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Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

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Master Dogen is explaining what "fully manifesting existence" means, and the difficulty is that it means something which is real. So he's telling us that it's something real outside of our ideal world, outside of our intellect. And he continues:

"Fully manifesting existence" is not to return to an original state of existence that once we had and have now lost, because the present moment includes both the eternal past and the eternal present.

"An original state of existence" – some people think that we're going back to something that we had and have lost, he's saying it's not that.

It is not to attain a new state of existence that we aspire to, for it does not include anything that we haven't already got.

If we think that there's something in the future that we're not quite good enough to get, he denies that.

It is not a discrete series of moments of existence, for it includes all moments.

If we imagine that fully manifesting existence is a state in the present, the present here, and then here, then here, that's a nice way to think about it, as a series of moments. But actually the present is not like that. When we think about it, it feels quite a good way to describe it but actually it's beyond that, it's beyond a series of discrete moments of existence.

It is not an existence that is beginningless, because it is me manifesting my ineffable state here and now.

So it's not something that has always been and always will be because it's immediate. So these are contradictory, and we can see that same argument in the Uji chapter which we did in January; the contradictory statements about the nature of reality. This same contradictory argument is echoed in Master Nagarjuna's writings too.

It is not a new existence, because Master Nansen Fugan said that *"balanced and constant body-mind is the truth"*.

That's a quotation from Master Nansen. If we think it's something that we didn't have which then came into existence now, then it contradicts what Master Nansen said.

Remember, since living beings are in the midst of fully manifesting their existence in the Universe, it is not easy for them to see this fact.

So we want to see it; not only to we want to be, although we already are, we want to see ourselves being. It's quite ridiculous really but it's our lot, it's our fate, to want to see ourselves as we are although we already are. We want to be a spectator on our lives as well as living.

Can we see another person's?

It seems like it yes, but I wonder if we really know another person's life. The nearest person to me is Yoko, and I guess I know Yoko's life, I suppose. I have a window into Yoko's life so I believe that I know Yoko's life. But I don't know if I really do. But we want to, we desperately want to, and that's the human condition. So it's not that we should stop doing it, just that we should notice what we do.

The meaning of "fully manifesting existence" understood in this way is getting to the heart of the matter – freedom in this moment.

I don't know if that's the best phrase there, but that's what I've put. If we understand "fully manifesting existence" as something immediate and full in the sense that he's described it, then we are getting nearer to the heart of the matter. And the heart of the matter is something full in the present. That's the end of his first block of explanation about the poem in which he's commenting on the first line, "all living beings fully manifest buddha-nature in their existence". So he's been commenting on and about what it is to fully manifest existence.

Have you got examples of the four viewpoints in that?

Yes we can find them, but not so clearly. Some chapters have it very clearly. We can see them but I don't find it so useful to mark them out, I find it useful to know what the four viewpoints are, to notice that Master Dogen uses them and then to leave it at that.

In the next passage Master Dogen starts to talk about the term "buddha-nature", so he's left "fully manifesting existence" as it is and he goes on:

When some students hear the phrase "buddha-nature" they misunderstand it to be some enduring "self" as described by the non-Buddhist Senika.

If you remember he comments on Senika's belief in the first chapter of the Shobogenzo, (Bendowa), in which he quotes Senika's belief in an eternal soul, then slams him for it.

In Soku-shin-ze-Butsu as well – Mind Here and Now is Buddha.

Yes. He says quite clearly in many places that the idea of an enduring self in the sense of a continuing soul that goes on to some other place is not Buddhism. He says buddha-nature is not that, it's not some kind of special characteristic or self that exists and goes on. The people who believe that:

This is because they do not really see other people in front of them, they do not really see who they are, and they do not see their teacher in front of them.

So he means that they are thinking about abstract things, not seeing reality as it is. If we think in the abstract we can come up with all kinds of spiritual explanations for the world.

Without really concentrating, they think that mind, will, or consciousness – which is just the movement of molecules in our brains – were the basis of the knowledge and understanding of the enlightened Buddha. No-one has said that buddha-nature is just enlightened knowledge or understanding.

There was a view that buddha-nature is something you can get by building your knowledge and understanding of Buddhism until you reach an enlightened state, and he's saying it is not that.

Mike, what was Dogen's expression here, where you've put "movement of molecules in our brains"?

"The movement of wind and fire".

Although people who realise and know what enlightenment is are buddhas, the nature of a buddha is beyond enlightened knowledge and understanding.

So the nature of a buddha is obviously buddha-nature, and is beyond some kind of special knowledge or understanding.

And when I describe a buddha as someone who realises and knows, I don't mean the various wrong kinds of realising and knowing described by some people.

He's referring to abstract knowledge, the kind of knowledge of sutras and of theoretical Buddhism which had been in Japan for hundreds of years prior to Master Dogen's return from China and his establishing of the practice of Zazen. There were already hundreds of years of Buddhist teachings but they were all abstract or spiritual, based on knowledge or understanding in the brain. He's saying the nature of a buddha is not that, If it were, very clever scholars would all be buddhas without any doubt. But a stupid person can be as much of a great buddha as a clever person. My master has the name Gudo, which means stupid way.

For instance, I don't mean that the movement of molecules in our brains is realising and knowing.

So the realising and knowing that he's talking about is not the realising and knowing of the intellect.

Realising and knowing are manifested correctly by a buddha – as they were by our Buddhist ancestors – just at the present moment.

Master Dogen's meaning of "realising and knowing" is something we manifest in the present moment. He goes on now to criticise other kinds of realising and knowing; the kind of Buddhism which had been established in Japan prior to him bringing the practice of Zazen:

Over many years, our ancestors have been to China and returned with an understanding of Buddhism to teach to others. They have been as numerous as blades of grass.

Because China was the centre of culture and Japan was an uncivilised place, and Japanese people thought of themselves as uncivilised, they went to China which

was the centre of the world, learned literature and all the trappings of civilisation and brought them back to Japan. So lots of monks went from Japan to China and came back with different teachings, and Dogen himself did. By "ancestors" he means Buddhist teachers of all different kinds; they have been "as numerous as blades of grass".

But many of them simply grasped knowing and understanding buddha-nature on the basis of the movement of molecules in their brains.

In other words they came back with explanations of what buddha-nature was, which they had an idea of, then they taught it to people.

With this understanding they mistakenly moved further and further away from the truth. What a shame! We students of the present should not follow in their footsteps. We learn what realisation and knowing are, beyond movement through time.

That's a strange phrase, but again it echoes his teachings in Uji, where he concentrates on the present being beyond time.

What does he mean by "students of the present"? Present day students or students that study the present?

Not our ancestors. We shouldn't make the same mistakes as those ancestors did, going and studying lots of theoretical Buddhism then coming back and explaining what Buddhism is in theory.

I can't see how people can study and study and not realise that there understanding is wrong, why don't they sit Zazen?

If they've never met Zazen then they have no centre, no practice. So lots of the earlier sects didn't practice Zazen, but they practiced things like chanting, reciting the name of Buddha etc. There are schools around now that recite the name of Buddha, and they believe that when you recite the name of Buddha it gives you some power or merit. So that becomes the centre of their practice. Master Dogen says those teachings are wrong – the theory is wrong and the practice is wrong. He says the centre of Buddhism is Zazen. If we practice Zazen, then it makes sense and we can think how can they possibly do that? But people hadn't met Zazen, nobody in Japan prior to the introduction of Zazen knew about Zazen.

It seems incredible that you can go from what the Buddha was teaching right off at a tangent and end up in a situation where people haven't ever heard of sitting, who spend their whole lives studying Buddhism.

Yes, it's true, and it's strange that even now there are lots of statues of the Buddha and they all sit in Zazen, but you very rarely hear people saying that it's a Buddha sitting in Zazen, or there's a Buddha sitting in some meaningful posture. People think that the posture is some kind of sacred shape. But if I see a statue of the Buddha sitting in Zazen it speaks to me directly.

Buddhism got mixed up with Daoism as well on its travels.

The human mind is very good at adding things, we like to add something and it's a natural tendency.

Weren't all the patriarchs, Bassho and all these people, weren't they practicing Zazen?

Yes.

And they were before Dogen.

Yes. Ah, the ancestors he's talking about here are specifically those ancestors in Japan who went to China and came back with esoteric theoretical teachings. He doesn't mean his ancestors.

It sounded like there wasn't any Zazen in Japan before Dogen.

Yes he says so, there wasn't any Zazen in Japan before him but there was in China. People who came from China to Japan according to Dogen, what they brought back wasn't true Zazen, there was already Rinzai Zazen, but that was different. So Master Dogen practiced with the Rinzai school for nine years or so, then went to China and met a Chinese teacher, and his experience of Zazen changed, something dropped away and he saw for the first time what Zazen is. The he came back and introduced pure Zazen, shikantaza – just sitting, not sitting with chanting, sitting with thinking, sitting with solving koans, sitting with hands in different shapes, sitting thinking about breathing, just sitting, that's what he introduced.

We're at the bottom of page two:

We learn what realisation and knowing are, beyond movement through time.

So that's his teaching of realisation and knowing, not realisation and knowing in an intellectual sense, but realisation and knowing that are beyond the process view.

We learn what movement is, and we grasp that it is not the same as the ineffable state at the present moment.

In this sentence he also echoes his writings in Uji; that we see movement as some process but viewed from the present moment, there is no process. That always sounds like a rather bizarre statement, because we know there's process. But at the same time when we're acting fully in the present moment we have no sense of process; the future and the past both collapse into the present.

When we can understand the true nature of movement, then we will also be able to grasp real knowing and understanding.

Again, he's talking about something immediate in the present. And when we know what true movement is, then we know what true knowing and understanding is, in the sense that he means it.

By movement does he mean the same as process?

Yes, that's what he suggests here. So he's talking in the third viewpoint, in terms of the four philosophies.

I don't understand what that means.

Good, because what he's saying is that in the present moment, there is room to be, to act, but there's no room to reflect or think. So his "being in the present" is synonymous with "fully existing", and when we are fully existing there is no room

to reflect on ourselves, so there's no room to understand. His "realisation and knowing" suggests some kind of total intuitive awareness.

And when it says that we can understand the true nature of movement, that implies that somehow you can understand it.

If you interpret the words like that yes, but when he says "understand", what else can I put? We've got to use words in English, he had to use words in Japanese, so what it's suggesting is that there's a realisation and knowing that is something total and is here and now and is not intellectual. So what is it? We can't put down what it is, but we experience it. So for instance when we meet someone for the first time, in the first instance we meet them something happens which is very complex, we can analyse it by saying that we see the person, the person sees us, and all kinds of things happen, we bring our interpretations to bear, how the person looks, how I feel and so on, but the total immediate situation is beyond our description – we realise and know something. In every moment we realise and know something, but not in normal way of saying it, we are on the limit of what we can really talk about. He's suggesting something rather delicate, a kind of pre-conceptual state of fullness, and in that he says there's real realisation, real knowing, real knowledge of movement, real buddha – everything is in there. He piles everything in there, the past and future, the present, everything is poured into this immediate state.

I think that Wittgenstein reaches a similar conclusion

Yes.

Though he didn't have Zazen, he reached the conclusion that thought is blind, thought can't see something right now.

But this sentence seems to be saying the opposite of that, it seems to say when we can understand it we'll also be able to grasp real understanding.

Does he mean realise rather than understand?

Whatever words we use, it's not enough, if I say when you can really understand what chocolate tastes like you'll be able to tell me, you don't think I mean you have to understand the taste of chocolate, no. We use words loosely sometimes and Master Dogen uses words in a rough way sometimes and in a very focussed way sometimes. When we really know is maybe better than understand.

When we see?

It's because we all know it that we can see it or understand it, because there isn't that distance. It's like trying to look inside your own eyeball, you can't have distance to look at it because we are it already. So we can sort of understand it somehow because it is us.

What Master Dogen is talking about is something real that's here, when we talk about it we say "something real that's here" and we say "real?, here?" So it's like I'm pointing at Anne, and saying there's Anne, and someone says "your finger's not quite pointing up there, it's pointing up there isn't it? So shouldn't it be pointing at Anne?" And I'm saying, yes, BUT I'M POINTING AT ANNE! CAN'T YOU SEE? Then someone says, "your thumb is pointing downwards", and I say yes it's pointing downwards, but don't you see what I'm trying to tell you, not my thumb, not my finger – THERE IS ANNE! So our intellect focuses on the words, we can

change the words, maybe "see" is better or "know", anything to get us out of looking at the words would be better. What he's trying to say is not in the words.

But there's something still bothering me about this sentence.

Yes!

When, and then, because we've been saying there's a constancy here, there isn't a great experience or flash. But he seems to be saying that when we've achieved this then we'll be able to....

It doesn't say that to me. He just says....

It's just an elaboration, the second half of the sentence is throwing more light on the first half....

When you understand the sentence you'll get it?

Have you understood the sentence?

Completely.

"When we understand the true nature of movement, then we will also be able to grasp real knowing and understanding." "We learn what movement is, and we grasp that it is not the same as the ineffable state at the present moment." He's saying that what we see as movement is something that we interpret in our consciousness, and that the ineffable present is not the same as interpretation. When work out, when we experience what is really movement, then we'll be able to put together what I mean by knowing and understanding.

Elsewhere it says that a buddha doesn't need to know that they are a buddha, this sense of grasping real knowing and understanding seems to suggest that a buddha is knowing that it's a buddha.

No, by grasping it he means throwing it away. To grasp real knowing and understanding means to throw everything away, stop thinking, that's what he means. Unfortunately we can't get past the words – "you said grasp!" Yes, but throw it away, "yes but you said grasp!" No not grasp! What do we do? He's just saying when we can really grasp it, when we can really grasp what I'm talking about, then we can see.

But that's quite difficult to understand, one of those phrases isn't in there, which is the diametrically opposed one which makes sense of the first, which is by which he means the throwing away of all thinking; ceasing to grasp.

But he didn't say throwing away all thinking, so I can't put it in there, I could do, shall I put it in?

Now it makes sense to me.

Mike, it's like what we discussing at Rowardennan last time, that you can describe to someone at night time that the sun has gone in and it's dark so you might bump into things, knowing those words is not going to help you when you're in the dark.

That's right, but we still ask for a list of things we might bump in to.

So being in the dark is real knowing and understanding of the dark?

Yes.

Going back to movement, in terms of tennis or football, you can see movement in it but when you actually play it you don't feel that.

That's right, our experience is different, and that's what he means. In real movement we have knowledge and understanding, when the football is kicked then where the ball goes next...comes.

Why did Dogen write so much? Why did he bother, he could have just said "sit in Zazen, goodnight".

Why did you go to India?

I just went.

That's why he wrote, he just wrote. So we live our lives, some people decide to get a bit of wood with hair on it, and dip it into paint and make marks on things. Some people decide to make funny noises for the whole of their lives, they get wooden or metal shapes and they make noises. Some people open their mouths and make noises on and on, so that's our life.

But he's telling us to cut all conceptual thought in the present moment, but he says so much about it.

Yes, he was a very brilliant man, if you look at his poetry and his writing and his use of language, and how close in the 13th century he got to modern concepts in physics for example, he must have been brilliant. So what does a brilliant person do? What do you expect him to do, just sit and grind rice?

Also, if you just sat Zazen without any explanation or philosophy, you'd develop all sorts of weird ideas about what it was, because it's natural for us to try and create edifices around us. So this is about knocking them all down.

Yes, exactly, he's deconstructing the world. And also in Master Dogen's time there was an enormous amount of misunderstanding; people were saying things like if you chant the name of Buddha you become a person who knows everything. And if you stand under a cold waterfall for three hours every day, you can become enlightened, and buddhas are superhuman, and after Gautama Buddha died he went on for eternity – on and on. So Master Dogen goes through all of this and denies it, which is exactly what Master Nagarjuna did in the 2nd century, he took all what he saw as wrong understanding and said no, no, no not that, this here. Buddhism is about this, here.

Yoko: Master Dogen must have known how complicated human beings are, in a way, so that's why he wanted to explain things. Human beings are very complicated.

Yes aren't we? The reason he goes on and on in such a complicated way about fully manifesting existence is that he's trying to say...something about...fully manifesting existence.

Buddha and nature have arrived here... have arrived here... have arrived here... Buddha-nature is fully manifesting existence, and fully manifesting existence is the nature of a buddha. Fully manifesting

existence is not as a series of discrete moments of existence, and not as a continuous line of existence. Because it is pure action at this moment, it is beyond description by the discriminating mind. What I am describing here as buddha-nature is not the nature of some superhuman person, and not like the idea of it which we hold in our minds.

That's what he wants to say. So it's very strange that he wrote so much.

Some people describe buddha-nature as being like the seed of a plant,

And this particular metaphor is also in Master Nagarjuna's work.

which sprouts when watered by the rain of Dharma. The twigs, leaves and flowers grow and the plant bears fruit, which in turn produces more seeds. These kinds of metaphors are just the romantic thinking of ordinary people. People who are content with this kind of metaphor should notice that seeds, flowers and fruit all exist as they are at the moment of the present.

So he's bringing us out of thinking about process and thinking about buddha-nature as a seed inside us which can be watered by practice or chanting, then it can grow and become a buddha, these ideas were prevalent in all the teachings at that time.

Seeds are already present in fruit.

There's a good statement.

And the leaves and twigs are already present in the seeds even though we cannot see them; they do not obtain them from somewhere else, but still they produce a profusion of twigs, branches, and trunks. These real facts cannot be explained ultimately by looking from the inside or the outside; they are just present facts, and are beyond explanation by a process of growth that moves from the past to the present.

Now that seems to deny scientific explanation. And he means to do that, but you'll find elsewhere that he affirms scientific explanation. So he's affirming a particular view; the third viewpoint which is the present. And he says in the viewpoint from the present, fully expressing ourselves in the present, scientific explanation, things developing as a process through time is inappropriate. So we can look at it in the process view but it's inappropriate to what he's talking about.

So even using the metaphor that ordinary people use, roots, stalks, branches, and leaves are all buddha-nature; they are born as buddha-nature, and die as buddha-nature. It is just the fact that they fully manifest existence.

So a seed is a seed, is a seed, is a seed, and that's what Master Dogen means by "fully manifesting existence", - being what it is. And it would be very nice to use a phrase like "being what it is" but unfortunately it doesn't fit in with all the ways he uses it. The problem I've had is to find a phrase that can fit with the way he uses the expression through the chapter. He plays around with this expression, so if I use something like "being as we are" there's a "we" in it, but lots of the use in the original are subject-less, so I chose the phrase "fully manifesting existence", a seed is a seed, is a seed, the fruit is a fruit, I am me, you are you, the Universe is the Universe, but without subjects and objects.

Things as it is.

"Things as it is" is a very good one – Shunryu Suzuki. Shall we carry on to the next bit or stop?

I'd like to stop.

Have you had a mind full?

There's a similar expression elsewhere in the Shobogenzo which is about firewood and ash, is this the same sort of thing?

Yes, so these viewpoints, these ways of looking, keep repeating. If we read the chapters of the Shobogenzo we will find the same viewpoints repeating, particularly this viewpoint, so strange to us, which denies process or which seems to say, you know, there isn't any time. And of course we know there is time, because we look at our watch, and it's ten past... So it's a puzzle. But if we keep looking at these chapters we notice that Master Dogen has four ways of looking at things and they all contradict each other. So yes, there is time, but there is a state in which time is not something we notice, or something that's appropriate.

So is buddha-nature a way of throwing away Uji and saying it's more than that?

Buddha-nature *is* Uji. All of Master Dogen's phrases all mean the same thing. So he's talking about only one thing all through the Shobogenzo. Buddha-nature is total expression in the present, Uji is total expression in the present, buddha is total expression in the present, nirvana is total expression in the present. There is only one fact that he's trying to explain. He explains it from many points of view, he shoots his arrows at the target from many different directions.

Why do you continue to study Dogen, when everything is apparent?

I can't think of anything else to do. I can't find anything that fires me up. I used to enjoy mountaineering, but I don't do that much any more, I like walking. And I do editing work because it pays well but it doesn't really fire me up to edit a scientific paper so much. The one thing that fires me up is this, so I can't stop it.

Why don't you write it in your own words?

I can't think of any words to write, so I creep into the edge of Master Dogen's huge light that he's shed, I creep and pinch a bit off the edge and gain a little bit of his light. That's what I'm trying to do here.

When you explain it from your own experience it always means something more to me than when you read what Dogen writes.

OK, so I'm learning to put it into my own words, but it's taken me a very long time.

Not these words, not your translation of Dogen but your own experiences.

Oh right, well maybe I can get some more....they only come out when I'm talking about this chapter.

So maybe rather than translations, do commentaries.

This is what this is really I suppose. These books are literal, and the paragraphs can't be understood without looking back at the original Japanese and seeing exactly what he was doing with the language; just reading the English you can't understand it. That's a shame, so my first step is to try and improve that.

Another reason I'm thinking is almost a political one, because you know this is a tiny little group isn't it, and you're really implying that many schools of Buddhism are actually going up a blind alley.

Yes, that's right, yes.

So it's quite an important project?

Yes, it's quite important, but when Nishijima Roshi teaches, as he gets older, he says more and more openly what he believes, but it's not easy to go around saying that this school or that school of Buddhism are going up a blind alley.

I was reading a bit of Jiyu Kennett, the reason why I read it is to get some context or comparison. And she was even kind of OK'd by Kodo Sawaki apparently. But the things that she says are incredibly different.

Yes they are. Yes.

(Inaudible)

Are you talking about me or you?

(inaudible)

I prefer myself just to rely on Zazen. So after I've done this chapter, explained it all, I just want to forget it all and get on with my life, and practice Zazen. So I want to rely completely on Zazen, so not to work out how Zazen can help me or how what I learned in this chapter can work for me. I never do that, it doesn't work for me. Just, that's my effort now, now it's finished, let's do the next thing. Shall we?

Thank you very much.