

Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin 2005
Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho
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Talk number 2
Sept 2005

We had just finished going through Master Dogen's discussion of having buddha-nature, being buddha-nature, being without buddha-nature and so on.

This next story is about Master Hyakujo.

Master Hyakujo preached to the assembly:

That means the assembly of monks.

"Buddha is the supreme vehicle; it is the highest wisdom. Leading the life of a buddha produces a buddha. Buddhas have buddha-nature, and are guiding teachers. Buddhas can regulate their conduct to avoid obstructions, and their wisdom is unobstructed. They have control over the effect of what they do, and so are free to be happy and wise. Living moment by moment, causes and effects move along with them. Living in the moment, they can throw away their life; dying in the moment, they are not afraid of death. Not trapped by their physical and mental limitations, they can live freely, accepting their limitations or transcending their limitations as they choose. When we have the state like this, unconcerned about status, achievement, or whether we are better or worse than others, then although we are no different to ants running over the surface of the earth, this world that we inhabit becomes unimaginably splendid and pure."

A very nice description, I wish I could be like that. Transcending everything, must be wonderful, I'd like to get that.

This is what Hyakujo says. A buddha's real body here and now is governed by physical and mental limitation, but since we are always in the present, we are also eternal. So we are not trapped but free. When we act in life, living does not imprison us. When we act in death, dying does not frighten us. Do not love life too much and do not fear death too much, for buddha-nature exists in them.

So what Master Hyakujo says and what Master Dogen reiterates is very important – if we throw away rather than build up our abilities then we can find freedom, but true freedom is not a permanent state. And we are always looking for a permanent state, permanent freedom, permanent happiness, whatever. But Buddhism says that our state is just in the moment, so it's just in the moment that we can be free. And it's true, "when we act in life, living does not imprison us". So we're all free in this moment to act. At the same time the body is governed by physical and mental limitations. We shouldn't think that there is something called a buddha who can do magic and transcend the limits of the body. The freedom and transcendence which is talked about in the Shobogenzo and that Buddhism talks about is not that kind, but the freedom and transcendence of the present moment. We can throw our life away in the present moment, and we can find examples of people doing that – they sacrifice themselves in war and in other situations. In a moment we can decide to live or

die, we can actually do it. We're always choosing, and in that sense we're always free. The reason we don't feel free is because we think about freedom in the wrong way. We think that freedom is to have all of the doors open for us to do whatever we want, but freedom exists in a prison cell. The phrase, "do not love life too much and do not fear death too much" is also very important. If we think of the situation in sport, I can always remember a Japanese Olympic Judo champion, I can't remember which Olympics it was, he was called Yamashita. He was a very excellent sportsman and a very excellent person. Someone said to him "you must want to win a lot", and he said that in every competition he enters, he throws away everything. He throws away any thought of winning, and he throws away any thought of losing. So we can extrapolate that to say we can, and we do throw away our life sometimes, and throw away our death. In other words we don't hang on to our possessions or our life. Sometimes we're caught in situations where we think we've got to maintain our position or maintain our pride or something like that. But sometimes we can throw it away. And if we throw everything away then we're free. If we have an idea of throwing away we should throw the idea away first. So not an idea of throwing things away and then doing it, but no idea.

It's a puzzle. Although it's a puzzle, we do it.

People who are offended or disturbed at my saying this are non-Buddhists.

Phew! I wasn't disturbed, were you? No.

Realising that buddha-nature is just what is in front of us now, we are free to make use of everything. This is to be a real buddha at the present moment, which is the supreme vehicle.

This phrase "supreme vehicle" refers to the story in the Lotus story, which is a parable. It talks about three different kinds of vehicle, an ox-cart, a deer-cart and another cart, I can't remember in detail.

And this real buddha exists at the present time and place; the unimaginably splendid and pure world.

Now when we read this "unimaginably splendid and pure world", it makes us think sometimes that this bloke must have been really somewhere else, in a kind of heaven. But the world that he's referring to is not heaven, but this world. This world and this life and this place are the only things that are real. Sometimes we want to change our life, but this life is the only life we have, so we have to get on with it. If we want to change it we have to start from where we are. Master Hyakujo is able to say, and Master Dogen is able to reiterate that the present time and place is unimaginably splendid and pure. The reason they said that is not because they lived in an unimaginably splendid and pure world different from ours, but because they could see that this world is the only world, this place is the only place. So it's unimaginably splendid and pure.

Next story:

Obaku was sitting in Nansen's room. Nansen asked Obaku, "What about the teaching that equally practicing physical balance and mental wisdom will make buddha-nature clear?"

These two were studying Buddhism together, and Nansen is talking about something that they had studied – the balance between physical and mental. So

practicing physical balance and mental wisdom, and if we get those two equally then our buddha-nature will become clear.

Obaku replied, "Independent of everything throughout the twenty-four hours of the day, we have it already." Nansen said, "Is that view your own?"

He was surprised at the clarity of the answer.

Obaku replied, "I dare not say it is."

This is a kind of deferential reply in Chinese, which means "yes, it's mine, but I don't like to say so". He's embarrassed to say so, it's a polite way to affirm it.

Nansen said to him, "Well, you don't need to pay me for the food, but who is going to pay me for all the travelling you have done?" Obaku kept quiet.

Yes I've made a mistake again, Nansen was Obaku's teacher, Obaku was Nansen's student.

His reply is kind of humorous because Obaku had been staying at Master Nansen's temple studying, so eating the food that he had supplied. But it was also customary to travel around to meet different masters. At the time that Buddhism was very vigorous in medieval China, you could pop off to see this master or that master and pick up teaching from all of them. You can do it now if you want.

With the question on equally practicing physical balance and wisdom, Obaku isn't asking about the teaching that there is something called *balance* that is separate from something called *wisdom*, and if we practice both equally buddha-nature will be made clear.

This is a strange sentence. It refers to Nansen's question. I think there's a wrong name in there isn't there? Can anyone see anything strange there. Nansen's asking, alright so I need to check that. It sounds, if we read the original question, as if he's asking about whether there are two separate things that we can make into one. But Buddhism doesn't believe that. Master Dogen is saying that underneath the question, which sounds like it's a discriminating question, getting two separate things and putting them together, but that's not what it's asking.

The state where buddha-nature is clear is the practice of Zazen, which *is* equal practice of balance and wisdom.

So if we say equal practice of balance and wisdom, we think of two things, but when we practice Zazen, there aren't two things.

Nansen's question is the same as asking "Who is it that buddha-nature is made clear to?"

When we sit in Zazen, not concentrating on our thoughts, we can say we have the nature of a buddha. But where is the "me" that has the nature of a buddha? If we look for ourselves in Zazen we always find ourselves, but if we don't look, there isn't anybody there. So Master Dogen says who is it that buddha-nature is made clear to? To say that there isn't anybody there doesn't mean we disappear, I can see you all sitting there... a few empty seats though...

They are making the tea.

Making the tea yes. So to say that there is no "me" when we practice Zazen is not to say that the person disappears. It's to say that we're sitting, or there is somebody sitting in the state which is undivided equal practice of balance and wisdom, but is happening to...who?

We could also express the true situation with the question, "How about the teaching that buddha-nature is made clear to buddha-nature in the balanced state?"

Master Dogen is playing with terms, in order to get us to see that what is being talked about is beyond the terms themselves. And what is beyond the terms themselves is just the state that we were sitting in, in the dojo here.

Obaku says, "*Independent of everything throughout the twenty-four hours of the day...*" The words "*throughout the twenty-four hours of a day*" mean that at every moment throughout a real twenty-four-hour day we are independent of everything. Being independent of everything at every moment through a real twenty-four-hour day is making buddha-nature clear.

When we read "throughout the twenty-four hours of a day" it locks us into a linear way of thinking about time. Master Dogen is reminding us that the twenty-four hours of a day are now, now, now, now, going on for twenty-four hours. And in every now, in the balanced state we are independent, we are not depending on anything. When we sit in Zazen we don't lean on anything on either side. If your hands get tired you might drop them and lean on them, if you do, you lose the balanced state but it helps with the pain. And this is the reason why Master Dogen says in his description of Zazen to put the hands one on top of the other, thumbs touching, rest against the lower abdomen, not to touch the legs. If we touch the legs there is some tension through the arms, so we are not independent, physically we are dependent. So we can say that to be independent through the twenty-four hours of a day is to sit up straight. If we slouch on the sofa watching the television throughout the four hours of an evening, we feel very heavy and sleepy. So we can't see what buddha-nature is after four hours of television on the sofa.

What time should we say has come, what world should we say has appeared, in the real twenty-four hours of a day? And do these twenty-four hours belong to the world that human beings have constructed, or to some other world, or have they arrived just for the time being from the perfect world of our imagination?

He's getting us to think about what we mean by a length of time. We think it's a length of time, we've been here nearly a day in this place. We think of that and we create an image of it. But the only real thing is time here and now. We construct a world of linear time, we imagine a length of time in which we've been somewhere.

Whether we are in this world or in another world of our imagination, at this moment we are independent of everything. We are at this moment living in the twenty-four hours of a day, so there may never be a time when we are not independent of everything! When Nansen asked "*Is that view your own?*" he means "*You are not claiming that is your own view, are you?*" And when Nansen asks "*Is that view your own?*" Obaku can't claim it as his own in front of Nansen, because [when Obaku speaks the

truth] it is not always “his own” view, since Obaku’s viewpoint is expressed in the clear balanced state.

Another curious sentence. When we speak the truth we can say that the words are not our own. I don’t mean speaking some kind of spiritual truth, you can do it if you’re teaching English, you can do it if you’re telling someone how to make a cup of tea. When you say exactly what you wanted to say and what you say exactly describes the circumstances, you lose awareness of speaking. There’s nobody speaking, there are words but nobody speaking. That sounds strange, but if anyone hear has taught, they might agree that this is the experience. It’s not always like that, sometimes you’re worried about what you’re saying, sometimes words come out. Where do they come from? Whose are they? Did you make them up before you spoke them? Can you remember what they are after you’ve said them? This is what he means.

So actually Master Dogen is suggesting that although the conversation between Nansen and Obaku sounds like Nansen asked a question and Obaku gave some kind of simple answer, underneath it both master and disciple knew what Buddhism was about. In their sentences there is some kind of deep understanding of Buddhism.

Obaku replies “I dare not say it is.” In China, this expression is used when someone is asked whether they have a particular ability and they want to say ‘yes.’ So Obaku’s reply doesn’t mean that he is unsure of himself. We shouldn’t take his words literally in this case. Although Obaku’s viewpoint is a viewpoint expressed by Obaku, although it is he who is expressing that viewpoint, he should not *dare to say* that it is. When he expressed his view, his state was natural and unintentional; just like a cow coming up to you and mooing! This is how we express the truth.

The truth that Master Dogen is talking about, we shouldn’t think it’s some kind of special truth that resides in Buddhism, it’s the truth of the world. Truth doesn’t belong to Buddhists or anybody particular. We all see the truth and lose it, we all speak the truth and don’t. And when someone speaks or sees the truth, the situation is as Master Dogen expresses.

We can try to express the same truth as Obaku using different words. Nansen said to him, “Well, you don’t need to pay me for the food, but who is going to pay me for all the travelling you have done?” In other words, he meant that he was not bothered about the cost of the food Obaku had eaten, but he wanted to know who would pay him for the sandals Obaku had worn out in wasted journeys.

So that suggests that Obaku might have gone here and there to visit other masters, but he learned Buddhism from Nansen.

You’ve got that round the wrong way again.

Quite possibly. The problem is that I can’t check my own work, so if you can see that it’s round the wrong way, please say so.

We should study what he meant by these words for a long time. Why wasn’t he bothered about the cost of the food Obaku had eaten? We need to study this sincerely and in detail. Why is he concerned about the cost of the sandals, as if to say, “What a lot of sandals you have worn out in these years of travelling!” Obaku could have replied, “I have never worn

sandals for a journey unless I could get some result that would justify the cost!" Or he might have said, "I have worn out only two or three pairs!" These could have been expressions of the true situation, and might have been what he wanted to reply. But he kept quiet. Keeping quiet is keeping quiet. He didn't keep quiet because Nansen didn't affirm what he said, or because he didn't affirm what Nansen said. Real Buddhist monks don't behave in that way. Remember, keeping quiet expresses something, just as a smile can express something sharp. Obaku's state is buddha-nature expressing satisfaction with daily life.

So all of Master Dogen's commentary is supporting the conversation between Master and disciple in a very deep way. If we can sort out who is the master and who is the disciple we'll be well away.

He uses these phrases "we should study for a long time" and so on. We tend to think there 95 chapters to get the head around, but they are all saying the same thing. So I guess if you stick with one chapter...

Yes, does he mean we should read and think about? Not generally. To study, for Master Dogen has a much wider meaning. So actually we do, we come across a couple of sentences which we don't catch, and they go around us somehow. Then we come back to them somehow. Yes, so that's studying. What it is we're studying, we're not sure.

He doesn't actually give an explanation as to why he's bothered by one thing and not the other, He just leaves it for you to think about.

If you have an explanation, I'd like to hear it. He often does that. We could say for example, Master Nansen was quite happy for Master Obaku to live in his temple. So he was quite happy to feed him because he was studying with him. But he wasn't completely happy with him going off and listening to other people. But he feels that in a friendly way, and humorously. Obaku's reply was rather nice, he replied unintentionally and truthfully, "throughout the twenty-four hours we have it already". Nansen thought "wow, is that you own view?" Obaku said "well, yes, I've been studying with you haven't I?" That's the kind of meaning behind the story, it's quite humorous. We could rephrase it all, Brad Warner might rephrase it completely in his style. We can make a colloquial version of it so we can see it more clearly.

When Master Isan quoted this story,

Master Isan is a later master.

he said this to his disciple Kyozan Eijaku: "Obaku wasn't able to hold his own against Nansen, was he!"

Later masters often interpreted this story to mean that Obaku kind of lost the fight between the two of them.

But Kyozan replied: "I don't agree! Obaku was resourceful enough to trap a tiger!" Master Isan replied: "Your viewpoint is as excellent as this!"

This is a story about a master and disciple commenting on the original story. And in this little story itself we can see the same situation repeated. The tiger is a powerful and dangerous beast that he manages to control, that's the image. So we can go back to the original story, Obaku said something very truthful and

exact and Nansen said "did you make that up?" and Obaku said "well... " the tiger is in front of him so he says "well..." Then Nansen replies and Obaku keeps quiet. We can say he trapped a tiger, he didn't face off against his master but he in some way trapped his master.

Master Isan was asking Kyozan whether Obaku could match up to Nansen in those times. And Kyozan replies that Obaku had the skill to trap a tiger. Not only could he trap the tiger, he could also tame it. Trapping a tiger and taming it requires independence of action. Is clearly realizing buddha-nature opening the eye, or is it losing the eye? Answer now! Right now!

This commentary is about the excellence of Master Obaku's reply. Master Obaku's reply in Master Dogen's opinion was not only trapping a tiger but also taming it. Not only did he come against his teacher but he controlled the situation with his replies. His replies were not designed to show how good he was, and Master Dogen says "buddha-nature opening the eye...or losing the eye". So if Obaku had decided that he wanted to make sure that his master realised how good he was, he might have thought of some clever replies, but he didn't, he let the situation pass. We can call that "losing the eye". In Buddhist terms opening the eye means to have an intuitive ability to see the situation. Losing the eye means throwing that ability away. But since that ability is one we get when we throw things away, we need to throw away the idea of opening the eye or losing the eye.

"The buddha-nature's viewpoint is as excellent as this!"

This is Master Dogen's reference to Master Obaku's excellent reply.

In this way, everything is independent, even every half thing is independent! Hundreds of thousands of things are all independent, and hundreds of thousands of hours are all independent, leading me to say this: The Universe is like a immense interwoven container; all the hours in the day are both dependent and independent in a complex way, and ultimately the whole of the Universe and all the worlds it contains exist before we conceive of them.

Those are Master Dogen's words, he wants to capture the nature of reality. So he's been talking about the dependence and independence of the present moment. And he wants to say that actual reality is extremely complex, and because it's very complex, we try and analyse it and try and conceive of what the Universe is like. But the whole of the Universe exists even before we start to think about it.

I'm going to stop there. I'd like you to ask me questions about the Universe now. Has anyone got anything they'd like to talk about?

What does the sentence "they have control over the effect of what they do" mean?

It means that they can do what they want to do, and not do what they don't want to do. In that sense what we do has an effect, if we do what we want to do and don't do what we don't want to do, we have a kind of control over the effect of our actions. Not that control in the sense that we can decide in our minds, but simply the ability to do what we want to do, and not to do what we don't want to do.

A lot of these descriptions sound as if there must be very wonderful beings around, but if we study Buddhism based on that kind of interpretation we can never understand it. So it's necessary to study Buddhism based on Zazen. In Zazen is contained the subject that Buddhism is talking about. All these words are talking about the state in Zazen, but it's difficult for us to understand how that can be. We interpret our state in Zazen based on lots of habits, points of view, feelings about ourselves and others, and so on.

If you notice any sentences which you think you have a better version of, please let me know. I think that to constantly improve our way of explaining the Shobogenzo is rather nice.

When Obaku says , "I have never worn sandals for a journey unless I could get some result that would justify the cost!" It says he could have said that, but neither answer would have added to the interchange or expressed the real situation, there would have been just answers. So he couldn't really have replied with those answers. It seems like a strange... Is he saying that Obaku could have said anything, but he chose to say nothing?

Yes, that's right. Obaku could have said all sorts of things, he could have confronted his teacher. But he didn't he kept quiet. Master Dogen is pointing to the fact that he kept quiet rather than confronting or trying to win in this situation.

And by not trying to win, he closed the trap shut.

His ability to keep quiet was his ability to tame the tiger.

In a sense they are not wasted journeys because he's learned that from this.

Could be, yes. Sometimes we have to do things to realise we didn't have to do them, but we have to do them to realise that. If only we could go through life in a very efficient way only doing the things we have to do, not doing all those things that we didn't need to do, wouldn't that be a wonderful life? But instead we go through life in a different way, wandering around in our straw sandals.

I'm still puzzled by the emphasis on independence. I'm surprised that he should stress this.

When he talks about independence it's in relation to twenty-four hours. So in a sense he means it in that every moment is independent. We think in terms of time-series, or process. This often causes us to worry, because we're on a kind of track. But he says that every moment is independent of every other moment. But at the same time he admits in his last paragraph that the world is very complicated, so there are all kinds of dependencies and independencies. Although we may be independent in this moment, although when we sit in Zazen we don't lean on anything, there are dependencies, we are dependent on each other. I'm dependent on you, if you were not here I couldn't say anything. So both are true. But he starts off by talking about the independence of the moment really. I think the fact that Japanese and Chinese are perhaps more poetic and less logically clear languages has an effect that when we see the translation we want everything cleared up. But Master Dogen didn't mean to clear everything up, he just spoke, gave a talk. If you listen to a recording of what I'm saying now, a lot of it's quite confused if you listen to it. If I give the recording to someone to listen to they will ask "what exactly did you mean there? What you said there and what you said there ten minutes ago was different". We want to get it right, sorted out. But I don't think Master Dogen had that feeling, he just spoke, gave his talk and

that was it. And in the language that he used it was permissible to be more...it was acceptable to give words more leeway. Does that make sense? That's the difference between Japanese and English for example. I find talking in Japanese much easier because you don't have to be so exact. But talking in English, people say "what do you mean?, you didn't say that last week". "Three months ago, I have it here, you said..." We have to be consistent through time and space, which is very peculiar really. In Japanese, if you have a day off work because you're out with a friend or something, or if you have a day off work because you're ill, all you need to say when you go into work is... you don't say anything "er..well, yesterday...hmm". And everybody is happy, really. I've done it. There's no requirement to be exact, or not the same requirement to be exact.

Is that reflected in the legal system, the most exact language is law isn't it?

I don't know. What do you think John, do you think Japanese is less exact as a language?

I guess in certain areas yes. Very often there is no subject in a sentence, so it depends on the context much more. Reading is not so clear.

Reading is not so clear.

Because you may not necessarily be furnished with the context.

If you were reading some old laws from the Meiji period, legal documents, would you expect them to be a little bit vaguer than English legal documents?

As far as I'm familiar with old Japanese laws, they do tend to be vague in the sense that they stick to general principles. That maybe the case with older laws in the West as well. But in answer to your question, I think Japanese can be very exact when it needs to be, and it can be very vague, it gives the user a lot of leeway.

In leases in English law there is no punctuation, to avoid ambiguity.

In Japanese, in technical documents can you imagine if there's no prepositions, no singulars and no plurals, can you imagine how you describe how to programme your washing machine? But there are ways, as John said, to be exact.

It's not surprising that the Shobogenzo was written in poetic language, because it's trying to capture something which can't be defined.

Yes and in a way it is very precise. But we want not only precision but consistency too. One of the great problems with the Shobogenzo is that Master Dogen contradicts himself. We want to sort it all out. It's easy for us, we want it all, we want to sort it all out from these pieces of paper.

Thank you very much.