

Dogen Sangha Summer Sesshin 2007
Talks on Master Dogen's Uji
By Eido Mike Luetchford
Talk number 1

Unfortunately there was a problem with the audio recorder for this series of talks, and comments by other people were not recorded clearly enough to transcribe properly. Apologies for that.

At this retreat, I'd like to talk about the Buddhist theory of time. There's a bit of a background to that, which I'd like to tell you about.

As some of you know, two years ago, I think it was August 2005, I went to a conference in Oxford on 'Consciousness Studies'. There were all kinds of people from different disciplines there – mathematicians, physicists, psychologists, boat builders, buddhists, all kinds of people. And they were all contributing their papers, or some of them contributed papers, about the nature of consciousness, which is a very big subject at the moment, particularly in artificial intelligence studies - because, as technology advances, in order to make intelligent systems they want to find out what intelligence is, and nobody's quite sure what it is. So if they want to make machines that model the human capacity for thinking, they need to find out what thinking is. And thinking is related to consciousness, so they're trying to find out what consciousness is.

Overall, I was very impressed and happy to go there. I didn't contribute anything, other than by listening, and I held a zazen session in the mornings. But I met a lot of interesting people there, and one was a German woman called Susannah Vrobel. She's one of these multi-discipline people - I think she trained as an artist but ended up as a theoretical physicist. And she gave a paper on 'The Nature of Now', and the title of the paper struck me when I was looking through the programme. " 'The Nature of Now'! Goodness! Are these people into that?" So I went along, and her paper was very theoretical and very complicated, and quite mathematical; but the fact that she was trying to investigate the nature of now made me very happy, because no matter how we try and investigate something, the fact that we're investigating it is the most important thing. So, although she is investigating the nature of now from a mathematical, which is an abstract, theoretical, basis, one never knows where one ends up. We talked a bit and she sent me some of her papers when I got back to Bristol, and I became a bit more interested because her ideas are based on fractals. I don't know if anybody knows what fractal geometry is, but a simple explanation is if you take the leaf of a fern and you look closely at it, each separate branch on the fern is the same shape as the whole leaf. And if you take one branch, on that branch there are separate little stems, and each stem is the shape of the whole branch. And if you take a little stem and look at the little leaf on the stem, each leaf is the same shape as the stem, as the branch, as the leaf, as the whole thing. So it's a kind of pattern where the same fundamental pattern is embedded inside, inside, inside. And lots of people have found this very interesting, and there's a whole branch of mathematics concerned with it.

So, Susannah Vrobel was interested in how "the now" can contain depth. We always think of now as being part of the line of time - now will soon become the next now, and so you've got a series of moments that make up a line of time. And we always think that now is just a point on that line. So to meet somebody who thought that now, the present moment, had some kind of depth in it, even from the theoretical perspective, is very interesting to me. And we corresponded a bit. I can't follow everything she says or writes, but it's very interesting to see somebody in that field. And when she wrote to me, I sent her a copy of a chapter

in Master Dogen's *Shobogenzo* called 'Uji', 'Existence-Time', which I think is chapter 11. *Uji*: existence-time. In that short chapter, Master Dogen explains his view about existence-time. And, actually, from the theoretical point of view, what Susannah Vrobel was looking at has some kind of similarity to Master Dogen's view, from a theoretical basis. So she was very interested, and she said, 'Can I send it to some friends of mine?' So she sent the chapter 'Uji' – not the chapter from the book but my modern interpretation – she sent it to a few other people, and then she asked me if I'd write a paper on it for a book that she's publishing, which is going to be a collection of all different papers from all different people that she's working with, about the now. So I wrote this paper, with great difficulty, and sent it off to her, and it's going to go in the book. So having done all that work to write the paper, I thought it'd be a nice thing to talk about it too. So that's what I'm going to do.

Now, first of all, let's start off with a bit of history. I don't know if anybody's seen this book, *Buddhist Logic*, by a buddhist scholar called Stcherbatsky who lived in the 1920's–30's in St Petersburg. In St Petersburg, they had a buddhist university, which was very famous, and he was one of the academics there. He produced two volumes about buddhist philosophy, going right back to the Sanskrit buddhist philosophers, and it's an excellent book. It's very heavy going, in two volumes. This is volume one, and if we look through the chapters we get titles like, 'Part One: Reality and Knowledge'; 'Part Two: The Sensible World'; 'Part Three: The Constructed World'; 'Part Four: Negation'; 'Part Five: Reality of the External World'. And then if we look at some of the sub-headings, for instance, Part Two: The Sensible World, 'Chapter One: The Theory of Instantaneous Being'; 'Chapter Two: Causation'; 'Chapter Three: Sense Perception'; 'Chapter Four: Ultimate Reality'. Those of us who have studied Master Dogen's writings can feel quite familiar with some of those headings – they're what we find Master Dogen talking about. In particular, 'Chapter One: The Theory of Instantaneous Being' is quite interesting, so I'm going to quote just a little bit, here and there, from what they wrote. The two buddhist philosophers that Stcherbatsky concentrates on, they lived in the sixth and seventh centuries. One was called Dignaga, and the other one was called Dharmakirti. I think Dharmakirti is quite a famous name, as a buddhist philosopher from the sixth century. Neither of these two buddhist philosophers are in the line of transmission of Master Dogen. Master Dogen's line of transmission goes back to Master Nagarjuna in the second century, then back to Gautama Buddha, as all lines do; but Dignaga and Dharmakirti are on different lines. And, actually, on reading their excellent philosophy, you can see that it's very abstract. But as abstract philosophy, you can understand parts of it are quite good.

There's lots and lots of history here, but let me read you just a paragraph from the second part of this chapter:

Such is the leading idea of Buddhism - there is no other ultimate reality than separate, instantaneous bits of existence. Not only external entities, whether it is God or Matter, are denied reality, because they are assumed to be enduring and eternal, but even the simple stability of empirical objects is something constructed by our imagination. Ultimate reality is instantaneous.

That's their basic position. Another part, in a sub-heading called 'Reality is Kinetic'. 'Kinetic' means moving, dynamic, so 'reality is kinetic' suggests that reality is never the same, it's always changing.

The essence of reality is motion. The world is a cinema. Causality – that is, the inter-dependence of the moments following one another – evokes

the illusion of stability or duration. But they are, so to speak, forces or energies flashing into existence without any real, enduring substance in them, but also without any interval, or with an infinitesimally small interval.

So this suggests a picture of reality as frames in a film. Now, now, now, now. As these nows flash past the lens of the projector, what we see is the flow of our life. Now, there's quite a lot wrong with that view if we look at it. We can't really believe that we're living in a cinema, that our life is a projection of images. And, indeed, Master Dogen, while not rejecting that view, goes in a different direction in the end.

Thus it is that ultimate reality for the buddhist is timeless, spaceless and motionless.

That means that everything is frozen in the now.

But it is timeless not in the sense of an eternal being, spaceless not in the sense of a ubiquitous being, motionless not in the sense of an all-embracing motionless whole; but it is timeless, spaceless and motionless in the sense of having no duration, no extension, and no movement. It is a mathematical point-instant.

That, obviously, is a very theoretical view. And anybody who knows the theory of calculus, differentiation and integration, will be able to see some mathematical basis for what they say. Anyway, this is the kind of thing that Dignaga and Dharmakirti wrote about in very great detail, and Stcherbatsky translated from the Sanskrit in this very excellent book.

But, in the sixth and seventh centuries when they were heavily into this theoretical philosophy – before then, in the second century, Nagarjuna, who is an ancestor in Master Dogen's lineage, had already written about existence-time, about the present moment. This is what he writes in one of the chapters of his work *Mulamadhayamakakarika* (MMK), which I translated into English in 2002, so this is my translation. This is in a chapter in the work which is entitled 'An Examination of Time'. And this is my interpretation of what he said in Sanskrit:

*Surely if the present and the future exist relative to the past,
They will both be contained in time past.
But if the present and the future are not both contained in the past,
How can they be related to it?
Again, it is impossible to establish the existence of either the present
or the future without their being related to the past.*

Obviously, we can't say something is in the future unless we relate it to the present, so the present is always related to our past.

*Thus present and future time do not exist as such.
Using the same process, it can be clarified whether present time –
or future time –
Comes before, after, or between the other two, or whether they are
all a unity.*

His way of writing is not completely clear to us. But, what he's discussing here is the relativity between what we think of as past, present and future, and that they're all interdependent: in order to have a future, we have to have a present and a past; in order to have a past we have to have a present and a future; and

so on. So he's saying that they're all dependent on each other, but it's impossible to work out which comes first.

*The nature of time is instantaneous and so it cannot be grasped.
Static time, which can be grasped, does not exist.*

By 'static time' he means the kind of time we envisage. Time now. We can grasp it, we can say 'It's ten to twelve, and soon it'll be five to twelve, and twenty minutes ago we were eating biscuits and drinking coffee.' So that's what he calls 'static time'. We can grasp it, but it does not exist.

*Since [real] time is impossible to grasp, how can we understand it?
If time depends on things, how can time exist when there are no things?
And as there are no things anywhere, how can there be time?*

So that's a rather puzzling couple of lines. But what he's saying is, because we can't grasp the actual nature of time itself, it's very difficult to understand it. What we can understand is not the real nature of time, it's a kind of construction. Our lives are constructed. He says that constructed time depends on things. For instance, we only measure time by events, and events are always connected to things – table, chair, me, you, air, space. So, things are the basis of the constructed time that we understand. But, in reality, the world is not composed of things, it's composed of one whole. So, in the oneness or wholeness where we don't name things, how can there be time? And if we think about those sentences, they sound quite difficult; but if we remember what we were just doing, practicing Zazen: when we practice Zazen, after our minds have settled down and we've stopped thinking, we're not differentiating, we're not thinking of things. And in that state, we don't have any feeling about time, we don't have any concept of time, we're not worrying about time, and time does not exist for us. So this is what he's saying in this verse. It's incomplete, but that's what he says in the MMK.

Then, interestingly, many, many years later, the poet T. S. Eliot, in his poetic work the *Four Quartets* - one of the four Quartets is called 'Burnt Norton', and in 'Burnt Norton' he writes this:

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation ...*

And he goes on for a few more paragraphs, and ends up:

*Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.*

Now, those verses are remarkably similar to Nagarjuna. And it's known that T. S. Eliot had an interest in Buddhism. Whether he'd read Nagarjuna is not known.

(Inaudible comment)

Is it? He must have pinched it then. So, what these Buddhist philosophers and Nagarjuna and T. S. Eliot are talking about is something to do with the fact that although, in our normal lives, we think we know what time is - 'It's about twenty past, it says on my watch.' We all know, don't we? And yet, in our very real experience, we can't find the nature of time. We can have an object which moves on, every time we look at it it's moved on. But the moving-on-ness we invent in our brains and share it with each other. So it's no good me saying to the cat, 'Hey, it's twelve o'clock.' But it is good me saying it to David, because David shares the same concepts as I do, but the cat doesn't. So, time is a human concept. And what they are all saying is, 'Well, besides that human concept, what is there?' And what they're pointing to is, 'Besides the concept of time, and the fact that when we look at the little movement and the little shapes we can interpret it as some kind of abstract flowing - throw all that away and what have we got? The only thing we've got is the present moment, where we are now.' And that's common for all three. Dignaga and Dharmakirti are very theoretical on that, they say it's just this point that hasn't got any duration, that the present hasn't got any duration. That's quite difficult, it doesn't make any sense, or at least I certainly can't make any sense of it - to me, something has duration, there's an extension, there's a width to what we're doing. Although what we're doing is now, I can't see now as a kind of point, an immediate point. Because we're still here, aren't we?

That's the background. Anybody want to raise any comments or questions on that background so far?

The theoretical and intellectual (inaudible).

That's right, and this is the difference. And, incidentally, Susannah Vrobel who's studying time, she practices some kind of meditation. I don't know exactly what she does, but she does meditate every day. And I feel that just the fact that, for instance, she is working on a theory that time has a depth, that statement suggests something different from our normal view of time. In other words, some richness or depth in the present moment.

Now is the extension in which we're existing, the thing that makes it existable to us, as opposed to this pinpoint instant. Even a pinpoint has its extension.

Ah, not theoretically.

Not theoretically? Well, that's the problem isn't it, that you can't think about the pinpoint that exists.

That's right. So, her theory is solving that problem. In other words, if we say we're only existing now, it's a very short time to be or do anything, isn't it? (Laughs) So, how can we just exist now but also feel a richness and depth to everything? I think that a lot of the people who are doing research into consciousness and artificial intelligence will confront these kinds of problems again and again, and they will have to, eventually, look at their own experience to make sense of things. That's my hope. It may be some years down the line, but I felt very much at that conference that these people who were exploring the nature of consciousness - which is very much related to the now, which is very much the centre of Buddhism - because they're looking at something that's reality, eventually, if they keep going, they will have to come round to looking at real reality, not abstract reality. So, twenty years, fifty years, a hundred years, it doesn't really matter. They're studying the right thing.

(Inaudible comment about Susan Blackmore)

Yes. The whole of the book that she is writing, and that she read a little bit of to you, and I've been reading a bit of it, is about that: What is the nature of our actual experience now? And if we think about it, we can tie ourselves up in tremendous knots. If we're very clever, instead of tying ourselves up in knots, we can construct wonderful theories. And some of those wonderful theories have some kind of benefit to human beings, although they are theories. Myself personally, if I try to think about, in detail, what my experience now is, it drives me up the wall. I'd much rather go and have a cup of tea and go out in the garden. But some people have the mental concentration to hold themselves to it, and then they produce some kind of theory.

(Inaudible) ... there's two things simultaneously going on. There's the experience of the interpreter, so my experience ... (inaudible).

Yes, it's true. And what we do is, we could say, on one point of view, what we do when we sit practicing Zazen in the room next door is we experience here and now. We're often drifting off, we bring ourselves back. We notice - even when we're drifting off and coming back, again and again, thinking to ourselves 'Oh, who said Zazen was supposed to be peaceful!' - in that process we can see the nature of what's drifting off, and where it's drifting off to, and where it comes back to. So, even although we're thinking and stopping thinking, thinking and stopping thinking, something slowly clarifies about what we're doing when we're thinking and stopping thinking. And where we actually are when we're stopping thinking, and where we are when we're thinking we're somewhere else. All that is very useful to us. We're actually investigating the same thing that Susannah Vrobel is, but from a much more participatory point of view. Scientists are observers, and in science, in modern times, they have a big struggle between the observer and the observed. In theoretical physics and in advanced nuclear physics they find that to observe something has an effect on it. So how can you watch it without affecting it? And what effect am I having when I watch something in order to see what's happening? All that area is being fervently discussed, because the scientist has to be an observer. But although the scientist wants to be an observer, and has to be in order to be objective, they can't help participating in it. Whereas we stupid buddhists can just participate freely. So, if we don't mind being a bit stupid, we can participate in the experiencing of reality again and again and again, and maybe one day something might become a bit clear about it! (Laughs) 'Ah, I see! ... (inaudible).'

I sometimes wake up in the morning, after having had a disturbing dream - nice disturbing or nasty disturbing, it depends on the day - but, if I feel a bit kind of harrowed when I wake up because I've had a dream that's kind of disturbed me, I get out of bed feeling kind of 'Ughh'. But, when I get out of bed and walk into the bathroom to wash my face I suddenly realise that, 'Oh, this is the world I'm actually in, with water, hands,' and I feel very happy, because I return to reality. So returning to reality, returning to this place, is to participate in the world. We are participants. ... Any more comments?

(Inaudible)

That's right. So we can say that although Dignaga and Dharmakirti were very excellent and great buddhist philosophers, their theoretical analysis of the present moment leaves us wanting. It's impossible for us to solve the problem you're talking about. We can say in theory, 'The present moment is infinitely short' - in ancient Buddhism I think it was supposed to be sixty four *ksanas*, which was their, you know, micro-micro-second measurement in ancient times - 'then the next moment starts.' But, actually, that doesn't satisfy us, because it

doesn't actually explain anything: 'If there's a moment here, then the next moment, there must be a gap in between! How wide is the gap?' And then we can go on and on and on.

It's not just an infinitely short, but an infinitely large point. It's without direction. So it's infinite in dimensions, without direction..

It's a problem of measurement. To talk about it you have to measure it (inaudible).

(Inaudible)

Yes, there's lots of different ways to talk about it.

(Inaudible discussion)

Yes, so it's quite a big problem, simply because we think about it. Master Dogen realised this and he wrote this chapter called 'Uji'. And in 'Uji' he discusses all the different things that everybody talks about here, in an essay which is full of images and metaphors, so it's quite rich. It's not a kind of, you know, 'A, B, C, D, therefore E' kind of logical exposition. It's more a whole kaleidoscope of images, concepts, and so on, around the subject of 'What is time? What is existence?' So, I'd like to go through that, bit by bit, in the next few talks.

This is my modern interpretation of the chapter 'Uji'. It's based on what's written in the Windbell book, plus Nishijima's previous translation which is not so literal, all put together. Let's go through it paragraph by paragraph and see what Master Dogen says, and then afterwards we can come back to the questions and descriptions.

First of all, the title 'Uji' is two Chinese characters. *U* means 'existence', but it also means 'to be'. In English, and in many European languages, we have two sets of words – kind of simple, concrete words, and abstract words. So 'being' and 'existence' is one example. 'Being' is somehow warm and real; 'existence' is somehow abstract, but they're referring to the same thing. If something exists, it *is*; but to say 'it is' is different to saying 'it exists', in the sense that one is more abstract than the other. *U* means 'existence', or 'being', or 'is', or 'are', singular or plural. And *ji* means 'time'. So *uji* means 'being-time', or 'existence-time', or 'existent-time', or 'time-is'. I wrestled around with the title, and I felt the title used in our translation in the book, 'Existence-time', somehow, for me, puts me in an abstract frame of mind. So I wanted to find a phrase that is more concrete. The obvious choice would be 'Being-time'. But 'being-time' sounds like a verb, you know, 'Let's practice being time'. So somehow it doesn't grab me.

How about 'Time-being'?

'Time-being', yes. That would do. But I came up with 'Time-present'. For me, the word 'present' also suggests 'existence' – 'to be present' is 'to be'. So, for me, 'time-present' says what I feel *Uji* says, better than any of the other ways. It may not do for you, so you can put your own title on it. It could be 'Time-being', yes. So, 'time-present' suggests a oneness of time and our existence in time. And that in itself is difficult for us to think about, but actually we're always one with the time now. We're always present in the time now. If you substitute another title for the chapter, then you have to substitute it all the way through the phrases. It may give a different taste to the chapter, so that's a project for somebody else to do.

The chapter starts off with Master Dogen quoting a poem. The poem was written by a buddhist master, a buddhist ancestor, in I think the ninth century, Master Yakusan Igen. And this is the poem:

A buddha of old said:

Time-present is standing on the mountain heights.

Time-present is sinking to the depths of the ocean.

Time-present is an angry demon, time-present is a buddha.

Time-present is a formal ceremony, time-present is the temple compound.

Time-present is an everyday individual, time-present is pervading the whole Universe.

In this poem, what the writer wanted to convey was not a series but a collection of concrete happenings. So not just time, but time happening, time-events. Another title for this chapter, instead of 'Time-present' or 'The Time-Being', would be 'The Now'. If you use 'now' in the very widest sense, we can make it embrace time and what's happening in time. And, in fact, in the paper I wrote I used the word 'the Now' as a synonym for *Uji*, because I like it. So, Master Yakusan says:

'Now, standing on the top of a mountain.

Now, sinking to the depths of the ocean.

Now, angry. Now, calm and serene.

Now, I'm in the middle of a formal ceremony. Now, the concrete compound of the temple in which I live.

Now, an ordinary person. Now, edgeless, pervading the Universe.'

So, he wants to say that time-presents are concrete, real. However, we have to be a bit abstract because looking at my watch it's twenty past twelve, and at twenty past twelve we stop the talk. So, 'Time-present is stopping the talk.' And we'll continue this afternoon.

Thank you.