

Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin 2006
Talk on Master Dogen's Ikka-no-myōju
By Eido Mike Luetchford
Talk number 1

First of all, I wanted to say something about what's important in Buddhism, because it's sometimes quite puzzling. We study what sometimes sounds like very abstract scriptures, written a long time ago, so long ago we can't really imagine; and then we practice Zazen; and then we do various activities at retreats, sesshin. And we're normally used to giving our importance to something – for instance, 'I went somewhere and the most important thing was this, and the other things weren't so important'. But the rather strange thing about Buddhist practice is that the important things are the very small, simple things and the large things are not so important. So if we don't understand a word of what I said at the end of this talk, it's alright, go and have a cup of tea. But after you've had a cup of tea, wash your mug up. And this is a kind of contradiction, really. But the fact is that all the sometimes rather abstract, difficult-to-understand, Buddhist scriptures are all saying that.

And those of you who have read the koan stories in our koan book, *Shinji Shobogenzo*, will realize that a lot of these stories are telling buddhist students who say, 'Tell me what the most important thing is in Buddhism,' expecting some kind of answer like, 'To find your own true Buddha-nature and spread it through the Universe,' or something, that the answer is something like, 'Get up and do the washing-up.' And it's not a joke – well, it is a joke, but it's very serious! Because just leading our life simply and practically is the aim of Buddhism. So then it creates a puzzle, really, because what we read sounds like it's talking about something completely different. If it sounds like it's talking about something completely different, and we make our effort to understand it and it's still talking about something completely different, my advice is throw it away, it's not Buddhism. Often we read something and it sounds completely different, but when we study it and then think about - 'Well, this is written by somebody in a different culture in a different time, so let me try and grasp what they must have been trying to say in normal terms' - then we can sometimes find the meaning. And some of the stories in these koans sound very strange when you first read them, but if you read them a few times and imagine these two medieval Chinese people out in a rice field talking to each other, then it can make sense.

One good example is a story in here, I'm not sure which number it is. In medieval temples they would hang lanterns up around the temple perimeter at night, because they didn't have any streetlamps, and to put the lanterns up they'd have a long pole. And to hang the lantern on the temple gate they would hang the lantern on top of a pole and put the lantern up and hook it on the gate. So if we understand that it's quite simple. But there's one story in there which says, if you translate it from Chinese, something like: 'The master said, "The lantern from the temple gate comes to the top of my pole."' 'Oh, must be profound! I don't understand it, but it must be profound! "The lantern from the temple gate comes to the top of my pole"! But if you think about it, if you're going to get the lantern down, and you've got a pole, if you're walking along in the pitch black and there's something bright in front of you, it comes towards you, you don't go towards it. So the lantern comes towards him at the top of his pole, and then he hooks it. So it's quite a normal thing. But if you read what it says in the book, you can then say: 'Can you understand this? The lantern is coming to the top of your pole? I want you to meditate on this and,' you know, 'find the profound depth of the top of the pole!', and all this kind of stuff, which some people seem to do! They do.

And it's not about that. So if we can't find a realistic meaning in what we read about Buddhism, my advice is close the book and give it away. You can read it if you want to, but you won't learn anything about Buddhism from it.

Bringing that into what we're doing here, the simple things we're doing are the most important. So we try to do as best we can, bumping along with each other. We try to do the best we can to make sure that the little things run smoothly, and then the retreat will go smoothly. And if there's a big calamity, we just have to accept it and let it go, as lightly as we can.

Right, next subject. The chapter that I want to talk about this weekend is chapter four in the first volume of the *Shobogenzo*, the green book. Master Dogen wrote this chapter in 1238, when he was 38 years old. It's not a long chapter, and it's based on a quotation by one of Master Dogen's ancestors, Master Gensa Shibi, who said that the whole Universe is one bright pearl. And the whole chapter is explaining what that means. *Ikka-no-myōju* means 'one piece of bright pearl': *Ikka* is 'one piece' in Japanese; *no* is a possessive adjective; and *myōju*, *myō* is 'bright' and *ju* is pearl. So, 'One Bright Pearl'.

As usual, Master Dogen starts with a kind of overview of his theme. And in this particular chapter his theme is the saying of Master Gensa, so he starts off talking about Master Gensa.

When Great Master Shuitsu, whose monk's name was Shibi and whose family name was Sha, was in this world, he lived in the great kingdom of Sung in Fuchou Province in the temple on Mount Gensa [and was thus known as Gensa Shibi].

Monks at that time had several names – they might have a name which is a kind of title, and they would also have their normal surname, family name, and then they would have their monk's name, and so on. So Master Shibi - his monk's name was Shibi - lived on Mount Gensa, so he's known as Gensa Shibi. The phrase "was in this world" - in the original *Shobogenzo* it says, 'in this great saha-world,' and *saha* is a Sanskrit term which is part of the phrase *saha-loka-dhatu*. And *saha-loka-dhatu* means 'the realm of human beings'. There were three realms – the realm of beings up there, the realm of beings down there, and we're hovering in the middle. So, between up and down, the realm of human beings – so, "this world".

Before he became a monk he loved fishing, and would drift in his boat down the river Nandaiko along with the other fishermen.

He was actually a fisherman, and he loved it. He was a fisherman because he loved fishing, and he would float down the river, fishing along with the other fishermen.

But it seems that he didn't fish with any great intention of catching the big one, and around 860 suddenly felt the urge to leave secular society.

The phrase "great intention of catching the big one," in the original Japanese says, 'the fish with the golden scales,' so it suggests that he wasn't trying to get something special. He wasn't trying to catch the fish with the golden scales, which was a legendary fish that lived in the river and if you got it, you know, you'd got everything. So he wasn't trying to get anything. He was contented with his life as a fisherman and had no great intention to be the best fisherman, or get the biggest fish, or anything. And then, "suddenly he felt the urge to leave

secular society." In those days, in order to study Buddhism, you really had to leave secular society, because if you stayed in secular society there was no time to practice and study. We're very fortunate, in modern times, because we can do both. Sometimes we wish we didn't have to do both and think, 'Oh, if I could just give up my job and be a kind of monk, that'd be great!' I wonder if it would be like that. 'Oh, I could go and live in a little hut up in the mountains and get rid of all these hassles!' But, if we actually did it, we might find that living alone in a little hut on the mountain wasn't quite as wonderful as we can imagine. But we can certainly imagine it. Up on a Scottish island.

Cold!

(To Mike) *You'd never last!*

(Laughs) But anyway, "the urge to leave secular society" means, in those days, that Master Gensa wanted to study Buddhism and, therefore, he had to leave where he was. He couldn't go to a retreat one weekend, tie his boat up and go off to a retreat. He would have to go off and live in a temple and practice. So that's what he did.

He abandoned his boat, and went to live in a temple as a monk. He was just thirty years old. But he had already realised how fragile the foundations of secular life are, and how noble the way of the Buddha is.

Our lives are very fragile. We don't often realise that, and we think we're quite tough. But even when we're tough we have another side along with the toughness. And we can disturb our own lives, or have our lives disturbed, quite easily. So life is fragile, it's true. And secular life is particularly fragile, as anybody who's been made redundant suddenly will know. We're members of a society and we have to follow the rules of society, and the rules don't bend so much for us, so we just have to go along with the way that life takes us. But those foundations are quite fragile themselves. Even major companies, Enron, can collapse in a moment. So it really is true. "And how noble the way of the Buddha is." We can guess that Master Gensa had seen monks and maybe visited temples and felt something pure and noble about leading that life, so that's what he wanted to do.

Finally he climbed the path up to the temple on Mount Seppo and became a disciple of Master Seppo Gison, under whom he practiced hard day and night.

Master Seppo Gison lived on Mount Seppo. If you see Chinese paintings, sometimes you see mountains that seem to go like that, and there's a little temple on the side and a couple of trees hanging over a waterfall, and it looks very poetically exaggerated. But lots of China, and parts of Japan, do have these very steep-sided little mountains and there are temples on them. And to get to the temples you have to climb up little stone steps. So the pictures that you see are not far from what it looks like. So he climbed up the path to the temple. And "practiced hard day and night" suggests he was practicing Zazen. It doesn't mean he sat in Zazen day and night without sleeping. We read stories about people who practice Zazen day and night without sleeping – it doesn't mean that they practice Zazen day and night without ever going to bed. It's impossible. It means that he put a lot of effort into it. So in the day he put a lot of effort into practice and studying, and in the night he put a lot of effort into sleeping. And we should put all our effort into sleeping, to sleep properly. There's lots of young people in Bristol, even in the middle of the night they put all their effort into doing other things. And I can't understand it! Even two or three o'clock in the morning they're

putting all their effort into getting excited. So Buddhism says, when it's night the best thing to do is to put our effort into sleeping.

That's because they're putting all their effort into being young!

Ah yes. That's why I can't understand it!

(Laughter)

They've got lots of energy!

It's probably Red Bull.

(Laughter)

One day, with the idea of travelling around to visit the many masters in other districts, he packed his bag and went to leave the temple.

In those days, in medieval China, there were lots of Buddhist temples and, unlike what's happening in the UK at the moment, the temples were practicing Buddhism. Our temples in the UK are turning into apartments and restaurants and sports halls and so on. But if you imagine, for instance, all the churches in Bristol were little Buddhist temples, and they all had a person in them who was teaching Buddhism, then you might want to go round and see what all the other people were saying. So it was quite natural for young people who wanted to learn Buddhism to travel round from temple to temple and listen to the masters teaching. It wasn't something you had to do, but some people wanted to do that. So, "he packed his bag and went to leave the temple." It's difficult to guess exactly, but he may have had something which he wasn't satisfied with where he was, we can't tell. Anyway:

A short while after leaving for his trip, he stubbed his toe on a stone. His toe started to bleed. He was in great pain. Right then and there he took a serious look at himself, saying, "I learned that this physical body isn't real, but in that case, where is all this pain coming from?" Then he turned around and went back to the temple.

So he's off on his trip, he hits his toe on a stone – I suppose he must have been wearing sandals – and that's very painful. And more than just that, the pain hit him very hard and he suddenly realised something. In Buddhism, there's a teaching that the physical world is not real and the mental world is not real. So he heard that this physical body isn't real and he'd been thinking, as a young man, about it and thought it meant that our real bodies are not real. This teaching is actually still around today because some people say that 'everything is empty,' and 'there is no self,' for example. So, 'if there is no self, why is my toe hurting?' could be another way of putting it. So, he'd interpreted the teaching he'd heard in a particular kind of way and imagined that his body wasn't real; but, with his toe bleeding, and in great pain, he suddenly realised something - 'This is real!' And that realisation made him go back to the temple. So we can guess that he was leaving the temple in search of something, maybe he didn't know what; but, hitting his toe on the stone, he may have found something, so he turned back.

On seeing him return, Master Seppo

... who was the master of the temple ...

said to him, "Who is this Shibi who is practicing so hard?"

Shibi is Gensa Shibi's first name. In the Chinese, it's written in quite a kind of nickname way. Actually, the master says, 'Bi of the dhuta'. And 'Bi' is a little bit of 'Shibi', and *dhuta* means 'hard practice'. So, it's very difficult to translate it to make sense, but we can say Master Seppo said to him something very familiar. I could say to Mike Tait, 'Taity! What ya doin' then, Taity?' That kind of thing. And he was a very hard practitioner, he'd been putting all his energy into trying to understand and practice Buddhism. So his master said to him, 'Hey, you hard little man. What are you doing?' And:

Gensa replied, "I have realised that it is not others who deceive me."

That's a very simple little phrase, but it's very profound. "I have realised that it is not others who deceive me."

Seppo loved these words, and said, "We all have this feeling inside, but which of us can express it like that?"

So Master Gensa may have been feeling inside, 'Oh, I can't get what I want here. I'm not satisfied.' If we feel like that about the place we are, we have some kind of unconscious criticism of the place we're at. So he may have had something inside thinking, 'This bloke here, Master Seppo, I don't think he's got what I'm looking for. There's something I can't get here, so I'm going to set off on a trip.' But, in hitting his toe on a stone, he realised something about the realistic nature of Buddhist teaching, not theoretical or spiritual. So then he came back to the temple and said to the master, 'It's not other people who are deceiving me.' And we can interpret that in lots of different ways; but we can say maybe he realised that Master Seppo was trying to teach him something true and it was he himself who was deluding himself, or deceiving himself, or whatever, confusing himself. So, Master Seppo realised what the young Gensa was saying and he was very happy to hear those words, and he was also very happy to hear Master Gensa's ability to say something very profoundly simple and honest. So he said, 'We all have this feeling inside, but it's very difficult for us to say it.'

He went on, "But what happened to your trip?"

"I thought you were going off?"

Gensa replied, "Bodhidharma didn't plan to come to China, just as our second ancestor didn't plan to go to India."

"Bodhidharma didn't come to China, just as our second ancestor didn't plan to go to India." I wonder what he could mean by that?' Bodhidharma was the Indian ancestor, twenty-eighth from Gautama Buddha, who came from India to China. And Taiso Eka was the second ancestor after Bodhidharma. So, they didn't plan to do what they did. What Gensa is suggesting is that, 'I don't really know why I turned back. I didn't have a plan to turn back, I didn't sit down and think, "Now I'm going to turn back." Just he turned back. And a lot of our actions are like that in our life. We can say they're unintentional, or we don't do them with a strong intention. The phrase "Bodhidharma didn't plan to come to China" is a very famous phrase in Chinese Buddhism. It was used by masters whenever they wanted to say: 'Well, life takes its own course, we're not always thinking our way through our lives. We're living our way through our lives. And Bodhidharma didn't plan, "Next year I'm going to go to China and spread Buddhism. Just he wandered maybe from island to island and ended up in China.'" And so Gensa

uses that phrase to suggest that he set off on his journey, and something happened, and now here he is back. So we can say his decision to turn back was intuitive - he just did it.

Does it mean his decision to go in the first place was also the same, because it's like going and coming back isn't it?

Yes, but we can imagine that he went off to find something, and stubbing his toe he found something. So he had some kind of intellectual intention in going, and the reality his toe faced him with broke through his intellectual intention, and so he just turned around and came back, naturally. We often have quite strong intellectual intention, like, for instance, you might see something in a shop window and think, 'Oh yeah, I want to get that.' And you can go home and you can think about it and if it's expensive you can work out how you can convince your partner that you really should have it. And then three weeks later you go into the shop, and then when you see it it's nothing like you thought, so you come out again.

Yoko: I suppose Shibi might have thought he had enough knowledge about Buddhism, so he wanted to go somewhere else to learn more; but, after having the painful incident, he realised he didn't know about Buddhism, so that's why he wanted to go back to his previous master.

There we are.

Yoko: My interpretation! (Laughs)

It's perfect. (Laughs) Thank you.

Yoko: That incident shocked him, because he didn't realise reality. One day he realised that he learned by his head, or brain, so, 'Reality is different from what I thought.' Does that make sense?

Yes, perfect. I needn't have said all that! You just said that one sentence!

When he had been a fisherman, Master Gensa had not even dreamt of reading sutras and other Buddhist texts. But the most important thing is our will to pursue the truth, and we can see this in Master Gensa's sincere attitude.

Master Gensa hadn't been reading books on Buddhism and then decided he wanted to be a buddhist. Just he was a fisherman. But he had a will to find out what the truth was, is. So a simple approach.

Master Seppo himself thought that Gensa was a particularly outstanding disciple, and praised him as the most excellent student in his order.

Master Seppo could recognise in Gensa a very simple and sincere young man who wasn't trying to pursue some kind of idealistic thing, but who wanted to find out what the truth of Buddhism was.

Gensa's only robe was made of vegetable fibre, and he patched it again and again. And next to his skin he wore garments made of paper or coarse vegetable fibre.

I don't think this means that he was kind of ascetic, you know, dressed in rags in mid-winter in order to achieve some spiritual state. Just that he was a modest person. And these suggest very simple, country clothes in medieval China. He didn't wear a bright orange, golden robe or something like that, just a very simple one. And when it tore he patched it up.

He never visited any other masters, staying only with Master Seppo.

This is talking about Master Gensa's whole life, not necessarily just the part before he stubbed his toe, but his whole life. So he didn't leave the temple, he didn't study with other masters in the end.

But he did gain the power to make the truth of his master's teaching his own.

We can say that if we study Buddhism with a teacher, we find out whether what the teacher is teaching is true and we make it our own. In that sense, we don't learn something which we didn't know and then once we've learned it and got it we take it away with us. We realise something that's true as the basis of everybody's life. We realise something in ourselves. So we make Buddhism our own. Or we realise what the truth of Buddhism is independently.

On finally realising what the truth is, he taught this truth to others with the words that the whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl.

And this phrase of his is the phrase that Master Dogen goes on to comment about. In the original, the words "the whole Universe" are 'the ten directions'. In medieval China they didn't have such a clear, common concept of 'the Universe'. So, 'the ten directions' - which I suppose were north, east, south, west, and then others in between them, and up and down, and others in between those, sideways, backwards, forwards...

I think it says, in a footnote in the green book, it's the eight points of the compass and then up and down.

Oh, right. That's what it is then, ten. But it suggests everything, not just physical space but everything. It's a phrase that they used to suggest everything. If we say 'Universe' we usually think of a physical world extending – here's the Earth, and then there's space, and then we know the planets are out here, and so on, the Milky Way, and so on. We have a kind of image. And the use of "the whole Universe" in this chapter is not limited to that concept we have of the Universe. So "the Universe" is not only the physical universe, but the Universe of all things and phenomena, including everything, and nothing. Not just the physical universe, but all our mental universe, too. So, Master Gensa said to others, in order to tell them something about Buddhism, "the whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl." And we can get something, intuitively, about what he meant from that. It sounds like he meant everything was perfect, or round and sparkling, or bright and round, or so on. But Master Dogen then goes on to tell a story in which Master Gensa is teaching one of his students. And then after that he goes on to comment about what "the whole Universe" means and what "one bright pearl" means and, therefore, to try and give us a picture of the truth of Buddhism. So the next few lines are the story between Master Gensa and his students.

One day a monk asked Master Gensa, *"I have heard that you say that the whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl. How should we, your students, understand this?"*

The monk can't understand the meaning of the phrase "the whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl." So he asks Master Gensa, 'What does it mean? How should we understand it? What do you mean by it?'

Master Gensa replied, *"The whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl. How could it be useful to understand these words intellectually?"*

He refused to explain it. He said, 'It's not useful to try and understand it with your brain.' Then:

Several days later, Master Gensa put the same question back to the monk,

... who must have been studying in his temple, ...

"The whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl. How do you understand this?"

He's testing out the monk.

The monk replied, *"The whole Universe which extends in all directions is one bright pearl. How could it be useful to understand these words intellectually?"*

The Master said, *"Now I see that you have only been trying to understand my words intellectually, as if struggling with a demon in a cave on a black mountain."*

The master wanted to see what his student monk would reply, but the student monk just replied with exactly the same words that the master used. In other words, he was just imitating his master. So when Master Gensa realised that, he told the monk that he was "struggling with a demon in a cave on a black mountain," which suggests some kind of an intellectual wrestling going on inside our brain. We all struggle with demons in caves on black mountains. Or, as in one koan story, we all have two oxen fighting inside of us. There's one story about an old monk who lived on a mountain, and he said that there were two oxen made of mud fighting inside of him, but they wandered into the sea and they both dissolved. So that suggests the intellectual conflict inside our brains disappearing. And "struggling with a demon in a cave on a black mountain" suggests that intellectual activity. The intellect always has two sides, so there's always two opposing views which we switch between. Master Dogen now goes on to comment on that answer, but I won't go on to that because we've only got five minutes left. Are there any questions about the story so far?

This may be what you've just said about the monk repeating exactly the words of the master, but isn't it an ironic answer - 'You've told me not to think about it; you're now testing me by asking me the question; I'm not thinking about it.'

Just run through that again.

The monk asks the question, 'What do you mean by this?' The master says, 'It's not useful to try and give an intellectual explanation of it.' A couple of days later, the master comes back and says, 'Now you give me an intellectual explanation of it.' And the monk says...

No, he didn't. The master came back and said, 'How do you understand it?' And that's a little bit different.

OK. So he's not implying necessarily that it's got to be intellectual at all?

'What do you think about this?' But he didn't necessarily mean, 'Tell me your thoughts about it.' Just, 'Give me something back.' It's rather difficult sometimes to translate the nuances in the language. But when Master Gensa went to the monk several days later and said, 'How do you understand this?', he didn't mean, 'Give me an intellectual explanation of it.' He just meant, 'This is the phrase that I teach, give me something back now, today, after the day before yesterday when we had our exchange. Give me something back.' 'Tell me what you make of it,' if you like.

So, in that context, you feel that the monk replying, "How could it be useful to understand these words intellectually?" is an intellectual answer?

Master Gensa seems to have thought so, because it was exactly the same words.

So he's trying to be clever, effectively, play with words, throw the same concept back at him? That in itself is an intellectual kind of notion?

I don't think 'being clever'. Just the monk said, 'I see, so it's not necessary to think about it. Ah, OK, I must remember that. It's not necessary to think about it.' And so he may have been going on for a couple of days thinking, 'The Universe is a bright pearl; I don't need to understand that, OK. The Universe is a bright pearl; I don't need to understand that.' And then when Master Gensa asked him, he said, 'Well, the Universe is a bright pearl, I don't need to understand that. That's what you told me.' But, in saying that, he didn't express anything real in his own understanding.

In his own understanding, OK.

He could have said to Master Gensa, 'Well, it's not much of a pearl today! Look, it's peeing down with rain.' Or he could have said, 'I don't feel like answering, I feel quite happy today.' Or he could have said anything which is more real. But the monk said, 'Eh... "The Universe is a bright pearl; I don't need to understand it intellectually." Is that right? Is that what you told me?'

So the monk didn't have an understanding, he just repeated back what his master had told him?

He didn't realise what that phrase meant. He understood what the master had said to him as an explanation, and he'd held on to it and then given it back. But he didn't realise what that phrase meant, what it was actually saying.

So basically he got the answer wrong, didn't he?

Eh... We have to wait to later in the chapter to see whether he got the answer wrong! (Laughs) It's an interesting question that, did he get it wrong?

It's difficult to understand these intellectual conversations, so the master has repeated the same words. But the monk still did not understand, so he was just replying the same words, the same words. There is no room to understand in this way.

Yes. We have a difficulty in English because 'understand' usually means intellectual understanding. So maybe the word 'realise' might be better because it suggests something more profound. So, 'the monk understood the answer, but he didn't realise what it meant', may be better. It's quite difficult, these translations.

Yes, I think so. Realise by your own experience.

Yes. That's right. Which is the only way we can realise anything. We can't realise it from somebody else telling us. We can only realise it when it hits us on the toe and makes our toe bleed.

Couldn't it be that the master discerned something in the way that the monk answered? Because there is a tradition, isn't there, of just saying the same thing back, which sometimes seems quite acceptable in koan stories that I've read, sometimes it isn't, based on nothing other than kind of instinctive feeling between the two of them, where the master realised that what's just been said isn't sincere. It's not in the words, it's in the way it was said, for example.

Well, everything's in the way that it's said. And the difficulty with reading koan stories is that they were real conversations. So we have to kind of imagine these two real people talking to each other. But the tradition of saying the same thing back I think is not part of real Buddhism. The koan tradition developed in very different directions, and in one direction it became even stylised. So they had stylised koans where the master would say, 'A, B, C, D, E,' and the student had to say back, 'D, E, F.' And if he said, 'D, E, F, G,' the master would say, 'Go away. Come back tomorrow.' That tradition is not the same tradition that we study. We're not interested in that kind of stiff game-play. But what did Master Gensa mean when he said "the whole Universe is one bright pearl"? What's he talking about? That's what the monk wants to know. So his question is sincere, but he doesn't understand.

But the master's objection, I'm asking, is it just that he got the same reply back? That wouldn't necessarily make the answer questionable, wrong, or debatable, or whatever.

Well, in your mind you can separate into two things – getting the same reply back, and seeing a real person in front of you. That's in your mind. There's no such situation in reality, where we get a reply and we don't see somebody in front of us. Or we see somebody in front of us and we don't get a reply. It's the same thing! In reality, a reply is given in a real situation by a real human being. Thinking about the past we can say, 'Could it be just that, or could it be just that?' It's impossible. There was a real person, Master Gensa heard his reply and saw his attitude, all together.

I think that's all I've been trying to clarify.

Right, good. Shall we stop there? Thank you very much.

(End of talk)