

## Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin 2004

### Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

By Eido Mike Luetchford.

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I've chosen to talk about Bussho (Buddha-nature), the first chapter in Book Two of the Shobogenzo. It's a long and difficult chapter, so I'm sure we won't get through it, and in any case I haven't finished my interpretation yet. For those of you who haven't seen them before, I've started doing what I'm calling modern interpretations of the chapters of the Shobogenzo. Either last year or the year before we did Genjo-koan here, and in the Winter Sesshin in Rowardennan we did Uji. Then I've done Bendowa, so this is the fourth of my modern interpretations. Calling these modern interpretations suggests that I'll be using fairly modern English, and also that these are interpretations, that means that if you compare them with the original English translation, you'll find that it doesn't always match. Sometimes that's because I've interpreted what Master Dogen is saying in a modern form, and occasionally it's because the English in our original Shobogenzo books is not accurate enough, it's not understandable. In order to make the interpretations I've used three sources; one is the original English translation that most of you have seen in our four volume Shobogenzo; the second source is another translation of the Shobogenzo that we did before we did this one right back in the late seventies and early eighties, I've got a big box at home with all the manuscripts from that translation, and this is a very much more interpretive translation, based on the one which Nishijima Roshi himself did in his rather Japanese style English in the seventies; and the third source is the original, which I can't really study clearly without Yoko's help, so we do it always together because Yoko has studied the Japanese Shobogenzo for as long as I've studied the English one.

Right so my modern interpretation I hope explains more clearly what Master Dogen is trying to say. What I've given you today is about half of the chapter, which is as far as I've got with it. Perhaps we can continue it at some other time.

*Bu* means Butsu, which is Buddha, and *sho* means nature, so it's quite simple – buddha-nature. Buddha-nature as a term in Buddhism was very much discussed in China and Japan, and it was also discussed in India before that. In Sanskrit, Buddha-nature is *buddhata*; if you put *ta* on the end of a Sanskrit noun it makes it into a "ness", so buddhaness if you like, or the essence of buddha. The chapter starts with a poem from Gautama Buddha, we don't have the Sanskrit source for this, but it was written down in Chinese, and it's the Chinese that Master Dogen is quoting.

**Gautama Buddha said:**

***All living beings fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence:  
Buddha is always present and does not change.***

Now if you compare this with the original you'll find that I've used a phrase which is not in the original chapter. That phrase is first seen in this poem and occurs all the way through the first part of the chapter, and that is "fully manifesting existence". It's a bit of a handful of a phrase, but it's a bit of an experiment; I wanted to try and catch something of the original Chinese/ Japanese meaning which is difficult to catch in English, you can do things in Japanese and Chinese

which you can't do in English. This phrase occurs again and again and as I say, it's my trial, if I can find a better phrase I'm quite happy to change it. But as we go through I hope you can catch what this phrase means – to fully manifest existence.

So the poem suggests that all living beings somehow have buddha-nature inside them. "Buddha is always present and does not change", suggests something constant about buddha and the state of Buddha. Master Dogen goes on to comment on this poem in the next very long paragraph, which is not broken up at all. So here is his commentary:

**This is the resolute teaching (loud assertion) of Buddhism by the great Gautama himself.**

I've put "loud assertion" in brackets, the original is "a lion's roar". A lion's roar suggests something very powerful and very natural, this is the resolute teaching or loud assertion of Buddhism by the great Gautama himself. Master Dogen says that what is said in the poem by Gautama Buddha is an assertion of Buddhism, it's asserting some kind of fundamental truth or essence of Buddhism.

**At the same time, this teaching has been the centre of the thoughts and viewpoint of all the buddhas and all our ancestors for a total of 2190 years of study.**

2190 years is longer than the time from Gautama Buddha to Master Dogen, and there is no comment on where this number appears from, but we think that it's Master Dogen's calculation of how many years, how many master-years from Gautama Buddha to his time. A master might live for eighty years, and the next one also eighty years, but their time overlaps, in chronological time it's not 2190 years, but in life or master-years it's longer. So he's saying that the assertion in the poem has been the centre of the thoughts and viewpoint of all the buddhas and ancestors over all the years that Buddhism has been studied and practiced. He goes on:

**Barely fifty generations of true successors to the Buddha's truth up to my master Tendo Nyojo, have learned this through their practice of Zazen, including the twenty-eight ancestors in India who lived in this state, and maintained it by their practice of Zazen from one generation to the next, and the twenty-three ancestors in China who lived in this state, and maintained it by their practice of Zazen from one age to the next.**

Master Dogen uses lots of very familiar short phrases in the original, phrases like "practice and experience", or "practice and study", and by practice he means the practice of Zazen. In English, although it makes the sentences much longer, to me it's much clearer to put down in full "practice of Zazen from one age to the next" – that's how Buddhists maintain their tradition.

**All our ancestors have lived in this state and have maintained it by practicing Zazen.**

So Master Dogen is asserting that what the Buddha's poem says about buddha-nature is something fundamental to the practice and study of Buddhism in all times by all people.

**What do the words of the Buddha mean: "All living beings fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence"?**

And he answers:

**These words mean that in reality, a person who cannot be captured in words arrives from somewhere we cannot describe exactly.**

That's a puzzling sentence, in the original it's actually a quotation from one of the koan stories from the Shinji Shobogenzo, a conversation between Master Daikan Eno and Master Nangaku Ejo. In this story, Master Nangaku Ejo says to Master Daikan Eno, "you are a person who cannot be described in words and you've come from somewhere which we cannot describe". It sounds a strange thing to say to somebody, but what he's trying to say is that if we think about the person standing in front of us with our conscious mind we give them history; they've come from somewhere, they have a name, they are doing something. So I am Michael, I come from Bristol, I'm sitting in front of you. But actually, the real situation at this moment is beyond this kind of description. Master Nangaku wanted to point out that reality, standing in front of somebody, meeting somebody, is beyond the way that we interpret reality, beyond the history that we give to ourselves. The history we give to ourselves is a kind of add-on that we keep in our memory and in our brain, and which we use to interrelate with each other. But we can suppose when a lion stands in front of another lion he doesn't think "ah, seen you before back on that trail, your name is...." So something about the immediacy of the present moment, and he uses a rather strange phrase, "a person who cannot be captured in words arriving from somewhere we can't describe exactly".

So Master Dogen says that the words "all living beings fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence", have something to do with just being who we are at the present, beyond interpretation, beyond name, beyond where we've come from or where we're going to or what we do – something ineffable, something that can't be captured in words. So this phrase suggests that what we manifest is just real here and now but beyond all of our interpretations. Then he goes on to describe the lines of the poem in more detail:

**"Living" or "sentient" or "life-form" or "creature"**

He's using alternative terms.

**all refer to beings that live, and fully manifest their existence.**

He's saying that to live is to fully manifest existence.

**In short, to fully manifest existence *is* the nature of buddha. And all beings that fully manifest existence *are* living beings. Just at this moment of the present, living beings in balance (inside and outside) fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence.**

So here he's describing to us something about the meaning of this phrase, "just at this moment of the present", "to fully manifest existence" is to live. This phrase "fully manifest existence" which I've concocted, holds a kind of fullness of being in the present. The fullness of being in the present that we recognise in somebody when we don't think about their name, or where they came from or where they're going, something immediate and full and real. This is what Master Dogen is discussing.

**This state is more inclusive than the different states (skin, flesh, bones, and marrow) that Bodhidharma said his disciples had attained, because it actually *is* the person.**

There's a story which is in the Shobogenzo and features in some of the koan stories, about Master Bodhidharma meeting his four disciples near the end of his life. He says to one student, "you have got my skin", which suggests something on the surface, then he says to another, "you have got my flesh", which suggests something deeper, to the third he says, "you have got my bones" which suggests something even more fundamental, and to the last one he says, "you have got my marrow", which suggests something really essential. It's been assumed that the story is implying that he was telling his students in order of value; you know, one is on the surface, the second student is a bit better and the third even better and the fourth really excellent. but Master Dogen denies this interpretation, he says skin, flesh, bones, and marrow are all real things. What he means by that is we all have our own characters, and in all having our own characters we fully manifest our own characters as we are. So to say so and so is better than somebody, or so and so is not so clever, or quicker, or slower as inappropriate. And in this sentence Master Dogen says that even those categories in that story are superficial compared with fully manifesting our existence, because fully manifesting our existence is a real person, it's more inclusive.

He makes quite a few references to stories, and he quotes quite a few stories in this chapter.

**This full manifesting of existence which is the nature of buddha is not a concept like "existence" or "non-existence".**

If we read some of the early Buddhist writings we can find, even going back to conversations between Gautama Buddha and his disciples, discussions of existence and non-existence. It was a very big topic in early Buddhism. There's a very famous conversation between Gautama Buddha and one of his disciples called Katyayana or Katchana, it's in Pali. The conversation is about whether existence or non-existence is the Middle Way. The Buddha says it's neither existence nor non-existence. So then for hundreds of years after this people were wondering what this could mean, they thought and talked and wrote, to try and work out what it is that is neither existence nor non-existence. In this sentence, Master Dogen means when we fully manifest existence, we are beyond concepts. And existence and non-existence are actually concepts – we can think about something existing and we can think about something non-existing, in our mind, but nobody has ever seen, in the history of the Universe, something that doesn't exist. Although we can say "non-existence", it's absolutely impossible to find something that doesn't exist, up to the present moment. In the future, people may find things that don't exist.

***"Fully manifesting existence"* describes real words spoken by the real mouth of the Buddha, it describes our ancestors' looking at reality, it describes me as a living and breathing monk. The phrase *"fully manifesting existence"* does not describe someone who has just appeared, or someone who has been here for eternity, or someone who can't be described in words. Nor does it describe a being who is created by external circumstances, or a being who is an illusion.**

So he's taking different categories and we can find echoes of these categories in different Buddhist writings, and he's saying it's none of these. He is saying is that to fully manifest existence is something real, and something real is beyond our ability to catch in words. What he wants to say is the meaning of the phrase "fully manifesting existence" is a reality, not a thought. It's something that we do, not something that we can catch in our description. So he issues these denials – not me, Michael who used to live in Taunton, and before that lived in London, not the

person who has been continuing for a long time, but something at the present moment. He goes on:

**What the phrase describes is not a combination of two different things into one, as in “mind combined with circumstances” or “essence combined with form” or similar concepts. For this reason, “living beings fully manifesting their existence” is *me-and-the-world-unseparated*,**

Now here he’s referring to something which Master Nagarjuna also writes about in his work, (the Mulamadhyamakakarika) that when we hear about oneness or something beyond our concepts, we picture it in our mind as things put together into one. So in hearing “oneness of body and mind” – people think here’s a body, here’s a mind, weld them together. But what Master Dogen insists upon here, and what Master Nagarjuna also insists on is that there aren’t two things put into one, there’s only one thing, the two things is what we make of the one in order to understand the world as human beings. So some people think “oh yes I’ve got it, we’ve got a body and a mind, and they are very intricately interconnected”, and there are even at the present time lots of books written about the interconnectedness of body and mind. These are very interesting and helpful books, but what Buddhism points out is that there’s only one thing, we can call it body, or we can call it mind, and we can write about how the two are woven together, but Buddhism insists that there aren’t two; it’s not two made into one, it’s only one. The phrase “fully manifesting existence” suggests something about this oneness, wholeness, undividedness.

**For this reason, “living beings fully manifesting their existence” is *me-and-the-world-unseparated*,**

The hyphens suggest it’s unseparated, but it’s inadequate, even that phrase.

**which does not depend on ability accumulated day by day,**

In other words it doesn’t depend on some kind of skill that we build up; getting better and better until we make ourselves whole.

**does not come from random circumstances,**

It’s not something that occurs from outside, just by things happening to us.

**does not depend on following the rule of the Universe,**

So it’s not some kind of state we get by following some rule, however universal that rule may be.

**and does not depend on having mystical powers**

Mystical powers have been attributed to Buddhist teachers throughout the ages, right from Gautama Buddha’s time.

**or on practicing to get a result.**

So if I practice Zazen and keep on doing it for a few years I’ll get better and better, then maybe I’ll become a buddha. He says it doesn’t depend on any of these three things. And he goes on to say:

**If living beings fully manifesting their existence were based on ability accumulated day by day, on random circumstances, on following the rule**

**of the Universe, and other similar things, then it would be necessary for people who fully experience what is real, buddhas who live in the state of wisdom, and our Buddhist ancestors' ability to see reality all to depend on ability accumulated day by day, random circumstances, and following the rule of the Universe. It is not like that.**

So what he's saying, if I summarise it, is that to fully manifest our existence is not something we learn, we get better at, and that we practice to get, it's not some special spiritual or mystical power we have or can attain. If it were, then all the people who see what reality is, the buddhas and our ancestors, would all have to depend on those kind of things, but they don't. He's slowly suggesting that the phrase "to fully manifest existence" is not conceptual, is not connected with learning, is not something we build up to, it's something immediate. And frankly, we can't understand what he's talking about unless we practice Zazen. But if we practice Zazen, we can catch something about what the phrase "to fully manifest existence" is referring to - in reality - the phrase is words, but it's referring to something real. So we have to make a connection between the phrase and something real, to us. If we can't find something real to fit to the phrase, then the phrase doesn't have a real meaning. We can explain it intellectually and analyse it, but we have to look for some real experience that fits with those words for us. And that real experience comes from Zazen. So something in the state of Zazen, we fully manifest ourselves, we're full of ourselves, Zazen manifests us, we manifest Zazen, we're sitting as we are, we are buddhas, we have the nature of buddha. All those point to it, but what it is we can't grasp sitting here talking. This is how Master Dogen works his way around the phrase.

**It is not like that.**

It is not something that we accumulate, some reward we get for our conduct, or build up by reading, or something that happens to us from the outside.

**There can never exist another world outside of this whole Universe. And there can never exist another me at the moment of the present.**

Those two sentences again are pointing us towards some whole, completely fully manifested experience. If we think in our minds, we can come up with very excellent and plausible theories for the Universe in which there may be other universes. And in another Universe there may be another me. Or we can analyse ourselves and talk about ourselves as though there were two of us, we do this all of the time, our language makes us do it - "I'm not happy with myself today" - is the you that's not happy with yourself happy? The way we use language is a kind of puzzle but we don't notice it - "I'm going to watch out how I do this next time", so there's two people there, the person who knows how to watch the other person doing it. And we try and do this, and when we do, we split ourselves. This is not a criticism, it's a fact, we all do it. That splitting in Chinese, was referred to as having a second person, or sometimes seeing a second moon. So the expression in the original says there is no second person, that means there is only one me, although I talk to myself and think about myself, there's only one of me. When I am one, then I fully manifest me.

*You say that Zazen is the standard method, but you get those experiences in daily life don't you?*

In millions of ways yes.

*I recently worked with a girl who was in a secure unit and she had a conviction for football violence, and she came in with a whole load of labels on her head.*

*Then I spent some time with her one to one, then afterwards I created a whole new set of labels, she's an ordinary fifteen year old girl, then off I go with that. Then in the middle, we were playing Monopoly, we just, all of that stuff disappeared.*

Yes, so we assert ourselves beyond labels, not only in Zazen, but Zazen is our standard. Whenever we act wholly, without a second person, we fully manifest who we are. And in fully manifesting who we are, we don't notice who we are. We are who we are, we don't think about who we are, we're not thinking about whether we're good enough, or whether we're too good, or if the other person is better, or whether we should or shouldn't be doing this, or whether it's good or bad to do it, or whether we want or don't want to do it, we just do it. And in that doing, that action, we fully manifest ourselves, we are ourselves. And as you say Keith, that occurs all through our lives. This is the subject of this chapter, buddha-nature is the nature of a buddha, but since Gautama Buddha taught Buddhism all those years ago people have misunderstood, and for hundreds, even thousand of years, buddha-nature has been discussed as some kind of quality, a quality that you get after doing this and doing that, and going up through the ranks or whatever. But Master Dogen is destroying that misconception in many different ways in this chapter.

*Mike, sometimes we use the phrase "I'm not myself" or similar, you conceptually think about something that you have to do, you know that it's good to do or bad to do instead of just doing it, whether people like it or don't like it....*

Yes, it's true, when we say "I don't feel myself today", we feel, "I should feel myself today". For instance, when I got up this morning I didn't feel so good, and I felt I should be a bit better than this, what a shame. But what Master Dogen says later in the book, is that we are ourselves. Lots of Buddhist stories say we are ourselves when we are not ourselves, we can never escape from ourselves. We're our irritated self, or our ill self, or our happy self. There's a very famous buddha, a Chinese master called Hotei, you can find statues of him with a big round stomach grinning Hotei wrote a little poem which says roughly – "when a clear mind comes I let my mind be clear, when a cloudy mind comes I let my mind be cloudy". What he wants to say is that we just express ourselves as we are, but when we don't accept ourselves as we are then we lose our wholeness, we can be whole even when we're ill, we can be whole even when we're unhappy, but if we think we shouldn't be unhappy, then we split ourselves.

I think I won't go on any further today, but if there's any more discussion or points to go back over, we'll go on with that.

*He says all living beings, but isn't there somewhere in the Shobogenzo where he talks about tiles and bricks and fields etc? Can you make sense of that?*

All beings have buddha-nature yes, but the poem says all living beings. So is a stone living? In the Mountains and Waters chapter (Chapter 14, Sansuigo), it says "a stone woman bears children by night", which is a very strange phrase. And in another chapter it says mountains are moving. In Japan I think gardeners give gender to stones, so there are male stones and female stones, and they have different characters. So what's a living being? Is a plant living? Is it being? I can't answer, can you answer? It really depends on how we look at things I suppose.

*Dogen said that stones have stone-consciousness.*

Right. But yes, the Shobogenzo does say that all things have buddha-nature. We can walk through a forest and feel the trees are somehow alive, living, and giving us some kind of peace.

*We can only really know about human beings though can't we? We can surmise what it was like for the dogs when they came in this morning but, it's all ideas.*

Well the dog is in front of us, so if a dog comes up and sniff at us, at least we know it doesn't dislike us too much.

*When you say a person who cannot be captured in words arrives from somewhere we cannot describe exactly, how can we imprecisely describe where we've come from?*

Imprecisely?

*Yes, it says we can't describe it exactly, which implies we can describe where we've come from inexactly.*

I need to change the words; that's my interpretation of the phrase which in more literal English says, "a person like this comes from an ineffable place.

*(inaudible) Most of our descriptions are imprecise, London is imprecise.*

Yes, but maybe it's more "ineffable", but this word is quite puzzling for people so I try to make it a bit simpler. But I don't mean to suggest that it's a place we can't quite describe, but rather that the place we come from...where is it, what is it, who are you, coming from where? So it's a kind of denial of the intellectual thought process which creates a picture around somebody. I can probably change it if you can suggest a better way. The quotation in the koan story is much shorter.

*Mike, you know where it say "ability accumulated day by day", you were saying that it's fully manifesting if you're actually doing something, say you were slicing a loaf of bread, just slicing, you'd be whole but if you were thinking then you would be split. But do you think that by practicing Zazen you're more likely to be just slicing bread wholly?*

Yes, "ability accumulated day by day" simply means that to fully manifest our existence is not a result of building up our ability. We usually think that to become a good swimmer for instance, we train, we usually think that to become a good buddha we train, and that's not wrong, but what Master Dogen is saying is fully manifesting our existence is not the result of something we do, it's a state in the present moment. So in that sense it's independent of past and future.

*So is it another denial of mental process?*

Yes. But what you were saying about slicing the bread, when we sit in Zazen, we're constantly training ourselves to sit as we are, and to drop off all our thoughts which are crowding in and going again. So we're training ourselves to slice bread, that's what Zazen is, it's slicing bread. To fully slice the bread is what we're training ourselves to do, if we train ourselves to do it, maybe we'll do it. But Master Dogen's description here is beyond that, he's saying it's not the result of training, it's an actual reality in the present moment. But when he denies something, you'll often find in the next paragraph or chapter he affirms it, because we need more than one viewpoint to understand reality. So if we say that reality is a process, the Buddhist state is a process; we train and train and



then we get to become a buddha, well it's true that if we practice Zazen day by day we becomes skilled at practicing Zazen or we learn how to sit simply. So we can say yes it is a kind of process, we have to talk about it like that, it's the only way we can make sense of things. However, the actual experience doesn't come from anywhere, it's just how we feel at this moment, or how we experience the situation at this moment. So that's what Master Dogen is talking about here.

*Can I just say that we've actually trained to get rid of things rather than training to get things. Dropping it off.*

That's right, dropping it off, so we're training to un-train ourselves, we're un-training.

*But it never stops does it? I mean if you did 25 years of Zazen and got really good at it, if you stopped...*

So when we stop breathing it stops.

*So if you stopped your practice, you haven't accumulated something I guess...*

We've un-accumulated something.

*Is he not pointing towards the idea that we've not got something that we can keep without further practice.*

We can't keep it, because we've just got rid of it. So Master Dogen's phrase is to drop it off, not to get it. If we drop it off, how can we keep it? We've just dropped it off.

*And it's almost creating a habit of dropping it off?*

Yes, then dropping off the habit. So he's very unusually skilled at trying to pinpoint things that we can't even see, can't even sense, but these things he's trying to describe are aspects of reality beyond our conceptual world. And reality beyond our conceptual world is simple, because it's here and it's now. So it's not beyond, it's here. But we need to get rid of all our concepts to let ourselves be here. And when we let ourselves be here now, we're manifesting fully, life.

*Could you also reverse it, in the sense that reality manifests us, buddha-nature manifests or realises us, so it's not me realising something, but reality realising me. So it's not even a two-way process it's, that's what it is. So stones and pillars, tiles and mountains manifest me or realises me, I'm a part of that.*

Yes, however, we need both viewpoints, if you say that something is manifesting me, lots of people will look for this "something". If we say "me manifesting something", lots of people will then look for the "me". So Master Dogen says forget about the something and forget about the "me". But in words, we can't do it. Yes, he often turns the viewpoint around and it's a very helpful way to look at things.

*I can't imagine mind not conceptualising though.*

No nor can I, it's impossible.

*So we do this and then drop off concepts, but actually, as a human being it seems beyond possibility to do it.*

Absolutely, it's beyond possibility to do it in the mind. But every time we act we do it, every time we act we drop it all away.

*I experienced it this morning when I did my exercises.*

That was this morning. So we can't imagine not thinking, it's absolutely impossible.

*You can do it for a moment, well we do it (inaudible) becoming a buddha is beyond....*

Yes, beyond our ability to think about. But we can do something which is fully manifesting ourselves. And to fully manifest ourselves, we and the world need to be totally engaged, we do it all the time but we don't notice that this is the basis of our life. We think all the rest is the basis of our life, we think all these words that I'm spouting now, we think that listening to me talk about Buddhism somehow will teach us Buddhism. But it's doing or acting which is the basis of our life and the doing or acting is what Master Dogen is writing about. But he can't write about it and he never managed to finish off what he wanted to say.

We'll stop there.

Thank you