

Dogen Sangha 2002 Summer Sesshin

Talks on Master Dogen's Shobogenzo

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Chapter 3 – Genjo-koan

Session 1

I've decided to talk about Genjo-koan over the next three days, because it's a nice compact chapter of the Shobogenzo, Master Dogen's work, but at the same time it's quite difficult to know what he really means. So I've attempted to write a more easily understandable version which you should have in your set of notes, also you'll find our original, direct translation of the Japanese translation of the chapter. So this is my attempt to make it easier to read; and it's only an attempt, because I can't do it, but I've tried. So if you browse the interpretation which I wrote, I hope it gives you a kind of feeling for what the chapter is about. What I'd like to do is to go through the actual chapter, the original one, if we can get through a couple of paragraphs in each talk, we'll get through the lot. If we don't manage it, it doesn't matter.

First of all, I'd like to say something about... knowledge, I suppose. I watched a programme on the TV about animals which live in extreme environments, anybody else see it? They had polar bears and marmots, but one curious creature is a frog that lives in the far north. Usually frogs, which are cold blooded animals, can't live where the temperature drops below zero because they freeze. But this little frog has adapted – absolutely amazing; when the temperature drops below zero, the frog freezes, but just before that, the drop in temperature stimulates its metabolism to inject very high levels of glucose into the cells. Now glucose is an anti-freeze, so it's got lots of little cells which are all packed with anti-freeze. When it freezes, its heart freezes, its blood freezes, its lungs freeze, so it's dead, but all the little cells, as individual self-contained items, are all alive. So the frog disseminates if you like – this is really strange. And then it stays like that all through the winter and when it thaws out, all its cells remain unfrozen, the frog itself is covered with ice and is frozen, it melts, then its heart of course is frozen so it's still dead.

So these cells generate between them in some miraculous way, a kind of electrical charge. As the charge builds up it suddenly discharges and kick-starts the heart, rather like how they resuscitate in hospitals with a defibrillator. So this is defibrillation in the frog's heart, then it's eyes start blinking and it's alive again (laughs) What's that got to do with Genjo-koan? Well the thing that struck me was that, I was watching this, and I've just told you about it, and we feel that – "oh it's wonderful, I've kind of grasped that, yes I know that now", so it's become knowledge, and it's very stimulating. But how did we get to know about it, and how did human beings notice this little frog and notice it long enough to see what was happening to it, and study it long enough to see how it manages to freeze? And do

you realise that this little capsule of information which I've just spewed out to you is actually the result of lifetimes of effort; somebody devoted the whole of their life to studying this. I don't know the detailed history but it must have been like that, otherwise how could human beings have noticed a little, inconspicuous frog down a hole somewhere in Alaska, freezing and then thawing out.

So I noticed that because we're such a knowledge-based society, we kind of grasp knowledge, then we think we know it, and it's exciting and stimulating, and that's as it should be. But sometimes we don't notice that this knowledge is a kind of very superficial picture of very great effort over lifetimes. And we don't often connect the knowledge that we grasp with the actual work that it is the result of. And this is particularly true when we try to understand Buddhist theory; we want to read something, read a few sentences and understand it – we want somebody to explain it to us so that once it's been explained to us we can say "oh yes I understand that now", and we can go off and tell somebody else. And if we can't tell someone else we feel we don't understand it yet. But actually, for instance, Master Dogen wrote Genjo-koan in the 13th century; this is not just Master Dogen's writing translated into English, it's a kind of mirror of his life. So it took him the whole of his life up to that point to produce that. So if we think we can sit down and understand it and digest it, or realise it just within the space of 5 minutes, 5 days, 5 years, we're expecting a lot. So if we can notice that what we're actually doing is... in a way, the writing is a window into somebody's lifetime of effort.

And what Buddhism says is, that it's the lifetime of effort that's important, more important than the window; the window is important because we can see what Master Dogen's effort was, and we can understand it if we study. But we shouldn't miss the fact that it's the lifetime of effort that's the important thing. Master Dogen found his path which was to spend his life explaining Buddhism, and we're just looking through a little window onto that. So from that point of view, our current society, which is very much information and knowledge based, is quite superficial. But at the same time it doesn't mean it's not important, it's very important. So we can't expect to understand in a short time. We can say that our effort to understand is more important than whether or not we understand, which is a strange thing to say, but it's true. So let's make an effort.

I won't talk about the interpretive version that I have passed out to you, I'll leave that for you to browse at your leisure. The Genjo-koan chapter has a structure to it, and that structure is based around, as some of you will have heard, Master Dogen's four viewpoints. And I'm not going to talk about that so much, but we can notice as we go along, that the paragraphs and even the sentences change viewpoints. The four viewpoints, which are fundamental to Master Dogen's writing right through the Shobogenzo, can be roughly categorised as first, a kind of philosophical or theoretical viewpoint, with which we're very familiar. In fact his first paragraph numbered 1, is his statement of something he wants to communicate with us, from a theoretical or philosophical viewpoint, or from a matter of principle. Then his second viewpoint is objective, concrete, based on nature; the external world, real concrete examples of things. So it's taking the theory and putting it into the world. And we can find examples of that in this chapter. His third viewpoint we call the view of action, which is a rather strange, bizarre way to describe it, because we're used to thinking of action as something we do, so how can it be a viewpoint? But actually, this viewpoint of action which is so bizarre, is the centre of Buddhism. We can say in a way that the viewpoint of action is no viewpoint, because when we're acting we stop analysing, and when we stop analysing we can't see what it is we're doing,

we're doing something, but we can't reflect on it while we're doing it. So it needs quite a lot of explanation, but we can say that the viewpoint of action in Master Dogen's writing... he talks about body and mind being one in action – mind and matter being one in action. He talks about the present moment being real, and the past and the future not being real in that sense. So that's his third viewpoint which we can find in this chapter. And then the fourth viewpoint is very difficult to write about, he tries to catch reality in words, which is impossible. So he tries with poetry often, or sometimes with a story, or a symbolic expression. So these four different viewpoints; the theoretical viewpoint; the more concrete or material viewpoint; the viewpoint based on action, or oneness, or the present moment; and the viewpoint based on reality, poetic, symbolic. This chapter contains all of those in quite a regular structure. So let's have a look at the first paragraph.

When all dharmas are seen as the Buddha-Dharma, then there is delusion and realisation, there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are ordinary beings. When the myriad dharmas are each not of the self, there is no delusion and no realisation, no buddhas and no ordinary beings, no life and no death. The Buddha's truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity, and so there is life and death, there is delusion and realization, there are beings and buddhas. And though it is like this, it is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds while hated, flourish.

Now in this paragraph there are these four views, though it takes a bit of digging out as he writes in a very beautiful and poetic way in medieval Japanese, and this is an attempt to put that into English. The word Dharma has a range of meanings; it's probably one of the most difficult Sanskrit words to put into English. It means a thing or an object, so it was used in the way that we use the word "thing", and it's also used to mean conduct or behaviour. It's used also to mean universal law, and we use it in Buddhism to refer to the universal itself – the Dharma; something we can't grasp, but something that we follow. But in this sentence, dharmas means things. But then Buddha-Dharma means the Buddhist teaching or the Buddhist universal law. So the same word is used in two different ways in the same sentence. So when all dharmas are seen as the Buddhist universal law, "then there is delusion and realization, there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are ordinary beings". Now what he means here is that when we see everything from the spiritual or abstract or philosophical or religious view, then we can discriminate – "oh, he's wearing a robe, he's a Buddhist", "he must be a Buddhist – he's wearing a rakusu", "he's not wearing anything, he's not a Buddhist" and so on. And we can say that the viewpoint which discriminates on the basis of religious or spiritual knowledge is Master Dogen's first view.

But somebody might come along and say "yes, I know this bloke's wearing a robe, but it's only cotton, and that bloke over there is wearing a t-shirt and that's cotton, so what really is the difference between them; they're both human beings, they've both got two arms and two legs, two eyes, one's wearing cotton of this shape and the other is wearing cotton of that shape – so there's no real difference between them". And we'd probably call that something of a materialistic or scientific view. So in the first sentence, he's saying that from the spiritual or philosophical or religious view we can have things called realization, things called delusion, practice, life, death, buddhas, ordinary beings – categories. And those categories only have meaning because we share them. So if we don't share the category, if we only have a personal category, it's very difficult for it to have any value. So how do we share

categories? It must be some kind of mental process, has anybody read Susan Blackmore? She has this theory that our mental constructs and ideas are like little viruses which travel from one person to another, so if we all for instance go to Buddhist lectures, we get these little viruses about Buddhist ideas which sit in our brain. So then we all have the same view, and they replicate.

So the first sentence is a statement on the spread of ideas and concepts and categories which we can then share – “that’s delusion, that’s realisation, that’s life, that’s death” and so on. The second sentence, which contradicts the first, begins “when the myriad dharmas are each not of the self”, myriad dharmas just means all things, so all things of the world are not of the self suggests not a subjective, but an objective view, so a scientific view if you like. So from the scientific view what’s the difference between delusion and realisation, they’re only patterns in our brain? What’s the difference between a Buddha and an ordinary being? Well we’ll have to take them apart and have a look at the brainwaves, then compare them. So the second sentence is that view. Then the third sentence says “the Buddha’s truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity, and so there is life and death, there is delusion and realisation, there are beings and buddhas”. So now we are back to saying that they do exist. Now what this sentence means is that separate from the subjective or spiritual view, and from the material or scientific view, there is another, more simple or basic view which transcends analysis. And the best way to illustrate that view might be to say “well, I’m wearing the Buddhist robe, so from the first view I’m a Buddhist. From the second viewpoint, I’m only wearing cotton, and everybody else wears cotton so I’m the same as everybody else. From the third view I say that I don’t care whether you call me a Buddhist or not, I’m wearing this robe, and if you call me a Buddhist it doesn’t matter. What matters, for me, is that I’m wearing it; I don’t care what you call me”. So in that sense we transcend thinking about, or analysing, either subjectively or objectively. Just wear it.

Q: I don’t understand why the second sentence isn’t the view of action.

The second sentence says that when we look at everything not from the view of the self.

Q: So when you act, the subject and object fall away, isn’t that a description of that?

No. When we view things objectively, we deny abstract, spiritual or religious concepts – so science denies religious concepts.

Q: I can’t see the difference between one kind of concept and the other kind (inaudible)

It is, that’s right. So we can say that both the religious view, and the materialistic view are based on concepts. So we transcend concepts, and where Master Dogen says “transcendent over abundance and scarcity”, abundance and scarcity suggest discrimination – a lot and a little. So we don’t care whether there’s a lot or a little, we just transcend it.

Q: So why is there life and death if we transcend it?

Are you going to live forever? We can ask if there’s life or death, or is there another life after this, or is there a death before this? We can discuss it, and scientists will say, “no, when we’re dead and our body changes, all the cells die so there’s nothing

there." And the religious person will say "yes, but there's something else which goes on to another life", and the Buddhist will say "you can carry on talking all day, but I'm alive now, so I'll have a cup of tea". That's the attitude, that means to transcend. So when we think about it, that third view is rather simple, and it doesn't sound right to call it a view; this is why it's so difficult to explain to people. So just because we say "I'm alive now, give me a cup of tea", we don't deny that we're going to die, but we know that we'll die some day and we were born sometime, but "two sugars please" – in my case. So action transcends thinking.

We can say that we come to the third viewpoint by bouncing around between the first and second viewpoints, which we get very tired of doing; we do inside our minds, when we have a conflict inside ourselves we are often debating between two sides of ourselves, and when we get tired and disturbed and fed up, after a while we wake up one morning and think "oh bugger it", and we feel happy. So that's nice if it happens. If we don't reach the stage where we transcend our conflict, we can sometimes become ill. So we can say that finding the middle between these two is very important, and the physical correlate of this is practicing Zazen. In Zazen, we sometimes concentrate on the spiritual or abstract – we're thinking, sometimes we concentrate on the physical – our legs and back is hurting, someone's making a noise outside. But Master Dogen taught that transcending both is the middle, and the middle way that the Buddha taught is transcending both these two. So we come to the middle, or the view of action by, in a way, wobbling between the other two, and in Zazen that's obviously physical because we're trying to keep in balance, and when we sit in physical balance with all our weight acting down through our spine, we hover between our thoughts and our feelings. If we concentrate on the mental, we'll never find that interface, if we concentrate on the physical, for instance our breathing, we'll never find that interface. If we concentrate on neither, but just let them come and go, there is a state in Zazen where we're sitting in the interface between the abstract and the concrete, between mind and body. And that state is called the balanced state. And this is the state that Master Dogen teaches, and from this state we get the view of action. So in Zazen we concentrate neither on the mental nor on the physical, they come and go, we wobble between them just like a tightrope walker wobbles on the tightrope – if he doesn't wobble he can't find his balance.

Then at the end of the paragraph, Master Dogen tries to capture the real situation, and the real situation is beyond anything we can say. So he says beautiful flowers die, and weeds grow though we don't want them to – this is the fact of our life. So in that simple poetic statement, he wants just to say "this is the fact, this is the fact". I'm here and my back hurts, or I'm here and I'm happy. So beyond everything there is a fact and that fact exists now, and we call that reality. But when we try and grasp reality it falls through our fingers; when we try and talk about it, we can't.

If we talk about it in the abstract, we can never catch it. When we act, we're actually doing something, which is not thinking about what we're doing, and Buddhism says that to act without thinking, without intention, is all right action. So right action is to throw ourselves into action. So in that sense we say something very strange and seemingly irresponsible; that when we throw ourselves into action, we become balanced, and when we become balanced our action is right. So when we think about it – "that means I can never be wrong, so what about... that.." so we're thinking, but real action is different from thinking about action. So when we immerse ourselves in action, there is a wholeness about it, and we can feel something, which we can call "right".

We act in the moment, in this moment, with our body and mind as it is. If we're angry now, then that anger we could say is a physiological state; there are certain poisons in our blood. So they'll be there when we act. However, if we try and wait until those poisons have gone before we act, we never act. So if we stop ourselves and say "oh I'm angry now I shouldn't act, I'm a Buddhist", or you know, "there's a snake in front of me but Buddhists don't kill so I won't do anything", then it's pointless, we can't live like that, we need to act now, there's no other time to act. So to think about right and wrong is not the same as to do right and wrong, and this is the fundamental point which we find very difficult. Because we're taught "think before you act" – but Buddhism says act!

Q: *Action could be.....someone might, in the moment, commit murder.*

Are you going to now?

Q: *I don't know, but I assume, in the case where the two girls were murdered, the man who killed them was....*

Unbalanced.

Q: *But maybe he wasn't thinking, he was fairly focussed.*

Yes, yes, but there is a reality, my reality is here, your reality is here, that man who murdered those girls did something terrible and he should be punished.

Q: *But was it right action?*

No, action is not what he did in the past; action is always here and now. So we can't change his past action, it's gone, we can punish him, but our punishment takes place now.

Q: *That's the action.*

That's the action. So what you want to talk about is theoretical action, and what Master Dogen talks about is always real action. So real action is different from talking about action. So the only place where we can do anything right is now, but if our body and mind is wrong now, then our action will be wrong now. But even if we act wrong now, the next moment is the only moment when we can act right. So we're constantly trying again if you like. And I always like to use the illustration of tennis. Although I can't play tennis, I notice that in the game, professional players, you can see this very clearly, are always trying to get rid of what just happened to them and concentrate on the next moment; they're trying again at every moment. Either they've lost a point so they have to get themselves back into balance to hit the ball, or they've won a point and they're thinking "oh I'm on the right course now" so they have to get rid of that thought. So that's one example where we can see that the only thing we can do is to act right now. So we have to try and return ourselves to balance at every moment. But how to do that is the question.

Q: *When it says there is life and there is death, in the first sentence "life" and "death" are in inverted commas, so they're concepts, and then in the third sentence they're not.*

Yes, you know that phrase in Sansuigyo – “mountains are not mountains, mountains are mountains”, well we can read this in the same way. So the first “life and death” we can say are the concepts of life and death; I know there is death, and yet I’m not dead, so all I know about death, all I know about my own death is a concept – I have not experienced my own death.

I very much hope that we can improve how to put what Master Dogen wrote in a very different language using characters that have a visual quality, how to put that into English. So we really need constantly to improve the text that is in front of us.

Q: So the first sentence is not a description of the state of action, from within the state of action?

No. So all this paragraph is doing is talking about it.

Q: That’s my problem, so it’s conceptualising it, from outside it.

Yes. So this whole paragraph that goes through the four views is itself in the first view, it’s all theory; it’s theory about theory, theory about practice, theory about action and theory about reality, it’s true.

Q: So a view of action is a contention of action.

If we think about the man who murdered the little girls, then what we’re doing is analysing a situation in the past which is not the same as talking about real action, even when we’re talking about real action, it’s still in the abstract. But at least, for instance I can say “the only place where I can act is here, now”, what I’m saying is abstract, but it’s pointing towards what real action is. I can’t act in the future, it hasn’t come yet, and I can’t act in the past. Of course it would be foolish to say that what goes on in our head doesn’t affect our actions, but that’s from a certain point of view, so we need four points of view, or at least four points of view, in order to capture everything we need to take into account if you like. We need to say yes, that if I’m in a terrible mental state then what I do is terrible, it’s true. And if I’m in a peaceful mental state then what I do is peaceful. But that’s not the same as actually acting.

Q: So our action can be unbalanced?

We can act in an unbalanced way, yes. People with short legs are poor at high jump, why? Because they’ve got short legs. Somebody whose mind is unbalanced will act badly, why? Because their mind is unbalanced. So there are facts, and somebody might say that we can change our intention in order to change our action, but the only place we can act is now. So if we’re discussing theory about action, or about somebody else’s action, we can’t then take that and apply it to ourselves, because the only time we can act is now, and the only body and mind we can act with is ours. So we should practice action, not practice thinking about other people’s action in order to then put that onto ourselves; that’s a long way around.

Q: So the idea is to put ourselves into balance?

Yes, that’s right, and that’s what we’re doing on this retreat, we’re balancing ourselves, then forgetting about whether or not our action is balanced; if we start thinking about whether or not our action is balanced, we lose our balance. So then

hopefully we can get back in the zendo and find it again. Then having got it again we want to look at it to see what it's like, then it goes again. So we're constantly peering at ourselves, and every time we peer at ourselves we split ourselves into two. Then we go off and do something, act, and we become one again, and human beings do this all the time.

Let's read the next paragraph and make a start, then we can continue this afternoon. The second paragraph talks about intention actually.

Driving ourselves to practice and experience the myriad dharmas is delusion. When the myriad dharmas actively practice and experience ourselves, that is the state of realisation. Those who greatly realise delusion are buddhas. Those who are greatly deluded about realisation are ordinary beings.

"Driving ourselves to practice and experience the myriad dharmas" suggests intentionally trying to put ourselves into reality, or as we often feel, intentionally trying to get something peaceful. And we often feel, especially when we first start to practice Zazen, that we want to get a peaceful state and we're disappointed when we can't get it. I like to explain it using the example of a pendulum; if we imagine in the course of our ordinary life, we're wobbling and swinging. Then we think that we don't like this wobbling, it's disturbing, so we want to stop ourselves wobbling, so every time I try and stop myself, my attempt to stop in fact keeps the wobbling going (Mike illustrates this with hand gestures). So I'll stop it here, no I'll stop it here – you get the idea, it's not a perfect demonstration! But if I take my finger away then naturally I stop wobbling. So we can say that trying to stop ourselves intentionally is not the way to stop ourselves, but to stop stopping ourselves is a very effective way to stop ourselves. So especially when we're practicing Zazen, when we give up thinking, you know, "I must stop thinking.....I must stop thinking (sighs)", we can't do it. But when we get tired of that and just keep sitting and correcting our posture, we find sometimes quite suddenly that everything clears and we're sitting quite peacefully. So Master Dogen says that when we drive ourselves to get what we want, it's a kind of delusion. Then he switches it around and says that the state of realisation is when everything practices and experiences us.

We'll stop there, thank you.