

Winter Sesshin 2004
Talk number 1
By Eido Mike Luetchford.
January 2004

We're doing the chapter Uji today. I've made an interpretive translation for us to read from. Before we start does anyone have any questions about Zazen or kinhin?

How to you define Zazen?

I like to say sitting in balance, because to me it's a balanced posture, and it's the same balance at the centre of sport. So this balance gives you a kind of still point. But the posture itself is not rock still, it's rock solid, but it's dynamic, so to keep balance you have to wobble a little, and so we sit and find the position where our weight is over the shoulders, the head is over the shoulders, and the body is balanced about the pelvis. And just to do that, so just to sit in balance. And because Buddhism says that body and mind are two sides of one whole, if we balance our body we balance our mind. It's a total balance. That's the best I can do.

Are we going too slowly in kinhin?

Well kinhin is quite interesting; lots of groups do kinhin almost as a kind of yogic exercise. But in Japan I was taught to do kinhin as a simple walking, just transferring the weight – one foot, then the other foot. So rather like, as I said, a duck, I heard that Master Kodo Sawaki described it as walking like a duck. And if you do that, you actually massage your pelvis, rather like doing something like this (Mike demonstrates) as you might do in Tai Chi or something, just simply transfer your weight and then just simply repeat, and doing that actually exercises your legs quite well. Roughly speaking one step is one breath cycle, but this can only be rough because everyone breathes at different speeds; if we try and breathe so that our walking fits exactly with our breathing, then we get jammed. There is someone doing Yoga breathing, hardly moving, there's someone else waiting behind, so just roughly, and we keep moving.

Is it better to be close to the wall when sitting Zazen or not?

Try both.

I mean is the point of sitting close to the wall to not have much distraction, or...?

Well it's tradition in a way. In temples in Japan, the places where you sit are along the edges of the zendo, so you're facing a wall. If you face inwards, everybody faces inwards, we have very sensitive eyes which catch things which disturb our Zazen. Providing we face someone's back, or the wall, then we can settle down without being disturbed. And if there's a wall somewhere here, it's quite comfortable, but you can also get used to sitting somewhere away from the wall, but whichever you prefer is alright. You have to get in early to grab a place by the wall, or sit behind someone's back. You can find your own place, as long

as our gaze falls down at about 45 degrees onto the wall or floor or someone's back, it's fine. But if we find that we prefer one or the other, we can choose.

OK, so this chapter is called Uji in Japanese, there are three or four of Master Dogen's essays or chapters in the Shobogenzo which are particularly important, and this is one of them. Unfortunately the important ones tend to be quite hard to understand, and this is one that it typically difficult. However, the principle he's talking about here is rather important, it's the principle of time in Buddhism. I thought I'd give it a go, and if after a couple of talks everybody is confused, then we can change and sing songs or something else. But let's start. The version with the Japanese title above the word Uji is the fairly literal translation which is in the Shobogenzo books that Windbell published, and the other version is my modern interpretation. Sometimes it's quite close to the original and sometimes it's quite different. We're going to go through my interpretation, so you don't necessarily need to refer to the original, but if you're very quick you can move between the two and see the differences.

The title of the chapter – Uji, was a kind of Buddhist phrase which existed before Master Dogen's time, there were lots of these Buddhist stock phrases, we have them even now. And Master Dogen was something of a revisionist, he took all of these traditional phrases which had come down through Buddhism in China, and re-interpreted them, and some of these re-interpretations were radically different to the received understanding of the words. The two characters in Japanese – “u”, and “ji”, can be translated in a variety of ways, and Mike will appreciate this as a Japanese translator. U, or it can be pronounced “aru”, has a very wide range of meanings. You know in Buddhism, we have the word “mu” – as in “mugen”, and it comes up a lot in the Heart Sutra which we chant, well we can say that “u” is the opposite of that – the antonym. So “mu” means, no, nothing, isn't, or something like that, and “u” means is, exists, even yes, you could say, so a wide range of meaning affirming something. Is that right Mike? Then “ji” simply means time, so in modern Japanese, “jikan”; “kan” means gap, so “ji” can literally mean time-gap, but it means ordinary time, so if you want to ask the time in Japanese, the word is “jikan”. How to translate “u” and “ji” is quite difficult, some people say existence-time, which is what we've used in the original version of the Shobogenzo, but we can also translate it as being-time, and there are some translations of this chapter with that title. Or we could say is-time, or we could even go way out in the direction of interpretation and say something like right-here-and-now, and all of those are somehow contained in the meaning of “uji”. What “uji” points to is something about being here at this time. And this is what Master Dogen explains in the chapter, and he does it by discussing a poem written by an old Buddhist master, I don't know who was the composer, and then going on to give some practical examples about walking in mountains and things like that, and then later on he comes up with another story of a conversation between a master and his disciple, and discusses that. Then right at the end he makes his own poem up. It's quite a short chapter, but his interpretation of time is existential – it's existentially existential, so it's sometimes quite fuzzy. If we go through the chapter bit by bit and if you want to ask questions, don't wait until you've forgotten them, or decided they're not important, come out with them there and then. He starts off with this 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 person
Time-present is pervading the whole Universe.

And I've chosen the phrase time-present, because it's the nearest thing for me to what I feel Master Dogen is trying to say. And in this poem, the phrases in the poem are creating kind of snapshots, and the snapshots are of different events in somebody's life. So we could say – right now standing on the top of a mountain, right now sinking to the depths, and we can interpret that, not literally sinking to the bottom of the ocean, but rather being depressed. We can interpret the first line to mean being elated. And the third line we can interpret as being very angry, then being very calm and peaceful. The fourth line we can interpret as doing something formal, for instance, we were just chanting a sutra. Being in the temple compound - which is an everyday activity for a monk. Time-present is an everyday person, time-present is pervading the whole universe, when do we pervade the whole Universe? Well we could say it's a kind of feeling or sensation we get when we're practicing Zazen; we feel no edges to ourselves. We can say that the poem is just snapshots of different states in the life of a monk; sometimes angry, sometimes sad, sometimes happy, sometimes elated, sometimes in the middle of a ceremony, and so on. But I use the word "sometimes", but if we look at Master Dogen's commentary on the poem, we find that he has a much more strict interpretation than "sometimes".

Time-present means that time is the present, and that the present is time.

In Master Dogen's thought, he equates here and now with this time. And more than that, he says that time is actually the present. And as we'll see later in the chapter, he goes on to discuss the process of time as something rather different. His first statement says that time and present are the same thing.

The state of buddha is always made real at a time, and because of this, the state is illuminated by the light of the present.

He often uses this phrase – illuminated by the light of the present, and we can imagine it as something quite real; when we're lost in our thoughts, we may have quite strong images in front of us, but they are hazy. But the real world in front of us is clear. So to be illuminated by the light of the present means simply to be clearly aware of what's around us, not caught up in our thoughts or caught up with images. So the state of buddha is always made real at a time. We can only be buddha at a real moment, and when we're buddha at a real moment, we're illuminated by the light of the present. As most of you know I guess, buddha, in Sanskrit means to be awake, or an awakened person. To be awake means to see what's around us, now, at this place. We're illuminated. If we're caught up in thoughts, images, hopes, fears, then they're not illuminated by the present, there's something hazy about them compared with the real cup in front of me.

His statement in the first paragraph is very existential, we could say that he's almost denying that time has any kind of process – throw away your watch, time is only now. But then in the second paragraph, he changes his view, and says:

But we must also study time as 24-hour time, this day. Anger has its time, and so it is 24-hour time.

But then he goes on to say:

24 hours is relative, although we can't be sure if one 24 hours is longer or shorter or faster or slower than another, we still say that a day lasts for 24 hours.

And it's true, sometimes we feel that an hour passes just like that, or that Zazen passes in a very short time. Sometimes we feel that time drags and we say so. But although we feel that, we usually think that this is our subjective feeling, and time is really ticking on objectively, and a day is exactly 24 hours long. But in this second paragraph, Master Dogen says that 24-hour time is relative. He doesn't reject our subjective feeling of time being relative in favour of objective absolute time; he doesn't reject either of those. In the original by the way, the medieval Japanese method of counting time was 12 hours in the day, and each hour had the name of an animal, so you had the hour of the sheep and the hour of the tiger and the hour of the horse and so on. In the original you'll find that it talks about 12 hours and it identifies them as sheep and goats and so on. Now in the next paragraph, Master Dogen touches on our doubt about time, and we do have doubt about time, because sometimes we feel time flies and sometimes we feel that time drags, and yet we have these things on our wrists that go round and round regularly. Our subjective experience and our objective information have some kind of contradiction. But of course we usually just ignore it, we're taught to ignore and we habitually ignore it. But Master Dogen says:

Although we never doubt our ability to clearly trace the passage of time, we cannot be sure that we know clearly what time is.

Of course I know what time is! - It's sixteen minutes and 15 seconds before 12 o'clock! But he's suggesting that this objective statement about time is not complete – our actual experience doesn't fit in completely with the objective fact. So "although we never doubt our ability to clearly trace the passage of time, we cannot be sure that we clearly know what time is".

What is it?

As ordinary people we have many doubts about many things, but our doubts are not always the same, they're always changing. But although this is true, every one of those changing doubts is time-present.

This is an interesting paragraph, first he talks about some kind of doubt that comes out of the very simple contradiction between our objective view of time and our subjective experience of time. Then he says that we have this kind of doubt, that doubts come and go, sometimes we doubt things, sometimes we don't, then he says but even when we're doubting, that doubt is always the time now - we can't doubt in the future, we can't doubt in the past, our doubt is now. He brings us back to time-present. Then in the next paragraph he goes on to look at time and events, and time and things:

We understand that the Universe consists of all the things contained in this world. We must also understand that all the people and the things in the Universe have their time-present. Just as individual things are independent of each other, so individual time-presents are independent of each other. This means that many people can want to find the truth at the same time, and there can be many times at which a single person wants to find the truth.

He's explaining that time and existence, time-presents, are independent of each other, so in a way he's trying to break up our process view of time. We all have a very strong belief that time moves, so we feel that time goes on and that

somehow time goes on and we're in it, so things and objects are in this kind of flow, and that this flow goes on just like the hands of my watch go round. But he's trying to break this up and say that everything, everywhere has its time-present. And this is certainly true for me, because I have my time-present – I'm here at this time. Are you here at this time? You have your time-present. Are you here at this time? You have your time present. Is that plant on the window sill here at this time? It has its time-present. Everything in the Universe has its own time-present.

There's a lot of powerful evidence to suggest that time is a process – memory, and cause and effect, if I knock over my cup of coffee, the carpet will get wet.

Yes, it's true. He doesn't deny it. He says we have to think of time as a period of 24 hours. But he denies that the objective view is true, and he denies that the subjective view is true. What we tend to do is that we have our own experience which is very powerful, our experience of things happening quickly, things happening slowly, in all kinds of circumstances. Then we have objective time that we learn about – the candle burning down, or water running round the wheel, or the clock, or the watch, or the atomic clock, but he denies that any of those are absolutes, which is rather an unusual view. He doesn't deny that this is a valid way of looking at reality, for example in terms of hands going round, but he denies that this objective time is absolute.

So we have to synthesise both views of time, we have to be able to understand time in both ways?

He suggests that to have more than one view of time is better than to have only one view of time. But the problem is that these views of time conflict, so we have conflicting views that we have to resolve. And Master Dogen always resolves conflicting views in the present. He says in the end there's only one moment that's real and only one place that's real, and that's here and now. Although we imagine and think about time as a process, or we can imagine or feel time as fast or slow, the only real moment that exists is here, and the only place that the real moment exists at is this place. But our brains can't work without process, so we have to spread things out into a process. And this is the basis of his continuing discussion.

T.S. Eliot in The Four Quartets is dealing with the same thing.

Almost exactly, yes.

In Burnt Norton, where he says – at the still point of the turning world, there the dance is, and there's only the dance.

That's right. It's almost identical, so I think that the start of Burnt Norton is.....it's amazingly close to Master Dogen's writings.

So it's time-present.

Right, and Nagarjuna's chapter on time in his Mulamadhyamakakarika is even closer to Eliot's verses than this – it's quite uncanny. From a Buddhist point of view, T.S. Eliot grasped the nature of time completely.

He would have ripped it off.

You think so?

Yes, The Wasteland is full of quotes from....

Really? Great, if only he were here today. But you're quite right it's uncannily, almost identical.

He's established in that 4th paragraph that time-presence is something that everything has; I have it, everything in the Universe has its time-present. And he goes on to say that:

This is true, not only of wanting to find the truth, but also of actually realizing the truth, and actually practicing a Buddhist life.

He wants to say that although we think of Buddhist practice – “I've been practicing for three years”, or “I've been practicing for nine years”, “I want to find the truth”, “I've found the truth”, “I did find the truth”, actually it's all at one moment. Wanting to find the truth happens at a time-present, and realizing the truth happens at a time-present, and practicing a Buddhist life happens at a time-present. Just this time-present, there is no other time-present. And then he goes on to say:

This person I think of as myself is a “person” that I put together at one time-present.

And it's true, I think of myself this morning, getting up, but that's only a memory. The “me” that was here this morning doesn't exist, and the “me” that's going to eat beans and beef burgers later doesn't exist either. I put myself together, so I create “Michael” at this moment, and I can talk to you about myself, but that construction I make is made at this moment. We put ourselves together at this moment into some kind of constructed self... we spread ourselves out through time, but Master Dogen says that this all happens at one time-present.

We can apply this thinking to everything in the Universe. This kind of intellectual analysis is the starting point of Buddhist practice.

This means that from Master Dogen's point of view, understanding the Buddhist view of time is very important. Now the next paragraph is interesting; he describes a person who has clarified their real state.

But a person who has clarified their real state sees only each thing, each thing, each thing, and lets go of understanding the nature of each thing. And at that moment, time-present contains the whole of time, and that time contains all things. Thus the whole of existence, the whole Universe is present at each moment of time. Have a quick look to see if you can find any part of the Universe that has escaped from this present moment.

What does, “lets go of understanding the nature of each thing” mean?

What he's describing here sounds like – “oh, it must be – a person who has clarified their real state must be a special kind of person”; we can translate that as an enlightened person if we like, then we start thinking that there are these people who have clarified the real state, and they let go of understanding and so on, but it doesn't mean that at all. It means there is a state in which we clarify ourselves, and in that state we only see one thing, one thing, one thing, and we don't bother understanding that thing. And that state is a common, everyday state that we all experience. And we can call it action. And by action, we can mean picking up a cup and drinking the tea, or getting up and walking through the door – when we act, we clarify our real state, because when we act fully, we

let go of understanding; it's impossible for us to think about what we're doing and do it fully at the same time. And anybody who is a sportsperson will know that's true; if you think about hitting the ball, you miss it. To hit the ball you just hit the ball fully, and stop thinking about it. What Master Dogen is describing here is not some kind of process towards a special state, but something momentary which he calls "clarifying the real state". He's describing here simple action in the present moment; when we act in the present moment we let go of understanding things and we just see event, event, event. And it's true, if you go running, you go out jogging, and in the first 20 minutes or so you might be thinking about the day, then you notice that you've passed some building that you didn't see, then your mind quietens down, and after a while you're just jogging. And when you're jogging like that without your mind being active, just there are flashes of moments – just now, just now, just now. And we get the same experience in Zazen; directly our intellectual mind quietens down and we stop being disturbed by thoughts of yesterday and thoughts of tomorrow, we can settle down sometimes to a state where we are just sitting, just sitting, just sitting.

In Master Dogen's teaching, he calls that "shikan-taza" – just sitting. He's describing that state. In other words, in order to experience time-present in the sense that Master Dogen is trying to describe it, we need to act, we can't experience it by thinking about it, we create a thought about time-present which is not the same as time-present. To come back to your question, to let go of understanding of each thing is what we do when we put our energy into complete action, doing something. Of course we can try and think while we do something, in which case we split ourselves, and in ancient Buddhism that was described as having two moons; they had this image of when we try and do something and think about it at the same time, there are two moons. And when we just throw ourself into what we're doing we are one moon – we are whole. Then we let go of understanding the nature of each thing.

Is that OK so far?

Now from the next paragraph he talks about our common view of time, and our common view of time we can say is as a kind of process. We're all taught that time is a process, so we think that we experience time as a process; actually we don't, but we think we do. If we talk about our experience of time, we overlay it with our learned picture of a process.

Until we study the Buddhist view, it is normal to think that "time-present" means at one particular time we become angry, and at another particular time we become a buddha. We imagine events as part of a journey, as though we were crossing a river or walking over a mountain pass. And although we feel fairly sure that the mountain pass or the river are still present back there where we crossed them, we have already passed them and moved on to be illuminated by the present, leaving them behind in the far distance.

In that paragraph he's trying to describe our imagined time, the time that we create in our brain. And that is our normal view. And he does it by describing time as a journey, so the things that we pass on our journey, we think they are still there, and we've moved on to the present and they are still back there. But then he says in the next paragraph that:

This is not the only way to think about it. And the time when we are crossing the mountain pass, or crossing the river, we are present there, and so time is present there. Time cannot elude the present. Accepting that time does not appear and disappear, the time when we are crossing

the mountain pass is also a real time-present. And even if time were to appear and disappear, the time when time is actually present is also time-present. Then how can the time when we are crossing the mountain pass or crossing the river not be swallowed up in the time when we are illuminated by the light of the present. How can we say that the time when we are crossing the mountain pass or crossing the river does not spew out this present brightness?

Here he's suggesting something even stranger. He's trying to break up our normal view of time as a journey, and that the events are somehow still back there, that we have passed them by and that they are still back there, and he's suggesting that the events are all here. In an analytical way, he's suggesting that the present contains everything. And it's not such a crazy suggestion, because the past... where is the past? Can you point to it? We think it's back there, somehow, but where is it? The only place I can find the past is here, now. That doesn't mean that there wasn't a past, it doesn't deny that past events affect the present, it doesn't negate the cause and effect relationship between things, but he's suggesting that time-present exists in everything, so if time-present existed when we were crossing the mountain, and time-present exists now, then both are in time-present, and there's only one time-present and that's time-present.

He's chipping away at the very, very strongly-held view that we all have, and which we find almost impossible to drop. And because we find it impossible to drop our view of time, sometimes when we practice Zazen, we keep thinking, "oh, another five minutes, I wonder when he's going to ring the bell", and "how long have I been sitting, it feels like hours....come on....oh, I've got to do this tomorrow....", and all these worries that we bring into our Zazen come from our view of time, and our view of time is hard-wired into our brain, because we're taught it since we were little. But we can't find animals with that view of time, you don't find a cat, stopping eating half way through to think about something it has to do. Or a dog – "ooh, I've just remembered, I'll come back to this".

But you could say it had an instinctive measure of time, so my blasted cat starts whining about five o'clock in the morning for its food at six.

Ah you've been teaching it you see, you've been teaching it to be human. Animals can learn to be worried and to have intention like us. And particularly cats and dogs, I guess we can train them quite well, so we give them the view of time.

What does Dogen say about the future? Does he feel the future has already happened?

Well the future, he says that the future is an idea, and the idea exists now, if the idea doesn't exist now, then I can't possibly imagine the future now.

But the past is more than an idea, the past is a.....

He says the past has gone already, but the past that we have exists now, so the past we're talking about now, exists now, that's why we're talking about it now. He says the past is now.

In our thoughts now?

There is no other past now, but the past in our thoughts now. And these are rather startling things to say, especially in the 13th century. If we think what was happening in Europe in the 13th century, people were talking about, probably how to get up to Heaven and so on, so Dogen's views on this are really quite startling.

He's saying, as there is no other time but now, and no other place but here, everything must be here and now. Where else can it be? That's why he asks whether anything could have escaped from the here and now, where else can the past be but now? But he doesn't mean that there wasn't a past, that I didn't have breakfast, he's simply pointing to something rather subtle, and that is, since we only exist here and now, then everything about the past and future are here and now, and anything that's not here and now doesn't exist. But we imagine and create in our mind a kind of time-line. We create a life, a personality; we create ourselves, our day, and our life. And not that they are not real, but that they are real creations that we make at the present. And we do, because I wake up one morning feeling depressed, and I create a depressed "me", my life has been terrible and it's going to be terrible. I wake up another morning feeling happy, and I create a happy "me" – yesterday was great and tomorrow will be great. But it all happens in the present.

Our experience of time then is connected to our experience of self as well?

Yes.

We need to construct a self otherwise, we will find it almost impossible to only.....

Yes we can't help it, that's right. That's why he doesn't deny our 24 hour time, and he doesn't deny, he says ordinary people think about time in this way, but it's not the only way to think about it. He's not saying that it's not the correct way to think about it, because we can't live without process. But process we create at this moment, because this moment is all there is, and we somehow, with our consciousness stretch ourselves out between past and future. And we all do it, all the time, and we can never stop. But Master Dogen is suggesting another view, and that other view is the experience that we have in, for instance, Zazen. When we practice Zazen, that's what we experience, time here and now, time here and now, time here and now. But we fight against being dragged out of here and now, when we're practicing Zazen, by thinking, "five minutes to go, three minutes to go, my legs are hurting", and all those things spread us out again. But sometimes when we sit, we can just be here and now, and this is what he's trying to explain in this chapter. Even though I've tried to write it in a modern way, it's not the kind of imagery we would use now necessarily, but the year 1240 was a long time ago, and he's using the images of his own life – temples in the mountains, crossing rivers, and so on, to describe something very subtle about the nature of reality.

I'll stop talking there, and if anybody wants to continue we have another seven minutes.

I think in The hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Douglas Adams describes the past as our explanation of the difference between our current experience and our state of mind.

That's nice. Was that a television series?

I think it's in the books.

Nice.

I think Dogen's easier!

The weather is getting a bit worse isn't it?

Anyway, we can continue this chapter until we're absolutely boggled. It's difficult because what Master Dogen is trying to do, in all the chapters of the Shobogenzo is to describe what reality is like. And we all think we know what reality is like, because society has taught us, but it's only taught us in a particular view. And he is giving us another view, and he calls it the Buddhist view. He bases his view on the practice of Zazen, so everything he says comes from his practice of Zazen, and in practicing Zazen he notices the true nature of our experience here and now. And then because he's a genius with words, he writes it down. The way we think about reality is not the way reality is, and this is what he's trying to point out. But he only has words to use and even his words in this chapter are not enough, so we practice Zazen. And when we practice Zazen, we experience time-present in the sense in which he's trying to describe it, so if we want to understand the chapter, we can refer to our own Zazen, that's our own real experience. And our own action.

Surely the writing down, the conceptualising of the experience of Zazen, is an active impediment to experiencing time as it is?

Yes, I agree. Let's throw it away! But then after throwing it away, we sit for a bit and we start thinking again don't we? Then we think and think, then write something, then we talk, then we think "oh this is too much", then we throw it away. Then after a bit it comes back again. Unfortunately, we can't do without thinking about it, and writing about it, and discussing, and we can't do with too much of it. We need both to throw it away, and to discuss and to write and to think about it – both. But we don't need to hang on to one or the other. We can stop now.

Thank you.