

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2005

Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

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We're continuing with Bussho, we're on page 8.

Master Daikan taught his student Gyosho: "*Buddha-nature exists just at the present moment, but the mind, which categorises all things into good and bad, creates an enduring image.*"

Non-Buddhists, Buddhists who study only theories or who study only the physical can never imagine this "*just at the present moment*" that Master Daikan talks about.

Both establishers and followers of non-Buddhism, theoretical Buddhism and materialistic Buddhism all exist just at the present moment, although they do not fully realise it.

This is a very important point, Simon and I were discussing something like this last night. The point I wanted to make is that all people exist just at the present moment in this place, whether they think they are here or not, whether they dream they are here or not, they are here. There is no other place to be. So Master Dogen says "establishers and followers of non-Buddhism, theoretical Buddhism"...that means those who don't practice Zazen but just study texts, "materialistic Buddhism"...that means following the form of Buddhism also without necessarily practicing Buddhism, all of those "exist just at the present moment, although they do not fully realise it".

And when something that exists *just at the present moment* preaches, practices and experiences *just at the present moment*, everything is just at the present moment.

The preaching is at the present moment, the practice is at the present moment, the experiences are at the present moment, everything is at the present moment.

This is what is meant in the Lotus Sutra where it says that when there are people who wish to be saved, then bodhisattvas manifest their bodies just at that moment in order to teach them what Buddhism is.

The passage in the Lotus Sutra seems to imply that bodhisattvas appear out of nowhere, materialise out of somewhere else to teach people, but it doesn't mean that. Master Dogen explains that the passage in the Lotus Sutra which says that bodhisattvas appear to teach people, means that people who know what the present is appear in the present and teach that the present is the truth. Whenever there are people who wish to be saved, this happens, according to the Lotus Sutra. To realise that reality is the present moment is to be saved, saved from the future and saved from the past. But not saved from the present.

This is fully manifesting buddha-nature. The body they manifest may be tall, or it may be short. The saints and ordinary people of our everyday lives all exist *just at the moment of the present*. The idea that saints and

ordinary people cannot manifest buddha-nature is the result of a limited view – narrow intellectual thinking. *Buddha* is an instant of body, and *nature* is an instant of action. This is why Master Daikan said “*buddha-nature exists just at the moment of the present.*”

So he's saying that somebody who is fully in the present, who exists just at the present moment, manifests buddha-nature. But we're all in the present moment. However, unlike trees, animals, stones, and sheds, we have the ability to pull ourselves out of the present moment. We've cultivated that excellent ability since the beginning of mankind, and we've become very good at it. We can create worlds that don't exist yet, and we can then move towards making them real. We can create universes in our minds, and without that ability we would be just like trees, cats, and dogs.

The sentence before seems to suggest that buddha-nature is body action, when it says that buddha is an instant of body and nature is an instant of action. That's the kind of understanding I get. Is that right?

Buddha is an instant of body, just you now here. That doesn't mean your body but not anything else. It's not that no.

No it seems to add the two together, the body and the action. It separates buddha-nature into buddha and nature and separates body and action. Seems to be suggesting some kind of phrase like body action, everything.

The body acting is buddha-nature. Buddha is an instant of a person, and nature is an instant of action. So he's playing with the phrase. He wants to say just at the present moment, there's somebody acting. To be fully in the present is not an intentional activity. We don't think that...Ross was talking yesterday about trying to be "mindful", you will find it difficult to do so. To be in the present is not to say "right, I'm going to be in the present", it's to act, to do something. So all of you who have been working in the kitchen have been acting very simply, preparing the food, in the present. Then you might have noticed some of you, while there was a spare moment of no pressure from Ela, that you drifted off somewhere, and started thinking about something else, soon to be brought back to the task at hand. That kind of action, which brings us into the present. We can't sit there and think, "I am mindfully in the present", - the thought is not the present.

Anything which isn't action, is not being in the present.

We can say so. But when we say not being fully in the present, we can't ever get away from it. It doesn't mean somehow we are somewhere else, it refers to the human ability to split ourselves.

Yes I was thinking about the gap of perception really. Any kind of perception means that there's a gap between where you are and what you're doing.

Yes, when we stop doing something, then we create a gap. This is the reason why in some Japanese temples they try to live a life which has no gaps. They rush around from morning to night doing things, in the hope that they'll close the gap. But they can't because they are human. So it's not a question of trying to get something, trying to get into this special state, it's just understanding the way we are.

But while you're thinking that, the thinking is taking place in the present moment.

Yes. That's right, we're always in the present moment. There's being in the present moment and there's being in the present moment. What he refers to is the state in which we are not divided, the state in which we are not reflecting on ourselves, the state where we're not thinking. It doesn't mean there's no cerebral activity, but where we're not thinking. When we're thinking, part of us is in our thoughts, we reside in our thoughts, our consciousness resides in our thoughts. But when we do something, when we act, we usually stop splitting ourselves and become one. And this oneness is the basis of our life. So we can't exist just thinking about life, we have to do. And if we sit for too long just thinking, in the end we have to get up and do something simple to get ourselves back to a nice state. But everything takes place in the present, the present is all there is. But we have the ability to, whilst being here, also to be in our thoughts. We split ourselves, and this is both the source of human beings' great achievements and the source of their unhappiness. Both of those things. It's our strength and our weakness.

The split is taking place now.

Yes that's true. So there's nothing to worry about.

It's quite a remarkable ability I think to be able to act without being conscious of doing it. An example which comes to mind is driving to work, I can drive to work and recall very little about the journey. My mind is somewhere else completely. And there are other things we do with absolutely no sense of focus or consciousness at all. I marvel at the brain...the body's ability to do that.

Marvellous isn't it. So when we're driving along, and we're lost in our thoughts, what we're actually doing is driving. And if we feel quite balanced and happy, usually we don't get lost in our thoughts when driving. We just drive. If we get too lost in our thoughts when driving there might be an accident. One difficulty; if we talk about just being in the present moment, the only thing we can do is create an idea of what that might be, and when we compare the idea we've created with what it was like driving to work this morning, it doesn't fit. But we've created an idea of "just in the present moment".

I was wondering about that, and...do you think there's a reason that Buddhist masters of the past haven't explained Buddhism as clearly as you do?

I think they explained it as clearly as I do.

I sometimes wonder, particularly when I read koans, that what they are trying to do is to point at reality without explaining it, because the explanation makes too much of a conceptual gap between reality and...And so sometimes it's better to hit someone with a stick or whatever it was that they did.

Yes, unfortunately we're all who we are. So if I could be someone who strode around with a stick and hit people and didn't say much, that's how I'd be. But I like talking, and discussing the points, that's me. That's what I like to do and it makes something clear to me, that's who I am. Nishijima Roshi was similar, maybe he didn't explain so much, but he did quite a lot. The problem for me with him was that his explanations were in a foreign language, so you couldn't be sure that he meant what you thought he'd said. So I had to keep asking him and asking him. He was like that. But there have been other masters who were not like that. But modern people are quite intellectual so we do have lots of complicated questions. And so maybe, because I have a complicated answer, it suits the situation.

There's a kind of irony here. We often go down this path of talking about life here and now, and straight away people go down the avenue of saying they'd like to live here and now tomorrow.

That's because we forget constantly that being in the present is just doing something. So then we sit in the lecture and we worry, "well wait a minute, I'm just listening so I'm not in the present, but I am in the present..." We get confused. So it's ok to be in a room listening to a lecture and thinking, it's ok. But we can still talk about something which is not intellectual and something which is whole. We can talk about it even in the state where we're thinking about it. But we mistake the thinking about it for it itself. But if you keep going to the zendo and coming back, you can see the difference between the two. So a Buddhist lecture is not the same as Zazen. The Buddhist lecture is not intended for us all somehow to be rooted in some special state. It's the attempt to use our communication skills, our language, to discuss what Buddhism is. And the reason we do it is because we've got questions about what Buddhism is. So whenever we have questions we want to find answers. We can make up our own, or we can ask someone else. We can accept an answer or throw it away.

You've said before several times it's pointing towards reality.

Yes. For example there's a difference between a Japanese group and a western group. Japanese people are not so intellectually intense, their culture is not. So if they don't understand something they just think "oh...I don't get that, never mind". They let things pass. But we grab things, and we want to grab it and shake it until we understand it – "what did he mean? That doesn't make sense, nor does that!" We don't have to do that actually, we do it, habitually, but we can stop if we like. So it's ok if you just sit there and let the words flow over you. That's still taking part in the lecture.

We in the West tend to get caught up in thinking, Yoko notices this, particularly in the kitchen. In the kitchen here, you get people washing up and in the middle of drying up two people will suddenly engage in conversation, and they stop moving, they freeze there talking. Then she comes along and she wants to get into the drawer or something, and they don't see her, she has to say "excuse me", to get into the drawer. That kind of thing to Yoko is extraordinarily strange, that people while drying up should be so engrossed in something abstract that they don't notice what is in front of them.

They are caught.

Caught, yes. In the West we're excellent at this, it has advantages to be this way, and it has disadvantages – you can't get into the drawer.

That's observable in breathing, it's observable in myself. I actually stop breathing. I think there is a relationship between presence and breathing.

You see people on TV on discussion programmes with terrible posture. Jeremy Paxman and his team, they seem to twist their bodies when talking. So it's something peculiarly western. I don't mean it's bad or that we should stop it, it's us. But for instance Japanese people are different, they are somehow simpler and straighter. But they are not so excellent at debating and their philosophies are not so excellent. But they are good at getting into drawers, which is important. Coming back to the story:

But *enduring* refers to something that does not change. We create in our minds separate and enduring images of a subject acting on an object,

and since these don't seem to appear and disappear in the normal view of things, we say that they endure.

He's describing the fact that what we create in our mind we impose on the world. We impose an enduring quality on things. If something doesn't seem to disappear we say it endures. If it doesn't seem to come and go we say it's still here.

It is the non-enduring grass, trees, and forests that exist *just at the moment of the present* that are buddha-nature. And the non-enduring body-and-mind of a human being *just at the present moment* is also buddha-nature. And because countries, mountains and rivers are all *just at the present moment*, they are also buddha-nature. The supreme, balanced and right truth, being *just at the present moment*, is buddha-nature. The great state that the Buddha passed into after his death (paranirvana) is buddha-nature, because it too is *just at the present moment*.

He's giving examples of things that are just at the present moment, and non-enduring. What he means by non-enduring is that what is here and now is just here and now. In order to create something enduring, we have to imagine an image of it. We create an image of ourselves in our mind and call it "me". That doesn't mean that there isn't a real me, but the real me I find here at every moment. The enduring image of me that I create sometimes gets a bit static. So I might have a view or image of myself which is not so close to how I am. But I still hold it in my mind.

That means we can never have any idea of anything enduring doesn't it? If everything only exists at the present moment then we have no...we cannot know that anything is enduring. We can't know that this mountain will be there in a thousand years' time.

Yes it will.

That's an idea in your mind, you can't know that though.

Yeah but we can agree it will, can't we?

No I'm not agreeing with you...If you're going to be difficult...

It sounds strange to say that we don't know that the mountain is going to be there in a thousand years. Of course we all do. But it depends what we mean by "know". We believe it's going to be there.

The world might end though, one of those things might hit the Earth. So we don't know, it might happen tomorrow. We think it probably will and we even hope it will. But we can't know.

It's a kind of probability.

It's connected by the way in which human beings view the world, and the way we view the world is to agree that it's an enduring world we live in. We all agree on that, although it's not always true. When it isn't true we usually get a big shock. But without agreeing on it we can't plan. Two cats don't need to agree that the world is going to be here tomorrow, unless they plan to meet tomorrow. But if we plan to meet tomorrow, we need to have an agreement that the world is enduring, otherwise we can't function.

Those narrow-minded people who follow only intellectual Buddhism or only material Buddhism, scholars of the Tripitaka who teach only from sutras and commentaries, and similar people will feel astonished or afraid on hearing Master Daikan's words, and might doubt their truth. But people like that are not real Buddhists, and they lead us away from the truth.

So this whole thing about being at the present moment, to discuss it is very weird really, very bizarre. But if we don't discuss the bizarre nature of where we are and what we're doing, we can never find the answer. Spiritual religions find the answer with even more bizarre explanations which we've heard for so long that they don't seem bizarre to us. To me, the idea that there is some abstract being that's controlling all of us from somewhere else, and that this being is everything, is bizarre. It's more bizarre than these texts. When we first read these pages it sounds strange. But if we compare it with the texts of spiritual religions it's not really so strange. Maybe reality itself is bizarre.

Now we start a new story. This is about the great Buddhist master, Nagarjuna. This story is of Nagarjuna giving a talk. The audience was not comprised of his regular disciples, but a general assembly, many of whom would possibly have been non-Buddhists, and some of whom would have studied different Buddhist philosophies. Although the story is not so complete, it seems that Master Nagarjuna was explaining Buddhism to them, and that they were engrossed because for the first time they heard words which struck them powerfully. When we hear explanations of reality, sometimes, they strike us because we intuitively know it already. So if we listen to someone giving a Buddhist talk, we can be powerfully struck by what is being said and when we're struck like this, the situation can become a kind of oneness. This happened during Master Nagarjuna's talk, and some people wanted to record this and to represent what had happened. They did this by using a metaphor of a moon – pictures were painted afterwards of Nagarjuna as though he were a full moon. There were many pictures hung in temples of Master Nagarjuna giving his talk as the moon. Master Dogen came across such pictures when he was visiting China hanging in the temple halls. When he asked the monks in the temples what it meant, none of them could give an explanation. So here he discusses this in some detail.

The Buddha's fourteenth descendant was called Nagarjuna. In Chinese, he is known as Ryuju, or Ryumo. He came from the west of India, but went to live in the south.

There isn't much known about Nagarjuna in fact, except that he was the fourteenth descendant from the Buddha, and that his name means Dragon Tree. So the Chinese names all contain the word "ryu" which means dragon in Japanese or Chinese.

But most of the people in the south sought happiness just in their everyday secular activities. So he explains the subtle teachings of the Buddha to them.

Seeking happiness just in our everyday activities suggests just simple secular people, going down the pub for a drink, going to the cinema, taking the kids out and so on. So they weren't very religious people or strong seekers of the truth. He explains the subtle teachings of the Buddha to them.

People who come to listen to him say, "the most important thing is to seek happiness in secular things. But this master only teaches us about the importance of buddha-nature!"

So they think, as maybe we feel sometimes, fed up with hearing about buddha-nature and all this, let's get out for a walk.

To this, Master Nagarjuna replies, *"if you want to see buddha-nature, you must get rid of selfish pride."*

He's suggesting that they are proud of their own way of life and even though they come to listen to him, they don't want to get rid of that pride and ask him directly what it is he's talking about. They just want to say "you only talk about buddha-nature" but they don't want to ask what it is he is talking about.

People ask him, *"is buddha-nature big or is it small?"* To this he replies, *"buddha-nature is neither big nor small, neither wide nor narrow, it neither brings happiness nor reward, it does not die and it is not born."*

These words suggest the nature of buddha. They suggest a nature which is not discriminative. And that suggests a state where we're not thinking or evaluating things. When we are evaluating things, we decide that this thing is bigger or smaller than this thing, something is wide or narrow, that makes me happy, that makes me rich. But in the simple state in which we're not evaluating or discriminating, there is buddha-nature.

When they hear this excellent teaching, they all manifest the will to the truth for the first time. Then Master Nagarjuna, sitting on his seat in the lecture hall, manifesting his own body just at it is, appears as complete and whole as the full moon. And those listening to his talk only hear the truth he is teaching, losing all consciousness of his physical presence.

This is just describing the situation in the lecture hall, everyone is rooted to the spot hearing these excellent teachings from Master Nagarjuna. And where it says, "sitting on his seat in the lecture hall manifesting his own body just as it is": it was customary for monks and masters to sit on a seat which was raised and which had arms on it. They would sit in Zazen on this seat. So it wasn't a chair as we think of it, but a little platform. In some old Chinese paintings of Buddhist masters you can see them sitting on a wicker chair with little arms, that's the seat, with the zafu on top. So he's sitting there in the Zazen position explaining the truth to them. They're riveted, to them he appears "as complete and whole as the full moon". The full moon was a very powerful image for people in those days, they would have seen the full moon quite a lot more than we do. "And those listening to his talk only hear the truth he is teaching, losing all consciousness of his physical presence". That suggests the kind of atmosphere in the hall.

In the audience is a man called Kanadeva, who comes from a wealthy family.

Kanadeva eventually became Nagarjuna's successor.

He says to the audience, *"have you ever seen someone in the state that the master is manifesting now?"* The audience reply, *"this state is something our eyes have never seen, our ears have never heard, our minds have never known, and our bodies never experienced."* Kanadeva says, *"here the master is fully manifesting buddha-nature for us. How can we recognise this? Because it is said that the imminent and balanced state of a buddha shows the fullness of the moon, and like the full moon, his nature is transparent and bright. The meaning of buddha-nature is*

clear. At this, the form of the full moon disappears, and the master appears on his seat.

Now in the story, it might be interpreted that the master literally turns into a full moon, then turns back into a person again. This interpretation was passed on, and Master Dogen is criticising it.

He recites the following verse:

***My body manifests the fullness of the moon
To show you what a buddha is.
There is no set way to teach the truth,
And the efficacy of these teachings is beyond words and images.***

We should remember that the true efficacy of Buddhist teachings is beyond what can be conveyed by words and images, and there is no set way to teach the truth. Master Nagarjuna explained buddha-nature to many people near and far, innumerable times and this is just an example. ***“If you want to see buddha-nature, you must get rid of selfish pride.”*** Do not fail to study the principle contained in these words. The words do not mean that you cannot see buddha-nature; they mean that getting rid of selfish pride *is* seeing buddha-nature. Selfishness comes in many forms and there are many varieties of pride. There may also be many ways to *get rid of* them, but they are all ways of *seeing* buddha-nature. Here, remember *seeing* means to look at something with the eyes.

Master Dogen is explaining that buddha-nature was in front of these people in the form of Master Nagarjuna. But their pride had been preventing them from seeing buddha-nature right in front of them. And so they were asking questions about it.

I’m going to stop there. Let’s finish a bit early.

Thank you.