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Talk Number 5: The Buddhist View of Living

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

Shall we chant *Kai kyo ge*?

(Chanting)

Today is the last opportunity to have a talk, so I would like to talk about the Buddhist view of living itself.

The Buddhist view of living itself is rather different from our normal view of our life in society. Living in normal society we all create our life by remembering what happened in the past and planning what will happen in the future. So for me, I have an image of my life in my head: I am going back to Bristol, and Bristol exists over there and I came from Bristol last week. Now I have spent a few days here in the Czech Republic, tomorrow I return to Bristol, next weekend I am going to an accordion workshop, later in the year I am going to Scotland for a retreat and I am going to visit my daughter in Australia. So, inside my head all this is my life.

We all hold an image of our life inside our head and that image is like a straight line of time; I mean, the past is back here (gestures behind his back), the future is over there and I am in the middle. I am moving along from the past to the present, to the future, like a train. In order to move forward into the future I need to think what I am going to do next and plan and then do it. This is our normal view of our life and this is the way that society works because we plan our future activities in cooperation with other people and so, for instance, we can all meet here together.

But the Buddhist view of life is a little different. I'd like to say more 'stupid', but the word 'stupid' is not exactly right. If you remember, I talked about the spider on the first day here and I said the spider is doing and thinking as one thing, i.e. the spider's actions themselves are intelligent. Without thinking, the spider acts intelligently. In Buddhism the view of our life is similar to that.

Buddhism says what we did in the past has already ended, although we hold the memory of the past with us all the time. That memory of our past we are holding in our consciousness in the present. And although we hold an image of the future in our consciousness, actually the future has not happened yet – so we are in the present. The past is in the present and the future is in the present; our whole image of our life is in the present. Everything is in the present. In the present we are already receiving the

result of what we did, of what we ate, of how we slept, and so on. If we stay up late and don't sleep enough, we feel sleepy. If we had a lot of wine to drink, we feel heavy. In the present we are already receiving the result of our past conduct.

However, the future has not been created yet, or more accurately, we are creating it at every moment. My action in the present creates the future. I pick up this sheet of paper and the world changes. You put your hands together and the world changes. If you leave at one o'clock this afternoon, it's different to if you leave at two o'clock this afternoon. So, at every moment we make small choices and with those small choices we are stepping into the future, step by step. Although in our minds we may think about our plans and be making arrangements for future things, actually, at every moment we make one step, one step and our action at every moment creates the next step. We are creating our lives at every moment; we create our own future and we live the result of our own past. We cannot escape the result of our past conduct. We are free to choose which direction to go in this moment. Buddhism says in this moment we have freedom. Not freedom in the sense of 'I can do anything – if I have lots of money, I can do anything...', not that kind of freedom, but a very simple freedom, 'I put my leg up – or leave my leg down, I cough – or don't cough, I blow my nose – or wait, I talk – or keep quiet'.

Buddhism says, these simple actions in the present actually create our future. But normally we don't think like that. We think about some goal or aim we want to get to, and we try to get ourselves towards it without noticing where we are going. Sometimes we don't end up at our aim at all. In fact we never end up at our aim because our aim is only an idea when we make it, and when we arrive at our aim, it's always different. For instance, you book a hotel in the South of Spain for a holiday, looking at the beautiful photographs in the brochure, 'Shall we have this room?' and when you arrive, the hotel is not finished yet (Laughter). Or we worry about an interview we have to go to and we think, 'Oh dear, I am going to make a mess of it' and we feel very nervous, but when it happens, we perform quite confidently.

Although we are always creating aims, we don't notice that we never reach the aim we created in our mind. Where we actually arrive, is where we arrived from each action, moment by moment; so this Buddhist view of life says that our action in the present is important. Although we might worry about big problems in the future, actually we can only take one step at a time and taking one step, the problem itself changes. If you have been hiking in big mountains, you might have an experience of walking along and looking at the place you are going to in the mountains. After five minutes you look again and everything looks completely different and another ten minutes and everything looks different again, you can see round the corner, down the valley. So, you have to change where you are going according to what you see at this moment. I talk about walking in

the mountains because I have done a lot of it, but it's similar walking through a city. Every few metres, your view of the city changes and this is true of our life.

So although we might have a big problem to solve, we can't solve it from here completely; but we can take one step, then the problem may change a little. Then we take another step. Then it might seem like a different problem. So we can proceed stupidly; not finding a solution to our problems from here, but solving the problem by walking into the future, because our walking into the future is intelligent even when we don't think about it. Although the spider is not thinking how to make his web, as he moves, he creates his web. Where is the plan? The spider has a little plan?! No, it's mysterious.

Living itself is intelligent. We can move forward in our life, not always thinking where we are going. I don't mean we shouldn't think where we are going, but we should notice that living itself is intelligent. Our lives unfold in spite of us; in spite of our efforts to plan, our lives unfold. I don't mean we shouldn't plan, but our life itself is a series of steps, moment to moment, and those steps themselves are intelligent.

In Buddhism this intelligence is called *prajna*. In Sanskrit '*pra*' means 'before' like the Latin '*pre*' and the verb '*jna*' is like the Greek '*gnos*' meaning 'thinking' or 'knowledge'. So *prajna* means 'before thinking' or 'before knowledge'. In Buddhism we say that our life is led by *prajna*. Some people translate this word as 'wisdom', but it is more subtle than wisdom and sometimes more 'stupid' than wisdom. For instance, we are walking along the street on the right hand side and we cross over to the left hand side and something falls on the pavement on the side we have just left. There are many situations in our lives where we make choices and we don't know why. We notice this in very severe or emergency situations; sometimes in an emergency situation we act and afterwards we say, 'I don't know what I did – I just did it'. We act intelligently without thinking.

Dogen calls this 'different from thinking' because we can't say it is not intelligent, but we can't say that it is normal thinking. Buddhism says we can lead our lives according to *prajna*. It's a valid way to live, just acting at every moment, adjusting our plans according to the scenery at this moment, noticing that each step is some kind of small solution. It's a nice way to live but you can't become rich or famous. So lots of people don't like it.

I'll stop talking now. Please talk about anything you care about.

You said that we always like to project some goal into the future: I started playing the guitar when I was eight and for a very long time I thought

that the only thing in life that would satisfy me, would be to become a professional player. So for years and years I worked at practising, doing shows but somehow it was always a struggle. Finally at one moment it happened. I noticed that it wasn't the thing that I had imagined it to be, it was completely different in reality. So I just stopped. After some time I again started to enjoy playing, just playing. Like when as a kid I had started to play.

In some situations it feels quite natural to live in the way that you described. When I cycle through Glasgow, the streets I go through have many potholes and I have to avoid the potholes and it is quite natural. So my question is: why do we sometimes not live that way, although it seems quite natural?

Because we are human. The best we can do is to notice that there are two situations: One is social reality which is the world we create with other people in society, in work and so on, and that reality exists in our consciousness, in our head – not only our head. The other is ultimate reality which is our simple actions at every moment. Everybody lives both those realities; everybody does. Buddhism does not belong to Buddhists. Everybody on this Earth is living in both those worlds. But society does not teach us to live in the ultimate reality or simple reality. So we have to rediscover it for ourselves sometimes. You can't get rid of the other one, but while you are rushing forward to reach some aim, you can notice your feet. Both ways of living are the same, although it sounds like a contradiction.

Is that because one is real and the other one isn't real?

They are both the same. While we are living in our created world, we are also living in the real world at the same time.

It's interesting though that they are sort of instantaneous. The instantaneous nature of existence is called the Buddhist view, but actually it's real and in fact it's the other way round: This is real. Maybe we should talk about the 'human view' because this is the one that is a view, a perspective and the other one is not a perspective.

Well, no, even the Buddhist view of the ultimate is a perspective or a view. It's my view, for example, Nagarjuna's view or your view. It's a way of looking at life or thinking about life. When we are in our normal social role, we have another way of thinking about life. But life itself is only one, so it does not have any views, any words, it's just life and we live it. Not Buddhist life or social life, just life itself.

I think that you mean (a member of the audience turning to previous speaker) that the Buddhist view points to reality, but it is still a view, it's a view of how to explain something. But we still call it Nagarjuna's view or

Dogen's view. But it means it points to something real that is beyond views.

Mike, if we have something in the future which is very worrying for us, it can be very hard to live that step by step.

Yes, but we are living step by step, the very hard step by step.

Recently I was told that I may be made redundant after twenty years working for a company. It may not happen for a year or two from now but I have been very surprised at how anxious that has made me feel and the effect it has had on me and how I live. – I don't know what my question is.

It's natural to feel anxious, afraid and rejected and all the things like that and you can't avoid it. The way forward is to feel like that. But as the days pass, things will look different. It may get worse, it may get better; but it will be different. We can't avoid problems. Problems are our life itself. We can only face them; even while crying and shaking we can face something.

If we try to avoid problems, our lives become very miserable. But we can have some other kind of stability which we can hardly notice if we are very, very worried or anxious because that stability is not in our mind, it's in us, in our moving forward. In the Shobogenzo, Dogen wrote a chapter called 'Zazen – State like the Sea' (Kai-in Zammai) and with this image he means that deep down the sea is still, but on the surface there are storms. We can't avoid the storms but Zazen can give us the stability of the deep ocean, which is not the same as a peaceful mind. Even if we are worried, frightened, upset, very, very chaotic, still we can have stability. This is called coping with life.

Last night I kept thinking about something and maybe till about three o'clock I could not fall asleep. But at about three, I realised that I was not worried about not falling asleep. I know that maybe five years ago I would have been furious and I would have broken something out of frustration. So maybe the sesshin helps or the sesshin was the reason I could not fall asleep, but I definitely think that Zazen can help us face the problem without jumping out of the window or hitting someone. Eventually I did go to sleep.

But if we have a goal it great increases the probability that we will reach it, maybe not exactly what was in our mind but something like it. That means it is quite important to have goals.

This is true.

The question is: what is a worthwhile goal in life?

A carrot on a stick, held just out here in front of us. Then we get up, wash our face, we go to work, and we come home – so it's important to have a goal and it's important to throw it away, both.

Perhaps the problem that people have with a goal is that they have the expectation that they are going to achieve the goal rather than just going along.

Yes, I am not saying you shouldn't have goals. You can live a goal-driven life and lots of people do. And without a goal we don't get out of bed. But the Buddhist view is that the goal gets us out of bed, the goal gets us into the bathroom, the goal gets us down the stairs: it's a different kind of view. It does not mean that you have to throw away your other views.

Are each of those actions a giving-up, like when we do Zazen we just give up or like sportsmen?

Yes, for instance, when you watch professional tennis players. You see them waiting for a new serve and they are bouncing about because they want to get themselves into a position where they are not thinking where the ball comes from, they are not thinking 'I might miss the ball' or 'I want to hit the ball' but they are just waiting there. Or if they just missed a shot, you can see them trying to forget, to bring themselves back into the present. Bringing ourselves back into the present is to throw away our goal. In that sense we have to keep throwing it away, but we also need it.

I am sorry; I can't give a simpler explanation of the whole of life. But I do my best. (Laughter)

I was recently reading a book about Shunryu Suzuki and the thing that stuck in my mind was when one of his students made a comment about there being just too much suffering in the world. Suzuki replied, 'No, there is just the right amount'. This struck me as quite an outrageous comment at the time, but it brought it home to me quite how other the Buddhist viewpoint is from my own. Initially Suzuki had had a very difficult life; he had experienced a lot of personal tragedy and was not coming from a point of view of complacency.

I have something to say with regard to the situation of being made redundant. It happened to me five years ago. I was terrified I would not be able to look after my family, pay the mortgage; I'd lose my house, the whole world come tumbling down. In fact I spent a few delightful months cooking and spending time with my baby daughter and then I got a job which was much nicer than the one before. I think it is very bad the way companies make people redundant, because they tell you months in advance of it happening, which encourages you to worry about things

which haven't happened yet. In fact the things that haven't happened yet are completely different from what you think they are going to be.

So, a wonderful job is waiting for you.

I think it also applies to breaking up with people.

A beautiful man or woman is waiting for you.

A better one! No, not a better one, but one that is also wonderful.

A wonderful future is waiting for us all – (the bell rings) – and here it is.

Thank you very much.

(Chanting of *Fue-ko*)