

Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin 2004

Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

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Just before we start on Bussho, Jane asked me some interesting questions that made me think about the retreat. I think in the end the word "retreat" doesn't really describe what we do, it's really called a sesshin. The reason I say so, is that I realised that lots of people think of a retreat as a retreat from the world into a peaceful little hideaway, to have a very peaceful and pleasant relaxing time. Although I don't deny that this kind of experience is useful, a sesshin is not like that. As we all know it's quite hard work; it's a kind of training, and if we try and find what we're training, we're training ourselves. That applies to all of us. So I think "self-management" might be a good term - how to manage ourselves. Our standard for self-management is our practice. We practice several time a day how to manage ourselves, in other words how can I make myself sit here when my knees are on fire, or my back is hurting, or I feel tired because we got up at 6 o'clock? And so that is what we are really doing, it's learning how to manage ourselves. None of us have to sit in the zendo, but we all do, and we all sit waiting for the bell, and while we're waiting for it we're looking for ways to manage ourselves, manage our pain, our thoughts and so on. And then outside of the zendo, we keep bumping into each other in lots of different ways. We all come to the sesshin with different past experiences, some of us catch colds like I have, so how do we manage catching a cold for example and still carry on doing what we've got to do? So it's not a relaxing time, it's a kind of training. But although it's a kind of training we can still find some kind of peaceful state, not the kind of peaceful state you get from lying on the beach, I haven't laid on a beach for many years, but it's the kind of peaceful state you get from a hard day's work, or even during a hard day's work. And a kind of work that doesn't disturb us, there are many kinds of work but some don't disturb us so much. For me walking in the hills is a kind of work that doesn't disturb me, it takes a lot of effort but it makes me feel happy. And some people, like Stuart, like digging in the allotment, it's hard work but it brings some satisfaction. That's what we get from a sesshin. Some people might imagine that Buddhists go off to a retreat somewhere and find some kind of eternal peace, but our peace is really a kind of truce between warring factions. And the warring factions are usually what goes on in our lives - the battle between the opposites that arise in our selves, the conflicts we have, and we find a kind of balance or truce between those opposites. So as Jane said this morning - it's not like you expect. And that's right, if it's like what you expect, that's not it.

Sesshin means "touch mind" doesn't it?

Yoko: In a way, to meet or to face mind, or heart - shin.

Yes, so not exactly mind in the western sense, but in the eastern.

Bodymind.

Yes.

Yoko: Or ango, so traditionally in India in the rainy season, they three months sesshin, so ango, an means peaceful or relief, then go means pure, self.

Shall we carry on with Bussho? We're on to a poem which Master Dogen is quoting from Gautama Buddha. I don't know where these poems come from, but we can suppose that this second poem is a continuation of the first, but there's no source given for them, nor indication as to what they were in Sanskrit.

The Buddha said:

***"If we want to know the meaning of buddha-nature,
It is just real present time, causes, and circumstances.
When time is here,
Buddha-nature manifests itself before us."***

Master Dogen then discusses this poem line by line. The poem itself suggests again something that manifests itself in the present, some kind of fullness in the present. But Master Dogen takes the first line which says if we want to know the meaning of buddha-nature (and to know the meaning of buddha-nature suggests some kind of intellectual understanding), and comments:

The line "If we want to know the meaning of buddha-nature" does not refer only to knowing in an intellectual sense. It also means wanting to practice it, wanting to experience it, wanting to explain it to others, and wanting to be unaware of it.

So he's saying that the first line doesn't have a narrow meaning, just to intellectually understand what buddha-nature is, but to want to eat buddha-nature, to get inside it, to know it in that sense. And he includes in that wanting to experience it, practice it, explain it to others, and to be unaware of it. To be unaware of it suggests real experience. Real experience is when we're not aware in the simple sense, we have some kind of awareness when we're acting but we're not aware of what we're doing in the sense of watching ourselves.

Explaining, practicing, experiencing, being unaware, misunderstanding and not misunderstanding, and so on, are all causes and circumstances that just exist at real present time. Causes and circumstances just exist at this real present time because they *are* real present time.

So he's taking each of these facets of knowing buddha-nature and saying that each of them on their own is a present fact. So we want to experience it – that's a present fact, we misunderstand it, yes but we misunderstand it in the moment of the present. So what he's trying to say is that there's only our presence in this moment. And everything that happens, experiencing, misunderstanding, being unaware, practicing, explaining, all this takes place in the present. And he wants to go further than that and say that for instance explaining buddha-nature *is* real present time. In our thoughts we explain reality as saying for example in the present I eat my meal, or in the present I drink a glass of water, but Master Dogen goes further and says that drinking the glass of water *is* the present, explaining buddha-nature *is* the present, listening to my voice *is* the present time. So in that way he's collapsing all of our conceptual ways of thinking into something, he's always doing this. So it sounds rather puzzling, it sounds like he's saying everything is just one, and that's exactly what he is saying. But that moves us out of the area of the usefulness of words, what use are words if there are not things? If there are no separate things we don't need words. So "causes and circumstances just exist at this real present time because they *are* real present time."

Real time and causes and circumstances thus mirror each other at this real present time. But the causes and circumstances that exist at this real present time are never mirrored in concepts that attempt to pin down the perfection or imperfection of this moment.

What he wants to say is, on the one hand we have what he calls causes and circumstances, and this refers to the separate events that we give names to in the world; "I'm explaining buddha-nature", "I'm misunderstanding", "I'm listening", "you're talking" - all those situations he calls causes and circumstances. Then we have real present time, so he says that they mirror and reflect each other. But those concepts which "attempt to pin down the perfection or imperfection of this moment", those concepts don't mirror the present. That's what he says. He's trying to create an image of the present moment in which things that are happening, and time are like two mirrors facing each other. And there's no room within that for talking about this moment being imperfect or perfect, if what we're doing here and now is right or wrong, whether this moment is full or not. What he's trying to say is quite difficult to understand and difficult to put down in words, he's creating an image using the word "mirroring". In the sentence he says that things that are happening (causes and circumstances) and present time are somehow mirroring each other, so we think of them as being two things somehow reflecting each other, but then he goes on:

This mirroring in the present is not divided into two as subject and object, and there is no such thing as a right reflection or a wrong reflection.

He creates a picture and then modifies the picture, he makes the image and then says that it's not two. So we're left puzzling.

Mike is that the same as when you say that reality is not how we imagine it?

Yes, that's what he means.

Is it also about the interaction between the subjective and objective points of view, it's the same thing?

Yes, that's right. So in our mind, in our thoughts, we divide into two, we divide subject and object. We say that *this* is happening in the *present*. Master Dogen wants to somehow, impossibly, create an image of that something *being* the present, and of course he can't do it, so he's getting as near as he possibly can.

And this is not unique to buddha-nature, it's true for eating, laughing, shouting.

Everything, yes.

It is just mirroring here and now, with no subject doing the mirroring and no object being mirrored. In this, real present time and causes and circumstances are undivided wholeness, which transcends concepts like "causes" and "circumstances".

That's his final collapsing.

This is real buddha-nature, free of the concept "buddha-nature". It is Buddha just being Buddha themselves, and the natural state just being the natural state itself.

"Things as they is".

From the distant past to the present, there are many people who have thought that the phrase "when time is here"

...Which is in the poem.

means that we have to wait until some time in the future for the buddha-nature to manifest itself. They think that if they continue their practice with this attitude, then one day the time will come naturally when their own buddha-nature will reveal itself. They say that until that time has come, there is no use in them asking their teachers for explanations or making efforts to find out what is true. With this kind of viewpoint, they continue to entertain themselves with trivia and let their thoughts carry them away.

This is a common way of thinking about a concept; words suggest a concept to us, so if somebody says "buddha-nature", we think about buddha-nature and we try to imagine what it is, then we hear that it's something to do with Zazen, so people think that if they practice it will come to them. So at some time in the future, (they think that) buddha-nature will come to them, that's the viewpoint which he's criticising.

This kind of person is not a Buddhist. To answer the line in the poem, "If we want to know the meaning of buddha-nature" is to really know the meaning of buddha-nature right here and now.

What he's doing here is saying that buddha-nature is something real, so if we want to know the meaning of buddha-nature we must look for something real. If we look for something in words or understanding, we can never find it. So where do we look for it?

And the line "it is just real present time, causes and circumstances" means to know that causes and circumstances are real time here and now. If you want to know what buddha-nature is, know that it is causes and circumstances as real time.

Or we could say, if you want to know what buddha-nature is, it's when there is no division in our mind between things that happen and the time at which they happen.

So here and now is karma, as well? The karma in this present moment rather than causes and circumstances.

Karma?

Yes, by causes and circumstances.

No not specifically karma, that's cause and effect. So by "causes and circumstances" he means the things that happen around us. And these things that happen around us in Master Dogen's view all happen fully in the present, but when we think about them, we separate them and describe them. So, no, not specifically karma in this instance, which is a different viewpoint. So when everything that happens around us and the time at which it happens aren't separate, then buddha-nature is clear. And the meaning of that is that when there's no room in the mind to think about the things that happen and the time at

which they're happening, because we are fully involved in it, we *are* those things, then we are buddha. Or in other words, when we're doing something fully and completely, then we have the nature of a buddha.

Can we ever know we're buddha?

No.

Ever?

Pardon?

Ever.

You mean in the future? Can we know we're buddha in the future? Or can we know that we were buddha in the past?

No, can we know we're buddha? You said no and you answered my question. We can't know we're buddha?

If we know we're buddha in the sense that we think "oh, I'm a buddha now", that's a thought, so the thought is different to the state ...the nature of a buddha. The nature of buddha-hood is the state where we're not thinking about ourselves or thinking about the world. So it excludes the possibility of us thinking about being buddha, or thinking about being anything. So when you say to someone "one sugar or two?", and you put the spoon in the bowl, at that point... So we can think back and say "yes, I see, I was a buddha then", but that's only a thought.

Sometimes in Zazen you think, "ah, this is the present moment!"

If we think that this is the present moment that's a fraction of a billionth of a moment after. Yes, so just prior to that.

You could say, "here comes the present moment".

Yes, just after that, between those two. What he's saying is very, very simple, and very, very fundamental. Because we are intellectual, human beings think, we cover that simple fact up. Master Dogen's teaching is a process of uncovering the nature of the present but it's difficult to see that, it sounds like he's covering everything up with these phrases, but in fact he's trying to deconstruct our interpretations of something which is very simple, that is, when we're involved in being ourselves in this moment, then that's all there is – involvement in being ourselves. We call that "action" in Buddhism, and we're unaware of it in the sense of thinking about it or recognising it. Of course we're not numb, when you put the sugar into the tea you don't suddenly disappear and become numb, but there's no second person. It's only afterwards that we think about it and try and work it out, but that's completely useless really.

Is it completely useless?

No.

It can't be can it?

No.

Otherwise we wouldn't be doing this.

But it's completely useless in the sense that to try and understand something that's already gone into the past, can't actually do something in the present. So if we look for buddha in the past, it doesn't exist in the past. I give up.

We did samu for three days and the first two days (inaudible)

If we stop talking things are different, yes. Walking is the same, we think we're going from A to B but actually we are just putting one foot in front of the other foot. If we do that for a while we look back at where we've come from and we think "oh".

(Inaudible)

Nowness is always here. Master Dogen says:

The phrase, "When time is here" represents the fact that real time is always here! How can we doubt that? At the very time which I doubt, buddha-nature is just coming back to me.

So the thing that most takes us away from the present is thinking and talking.

A deep habit though isn't it?

Yes. Yes, we chat.

But it's a good habit to have a process view of life as well as acting in the moment, because if we didn't have this view...

We wouldn't have any civilisation. Master Dogen has never said that we should get rid of this view, it's like for example, if you learn to ski you don't think "am I going to have to wear these bits of wood on my feet for the rest of my life?" That's crazy isn't it? Or you know, you learn to swim and you think, "I've got to go into work like this?" But this is what we do when we study Buddhism, we think "so I've got to somehow think in the present moment all the time, I mustn't look at my watch again?" It's crazy.

We do communicate with our fellow human beings using words as well as action. And those words are important.

When I said that the thing that takes us away from the present most of all is thinking and talking I don't mean it as a criticism, I mean it as a fact. We want to be taken away from the present, so when we find a simple, repetitive task like sewing, we inhabit a different area. That's to be human to do that, just the fact, that's the way we are, not that we should stop doing everything like that. But, we have a problem, and that is that we can inhabit an area which is separate from the present to such an extent that we believe it's real, and that's the source of lots of our suffering, or our problems.

When I was on holiday in a beautiful place, there were people reading books, they were in the habit of being somewhere else, they weren't where they were.

How do you know?

They were reading their books.

Why shouldn't they read a book there?

What I was saying was that we, I get into the habit of other place-ness, I read a book, we do that a lot, it's a habit we get into.

Samu is practice isn't it?

Samu? It's a practice, it's work, yes. "How can we doubt that?"

Remember that the phrase, "...the time is here" suggests not wasting a moment throughout the day: not waiting for the time to come before acting, but seeing that the time is here and acting.

"Oh...I'll do that later" – so think, thought, postpone until later, he says don't do that, the time is here and now so do it now.

Could you phrase that differently, at the very time at which I doubt, buddha-nature is just coming back to me?

If I doubt whether buddha-nature is present, just my doubting in the present moment is buddha-nature.

He says something similar in Uji.

Yes. He's suggesting that by doubting we think we don't have it, or it's not here.

So doubting is just buddha-nature coming back to me?

That's what he says.

It's not really coming back, it's just...

No, he's saying, you know...sometimes for example we feel that we're not balanced, something's going on in our life and we don't feel right. Then just in the next moment we do something and we realise that we are balanced. So balance comes back to us, when we were doubting that we were, somehow it had run away, then in the next moment something happens and we realise that actually we can be balanced in the middle of being unbalanced.

Does it actually run away or does it just seem like it's run away?

Actually there's no *it* to run away. He's creating pictures, so there's no *it*. That which does not run away is it.

Forgive me Mike I always come back to this, but why do we persist in elucidation of our experience of Zazen when we can sit and practice, it seems that it's almost a self-defeating thing that we do, continually coming back to Dogen and to descriptions and to conceptualisations of what we're doing?

I can answer that for myself, I can't answer it for you. I stumbled across Buddhism when I met Nishijima Roshi in Tokyo and I listened to what he said, and what he said started to make sense to me. And that sense made me value Zazen, the fact that he taught me how to practice Zazen was one thing, but the fact that he made sense sometimes, not always, somehow reinforced it, made me think that this was the right track. So I listened to him on and on, and at the end of 25 years, it's all I've got, the only thing I've got to teach is how to practice Zazen and the things I learned from Nishijima Roshi about Dogen, I don't know anything else. So I just do it. Fortunately you mugs listen.

I'm not complaining, it's just that there's a contradiction isn't there?

There's a contradiction yes, and that contradiction is real. But the fact that we ask the question is the answer itself, if you don't need to ask the question, there's no need to be here. The fact that we ask questions.

(Inaudible)

When we practice Zazen we notice what we're like, "I don't half think a lot, my mind never stops". Or we find it difficult to sit with our legs crossed. This is information about us which we notice about ourselves. Or we might notice that we've got a headache or a bit of a cold, or we might notice that we feel irritated. Those things we notice because we're just sitting with ourselves without any external distractions, these are the simple things that we wouldn't otherwise notice. That's quite helpful isn't it? And we notice the difference between reality and ideas.

When we practice Zazen, we sit in reality, and because we sit in reality, reality seeps into us. Without doing anything else in the rest of our lives, reality is seeped into us, so we don't mistake ideas for reality and we notice the difference between ideas and reality to some extent. We're not trapped by ideas so much as if we didn't practice Zazen.

So this provides us with a language of explaining that?

This? Yes, this is what Master Dogen is doing, he's saying that Buddhist ideas point to reality beyond the ideas, the image of the finger pointing at the moon. Most people discuss the finger pointing, but he wants to discuss the moon, the moon is the important thing. We normally think that the ideas are the important thing, we value the ideas more than the reality, but Master Dogen is interested in the reality. So we do this very simple practice of sitting in reality.

Is there also a thing of if you only did the practice it kind of becomes it's just the way you look at it, but people can view it as a special thing that happens in a special place. And without that understanding of how it forms, it just becomes a thing you just go off and do, it still has the same physical benefits it still, um...

These are ideas. So Master Dogen is saying ideas are different to reality and reality is always here and now. This is reality here and now. We can discuss ideas about reality, but they are different from reality. That's what he tries to explain. And he does it to the best of his ability. In the 13th Century, poetry was used to express very subtle things which hadn't been clarified, and other ways were used to create a new vocabulary, we have lots more finely tuned words to describe parts of reality than existed in Master Dogen's time, so he used poetic language and images and played with language in a way that put him a long way ahead of others writing at his time. So this is his way of saying "no, not the reality we're thinking about but this reality". And this is the way he does it.

And because the time is here, there is no room for concepts of "buddha-nature"; is it self evident that the time is here and buddha-nature is just manifesting itself in front of us. This means that the time that is here and now is the only time there is, and the buddha-nature that is here and now is there only buddha-nature there is.

And the retreat that we're having here and now is the only retreat there is here and now. He keeps saying that because... we say "yeah I get it, I get it, then

we're off again. So he keeps pulling us back again and again. This is what we do in Zazen, we pull ourselves back, again and again, a thousand times, a hundred thousand times, we pull ourselves back. It doesn't mean it's wrong or bad to fly off, human beings fly off, but this is the basis of our existence, it's here (Mike knocks on the table), this is the basis of our existence. And we undervalue it in the modern world, which is so strongly founded on intellectual excellence, and invention and culture. All these things are flowers produced by our consciousness, by our minds, by our power to think, we've created all of these flowers. So we tend to forget the vase with the water in, and he keeps saying – the flowers are in a vase, don't forget the water! We need to keep saying it. And the best thing for me about talking about it again and again, is that I'm reminding myself, again and again. What we're doing is something very simple. So in a way, we create the flowers, then we say yes, they're flowers. Then we create some more and say "ah yes, they're flowers". We're mapping how we are – "oh, I'm an intellectual dreamer, but I'm sitting", then we float away again and come back. So it's a kind of...activity of studying, then realising that our study is not contained within our study. We come back to it in Zazen, then drift off again, then realising again it's not in here, it's there. Then slowly we can see what the words are doing, what words really are, what meaning really is.

Does that relate to the idea of studying the self?

We're studying ourselves yes, we're studying ourselves; we're studying the way we grasp with words or are puzzled by meaning or lack of meaning and so on.

Kodo Sawaki says that we shouldn't try and take the temperature of our Zazen.

We shouldn't?

It's quite difficult isn't it, because there's...if you take the process view as a very perceptively, of our perceptual physiological state, which is particularly obvious on a sesshin, the way we are experience centred, balanced, engaged, and when you're not on sesshin it's different, despite the fact that you are still practicing Zazen, less Zazen. So our life is unstained, I wonder if you could explain that?

We shouldn't compare, he means we shouldn't compare – this is good Zazen, this is bad Zazen.

This is Zazen as it is.

This is my Zazen, now.

His statement is coming from, is referring to the present moment.

Yes. The person who is sitting now is the only me there is now. This is me, this is my Zazen and it's real. All the other Zazens are imaginary. So when we compare, we always compare something that's imaginary to something that's real. That's crazy, and this is what Master Kodo Sawaki says about comparing. But we still do it, but we can notice what it is we're doing; "my Zazen last week was much better than this", but last week's Zazen is finished and this is the only Zazen I'm doing, now.

It's impossible to have a conversation though without getting lost in concepts though isn't it?

Yes.

It's natural if someone speaks to you to respond naturally.

Yes it is. But there's something unnatural which we think is natural, for instance in England we value intellectual ability. When I was a child I grew up thinking that to be clever was a kind of highest attainment that you could have. So you know, clever people went to college and university and other people became carpenters and plumbers and so on. That for me was an aspect of my upbringing, and it's in our society in the west. We value ideas because cleverness is based on ideas. So when we talk with other people, those ideas hold us in, and we don't like to interrupt someone's conversation for example, or if someone asks us a question we want to focus our answer to exactly reply. All that is a kind of western habit, and it's extreme but we don't notice it, we think it's normal. To be able to break that is very useful, even though you might be discussing quantum physics, someone taps you on the arm and says, "excuse me, your shoes are on fire", some people would say, "just a minute, I'm talking..." We have a habit in the west of locking in like this. If you go to Japan for example, there's a flexibility that we don't have, if we could get that flexibility, our lives would be smoother

How can you replace ability though if you're still engrossed in concepts?

Don't think that the concepts are the most important thing. When we're talking with someone else, we think that what we're doing is the most important thing. We might be just about to do something and someone says something and we are distracted. So a kind of flexibility is good. Can you say anything about that, Yoko?

Yoko: Hmm...no. It's very complicated.

We'll stop there.

Thank you.