think, he should have asked the dog and the dog would have said 'Whoof!'. Yes, it's quite a long complicated koan, much discussed, but when Joshu said 'mu' when he was asked another time, he said 'u' and 'mu' means negative and 'u' means positive. So, have you got Buddha-nature? Well, yes, but no, because we all have our own nature but it is not a concept. We haven't got what we mean by the concept 'Buddha-nature' but we have got our own true nature. We have got it and we haven't got it.

*Sorry, not the same point but if Nagarjuna in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century was denying reincarnation and if Dogen several hundred years later is also denying reincarnation, why is it that in my son's religious study lessons at school they teach that Buddhists believe in reincarnation?*

Because there are other lineages which believe in reincarnation; for instance, Tibetan Buddhism, which is very strong and powerful in England, believes in reincarnation, which suits a Christian society because Christians believe in life after death. So it's just right for us, really. Tibetan Buddhism may have influences from previous religions, just as Buddhism has influences from previous religions which believed in reincarnation and a life after death. Brahmanism believes in reincarnation, but Buddhism doesn't. But it's a common assumption that Buddhist believe in reincarnation.

(Inaudible comment)

*I have heard that the Buddha wouldn't discuss the subject.*

What happens after death? It's a difficult one to discuss, isn't it really?

*There is the story of the master who was asked if there is life after death and he said 'I don't know; I'm not dead yet'.*

Ah, yes.

Chapter 25 is a discussion of *nirvana*, making it into a real state that real people have in the present rather than some mythical place you go to.

Chapter 26 is an examination of the twelve-fold chain of cause and effect, of the twelve links which is a causal description of the development of consciousness.

Chapter 27 is the 'Examination of Views' where he discusses all the different views that we have about life and reality. He culminates with his last verse which is written on the back of the book:

I pay homage to Gautama Buddha,  
To he who out of compassion  
Taught the true dharma  
As the relinquishing of all views.

This suggests that all views are constructs, and dharma or reality is that which is left when all our views cease, in other words, when we stop thinking about or reflecting on our life, then we are actually in our life. So when we are thinking about reflecting on our life, we are pulling ourselves out of life to look at life.

*So 'views' is rather like 'opinions' not viewing, like me viewing you now, I am looking at you – it's not that kind of view?*

You could say, it includes that, yes.

*So, if I relinquish my view of you now, how would I do that?*

Shut your eyes or pick up your book and throw it at me. So if you act, in the instant of acting you stop looking at me and interpreting what you see for a split second.

*(Inaudible) at 28.29*

This is too difficult for me to answer. (Chuckles)

*I thought you had the answer to everything.*

Yes, I do; that is my answer. (Laughter)

In the beginning of the book Nagarjuna has a kind of dedicatory verse which I didn't quote but this verse sums up what he wants to say in four lines. This is what it says:

Not ceasing, not arising, not cut off, not eternal,  
Not identity, not difference, not coming, not disappearing.  
That which the perfectly awakened one taught is the realised universe, freedom  
from hindrance, happiness.  
I salute him, the best of speakers.

That's a literal translation; you can make it sound more poetic than that, which I did try to do and it is in the beginning of the book.

So this is my interpretation of this to make it sound smoother:

'The realised universe that the perfectly awakened one taught  
Does not arise or cease'.

In other words, our real experience in this moment is not of something arising in front of us or ceasing in front of us. Therefore reality does not arise from somewhere and disappear to somewhere.

'It is neither eternal nor transient,

It doesn't last forever and it doesn't only last now.  
It is not found in sameness nor is it in difference  
It's beyond categorisation,  
It does not appear, nor does it disappear,  
It is free of all hindrances and is happiness itself.  
I revere what the Buddha says above all others.'

His statement there is that reality is just here, just at this moment. This moment doesn't come from the previous moment and doesn't disappear so that the next moment can come, because reality has the very strange quality about it that it is always here. We can invent models of reality, like that it must resemble the frames of a film: this moment and then the next moment. But that is only a model; there is no next moment. There is only this moment and this moment goes on forever; so it's eternal. But this moment is only now so it's also instantaneous; so it's both instantaneous and eternal.

Our model of reality stretches from past to present to future. We make a line of time: the previous moment, the next moment, this moment, the moment after this, the moment after that. But Dogen says quite clearly in Uji, reality is not lined up in a series, moments are not lined up in a series, neither are they piled on top of each other. Reality has a quality about it which we can't grasp. It's always changing, it's always here, it never comes, it never goes. It's infinite and it's also instantaneous. It is beyond all opposites and it's here now. Can you understand that?

So all our models, you know, passing from past to present to future are only models. We can't see the present moment going into the past; we can't see the present moment going into the future; there are no cracks in the present. It's just present, continual present, but it's not continuous. In mathematics there are two ways of basically modelling time: one is continuous which is analogue and the other is discrete like for instance, digital music, lots of little pulses. Reality is both, analogue and digital, or both particle-like and wave-like. And it is always here.

That's all I want to say about MMK this time and there is an awful lot more to talk about it. To talk about it in detail, to go into some of the verses to discuss what he actual says would have to be another project at another time, or series of talks at another time.

Five minutes of questions:

*Do you think this is why Japanese doesn't know the future tense? They only use the present tense... (inaudible)*

Yes, which appears as a weakness, especially in the strategic, political and economic field. Japanese society is very present-oriented and appears to be short-sighted from a western strategic kind of way of looking at life, yes. We can see the weaknesses of such an outlook, but there are also strengths. I discovered this quite soon after I went to Japan. Because I was involved in training technicians, I wanted to plan it all out. But the Japanese people I worked with just wanted to start. I said 'You can't start without planning – I just don't

know where I am going'. But while I was arguing and thinking and planning, they already were two steps on the road. It took me about three years to realise that that also works. You can actually take a step without any thinking or planning and then you can take another step; then you can actually walk, you don't have to think where you are going in order to walk. But both sides have strength and weaknesses. I am not suggesting one is better than the other.

Any other comments or questions?

*That last verse is a brave thing to write at the end of a book where he has been expressing views, isn't it, to pay homage to he who told the true dharma relinquishing all views; it's a bit like in 'Wenderwal' where he says 'what's the good of writing books?'*

Ah, yes, what is the use of the words on this page?

*Is it the same you were getting at, is it the same thing you were saying earlier?*

Yes. He is saying that ideas are different to reality and that Gautama Buddha taught reality; he didn't teach ideas. The dharma is not an idea; Buddhism is not an idea. It's not a philosophy; although there is Buddhist philosophy, the philosophy points out of philosophy. The words are pointing at something outside the words. And the fact of words pointing to something outside the words is important; otherwise we get trapped in words.

*Regarding the thing about views, doesn't he also means we all have opinions about people and races and ideas, that by relinquishing all those preconceptions you are going to be a lot more relaxed about life?*

Yes. But it is a very difficult thing to do because society demands that we have opinions and views; human society requires us to have them.

*It doesn't require us to have extreme views*

You can say 'relinquishing' them is an important word because we can't live in society without views but we need to be able to relinquish them. And this is what we are doing in Zazen. We go in there and we give up all our thoughts, or try to. We relinquish all views. That last verse suggests to me that Nagarjuna must have practised Zazen, that he was a teacher of Zazen and that all the people in the lineage of teachers from Gautama Buddha taught the practice of Zazen. And Dogen says that that is what is taught, the practice of Zazen.

*So what we can take away from here is a balance between ...*

Your bags, nothing else. Don't take any of Earth Spirit's stuff away, please leave it all here.

*...a balance between relinquishing views...*

No, don't take anything away. Just go away at the end of the weekend with your bags, I'm serious. You can forget everything; forget all the talks, forget all this

because it's finished. Don't hang on to any of it. Just go home and enjoy stopping off at the motorway services...

We can live life freely. We can do what we want with our lives. Buddhism doesn't say 'Live this kind of life, that kind of life'. It says 'If you live in this way, you can be awake; you can be happy. Sometimes you're happy and sometimes you're unhappy. You can be contented about sometimes being frustrated; You can be unworried about the fact that you worry.' So, just get on with your life and practise Zazen every day, please.

And now our resident poet, Ralph, will read one of his poems which is pointing to reality outside of words.

*Words pointing to reality outside words is poetry. I am leaving immediately after this, so I would just like to say thank you for that.*

*(Here follows the poetry reading)*

Thank you very much.

So, now it's time to get ready for Zazen.