

Dogen Sangha 2002 Summer Sesshin

Talks on Master Dogen's Shobogenzo

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Chapter 3 – Genjo-koan

Session 3

Back to Genjo-koan. I realized what the problem was with that paragraph yesterday, it was "the mirror's reflection of an image". People don't know what that's connected with. It took me a long time to realise this, sorry. He uses it in paragraph six to talk about realisation, and realisation means to be whole. So although it sounds rather as if he's talking about subject and object, for him, the mirror's reflection of an image and the water and the moon, suggests the state of realisation. So what he's saying is that when we look and when we listen, although we're sensing directly and we're doing it with our whole body-and-mind, so when we intently concentrate on something, we're completely involved in it, at the same time it's not like the state of realisation, when we're experiencing one side, we're blind to the other. So we can start on paragraph four. Sometimes it's difficult for me to understand people's questions, so I realise it must be difficult sometimes for people to understand what I'm saying, so we'll have to puzzle our way through. Everything I say is perfectly clear to me! I remember my Maths teacher saying at High School "I don't know why you boys can't understand what I'm saying, I keep telling you the same thing". So at last I understand what the problem is – we understand exactly what we want to say, and that's where it ends.

When people first seek the Dharma, we are far removed from the borders of Dharma. [But] as soon as the Dharma is authentically transmitted to us, we are a human being in [our] original element.

"When people first seek the Dharma, we are far removed from the borders of Dharma", suggests that when we're first looking for what reality is, or what the truth is or whatever, we approach it rather intellectually. And this is natural. So we don't know where it is, we don't know where it is, what we're looking for. And lots of people give us words and images where it might be, and we look and look, but it doesn't seem to be there. So we're far removed from the Dharma. "But as soon as the Dharma is authentically transmitted to us", sounds a very... it has a kind of mystical ring to it. But authentically means from one person who knows to another person who knows. So for instance it's very difficult to learn to practice Zazen from a book, we can start from a book, but what we need in the end is somebody who practices Zazen to tell us how to practice Zazen. And not only Zazen, this is true of, for instance craftsmen who teach their craft. There used to be an apprentice system, the master craftsmen taught his apprentices not by giving them a book and telling them to read it, but by showing them how to do it. And authentically transmitted means from one real person to another real person. So the Dharma being authentically transmitted means one real person who practices Zazen, showing

another real person how to practice Zazen. So it's quite practical. In that case we become "a human being in our original element". This suggests that we return to our normal state, and when we return to our normal state we're in our original element; we feel comfortable in the world. Now Master Dogen then goes on to give a metaphor for the kind of feeling that we have that we're the centre of the world. And he does it using the analogy of sailing along in a boat.

When a man is sailing along in a boat and he moves his eyes to the shore,

We should make that "when a person is sailing along in a boat, and they move their eyes to the shore"...

he misapprehends that the shore is moving. If he keeps his eyes fixed on the boat, he knows that it is the boat which is moving forward.

So that metaphor is.....where is the centre? Is everything revolving around us? Or what? Master Dogen uses it to talk about what he goes on to discuss in the next sentence.

Similarly, when we try to understand the myriad dharmas on the basis of confused assumptions about body and mind, we misapprehend that our own mind or our own essence may be permanent.

So because we think that there is something called a "body" and something called a "mind" and that they exist separately, our picture of the world has some confusions within it. And if we try to understand all things and phenomena based on those assumptions, we come back to the assumption that I think Descartes made, that I have to start with my mind, because my mind is the only thing that's constant. But Master Dogen says that's a misapprehension, that there is no permanent mind or essence or self. That's not to say we don't feel permanent, because we do. In the chapter called Bendowa, Chapter 1 in the Shobogenzo, there is a question towards the end of the chapter which talks about the non-Buddhist Senika, who spread the belief which was very common in India in the Buddha's time, of an eternal essence or soul which carries on after the body dies, and presumably goes into the next body. So it's a kind of permanence or self-essence. And this belief in the permanence or self-essence, which in Brahmanism, I think is called "atman", was very strong in the Buddha's time, and is still very strong now. But Master Dogen said that it was a misapprehension. And maybe what we were talking about yesterday – Richard Feynman's example of the atoms in the brain of a rat replacing themselves every two weeks, is quite a nice physical correlate to that. And the other thing is, when we look for our mind, we can always find it. So the problem is to investigate the mind is almost impossible. When we're practicing Zazen, every time we notice we're thinking, we're thinking, and every time we might be doing something else, there's no "us" to notice it. So I'd like to suggest that the mind is always here when we look for it. So every time we look for it, we find it. But it's not permanent. Now from that statement that there is no permanent essence or mind, or soul, Master Dogen goes on to talk about what is real. And he starts by saying:

If we become familiar with action and come back to this concrete place, the truth is evident that the myriad dharmas are not self.

So to "become familiar with action and come back to this concrete place," means simply when we involve ourselves fully in our action, we're here, we're acting here;

the stage for our action is always the present place and the present time. And when we're acting in this place, at this time, there is an experience of something whole. And that something whole is not centred around self, but is ...the opposite – uncentred around self. So he's saying that action brings us back to this place, because action can only ever be now. All the other actions that we can talk about are stories about action; we can talk about action in the past, actions of other people, actions in the future, but they're not real. So Master Dogen's definition of "real" is very narrow – real means something here, now. When we don't notice what we're doing, we're acting. But usually we act over a period of time, and it includes us stopping acting and reflecting, thinking what we're going to do and so on, and it's difficult for us to see action at the immediate present. But we can sometimes, for instance in a very severe emergency, we find that there is action, but who's doing it we don't know. It's funny, "I just put my hand out, and caught it, as if I didn't know I was doing it". And this experience is very real to us. So in some situations we can notice the nature of action, but normally we don't notice the nature of action although we're doing it, because our minds are running over it.

Q: Is it like action gets trapped in the past or future?

No, action is always here, always now. But we think about action, and we talk about action, and we think that the action we think about and talk about is real, but it's not. So we might say, "oh, balanced action – so what about a person who goes out and shoots somebody?" But that's not action, that's talking about someone else's action, which is not the same as real action".

Q: So the description of catching a ball is different to catching it.

Yes, the actual experience is something ineffable. It's so short, and our mind is moving over the top – filling in over the top, that we don't notice the nature of simple action. And yet if we don't act, we die. And so these simple unnoticed instantaneous actions which we are all involved in at every moment, maintain our lives. And if we don't act, we die. So if we are imprisoned, we usually find it very difficult to keep our mental balance. And if we don't have freedom to act, we usually get rather disturbed mentally. Or if we are busy at work, and doing concentrated mental work, every now and again we need to move – to get up, get a cup of coffee, or go out. And those simple actions are crucial, because if we don't do them, we can't maintain ourselves. So action is always happening, everybody's acting, but we don't notice it. And we don't notice that simple action is important.

Q: What do you mean when you say that the mind runs over our action?

Well for instance sometimes in the morning when we're cleaning our teeth, we're thinking about what we're doing that day, we're not fully involved in the action, so our mind is running over it. And that story that's going through our mind is not what we're doing. I don't mean that we shouldn't do this, or that it's wrong or anything like that, simply, that's the fact. But what maintains our life, is the cleaning of the teeth, but we don't notice that. So we might feel we're too busy to clean our teeth this morning – the "too busy" is our busy mind. But it's very difficult to explain in words, I don't feel my explanations are very good. But action is always here, action is always now, and that's real. So anything that's not here and now is not real. And this is very difficult to accept, because we live in a largely virtual world. So we could say that we have our immediate range of perception, and out from that, in an ever-expanding disc, we know that Bristol is 50 miles away, and I know that Yoko's going

to Japan which is over there. So we build up this huge picture of our world, which is real and virtual, but we don't notice that some of it's real and some of it is virtual, we make it into a huge continuum. But Buddhism says that there is something real, and what's not real is virtual. And that's the way it is.

Q: *What do you mean by "real"?*

Something which is here and now, is real. So this is real. It's here. So people think that things have essences, and we say that they have essences, but in Buddhist terms, reality is always in the present, so there isn't a reality for this stick, yesterday. It doesn't mean it didn't exist yesterday, simply that this is real, this is real now. Yesterday I was holding this, I think. Was I holding this yesterday? But we can't go back and see my holding it yesterday, so it's a memory. I don't mean that it wasn't really here yesterday, but simply there's a quality of realness of something which is here, which is different from what I was doing with it yesterday.

Q: *Are you saying yesterday's gone?*

Yes, it's gone. This is a very difficult point, it seems bizarre. So Master Dogen goes on to explain it in terms of the Buddhist view of time. And he says this:

Firewood becomes ash; it can never go back to being firewood. Nevertheless, we should not take the view that ash is its future and firewood is its past. Remember, firewood abides in the place of firewood in the Dharma. It has a past and it has a future. Although it has a past and a future, the past and the future are cut off.

Now in those sentences, what he wants to say is that of course we have a past and a future, but real firewood is firewood here and now. Yesterday's firewood becomes tomorrow's ash – OK, but, real firewood is firewood now, real ash is ash now. So something now is the meaning of real. And he says its future and past are cut off, that means we can never go into the future, it's impossible. We think that we go into the future, but what actually happens is mysterious, the future actually comes to the present, so it's not the future any more. And the present goes into the past and it's not the present any more. So the past and the future are cut off from the present. This is a very strange thing to say, and the Buddhist view of time is strange.

Q: (Inaudible)

Yes, that's right, if we let go we can't possibly investigate reality, because for instance science can't function unless we look at process. So we can't deny the value of human effort in building society and building a future and looking at the past, history, and planning for tomorrow. This is very important, but the Buddhist middle view, the Middle Way, transcends that, it says: as well as all those views which have created human society, and which will create human society, and with which we analyse the world, there is another view, and this is based on something very simple and primitive, which is that there is a quality about now-ness and here-ness which is different to then-ness, or the past and the future. And that quality is real. And the only actions we can take are in the present, and the only effects we can have on other people, things and ourselves are in the present. It's quite difficult to get a grasp of it. So he goes on to use the example of ash:

Ash exists in the place of ash in the Dharma. It has a past and it has a future.

So everything, everybody, and every object or phenomenon, is real in the present, and every present has its past and its future, but real means in the present.

Q: So he's saying that it's our minds which are describing these qualities?

Yes, but our minds are real in the present. It's very difficult for us to understand, but our real mind in the present creates a past and a future. So we can't see the ash that the firewood might become, and we can't see the firewood that the ash used to be, but we know it existed, but it's not real. So the Buddhist view of action, or the present moment, or existence-time, is very strange, bizarre. Now he goes on from this to talk about human beings.

The firewood, after becoming ash, does not again become firewood.

So we can't go back from the present to the past.

Similarly, human beings, after death, do not live again.

So Master Dogen didn't believe that human beings had some mental essence or soul, and that after being human beings they became human beings again in another form. And Master Nagarjuna nearly one thousand years before says exactly the same thing, in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, that it's impossible for human beings to die and then to live again. And this is because Buddhism has always said that body and mind are one – one thing. And if body and mind are one thing, it's impossible to have a mind without a body, this is what Nagarjuna says; if something goes on from this life into the next life, it's without a body, but how can something go from this life to the next life without a body? So Buddhism has always, since and before the time of Master Nagarjuna denied that soul, spirit, or mental essence exists separate from a body, or physical essence, they are two sides of one thing, they don't exist separately, they have no separate reality. That's not to say there's not a mental or spiritual side of things, just the same as there's a physical side. But those two sides are the way we view something, and the something in itself is the combination of those two sides, or a combination of subject and object, or a combination of body and mind, however we like to put it. So because of that fact, there is no abstract part of us which can go on and live again after death.

Q: So why does it say in so many Buddhist sutras that reincarnation is true?

It was already in India at Gautama Buddha's time, it was Brahmanism. So it was quite natural for it to remain in Buddhism where people studied without practicing. So we can suppose that many people in the hundreds of years after Gautama Buddha's death studied Buddhism and listened to people talking, but didn't practice Zazen, or Dhyana. And the whole of Buddhism is centred on the practice of Dhyana, or Zazen. And that's why all the statues of buddhas are sitting in Zazen, it's not some kind of decorative Indian custom to sit like that – they're doing Zazen, though you don't need to call it Zazen, they're doing Dhyana. So those masters who practiced Dhyana taught that Dhyana was the centre of Buddhism. And those masters who stopped practicing Dhyana taught an understanding of Buddhism, which people didn't have any place or experience to refer back to. So masters like Master Nagarjuna, who taught Buddhism based on the practice of Dhyana, their

students were able to say “well, I’ve heard what he’s said, so in my practice, does it sound reasonable, that reality is just here and now, and the past and the future are not real”. If we practice Zazen, we have the simple experience of the immediate present, and if we continue practicing Zazen that experience kind of fills us, it becomes a kind of belief, or realisation, that what is real is just here and now. So from this experience we can tie the words of the teachings of the master back to something real. But if we don’t practice Zazen then we try to analyse and tie up the words of the masters with something abstract, then we’re in the shit – when we get in the abstract realm, all we can do is argue and discuss.

Q: So you made the statement that the physical and the mental are whole, so the physical dies and the mental dies. So there is no rebirth?

Well I can’t tell you. But I don’t believe in rebirth. And Master Dogen didn’t believe in rebirth. So saying whether there is or not is almost impossible I think.

Q: There’s the bit in the Pali canon where the Buddha is asked various questions.....

Q: There is reference to rebirth in the very old sutras, which talk about rebirth, (inaudible)

Right, well, however, those thousands of lives that those monks saw, they saw in their present, they never saw them in the past or future. So even if we sit in Zazen and imagine the whole of the Universe from the beginning to the end, our imagining it is all in the present, so THERE IS NO FUTURE! IT’S HERE! JUST OUR MIND IS GOING ROUND, IN THE PRESENT, WE IMAGINE OUR BIRTH, IN THE PRESENT, we can’t get out of the present, it’s absolutely impossible!.....

At the same time, it is an established custom in the Buddha-Dharma not to say that life turns into death.

So that means that in Buddhism, we speak of life being now, death being now, so a kind of denial of process or continuum. It doesn’t mean that we should go around at work saying, “oh, I don’t have to plan anything, because tomorrow doesn’t exist. I made a mistake yesterday? I don’t give a damn.” We have to live in the real world, and the whole of human society is founded on a time continuum and process, so that’s what we all share. But at the same time, we can add another viewpoint to it, which says “oh, I’ve got so much to do, I’m stacked up with things to do, but the only thing I can do is now, so I’d better start”. So we can have the Buddhist view and the other view at the same time. Then when we start on the first of our list of tasks which are filling our mind, we find that things change completely – directly we start the first job, the other jobs which are towering over us, and worrying us, disappear for a bit. So to be in the present with a simple act, is the way out of illness, I don’t mean it will cure cancer, but it’s the way to ground ourselves and to redeem ourselves.

Q: (Inaudible)

Yes, and Master Nagarjuna has a chapter in the Mulamadhyamakakarika about movement, or walking. It’s almost impossible to put it into words, but sometimes when we’re practicing kinhin, because we’re maintaining the posture of Zazen and we’re walking very simply, we can get a kind of feeling that although we’re walking

round, we're just here, we're just here, just here. So kinhin's a very nice practice to do between Zazen, and we can notice that we're always just here.

Q: *And it doesn't hurt.*

When it doesn't hurt, there is no pain, when it hurts, the pain fills the Universe. Does it hurt now?

Q: *No.*

OK then.

That is why we speak of *no appearance*. And it is the Buddha's preaching established in [the turning of] the Dharma-wheel that death does not turn into life. This is why we speak of *no disappearance*.

Now these two phrases – “no appearance” and “no disappearance”, were very common in Buddhism right through from the earliest writings. There were many theories; one school, called the Abhidharmin, said that all things in the world appear, then stay in the world, then disappear – a kind of atomic theory. So all the dharmas in the world arise, stay, then decay, this is a kind of primitive science. But the Buddhist view is different; it says that reality doesn't come from anywhere, or go to anywhere, it's always here. So we've got this very strange situation where we're always here, we don't stop being here, there's no end to the present moment, or a beginning to the present moment. So although we think that the present moment comes from the past and disappears into the future, even that doesn't hold water because the present is always here, it never disappears. And because it's always here, it never appears. So the nature of reality is very peculiar; it's always here, it's cut off from the past, it's cut off from the future, so it seems to be something that's here, here, here. But even that doesn't make sense because it's never not here, I've never found any part of my life where I'm not in reality. So no appearance, no disappearance.

Life is an instantaneous situation, and death is also an instantaneous situation.

That means that when we're living we're alive, and when we're dead we're dead. So we can talk about death, but that's not real death.

It is the same, for example, with winter and spring. We do not think that winter becomes spring, and we do not say that winter becomes summer.

Of course we do, it's becoming autumn now, it'll be autumn soon, But what Master Dogen is talking about is a particular view, and that view is known as the third view, or the view of action, or the middle view, or the truth if the middle, or the Buddhist view. Though actually we can't live in this world with this view alone, we can't live in this world with the spiritual view alone, and we can't live in this world with the scientific view alone. So we need all three. But what Master Dogen is explaining in this paragraph is this Buddhist view – the view of instantaneousness. He says a lot more about time in the chapter called Uji, later in Book One, where he explains the Buddhist view of time as being existence here and now. So just to recap, he's looking at different aspects of the Buddhist experience and this last paragraph that we've just read is in the third view, the view of action. And these paragraphs are

always the most difficult to grasp, what he's trying to say. Because he can't say what he wants to say in words. And I can't explain what he's saying in words. So we can just try. The in paragraph six, he goes on to talk about the state of realisation, or as some people say "enlightenment". So the next paragraph is about the state of enlightenment.

Q: *What the meaning of "the turning of the Dharma-wheel"?*

It's symbolic, in Tibetan Buddhism they have prayer wheels, and that's another physical symbol of the Dharma going round. So we can say samsara, or daily life, or the fact that we wake up every morning, every morning, every morning, so there's a kind of turning, The idea of turning is symbolically used in Buddhism in many ways. So the turning of the Dharma-wheel suggests that the truth is moving, or the world is moving. And we know that all our experience.....

Q: (Inaudible)

Dharma-chakra yes, in Sanskrit, Dharma-wheel is Dharma-chakra. And there was a Sanskrit Buddhist deity called Chakravatiraja – the Wheel Rolling King. So the idea of going round and round is quite strong, and of course it's part of our lives – today is going round and tomorrow will, and the seasons go round, our minds go round. And in another chapter in Book One, Hokke-ten-hokke, The Universe turns the Universe, Master Dogen talks about this, reality has a direction, or a movement. Sometimes we feel we're pushing it, sometimes it's pushing us, sometimes we and it are moving together. So it's a symbolic reference to this aspect of reality. It's quite a natural kind of symbol.

Q: *Master Dogen mentions the holding up of the flower.*

The twirling of the flower yes, when Gautama Buddha twirled the flower and Mahakasyapa smiled, so that means the Dharma moves forward. So when we act in the present moment, because there is no subject separate from object, because we don't know who is acting, we can say I'm acting, or we can say the Universe is acting. Of course it doesn't seem to make much sense to say the Universe is acting, but in a real sense, at the instant, action pervades the Universe. And Master Dogen says this at the beginning of Bendowa. He describing the state in Zazen, he says very strange things like, when we act in this place, our action pervades the Universe. But we find that difficult to believe. I'll carry on. The next paragraph is about realisation. This is a puzzle to us, because it's the word "satori" in Japanese, and satori has come to mean some kind of breaking through into a special state called enlightenment. But if we think of the word enlightenment as meaning everything becomes clear, like somebody turns the light on, then we might get a little bit closer to the meaning. When we're living in the world of our thoughts, we don't notice what's in front of us. And when we're trapped in the physical world and swamped by our feelings, it's difficult to see the world clearly. But there is a state where we're not trapped either by our thoughts or by our feelings, but we're free, and that state is the state in Zazen. So we sit in Zazen, free in that position, and if we notice that our head is rigid, then we wobble it a bit and it becomes free. So for all our body to feel free in Zazen, even though it might hurt, there's some kind of freedom from our thoughts and at the same time from our perception. And in that state, everything is clear. Of course, even though we're sitting with our head free, sometimes we feel our mind is going round and round, but if our mind is going round and round, it's usually because that's what we habitually do. So in that sense Zazen shows us what

we're habitually like. And if we habitually live a life that's very concentrated on intellectual matters, and we put a lot of energy into thinking, and never leave that area, then even when we practice Zazen, that continues. So if we sit in Zazen in the state of freedom, our busy mind will slowly settle, but if we expect all our thoughts to suddenly disappear, they usually don't. But if we don't expect this, sometimes, just for a moment, we find ourself just sitting and the sun coming through the window. And in that moment we have realisation, or satori, or we're clear. And separate from that state; all the other states that are talked and written about are kind of dreams about other worlds. So for that reason Master Dogen says there's no enlightenment outside of Zazen, there's no realisation outside of Zazen, or outside of action. But Nishijima Roshi doesn't like the word enlightenment because it's so value-laden, so we usually use the word realisation. Or we can even say being awake, or being clear. So he tries to describe this state, and he uses this "moon being reflected in water" metaphor to describe the state of everything is as it is. When we sit in Zazen and just, we feel settled, everything is as it is.

Q: *What about being unaware, does "dropping off body-and-mind" mean realisation as well?*

Yes.

Q: *Because you said you're aware of the sun shining didn't you?*

I didn't mean to be aware of it, just that it's shining on you. I can't describe it. Did you have a state like that?

Q: *Can you experience realisation?*

(Inaudible discussion)

We can only experience it, we can't define it, so I'll shut up.

Q: *Can you consciously experience it or...*

You can think that, that was it just now, but when you're thinking "that was it", it's not.

Q: *It's gone.*

Yes.

Q: *I can't sit in the present.*

You can't? We're always sitting in the present.

Q: *Can I experience enlightenment?*

We can't answer that question, we have to keep looking at our own experience. Sometimes, sometimes, we get up in the morning and we clean our teeth. Usually when we're cleaning our teeth, we're thinking. It's quite a common habit, to get up in the morning and while we're cleaning our teeth the day starts in our mind, not always. But sometimes, we're just doing it. We can say that about eating; often we're talking while we're eating, but sometimes we just sit and we eat. Sometimes

we sit and we don't talk, and we feel we should be talking. But when we just sit down sometimes and just eat, we just eat. So it's a state of wholeness.

Q: *But in terms of awareness and not awareness, is it... for instance, thinking about not thinking, you're sitting Zazen and you see that there's no dialogue going on inside your head, but you're seeing the floor in front of you, and there's some kind of awareness, vision, Then sometimes afterwards you think, yes you're aware of the floor in front of you, but before, there wasn't anything really. So both those - awareness and non-awareness can both come under realisation?*

You mean awareness of the floor?

Q: *Just some kind of awareness.*

Yes of course we have some kind of awareness.

Q: *But sometimes in Zazen it seems like also there isn't any awareness.*

Q: *For me it's an awareness of something that's just gone.*

That's nice.

Q: *It's just dropped out of the moment again.*

Q: *Is it like John (inaudible) saying, "eureka! I've found it" and then he ends up saying "eureka" until he dies?*

Could be. What we're doing now is trying to understand what the state is, so that when we understand what the state is, we can get it. But that's not Buddhism, and for that reason, Master Dogen says that when we are buddhas, we don't need to be aware that we're buddhas. So the point is that this is the way that things are, so when we sit in Zazen, all these experiences are there. But Buddhism is not understanding the experience in Zazen, but sitting in Zazen. And we talk about Buddhism in order to get stuck up a track with all the gates shut. So what Master Dogen is trying to describe is impossible, but in trying to describe its impossibility, we at least get pointed in the right direction.

Q: *So is that like (inaudible) mindfulness?*

I don't like the word mindfulness, because it suggests me watching myself.

(Inaudible)

However much now we want to understand and grasp with our minds what realisation means, we can never do it, but we're all doing it. So to do it is important. So to do it is more important than to discuss it. So we'd better stop discussing it.

End of talk.

