

Talks on Master Dogen's Shobogenzo

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Chapter 3 – Genjo-koan

Session 5

We're on paragraph eight. Paragraphs eight and nine are one paragraph in the original, but they naturally split. They're about action itself. Master Dogen describes action using the examples of birds flying and fish swimming, and he wants to describe the ineffable, or unlimited nature of action in this place. When we act in this place, we don't notice the unlimited or ineffable nature of our action, usually. But Master Dogen puts it into words:

When fish move through water, however they move, there is no end to the water. When birds fly through the sky. However they fly, there is no end to the sky.

He means that when we act, we can keep on acting, there are no limits to our action. He doesn't mean that the fish can swim in a straight line and never reach the edge of the ocean, but simply that the fish carries on swimming throughout the whole of its life, and the same for birds. In the second sentence he says:

At the same time, fish and birds have never, since antiquity, left the water or the sky.

What he means here is, that a fish needs water in order for there to be swimming, a bird needs sky in order for there to be flying. And we can only act when there are circumstances or situations in front of us. In our minds, we can think about "me", we can think about me doing something, and we can think about a situation. But that's only in our minds, in reality, action can never exist separately from "me" and the circumstances. So me doing something, is action. And in that action, me, the something, or me and the circumstances are welded together, or one. But although this is a very simple fact, we don't notice it because of the way we think. So we think – "I can do an action", then we think abstractly that this action exists somewhere waiting for me to do it, then I can think what it should be like, what should I do for it to be good? And what kind of actions are bad? But actions don't exist separately from me and the circumstances. So without a subject and an object there is no such thing as action. So to think about what is good action and what is bad action, is only a thought, and it's utterly different to acting. In the interface between me and the doing, me and the object, in that interface itself is the action. And in that action itself is the good or bad, it doesn't exist separately. So Master Dogen says in another chapter of the Shobogenzo that we usually think that good exists somewhere waiting for someone to do it, but that's wrong. So in Buddhism, morals are not abstract, morals are inseparable from action. So in this sentence he wants to imply that birds have never left the sky, and fish have never left the water, human beings have never left circumstances, or in other words, the way that we think about things separately, is only thinking, and real action can't exist without exist without a bird and the sky – real swimming can't exist without fish

and water. So “fish have never since antiquity left the water”. And the next sentences expresses the fact that our action fills the moment:

Simply, when activity is great, and when necessity is small, usage is small.

We think of action, in our mind, as being concentrated or spread out. For instance, we've been acting here in this centre, we haven't gone very far, all our actions over the past two or three days have been here in this limited area. But in our normal life our action may be spread out – driving up to Manchester. Flying to Brussels or whatever. So we think of action as being spread out or limited. But although we think of it like that, our real action is always in one place, this place. So talking about fish and birds – “when their need is great, their range is great”, they can act over a large range. “When their need is small, their range is small”, they can act in a narrow range. I've changed the text a bit from the book, I think it's clearer. But:

Acting in this state, none fails to realise its limitations at every moment, and none fails to somersault freely at every place;

This rather poetic expression means that when we act, we're limited to this moment and this place, but in the limitation of this moment and this place, we're completely free. So there's a paradox, that action is both limited and unlimited, or both bound and free, or both finite and infinite.

Q: How is there freedom?

The freedom is in the moment itself, (Mike shouts loudly), that's a kind of freedom to shout anything stupid, or ring a bell which is even more stupid, on and on. But we can do it, so that's a kind of freedom. So to express ourselves now, has a freedom, but at the same time we're limited – I can't shout any louder than I did, and I can't make a noise like a rhinoceros, I can only make a noise like a stupid human being. So we're always limited, but we're always free. And this is a paradox in the nature of human existence. We think of freedom as meaning we can do what we want or go where we want, but the true meaning of freedom is a little bit different to that – we can be free in this moment to be in this moment, but we can't be in another moment. So freedom has its limitations, but in its limitation, it's completely free.

Q: Inaudible.

Yes, but if we actually act freely we can feel the freedom, if we think about it, we can think about the limitation. But if we do something we can express ourselves completely freely just for a moment. And lots of people do it by going dancing.

Q: Inaudible.

So the limitations are obvious to us, the freedom we only experience in action. So he means acting in this state, we all have limitations at every moment, we all “somersault freely at every place”. But again he emphasises:

but if a bird leaves the sky it will die at once, and if a fish leaves the water it will die at once.

So if we try and separate ourselves from the circumstances, then we can't act. So we always think around ourselves – “I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that”, but action is when the “I” and the “this”, meet. And if there's no “I” or no “this”,

there can't be any action. So he expresses it this way, "if a bird leaves the sky it will die at once", we can interpret this to mean that if we leave our daily life we will die at once. A bird needs the sky to fly around, and we need our daily life – getting up, washing our faces, having something to eat, doing something, going to bed, that's our life. So he goes on to say:

So we can understand that water is life and can understand that sky is life.

So for a human being our everyday existence is life, but we tend to think "I want this kind of life", and then go around looking for it. But the life that we have is the interface between "me" and my surroundings. So my surroundings are my life, this place is our life. For a fish water is life, for a bird sky is life. And then he turns it around and says that a bird is life, a fish is life. So because he's expressing the fact that life, real action at the present moment is our life here and now, is the subject and the object meeting, or "me" and circumstances meeting, he wants to put it from one side and its opposite side too, So he says life is a bird, life is a fish. This is just his technique of looking at things from one side and then switching and looking from the other side. So we are here, this place is us; we don't exist separate from this place at this moment. But we can think about ourselves separate from this place at this moment, so we think "next week I'm going to be in Paris", but we don't actually exist without surroundings, so we're real, here, and the "me" I'm thinking about next week is not real, it's an idea. Then he goes on further.

Birds are life and fish are life. It may be that life is birds and that life is fish. And beyond this, there may still be further progress. The existence of [their] practice-and-experience, and the existence of their lifetime and their life, are like this. This being so, a bird or fish that aimed to move through the water or the sky [only] after getting to the bottom of water or utterly penetrating the sky, could never find its way or find its place in the water or in the sky

"Like this" means as in the previous paragraph, so this is how the birds and the fish actually live, in the water or in the sky. And here, he's referring to the fact that we want to know what we're going to do before we do it. So he's using the simile of a bird and of a fish to say that if the bird wants to work out now which way it's going to fly, over there or over there, and it checks to see if there are any branches in the way and so on, that's ridiculous. He's saying that we can never find our way or place in that way. So as human beings we tend to very much have this attitude, we want to make sure everything is safe and ok and to know what we want to do before we start acting, but Master Dogen says that we can't find our way or place if we only think like this. And it reminds me of when I first went to Japan; in England I was brought up to believe that we should think before we act. I didn't notice that I had been brought up to think like that, but when I went to Japan, I noticed that people did things without discussing them so much or working things out so much. I found this very frustrating – stupid. Where I was working, I would be there saying "well we can't do that because this will happen" and so on, and my Japanese colleagues were already half finished. And it took me quite a long time to realise that another way is just to start. And to start in co-operation with other people, not stupidly, but as we go along we see a problem then find a way round it. But what I was trying to do as was my habit, and it still is to some extent, was to think my way through. And of course that has its value, and strategy is based on that to some extent, but we have to move. So to start moving and then find our way as we move is also a very realistic way to proceed. So after ten years I could do it a bit. So if we aim to move through the water or sky only after working everything out, we can't find a

way or place in the water or sky. So it also suggests some kind of intuitive move. This reminds me of mountaineering, because if you look up at a mountain and try and plot your route up, when you get there it's not like that. But if you keep moving forward, each time you go round a corner, you can get a new picture, and you can plot your course as you go. But at the same time, if you don't have an overall strategy, then you might be in trouble. But it's essential that we move forward in life without having a 100 percent clear picture; if we do have a 100 percent clear picture, then that picture must be wrong. So we can get a 50 percent picture, then take a step, then notice that reality is not quite like our picture. We often find this if we get something planned, our plan is exciting, and we think we know exactly what's going to happen. We take one step forward and everything's changed. Even coming to a retreat, we think "yes I'm going to have a really nice time, I'm going to really enjoy myself", and at the end of the first day we think "if I creep out in the night will anyone miss me?" And of course the opposite happens too, we feel tired and think we might not go, but we do go and everything turns out nicely.

Question: Inaudible.

Well we can make plans, and we can't stop making plans. And if our plan turns out to be different to reality, we should go with reality, not with our plan, this is the point.

Question: Inaudible.

Yes, but the strange thing is, we make a goal and move towards it, but when we reach it, it's not the place we were aiming for. So we do need goals, but the goals are a kind of carrot, which move us forward, but we don't actually go towards that goal, or we think we do, but where we arrive at may not be the same as our goal – our goal is an idea, and the place at which we arrive is real. It may not be so different.

Yoko: If people are quite balanced, our goal is near.

Yes. So today's goal for me is to get through today. Now the next sentence is very important:

When we find this place, this action is inevitably realised as the Universe. When we find this way, this action is inevitably the realised Universe itself.

We can take that as a single sentence.

This way and this place are neither great nor small; they are neither subjective nor objective; neither have they existed since the past nor do they appear in the present; and so they are present like this.

Now I thought of an example to explain this, I don't know whether it will be helpful or not, but the example I thought of is like, we're all in a huge hot tub, and this hot tub has different temperatures in different places, and around the edge are seats, and some of the seats are high and some are low. We jump into the hot tub, and we're trying to find a place which is comfortable for us. Human beings have different ways of doing this – some people who are short, find a seat which is deep so they sit with the water almost up to there, and some of them say "I'm ok really, this is fine, this seat just suits me". And some who are tall find a seat where half their body is out of the water, and they say "no, I'm quite warm, it's almost up to my shoulders". And others sit in the very hottest part and

say, "oh it's not too hot", and others sit in the cool part and they say "it's warm enough". Some people keep moving til they find a temperature that suits them. And they feel quite contented, and when they sit in the hot tub feeling contented, the temperature is just right. So they can't tell whether they're hot or cold, they're just sitting there happily. Then a few more people jump into the hot tub, and the people who were sitting half out saying "I'm alright" don't like these new people coming – "get out, you're disturbing me, I'm in just the right place". But the person who is sitting in the place which suits them is quite happy just to move to one side and let the new people in. So that rather strange example helps me to understand what it means to find this place, and this way. We're all different, short and tall, some of us like talking a lot and some of us like saying nothing, and some of like eating a lot and some a little, and so on. And we've all got our place. But what we tend to do is think "oh I talk too much, I should be quiet", or "I should say something", or "I'm rather weak, I should make myself stronger". Those ideas really disturb us, because we try to be something that we're not. So when we practice Zazen and follow the Buddhist path, what we're looking for is not the strong, confident me that I want to become, but the me that I already am, and that's the same as finding the right seat at the right temperature, and co-operating when other people come in. But we find that very difficult, to be who we are, to find our own place, our own path, is not so difficult, so we find it very difficult. We're trained, and society expects and encourages us to be something that we're not, we think who we are is not really good enough. Of course it's very important to make an effort, but at the same time we should find our own place in the hot tub, we shouldn't sit in boiling hot water saying "this is fine, it's fine" We should move. So we have to keep moving, and to keep moving means to drop our idea of how we feel, and so it's related to being honest. So we often feel cold but feel that we should be able to put up with it. So that's the best I can do to explain that with my little example of the hot tub. So we each have to find our own place, what suits us, how life suits us. And we all have our own talents, whether we're big or small, strong or weak, talkative or silent, those have their own merits.

Question: *How do you distinguish between.. say you're sitting in a place which is too hot, so you think "oh, I'm a person who is too hot"...*

Stop thinking, just move around. So don't think "I'm a person who is too hot", just "phew" and move, so act. And this is what we find so difficult. So even sitting in the hot tub, we say "oh, this is too hot, I must...." No, don't say – move.

Question: *But at the same time, sometimes we have to accept this, we can't always...*

Yes, so my example of the hot tub really is useless, because it's only a picture.

Question: Inaudible.

Yes, we can usually find some compromise.

Question: *With your example Mike, when you feel too hot, do you need some idea that there may be a cooler place to find?*

No, just move. This is where talking about it is so different. Just move around. So people who lead an active life find their own place quite quickly. But for example, we're trapped by our image of ourselves, if somebody were to appoint me as a manager of a very large company, I'd be absolutely useless because I don't have that kind of character. And if somebody was to take a manager of a large

company and put them in a small office doing photocopying, they would be useless. But we tend to try and put ourselves where we imagine we should be.

Question: Inaudible.

So striking the pendulum is trying to look at ourselves, so stop looking at ourselves, that's why Master Dogen says in the previous paragraph, "to realise the self is to forget the self". Stop looking at ourselves.

Question: Inaudible.

Yes so we can see all kinds of things in the hot tub. But I wanted to suggest that the person Master Dogen is talking about is rather flexible. But in talking about it we're creating a perfect picture. But unfortunately there is no picture of reality, we have to just joggle along together. Nishijima Roshi says we're all like pebbles at the bottom of the stream; the water pushes us around and we bump up against each other, sometimes we just settle where we are. So we're here.

Question: Inaudible.

Last night I was in there too long, I was too hot, It was only because Colin moved that I did. So we do that – we put up with things, but we can notice that. So the hot tub analogy is too much of an analogy really. But anyway, "when we find this place, this action is inevitably realised as the Universe, when we find this way, this action is inevitably the realised Universe itself". The realised Universe is a rather unusual translation of the chapter title – Genjo-koan, and it's a difficult...the realised Universe, or realised as the Universe, it's hard to understand. But when we act, we make everything real, because the present moment is real, and acting is reality. So the realised Universe means everything made real, realised not in the sense of understood, but made real. So "this action is inevitably realised as the Universe", we can also say this action is made real as everything. And "this action is inevitably the realised Universe itself", we can say, this action is inevitably everything made real. So when we're sitting thinking, of course our thoughts are real, but they're thoughts about the world, they're not the world. When we act, what we're doing is real, so acting realises the Universe.

Question: *Why the Universe, I kind of understand...*

Well the world then.

Question: But when it says "this way and this place are neither great nor small" the Universe or the world, that seems like a great place. If you talk about our pain in Zazen filling the whole Universe, it seems to be making our pain a lot more that it is.

Yes it does seem to, if we think the Universe means from here to the edges of the solar system and beyond, then it seems strange. But if we think of the Universe in the palm of our hand, as Blake said....

Question: *You don't mean the Universe in the scientific sense?*

Not only the scientific sense, but in the real sense, the Universe is just here. And we can't grasp that.

Question: *But why does it say the Universe rather than reality?*

We can say reality, but then we have to say "realised reality". So maybe the choice of words can be improved on. Science says you know, you can peer at the atoms and the bits of the atoms, and the bits of the bits of the atoms, and as Richard Feynman said every time they smash a particle into pieces they find more particles. This is the way atomic physics is going. So the closer we look at reality, the more parts reality has, so in a very real sense, we can say there's a Universe inside the atom, but it's the same Universe that we're inside. So we can't understand it, science can't understand reality, and we can't understand reality, but we experience it. So it is strange to say "to make the Universe real", yes.

Question: *is this something similar with Hinduism, by dancing the god creates the Universe. So for me I understand that as that I make the world with my action.*

The dance of Shiva. So the mythical gods, when they dance create the world, it's a difficult picture.

Yoko: No, you yourself.

Question: *So the pain in Zazen fills the Universe...*

"Well it didn't feel my Universe, so my Universe must be different, ah yes, there's lots of different Universes"....then we get more and more complicated, so it's very difficult to understand when we say "Zazen fills the Universe" for example, as Master Dogen says. So he's creating pictures, so we need to look at lots of these pictures to see what the story is, that's the first thing. If we read lots of the Shobogenzo we can see these pictures that he creates. But the most essential thing is, what Master Dogen is talking about is not in the words, this is something that we're very poor at in the west – we find it almost impossible to believe that the meaning of a sentence is not in the sentence. We're sure that the meaning of the sentence must be in it, so we look for it in the sentence, and we look and look for it, and we hang on to that sentence, we peer at it, we turn it round and compare it with other sentences. But the strange thing is that the meaning of the sentence is not in the sentence.

Question: *Two plus two equals four.*

Ah, the meaning of mathematics is in the sentence, yes I mean the meaning of what Master Dogen is saying. So if he's talking about mathematics, then we can find the meaning yes. So anything abstract the meaning is in the abstract. So philosophers normally discuss abstract things, and their meaning is within the bounds of abstract discussion. But in Master Dogen's description of reality, he's talking about something that's not in the worlds. So he says in one paragraph in Bendowa, "how can the words in this paragraph be relevant?" But we're not used to that, but we can see for instance if someone writes a book on skiing, we can see quite clearly that someone who sits on the sofa reading it saying, "well, where it says put your skis pointing slightly inwards there, how far inwards would you point them?" Someone who skis would laugh and say, "no, no, it's only a book about skiing, go out and try it, read the book by all means, but then close the book and go and do it. But when it comes to reality, people don't write so much about it, so we want to lean about it here and get it completely clear, then go out and find it. So this is difficult for us.

This way and this place are neither great nor small; they are neither subjective nor objective; neither have they existed since the past nor do they appear in the present; and so they are present like this.

This describes the person who is sitting in a perfect temperature, the person who is hot feels hot, the person who sits in the cold bit feels cold, but the person who is sitting just right feels not hot or cold, just happy. So in the balanced state, we don't feel the need to discriminate – this is better this is worse, this is right, this is wrong, this is great this is small, this is mine this is yours. So the state which Master Dogen is describing is sitting in body temperature water.

When a human being is practicing and experiencing the Buddha's truth in this state, to get one dharma is to penetrate one dharma, and to meet one act is to perform one act.

So in this state that Master Dogen is describing, we just do one thing. So because our mind is not full of lots of different things, we can just do what's in front of us. And to do one thing is to penetrate it completely. So we know that if we think and remember some kind of physical or sporting activity, when we do something completely, that we penetrate it, or we fill it. So I think that somewhere in the Bible or in Christian teaching, somewhere it say purity of heart is to do one thing. So that seems to me quite similar, so we just do what we're doing completely.

In this state the place exists and the way is mastered, and therefore the area to be known is not conspicuous.

So in this state, "the place exists", means we're acting here and now, "the way is mastered" means we find our place, we find our path, "and therefore the area to be know is not conspicuous" means that it's not always intellectually clear, so it's an experiential feeling of being, and not an explicit intellectuall knowledge, or we don't quite know where it is; we're here, and we're fully here, bit we don't quite know where here is.

The reason it is so is that this knowing and the perfect realisation of the Buddha-Dharma appear together and are experienced together.

So there's no separation between perfect realisation of the Buddha-Dharma or perfect making real of reality, and the knowing that we're in our place, are not separate. So when we sit in the hot tub, in the place that's just right, we can't feel anything, because everything is just as it is so we feel content or happy.

Do not assume that what is attained will inevitably become self-conscious and be recognised by the intellect.

This is a sticking point for us, because not only do we want to find our place but we want to know clearly that we're in it. So it's not an intellectual recognition.

The experience of the ultimate state is realised at once.

It's a momentary state, here and now.

At the same time, its mysterious existence is not necessarily a manifest realisation.

So it's not explicit, it's not something clear "oh I realise that I'm in the right place, I'm doing the right thing"

Realisation is the state of ambiguity itself.

Ambiguity suggests that it's not something clear in our minds. And that's the end of that paragraph. In talking like this, we kind of create an image, so we'd better stop.

Q: *What does "at the same time, its mysterious existence is not necessarily a manifest realisation." mean?*

It's a bit difficult to catch the original meaning of the Japanese, but the footnote says that manifest realisation and realisation are both the genjo out of Genjo-koan. So it's a little bit of a play on words in the Japanese. The mysterious existence of the state of balance, or the state of being in our place, following our way, is not necessarily manifest – it doesn't actually appear to us.

Yoko: (Inaudible)

We can see that in Zazen itself – we start off on a sesshin thinking that we will sit a certain way, with our legs like this, and so on, and we can have a kind of slight idea, but then in sitting itself, our body adjusts itself and towards the end of the sesshin if we're lucky, we've given up all those ideas, and in giving up the ideas, we find ourselves just sitting. And in just sitting, we find some kind of satisfaction, but that satisfaction contains that disappointment with ourselves. We say "ah it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter..." So then we sit, and in that sitting containing happiness and disappointment, there's some kind of contentment. So it's quite a subtle experience which transcends whether we're thinking or not, whether our feet are aching or not, whether we're sitting in the full lotus or not, it transcends all those, and we think "oh well, this is me and I'm doing it". And that's the state, because that's the real me sitting, with my real body.

End of talk.

End of Genjo-koan:

Zen Master Hotetsu of Mayoku-zan mountain is using a fan. A monk comes by and asks, "The nature of air is to be ever-present, and there is no place [air] cannot reach. Why then does the Master use a fan?"

The Master says, "You have only understood that the nature of air is to be ever-present, but you do not yet know the truth that there is no place [air] cannot reach."

The monk says, "What is the truth of there being no place [air] cannot reach?"

At this, the Master just [carries on] using the fan. The monk does prostrations. The real experience of the Buddha-Dharma, the vigorous road of the authentic transmission, is like this. Someone who says that because [the air] is ever-present we need not use a fan, or that even when we do not use [a fan] we can still feel the air, does not know ever-presence, and does not know the nature of air. Because the nature of air is to be ever-present, the behaviour of Buddhists has made the Earth manifest itself as gold and has ripened the Long River into curds and whey.

Shobogenzo Genjo-koan

This was written in mid-autumn in the 1st year of Tenpuku, and was

**presented to the lay disciple Yo
Koshu of Chinzei.**

Edited in [the 4th] year of Kencho.