

**Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin Czech Republic
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**Talk Number 2: Questions and Comments on Zazen
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(This talk was translated consecutively into Czech, and some of the questions were in Czech)

(Chanting: Kai kyo ge)

One reason that we practise Zazen facing the wall is to develop eyes on the back of our heads. Once we develop eyes on the back of our heads, we can notice after we go through a door, that it's left open. (*Reference to a door left open in the dojo by someone who had to leave early*).

More seriously: Especially in modern culture, we concentrate on what is in front of us and on what we see and what we are thinking and this makes us excellent at projecting into the future, projecting into the space in front of us. Because of this cultural habit, we move forward; if we have an intention, we move forward towards the intention. If we have something to do, we move forward towards the thing we need to do. If the telephone rings, we move towards the telephone. We completely forget about where we are or about the place we just left behind us. So we rush forward into the future leaving lots of things trailing behind. One effect of Zazen is that we can train ourselves to be where we are and to look out of the back of our heads and the sides of our heads, generally speaking, just to be aware. But to be aware we have to give up the eagerness of what we want to do; we have to give up our eagerness or control our eagerness just a little. So, do try. Does that make sense?

(Comment inaudible)

When I say eagerness, I mean a tendency to want to be somewhere we are thinking about. But, of course, there is another kind of eagerness, a kind of vitality which we can have at every moment.

Does anybody have any questions or comments, generally about Zazen?

You said this morning that there are different factions of Buddhism. Are there different factions of Zazen?

Yes, there are. For a long time there has been a tradition of believing that if we practise Zazen, we can make ourselves into a better person living in a special state. There were Japanese teachers in the Rinzai tradition (not including Rinzai himself), who taught that if you practise Zazen, you can get something very special which they called enlightenment. This creates in the person who is practising Zazen a kind of hope and eagerness to get something better, to become special, to get to some special state. But according to the teachings of Dogen, the thirteenth century monk whose teachings I follow, Zazen is giving up all those kinds of hopes and all those kinds of beliefs, and all hope of becoming a better person. When we give up all hope of becoming a better person or a special person in a special state, then we become a normal human being who is awake

to the world. That is what in Buddhism is called a Buddha. So, that is quite a different view of Zazen.

Then there are many other forms of meditation where people consciously have something in their mind or are consciously meditating on some kind of subject or some kind of image. But that kind of practice is completely different from Zazen.

Sometimes I feel I am thinking too much during Zazen about daily life.

When we sit in Zazen, we notice how we are and if, for instance, we spend a lot of time thinking as part of our work or just as part of our character, then when we practise Zazen, we notice our thinking. But our thinking has no target. When we are thinking as part of our work, it is different. For instance, my work is computer work; I spend a lot of time thinking and then typing. But I don't notice the thinking separate from my typing: It's my work - I am just working. When I practise Zazen, I am not typing, only the thinking is left. So sometimes we notice that we are thinking so much.

Our Zazen is the result of how we live. And even when we practise Zazen and we notice we are thinking a lot, if we sit in the balanced posture and we stop ourselves every time we notice that we are thinking, then we become a little more settled. We can't expect miracles. If we have a very, very busy, stressful couple of weeks, and then practise Zazen, we feel the whole stress coming out. If we had a nice holiday for a couple of days and feel rested and happy, then our Zazen would be more peaceful. Zazen is not a way of getting rid of all the things we did in our life. The way we live shows in our Zazen without fail. The effect of Zazen is very subtle and slow. Even if we have very thinking-based work, if we practise Zazen every day, we can just let ourselves settle. Even if it is only a little bit, it is a very great help.

I sometimes use the simile of a glass of water which has got some ash inside the water; we put our finger in the water and we stir the water around and the water is cloudy. If we take our finger out of the water and stop stirring, the cloudiness, the ash settles to the bottom. This is like our consciousness; we are always stirring our consciousness, even in Zazen – So we have to train ourselves to take our finger out, again and again and again and again. This training is very valuable.

I would like to follow with a different aspect of the question. Do you think it may be beneficial, if during Zazen there is a lot of thought? Most of the time the thoughts might not be very useful, but sometimes it may happen that there is a thought which in ordinary life won't come to you because you are too busy thinking of other things. I wonder what you do if you have this kind of thought: Maybe it's not a good idea to follow it in Zazen because we should just let it go. But would you perhaps analyse after Zazen what this thought meant? I think some thoughts might be beneficial even if they come in Zazen.

We often have thoughts in Zazen and we can't stop them unless we notice them; but usually we have already had the thought before we notice the fact. We don't notice until after we have done the thinking, so we can't stop it retrospectively. So it's inevitable to think during Zazen but we don't intentionally think and we don't intentionally keep thinking. Sometimes the thoughts which come up are

strange and random, sometimes they make sense, sometimes they don't, sometimes we remember afterwards, sometimes we forget completely. If we remember them afterwards, we can do whatever we like with those thoughts, quite freely. Only during Zazen we stop our train of thinking when we notice; after Zazen we can do what we like.

How does the state of 'sunyata' relate to Zazen?

The word '*sunyata*' in Sanskrit is usually translated as emptiness and I'm not sure about the connotations of 'emptiness' when you put it into Czech. In English 'emptiness' suggests 'nothing at all' and so there has been lots of discussion about the meaning of '*sunyata*' in Buddhist circles. But according to Dogen and according to my teacher Nishijima Roshi the true meaning of '*sunyata*' is the very fine and nice balanced state which we experience in our lives sometimes during Zazen when our busy mind settles after we have been practising at a sesshin for example for a couple of days. It may also happen for instance when after a long hike in the mountains you sit eating your lunch, your mind is empty of all thinking and you feel simply satisfied. So that emptiness of 'busy-ness' in our consciousness, that absence of 'busy-ness' in our consciousness. Does that make sense?

We all experience it, everybody does, not only Buddhists; but it doesn't stay – it comes and goes.

In the past I have heard you associate certain sports with practising Zazen and the similar state you get to in both. So why should we practise Zazen and not just play sport?

Yes, I think Zazen is the simplest sport, and even Dogen writes in his teaching that Zazen is only one way to get the balanced state. There are a million other ways. However, even if we practice sport and because of our effort we get a very nice balanced state of body and mind, most sports still have some intentional aim and that intentional aim often disturbs a person's nice state. It's true that very excellent sports people train themselves to keep in the balanced state and try to give up their intention to win, because at the highest level of competition if you have a strong intention to win, you often make mistakes. So, yes, sport is indeed an excellent way to get the balanced state, but it is also very easy to lose it because of your will to win. Zazen does not have any intentional aim and is therefore much more powerful. We can attain the balanced state and there is no reason to get rid of it.

I was always told that one can learn from one's mistakes and if one achieves a perfect state in Zazen, then theoretically one will never make a mistake.

Yes, that's true; if for just the one millisecond you are in a perfect state, you never make any mistake. So it's true for one millisecond. (Laughter). But often, for instance, if we come on a sesshin and then after practising for some time and keeping away from the disturbances of everyday life we go home, we feel very nice and happy and balanced and satisfied. Then sometimes from our deep subconscious we feel that we miss the disturbance. So we think 'Oh, I could just

fancy a couple of glasses of wine tonight' or 'I feel too peaceful' and then we disturb ourselves a bit and we feel better.

We have been talking about how Zazen and sport are two different ways of achieving a balanced state, but is it true that there is this purpose in Zazen? Do we purposefully try to achieve a balanced state in Zazen?

Yes, we do, but that purpose is in our mind. Before we practise Zazen, we might have an intention: 'I am going to sit to make myself balanced'.

So, if my wife asks me, 'Why do you sit Zazen?' now I can reply. (Laughter)

Yes, it's a question of the difference between thinking and doing. In our mind we say 'I want to become more balanced, so I am going to practise Zazen'. It's the intention. We want to do it. However, when we sit on the cushion and take the posture of Zazen, we have to give up that hope because that is the only way to make ourselves balanced. We want to become more balanced and we sit down and give up that hope to become more balanced; this is very strange, but it is the same in sport. Somebody playing a competitive sport wants to win. For instance, in a judo competition the person wants to win. But when they get onto the mat, they have to give up the intention to win - to get the best chance of winning. So the best chance of being balanced is to stop wanting to be balanced when we are practising.

That seems to tie in with what you were saying this morning about not having a hierarchy because there is no desire to win in Zazen, not like in sport.

Of course, in our minds we have lots of intentions all the time but in Buddhism our intention is to have no intention; my teacher often said "Our aim is no aim".

So when you go hiking in the mountains, you achieve this balanced state. But do you think that when you practise Zazen, that it has more value? Both in the mountains and when you practise Zazen there is nothing special to get. Does Zazen have some deeper meaning?

No, but it's more powerful because there is nothing to distract us. If we go for a walk in the mountains, actually, sometimes we can spend the whole time talking to our companions about some situation which we left behind. So we are not walking in the simple state. There are lots of ways of walking. If we practise Zazen, the situation is more bare, more stark and in that way it is more powerful. That is why I say Zazen is the simplest sport.

Is that because the result is nothing rather than something? With Zazen the result is nothing, just emptiness.

No, just because it is simple and severe.

You said earlier that when we notice a thought, we should stop the thought. I wonder about the line in the Fukan-zazengi about the essential skill of Buddhas which is neither thinking nor not thinking but non-thinking. Is that right?

This is a very interesting subject. It's difficult to understand if we *think* about it and this is very closely connected with the development of western civilisation. We know the state which we call thinking, and we know the state which is without thinking – there is no thought. But Dogen writes about a state which is different from both of those. If we *think* about that problem, we can't become clear about it and the reason is that for thousands of years in western civilisation we have learnt to separate thinking from doing. We are taught by our culture that we think about something and then we do it. We are not very familiar with the situation of thinking-doing.

For instance, in human society we believe that we think our way through our life. We plan and devise a strategy and then we act. That belief has created our excellent civilisation. As a result of that we come to see, for instance, animals or nature as not thinking. So if you see a spider in the corner of your window and it's moving along making a web, you don't usually imagine the spider is thinking about that: 'Ok. Now I go up here, then I put one thread down to there, ...'. (Gestures). So the spider doesn't have the same way of being that human beings have. A spider is somehow doing wonderful things but he is not thinking like we do. This approach is the result of our belief in the separation of thinking and doing. We have forgotten that actions themselves contain intelligence. Every action of the spider has thinking inside the action but not separate from the action. Yet we are so used to believing that thinking is separate from acting, that we can't imagine something which is acting and thinking at the same time. Although we do it all the time, we don't believe it. What the spider is doing is different from thinking. It's that the spider is neither thinking nor doing; he is doing-thinking. He is whole; he is not separate. But human beings have been separating thinking and doing or mind and body for thousands of years. We forgot that there can be actions which are intelligent without separate thinking. It's a big subject because it is at the heart of one weakness of our western culture which is, however, also its greatest strength.

That was a bit heavy, wasn't it?

Do you think it is also a weakness for the people in Asia because Dogen wrote about this subject?

Yes, it's not only a problem in western culture but especially in western culture. This is because, in addition, we had Plato and Aristotle. Plato said that there is a perfect world of ideas and this is an imperfect world which is a kind of shadow; so there is the perfect ideal and an imperfect world. Then Christianity came with a belief in a perfect heaven and an imperfect world. That division was made much stronger in the West than in Asia.

Thank you very much.

(Chanting of *Fue-Ko*)