

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin Czech Republic February 2009

Talk Number 1: The State of Buddhism in the West By Eido Mike Luetchford

(This talk was translated consecutively into Czech, and some of the questions were in Czech)

(Chanting of *Kai kyo ge*)

As many of you know, I don't like to give a long talk with nobody participating. So it's nice if I can talk for about fifteen minutes and if you have a question, please ask it. Questions are a very important way to clarify Buddhist philosophy and the simple, stupid questions are the most important. The very sophisticated, complicated questions are too difficult for me. (Laughter)

You may hesitate, but please overcome your hesitation. I want to hear your opinions also, not only questions and if you disagree with something, it is fine to say so. As any of you who are scientists or work in the scientific area know, understanding develops best by dialogue, even sometimes by disagreement, but not some kind of reverence. I don't like reverence. Also, if any of you have questions about Zazen, please ask me at any time during the retreat and we can come into the dojo and try to find a solution. If you have a kind of philosophical question about Zazen, you can ask it any time; even if we are talking about a different subject, it doesn't matter.

This morning I want to talk about the state of Buddhism in the West. In western countries Buddhism has now become very popular. It would seem that Buddhism is becoming stronger, Christianity and traditional religion is becoming a bit weaker. So the situation sounds very encouraging. But I have a different opinion. I think in the West, in Buddhism there is a hidden crisis.

I meet many people who are interested in Buddhism. But if they read different books about Buddhism or visit different groups who practice Buddhism, they find very little in common and sometimes nothing in common and so it is very confusing. Usually, then, people decide: "This group suits me or I like that group... the way they do things", and so we have a situation where there are a lot of different teachings about Buddhism, which sometimes have very little in common. There must be many people who disagree with me strongly. They would say, "Oh no, everybody has the same thing in Buddhism, we are all one. We all believe in the Four Noble Truths and the Precepts; we all do meditation and we all revere the Buddha", and so on... But I think that the tendency in the modern world to assume that we all believe the same thing is misleading.

People like to cooperate and this is very useful. In the small city where I live I often get letters from other religious groups: Christians, Hindus, Muslims, etc. and the two large universities in the city have formed inter-religious groups. These inter-religious groups receive funding from the government and the universities to encourage inter-religious activities and discussions between different religions. I don't mean that this is not useful; of course it's very useful.

But within the area of Buddhism we don't yet know what Buddhism is. Before we can have useful dialogue about Buddhism, we need to know what it is.

Some people believe that Buddhism is a religion and that Gautama Buddha whose statue you see here by the flowers is a kind of spiritual being or god. This happened soon after Gautama Buddha died, two thousand years ago. They made him into a god and they said that after he died, he entered a special place called *nirvana*. And this belief is still very strong. In some groups of Buddhism they believe that we go on to another life after this life and then even another life after that life, that all the time we are becoming more and more perfect until we attain some godlike state. But I can't believe in that kind of Buddhism at all. I like to tell people about the very simple kind of Buddhism which I learnt for twenty, thirty years in Japan; it's so different from the other kind of Buddhist teachings that I wonder if it's the same thing or not.

Some of the people who are teaching in the West like to build up very large groups. They are very diligent to get new people to join them. Then, when they have joined the group, they find that the group has many different activities and there is a hierarchy within the larger group. The original teacher is at the top and all the people underneath hold him or her up and gently push them into heaven. Unfortunately, these leaders are not familiar with heaven; so sometimes they do very embarrassing things and their followers hide the facts.

This kind of activity has been very common in human society for thousands of years. We can see it in all religious groups, groups which in Europe have been mainly religious groups and we can find this behaviour in Christian groups everywhere. The person at the top has a direct telephone line to God, maybe broadband (laughter) and this special transmission goes from the top person to other people and then to the lower people and then the very lower people. Then it is necessary to introduce ceremony, even clothing to support that structure. This is very familiar in Christian Europe and it's also very common in Buddhist groups now. In the Christian hierarchy the person at the top wears very special clothes, a hat and very beautiful robes and they have many people going round helping them and so on. I have seen the same thing in Buddhist groups. For instance, the robe which Buddhists wear in some Buddhist groups has a very special significance or the colour is very significant. They believe that certain colours mean something special.

This kind of hierarchy, and the organisation which supports a hierarchy, is very common, almost, we can say, natural human behaviour. Unfortunately, in Buddhism it is a very big barrier to finding out what reality is. We look to people higher up the hierarchy to give us something and if we get something, we feel happy and if we don't get anything, we feel disappointed. But original Buddhism is about losing things. We can say it is about losing everything. This does not mean we should take off all our clothes, give away all our money, our car, have nothing; it means that in order to see what is real in life, we need to lose all the things with which we cover up reality.

There is a very well known quotation from the Christian bible where Jesus says that to enter heaven you have to become like children. Actually, I don't know what he meant to say, but I feel that it contains some kind of truth. In Buddhism we try to return to our normal state and we can say our normal state is

something similar to when we were children. That does not mean to behave childishly, but to be open, cooperative, honest and simple. All of these qualities we can lose very easily. I frequently lose them. In daily life, in working, in becoming stressed, in dealing with life's problems we sometimes stop being open. It's too painful. Or we start to think in very complicated ways because being simple doesn't seem to work. So, of course, to return to some simple, natural state like a child is a kind of dream or a kind of ideal.

However, life in society is very severe. More and more we need to use our brains to deal with things in society, to make choices about our bank details, our work, about where we are going for a holiday, what we are doing in our job. Thinking, thinking, thinking. We desperately need some space in our life to become simple for a short time, to become stupid for a short time and if we practise Zazen, simply, stupidly, every day, we can let ourselves come back to reality. This is the centre of Buddhism. This is what Gautama Buddha taught after he sat in Zazen for some period, I think forty days. But after he died, people were very diligent to create some huge religious movement, with gods and kings and chief priests and assistant chief priests and monks and nuns and ordinary people and so on. I think, Gautama Buddha might have walked back into the forest if he had seen it.

All this is not necessary though, of course, human society can't help these things. When we work in society, there are many organisations with hierarchies and always that kind of structure appears. But in Buddhism we should resist it. If we don't resist it, it will grow and grow and we will have very hierarchical Buddhist organisations who are worshipping themselves and who have lost the ability to be simple. This is what I feel about recent developments in Buddhism in Europe.

In 1860 Japan opened up its borders after 300 years of isolation and for the next forty years the government brought in a great deal of western ideas and western systems. At that time they saw very spiritual, hierarchical religions in Europe and they looked at the very simple Buddhism that existed in Japan and they felt a bit ashamed. Theirs was a religion for farmers; so they tried to destroy original Buddhism in Japan. They burnt the temples and sacked the priests. They created new Buddhist groups which were more spiritual, more hierarchical and introduced those into Japan and the simple nature of Buddhism was almost lost. But there were a few teachers who taught their students the original nature of Buddhism. One monk was called Nishiari Bokusan (1821-1910) and it was one of his descendents who taught, for instance, Shunryu Suzuki. Shunryu Suzuki went to the United States in the 1960s where he taught very simple and direct Buddhism. He told his students: "Don't go back to Japan". In Europe there was Master Deshimaru who had been taught by Kodo Sawaki, a Japanese monk who studied original Buddhism. But in both cases after they died, organisations grew and grew and became hierarchical. We should resist this. This is my feeling.

We should resist building hierarchies, because it makes simple Buddhism into something spiritual and something complicated. Of course, it is necessary to have a teacher if we want to learn something. But I don't feel, for instance, that I am the head of an organisation. Because when I am teaching, I am teaching myself, or reminding myself, and I am very thankful that people come and

listen. If nobody comes to listen, I have to stop teaching myself. This is my attitude.

If you have comments or questions coming from your own experience I'd like to have a discussion in the next twenty minutes. So please, speak if you would like to. If it's silent for a while, it's more difficult to speak: It becomes more and more difficult. We start to cough and move around.

Question: Are there groups in Japan that operate the same way that you teach or are you saying that they have come to Europe now?

They have come to Europe and stayed and there are very few such groups in Japan. This is why Shunryu Suzuki said to his students: "Don't go back to Japan" and Master Deshimaru said to his students: "Don't make contact with Japan". Actually, both groups made contact with Japan after their masters died because they felt lonely and lost.

(Comment from audience inaudible)

It might seem difficult when the master is no longer there but only if we believe that there is something very special to get. If we believe that there is something to get, then we have to find somewhere to get it from.

But teaching Buddhism is not like that. Many people believe that if we dress the traditional Japanese way, for example, or we dress like a Tibetan, then we get something to do with their religion, but actually that's not true. Of course, there is nothing wrong with dressing like a Japanese monk or dressing like a Tibetan monk or whatever. Everybody has uniforms. I am wearing this little piece of cloth and other people are wearing the same; it's kind of comforting. When I am wearing this, I feel 'Oh, I'm a Buddhist'. But this cloth can't teach me how to live; I can find out how to live by getting rid of all those extra things and looking at life simply.

Yet we like to have lots of things and ceremonies for example. The people from the States that went to Japan wanted to become more Japanese. Maybe they believed that they would become more Buddhist, more enlightened. Unfortunately, it's not true. Even if we have very beautiful robes and even if we can hold a stick of incense in a special way and we can chant very beautiful chants, we are far from any enlightened state. To wear a uniform and to put incense into a bowl nicely, to have a fragrant aroma in the room is pleasant and decorative. It's like singing the national anthem before the start of a football match. It's human society's ceremony.

Comment: Your talk confirms my experience. I spent four years in a European Buddhist community run along traditional lines. I arrived there, from a tradition where you learn by discussing and asking questions. But I found I was buried in all things I had to learn in order to succeed and be accepted in that particular community. So my mind, my energy was taken up with learning how for example to put the incense, with wanting to do it right, with getting stressed about not getting it right and not being accepted. There was a whole set of rules and ceremonies to contend with, so in the end I realised I lost more and more of my integrity and my authenticity.

Everything has value, even training in that way has some value. We can get benefit from learning discipline, by doing something in a certain way, in following somebody else's instructions, but, as you say, it is easy to lose sight of your own integrity.

I don't mean to be critical of other Buddhist groups or anything like that but I feel it's important that in Europe people start looking at what Buddhism is about, not to hide themselves in learning lots of ceremonies, but to find their own way, not somebody else's way. I do not want anybody to follow my way; my way has been like this (draws a large zigzag line in the air). Everybody can follow their own way.

(Question inaudible)

I think it's very nice here. In my small experience you people here in the Czech Republic have a kind of pragmatism which is maybe missing from the UK and you are more straightforward.

My experience of the crisis of Buddhism is as follows: when I started to practise with Grégoire Debailly at a summer sesshin there were about forty people. Now it's only three to five people, which is a bit sad for us. I think in this frenzied modern world there are only very few people who are prepared to stick to pure Zen. People are interested in Zen philosophy and so on but most people abandon pure meditation. When Grégoire Debailly started teaching, most of his students were university students. As they began to have their own families and to have responsibilities, the community began to shrink.

We should not do anything. If our group gets smaller, we can teach one person or two. When there is nobody, we can stop. People should decide freely. I never want to encourage somebody to come or stop them from leaving. Everybody makes up their own mind. This is sometimes a sad and sometimes a happy fact. We just have to accept it.

Thank you.

(Chanting of Fue-ko)