

What is Buddhism?**Talk given at Padma Farm (Czech Republic)****By Eido Mike Luetchford****June 2006**

Today I wanted to talk about "What is Buddhism?" In the West there are many different schools of Buddhism, and they're all called "Buddhism". We have Zen Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism, and Theravada Buddhism, and so on. And as I said yesterday, I only know one kind! But even from my narrow point of view, I can ask a question, "What is Buddhism?" Is it wearing something like this (pointing to his rakusu), or a robe? In which case anybody can wear this. Are they a Buddhist? Is it burning incense in front of the statue of the Buddha? So if somebody puts a statue of a Buddha in their house and they burn incense, are they a Buddhist?

If we look at the beginning of Buddhism, 2400 years ago, a man called Gautama, in India, according to legend he went into a forest and in the forest he studied with yogin how to find the top, highest level of consciousness. But after eight years he wasn't satisfied. So he came out of the forest, where he had been starving himself, and drank some milk, and felt good. And then he sat under a tree, and he sat in this posture (lotus posture), which is a yogic posture. And then, according to the story, after about one month he invented Buddhism.

So what did he invent? He didn't have this (rakusu). Or he didn't have some kind of chanting. He didn't have incense. He didn't have any books about Buddhism. So what did he discover? This is the most important thing. Also, he didn't write any books. After he died, many people wrote books about him, but these books were written many, many years ago and sometimes it's difficult to understand. They were written in Sanskrit or Pali and they are very flowery, very poetic. So it's still difficult to find out, what is Buddhism?

In my case, I met a Japanese monk called Nishijima, and he based his teaching on a Japanese monk who lived in the thirteenth century. The monk was called Dogen. And Dogen was a very unusual man because he wrote a lot of instructions and information about Buddhism. Of course, these instructions and descriptions are written in a very medieval Japanese and Chinese. So even if we read them, it's difficult to understand. But I became interested and studied them for more than twenty years, and surprisingly I found that his description of Buddhism was very real and very simple, but also profound. That was very interesting to me because I have never been interested in extra things. It's my character, I'm rather rough! So this morning, before the first sitting, I forgot to light the incense. But the next sitting I remembered!

So I want to give you a very simple explanation of what Buddhism is according to the writings of Dogen. Dogen often uses four different aspects to describe something. So I'm going to describe Buddhism from his four aspects, or four viewpoints.

The first: there seems to be theory about Buddhism. We can go into shops and see thousands of books about Buddhism. So it seems important that we have some theory or philosophy about Buddhism. When Gautama went out of the forest and sat under his tree and found something which was true, he went to find his friends to explain to them a kind of theory or philosophy. And we still have Buddhist philosophy now. But Dogen's idea of Buddhist philosophy or Buddhist theory is rather unusual. He says we can find it everywhere - not only in books, but also in the forest, or in the mountains, or at sea, or in our lives. So according to him, in addition to written theory there is a kind of teaching of

Buddhism from the universe. In the modern world, we can interpret this as that all theory which teaches the truth of the world we can say is Buddhist theory. It sounds very strange to say so. So, mathematical theory which describes exactly the path of a rocket we can say is theory about the truth. Theory in science about DNA we can say is theory about the truth. So in Dogen's view, all theories, including science, mathematics, all kinds of writings, if they are describing the truth of this world, they are Buddhist theory. So as a buddhist, we can study everything – philosophy, science, sports psychology, anything which tells us the truth of this world. This is Dogen's view about theory. So he embraces not just very narrow writings about historical Buddhism, but a much wider view. That's his first viewpoint.

The second aspect we can say is our bodily health. Buddhism is very concerned about bodily health. So Dogen wrote in his writings a lot about how to look after our health. Of course, in the thirteenth century, there wasn't so much information about health. Now we have too much information! 'If you eat butter it's good for you.' 'If you eat margarine it's good for you.' 'It's better not to drink any wine.' 'It's better to drink one glass of wine a day.' And so on. But we can say all these kinds of information about health are searching for the best way to live. Sometimes this way, sometimes that way. To look after our health by eating the right food is very important. We put food inside our body, and so it has a big effect on us. In the UK, some schools have big problems with children who are eating a lot of junk food. So one famous British cook designed a diet for schoolchildren, where they had an experiment in one school. And after changing their diet the children became much calmer and, it seems, happier. Usually if we eat food which we don't like we don't think, 'Oh, it's going to have an effect on me.' Sometimes I eat a meal in a restaurant and it gives me indigestion, but I don't usually think, 'Oh, this is bad for me.' However, it's clear now, in modern times, that generally we should try and eat a good balanced diet.

Also, our lifestyle, waking in the morning and going to bed at night, has a big effect on our lives. Master Dogen recommended getting up very early in the morning and going to bed early at night. But sometimes we find that impossible in modern life, so the most important thing is to be regular. Getting up at the same time every day, going to bed at the same time every day, makes our life regular. But many people don't like to hear that! They think only old people live like that. So there are many aspects of our health that we can look after very easily in modern life, and in the thirteenth century it was not so easy for Dogen to do this.

His third viewpoint or aspect is to be active. To be active can mean many things. In Buddhism, to be active has quite a simple and not intellectual meaning. It means to do something instead of thinking about something. Of course, we find that very difficult in modern society, because modern society is based on thinking. So often we think for long periods of time in order to plan what we're going to do in the future. But if we lead our life only by thinking and planning in our head, without acting, our life is very unbalanced and we tend to worry, which way to go, what we should do, what we shouldn't do. So Buddhism recommends that we act stupidly. Of course, you can't go to work and say to your boss, 'I'm a buddhist, so just I do that, now I do that, now I do this, I don't need a plan.' We have to live in human society. But we should notice very clearly that human society is a construction based on the human ability to think. And although thinking and planning before acting is absolutely necessary in modern society, at the same time it has a very big effect on us. Sometimes we lose our freedom. So Buddhism urges us, encourages us, to discover our freedom again by acting freely - not planning everything to the last exact detail, but jumping forward in a more free manner.

There are many stories in ancient Buddhism, especially from China, they're called koan stories. And in the group from Japan which I belong to, we translated many of these koan stories. And if you read them, some of them are very amusing. But you can see, in many of the stories, buddhists encouraging people to act. For instance, there's one story where a student and a master are eating together, and the student is eating, but while he's eating he's thinking something. So he says to the master, 'What is the very essence of Buddhism? Please explain it to me.' The master says, 'Have you finished eating?' The student says, 'Yes.' The master says, 'Then wash your bowl up.' It sounds a bit stupid, but the master is saying, 'Don't think, act!' As I said, this is quite difficult in modern society because we invented such an excellent set of interlocking systems. Modern cities are very, very complex organisms. So we have to fit in. But fitting in to human society, we pay a price. So we should remember our own freedom to act. The biggest thing in modern society which helps us to act is sport. When I was a child we didn't have so much sport at school, and not so many different sporting activities; but now we can go to the gym, or the sports club, we can go cycling or walking. We have tremendous freedom to follow some kind of sporting activity. And sporting activity teaches us how to act. So if we go to the gym after work, and we just act for half an hour or one hour, running on the running machine or something, then we find our freedom again, and we feel, 'Ah, that's better.' Our mental problems disappear, until tomorrow.

The fourth aspect which Master Dogen uses is the practice of Zazen. Of course, *zazen* is a Japanese word. But *zazen* has the same etymological root as *ch'an* in Chinese. And the word *ch'an* in Chinese came from the Pali *jana*, or in Sanskrit *dhyana*. So *zazen* is the same word, etymologically, as *dhyana*. And *dhyana* is this (sitting in the Zazen posture). Gautama used the word *dhyana* to describe this. We call it meditation in English. In English it suggests some kind of mental process possibly. But whether *dhyana* is a mental process or not is difficult to say. So Master Dogen describes *dhyana* or Zazen from four different aspects. He likes to look at things from four points of view.

He says that *dhyana* or Zazen is different from thinking. Of course, sometimes in Zazen we're thinking. Sometimes in Zazen we're not thinking. Sometimes in Zazen maybe we're thinking, maybe we're not thinking. 'Am I asleep?' 'Am I awake?' So, it's different from thinking.

From the second aspect, Zazen is balancing our body and mind. One way to describe balancing our body and mind is to talk about the autonomic nervous system. In the body there are two halves to the autonomic nervous system, and they act against each other. One half of the nervous system makes us aggressive or active, the other half of the nervous system makes us passive or satisfied. When we sit in Zazen we find the balance between the two aspects - not so active or aggressive, not so passive. In Zazen we can feel ourselves moving between the two, wobbling. Sometimes in Zazen we feel sleepy, sometimes in Zazen we feel a bit excited, or very wide awake. So we're wobbling between the two sides of our nervous system. This is one way to describe it. Also, physically, we are sitting in the balanced posture. When we sit in the balanced posture, our deep extensor muscles in the spine - there are many deep extensor muscles between the bones - and when we sit naturally straight these muscles relax. And when they relax, our spine becomes longer, and this has a balancing effect on our body.

The third aspect that Dogen uses to describe Zazen, he says it's oneness between body and mind. But how do we make our body and mind one? Well, he says we don't need to. Just we can stop making it two. On the television in England, there's an advertisement about a car, maybe Citroen, I've forgotten. This car

comes into many pieces and the pieces become a big robot, and then at the end the pieces all comes back together to make a car. So human beings, we pull ourselves apart into many parts, many different thoughts and feelings and worries. We often do two things at the same time, or three things at the same time, and we're very skilful to do this. But if we stop doing it, we come back into a car again. This is the meaning of oneness. So oneness between body and mind means we stop being two or three or four. Sitting in Zazen, we stop thinking about separate things, and we stop concentrating on our perceptions, and slowly we come back together again. We become whole. Of course, my description sounds very nice, and if you compare it with your Zazen or my Zazen, it sounds too perfect, it's true. Words always create very perfect pictures. However, if we practice Zazen regularly, we can notice this kind of characteristic to Zazen. Of course, in Zazen we're sometimes splitting into many parts - thinking, and feeling the pain, and listening to the loudspeaker. But sometimes we come together, one. So we can say in Zazen we're wobbling - sometimes sleepy, sometimes thinking, sometimes listening, sometimes in the middle. And to be in the middle is balanced. And although in our mind we think balance is something perfect, actually real balance is not like that. Real balance is wobbling. But in our mind we have some perfect balance.

Then the last aspect that Master Dogen uses, he says Zazen is oneness with the Universe. Sounds wonderful! But when we sit in Zazen, and we let ourselves come back together, then we don't notice a separation between 'me' and 'the world', 'me' and 'the person beside me', 'me' and 'the room'. This very simple state is satisfaction. So Master Dogen calls it oneness with the Universe - because we're part of the Universe, and the Universe is something very complicated; but if we stop thinking about ourselves as separate people we can notice we're just part of the Universe, like a little bit of mildew, a little bit of dirt in the field.

So that's Master Dogen's description of Buddhism from four viewpoints, so I'll stop there.

I'd like some more explanation as to what to do with your eyes during Zazen? Should they be open or closed? Or where to look?

Ah yes. If you close your eyes, sometimes you go to sleep. So to open the eyes is usually better. But if you're not sleepy and you close your eyes, it's not a problem. But to sit in balance, it's easier to have your eyes open. And when we look at the wall we can say there are two different ways of looking. Sometimes we look at the wall and we see little pieces on the wall, or a face, or an angel, or something, a Buddha - we're looking very carefully. And sometimes we go inside, so our eyes are open but we're not seeing anything. Neither of those two. Between the two there is another way, just looking. Not looking very closely, and not going inside, but just looking. But if your eyes close a little it doesn't matter.

I'm quite stretched here on my right side, and now when I do Zazen I feel more pain in my muscles on this side, like they're not used to holding the body. Is this an obstacle to Zazen, so that I first have to fix it somehow, or can Zazen itself...?

Yes, Zazen is fixing it. But why is your side like that? There must be a reason. For instance...

I think maybe it's emotional or something like that, you know, on this side, like energy...

For instance, do you drive the car like this? Or, 'Today I'm doing this!'

(Laughter)

No, it's really like... When I don't think of anything, or when I'm driving the car or doing something and I'm not watching the body. Then I watch my body and I realise that I'm stretched here. But I don't have a reason, so maybe it's something to do with emotions, from the past.

Yes, it's true, sometimes when we're sitting in Zazen we can find a muscle tension for which we don't know the reason. We didn't realise it. So it's very difficult to find a reason. But when we sit in Zazen, our muscles slowly drop off tension. The reason I say so is because I can see people's backs sitting. And many times I saw people, they sit maybe like this, because they've been working very hard with the computer. So they come here, they sit straight, then maybe after fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, their muscles relax, and they sit like that. Of course, Zazen doesn't cure some muscle problems. But if we have some kind of tension for which we don't know the reason, it can improve it. But if we have a serious problem with a muscle, we should go to a physiotherapist.

It's not like I would feel pain in normal life, just when I do something more extreme or unusual, I can feel it like a problem.

Maybe habitually you have some habit which you didn't notice. We all have very slight physical habits. So, for instance, some people like to sit like this, and they don't notice they're always sitting like this, then they practice Zazen and their body's a little bit like that.

(Laughter)

(Inaudible) We're all like that, everybody.

(Inaudible question about a practitioner holding his shoulder.)

Ah yes, I have a problem with a muscle. Do you know the periformis muscle? A deep muscle inside. Usually I sit in lotus position, like this. And unconsciously I'm lifting my leg, so I'm making a tension in this muscle - maybe for ten, fifteen years. Then, maybe six months ago, I get a muscle problem here. So then I noticed, 'Ah yes, I have tension here. So I have to relax there.' But for fifteen years I didn't notice.

A second small question. Maybe you've already said this, but I somehow didn't remember when I was doing Zazen. What is the thing I'm focused on, with my mind, when I'm doing Zazen? Or am I not to be focused on anything?

We're wobbling. If we have something to focus on it's very nice. But in Zazen we don't focus on mind, we don't focus on body. 'We don't focus on thinking, we don't focus on body, breathing! What? There's nothing else!' But there is something else. There is something subtle. There is a state which is not thinking and not focusing on physical, but between the two. But we don't notice it. So in Zazen we wobble from thinking and feeling, and there's some other state. And if we practice Zazen regularly we find the other state. And this is not special, this is normal. If you practice a sport, you're practicing to get that state. If you're learning to swim, you're trying to get that state. So that state is at the centre of action. Not this way, not this way, but in the middle. When you learn to ski you're wobbling - too tense, too relaxed. Then slowly you find something else - not too tense, not too relaxed, 'Whoa!' That's the state.

(End of talk)