

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2005

Talk on Master Dogen's Bussho

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Shall we continue with the chapter, or would you rather have something else?

Michael, could I just ask one question. Master Dogen talks about these stupid people, I wonder why he...does he ever write about compassion? Does he write about these people in any other terms?

Compassion? No he doesn't write about compassion, no. Well he does, in two of the later chapters of the Shobogenzo, as one of the aspects of the Buddhist character. But not generally no.

I just wondered, that's what I picked up before, this stinging, it seems a rather scathing commentary on people with no understanding. I fear I'm also quite judgmental, although I like to think I'm not, I am. He doesn't say anything else about people other than that stupid people don't understand, in that way? He doesn't write about it in any other context?

You mean he's not kind to them?

Yes that's what I mean.

He is kind to them.

Well, by giving them the opportunity of hearing...

No, by being himself. So if we think we can be compassionate to someone else, what we usually do is to try and be how we think it's best to be to comfort them, or something like that.

Or what would make us feel better.

Or what would make us feel better, it's very difficult to work out what that is. Master Dogen is always himself, so if he feels that what people say is really stupid, he says so. If he feels that what people teach is really good, he says so. The common Buddhist idea of compassion doesn't come up in Master Dogen's teachings. But it comes up in Christianity a lot so people can find that if they want it. Compassion is one aspect of the natural state of a human being. If we're in our normal, natural human state then we can't help being compassionate at times.

Presumably when he's talking about stupid people he's just talking about, he's not talking about everybody, he's just talking about some people who...

Yes he's always specific, he says the stupid people who believe that the spirit goes out of the body when you die, things like that. He always criticising people who believe something which is ridiculous. So he calls them stupid. If they're Buddhist monks he calls them mad dogs, or something like that.

Where did we get to?

The Venerable Kanadeva, who became the Master's successor, recognised clearly that the Master was manifesting the fullness and completeness of the moon, recognised that he was fully manifesting existence, recognised this as the nature of a buddha, and recognised is as the body of a buddha.

So Master Kanadeva recognised his master's state.

Although there were many students who studied personally with Master Nagarjuna and learned the whole of his teachings, none were as excellent as Kanadeva. The Venerable Kanadeva was worthy to share the Master's seat just as Mahakasyapa did the Buddha's, and his teachings were able to guide Master Nagarjuna's students in addition to his own.

I think it says in the early writings that Gautama Buddha made room on his seat for his disciple Mahakasyapa, he shared his seat with him. Master Nagarjuna's students were able to benefit from hearing what Kanadeva said.

He received the essential teachings of Buddhism, the supreme and great truth, in exactly the same way as the Venerable Mahakasyapa did on Vulture Peak, and took his rightful seat in the order.

Vulture Peak is the place where Gautama Buddha was said to have given many of his talks. There may even have been some kind of building there I suppose.

It's a very small place actually, it's like a little point, it wouldn't hold many people.

Nagarjuna had many students in the period before he embraced the Buddha's truth, at which time he left them all behind, together with those non-Buddhist theories.

Master Nagarjuna was already well known as a philosopher before he started to follow Buddhism. He gathered quite a few students with his philosophical teachings. I don't know what his teachings were, there is very little known about Master Nagarjuna, but evidently he was a teacher before he became a Buddhist. Those students that he taught were said to have claimed that they knew what he was teaching, after he became a Buddhist they kind of attached themselves to him even though he had changed his views. So he left them all behind, together with the non-Buddhist theories he was teaching.

He personally passed on the essence of the teachings only to Kanadeva, who became the authentic successor to the universal truth that the Buddha taught. But there still remained groups of people who claimed that they were the successors to the truth that Master Nagarjuna taught. They produced commentaries and interpretations which they claimed were written by him, although they were in fact forgeries. The writings of these groups, all of whom Master Nagarjuna had forsaken long ago, continue to disturb many people. And we, as students of the Buddha's teachings, should be clear that anything that was not passed on by Kanadeva cannot be the authentic teachings of Master Nagarjuna.

So what Master Dogen is saying here is in fact that the teachings passed on are more authentic than written teachings. He's affirming the fact that Buddhism is passed on from teacher to student. And of course writings are valuable, but he puts priority on the teachings that Master Nagarjuna passed on to his student

Kanadeva and says that some of the writings attributed to Master Nagarjuna weren't written by him at all. That's quite a claim to make, and it's puzzling to hear that, how can he make that claim, how can he know? Well because Master Dogen believed in Zazen, he believed in what he'd learned from his master. His master told him something very simple, he said only believe what I tell you and teach your students what I tell you. And so Master Dogen looked at what other people were saying were Nagarjuna's teachings, and in those teachings he could find nothing of what he'd received. So he said very straightforwardly they can't be his teachings. That's an assertion which we can't prove, but it's definitely something that we can assert. Without evidence we can still assert it, we can read a book that might have been written by Master Nagarjuna and state that it's impossible that he could have written it. Then wait for the flack.

It's interesting, in the context of Ralph saying that he mistrusted words, because there are a lot of stories aren't there of masters asking for whatever, asking for an explanation of reality, and if the students uses their master's words then they won't affirm that. The student has to find his own words and express their own understanding. Therefore it's not a verbal transition, it's not located in the area of words.

It comes through words, but it's beyond the words. But it comes through words, it doesn't come through something else. Our understanding comes through words but what we understand is not the words. In those masters refusing to answer, to give their students affirmation if they were using set phrases they'd learned from someone else, that's real compassion. You can find lots of instances of compassion in Master Dogen's writing but he doesn't write about it as such as being compassionate. To leave someone to find their own words instead of giving them yours is compassionate. Tough love.

You should say that they should only find their own teachings as well rather than do what my master told me. Maybe you have to give them rope to hang themselves, rather than saying you've got to study and practice this.

Nobody has got to practice and study this, no, I agree absolutely. Nobody has got to listen to me for example. But I insist on what I say. As Mike said, there are several koan stories where a student says "Master, tell me what is right" and the master replies that if he did so, the student would never be able to find the words for himself, or something like that. That sounds quite unkind, but is in fact compassionate.

And we, as students of the Buddha's teachings, should be clear that anything that was not passed on by Kanadeva cannot be the authentic teachings of Master Nagarjuna. This conclusion is the right one because it is based on belief in the authenticity of the teachings passed on directly from one person to another person. But many people accept those theories, although they are obviously phoney. It is very sad and a cause for regret that many people are stupid enough to insult the wisdom of the buddhas in this way.

So there he's found some stupid people. It's quite interesting, we feel there's something wrong if someone asserts a belief in an authenticity which can't be proven. And especially since a lot of Buddhist writings have been claimed by scholars. Scholars have claimed them as their own, and set around those writings the rules of scholarship – you must be able to prove this and you must be able to do this and that. But there is the simple act of affirming that something is true because you heard it from somebody who you believe knows what he's talking about.

Belief is a very strange thing, we think that in modern terms the word belief means some kind of trusting in an idea but actually belief is far deeper than that. We all have belief, if we believe in God that's a belief, if we believe there's no god, that's a belief, if we don't believe in any religion that's a belief. Simple belief is not only an idea or a spiritual characteristic, it's something far deeper than that. Real belief has the power to direct our actions so when we believe in something we can direct our actions from the belief. This is a very strange characteristic of human beings but very powerful. So Islamic fundamentalists who believe that they are fighting for God's truth and will go to heaven can kill themselves and other people quite straightforwardly. That kind of belief is not the kind that... believing in crystals or ley lines or whatever, but a much more fundamental belief. And we all have a fundamental belief, everybody has. We might have the fundamental belief that nothing is worth trusting, in that case our lives are usually quite directionless. If someone has a belief that nothing is really worth believing in, that belief itself directs their life, but it doesn't give them any direction so they are constantly looking around. But if you have a belief in something clear then your life goes in a particular direction, your actions come out of that belief. So belief is not a mental thing, it's mental and physical.

The effort that we need to put into effortless Zazen, to sit without intention, but at the same time you need strong direction to actually sit there.

Yes, so we can taste belief in Zazen, that's belief, we don't call it that, we think belief is something far shallower. The reason that we sit in Zazen even though we don't quite know why, and wonder why, something keeps us doing it is that we have something in our body and mind that gives us the direction.

So if we say we find something to believe in at some point in our life, does that mean we find something to do or follow or be interested in that aligns itself with our fundamental belief, or do we find something that we then start to believe in and form our belief? So do we have a fundamental belief?

I think all human beings have a very fundamental simple belief in humanity, in the normality of human beings, in the ability of human beings to be truly human, but we cover it up. We say we believe in this thing or that thing, or we believe in a particular god or way of life. But underneath if we didn't all have a basic belief in humanity, humanity couldn't exist, we would all fall apart. So I think we all have that at a very basic level but we don't normally call it belief.

So then if we find one kind of Buddhism or another, or one kind of religion or another, or science and we believe in it, that's because it represents our idea of humanity?

Or resonates with it. It resonates with our feeling...it resonates with our selves, not with an idea, but with our humanity itself or with reality itself. So we often find that things we can accept and believe in somehow seem to be familiar to us. It's like uncovering something in ourselves rather than putting something on top of ourselves.

So why do some people find belief in Zen Buddhism for example and others find it in vision quest, or Shamanism or Christianity or fundamental Islam?

Well Master Dogen would say that those other people are stupid. He would say that they are shallow, he would say that they are looking for superficial belief. But if we uncover our true selves, our buddha-nature, then our buddha-nature has

the direction or belief. I can't think of another word to use, belief doesn't sound suitable.

Have you told any fundamentalist muslims that they are mad dogs?

No. If we believe something then it can direct our actions. So the same power directs a fundamental muslim that directs Master Dogen saying that these can't be the authentic teachings of Master Nagarjuna. And one phase of that kind of assertion sounds arrogant. But the other face is that if we don't assert what we fundamentally feel then we can't assert the direction of our lives. If we say well maybe this maybe that...If we go into a judo match and have that attitude we don't get any result. We have to assert what we believe in, so we have to find what we believe in. If we find what we believe in we can assert what we believe in. When we assert what we believe in we give ourselves direction.

A problem for us in the modern world is that we've lost our belief, Christianity used to give everyone in western society a strong enough belief to direct their lives. Society was quite ordered even when I was a child, Sunday school, church. Now Christianity has become weak, so I as a child couldn't believe it, I tried, it didn't resonate at all. We've lost our belief and we're all searching for one. We think that belief is outside of us but actually we're looking for what is outside that we hear that resonates with something very fundamental in us, which is our belief in humanity.

When you find those ways of expressing what's internal or what resonates with you, is that...in a way using words with the un-split self...

Yes. So we express ourselves. I used to teach Maths, and when I taught I didn't express myself, there was no passion in my words. But when I teach Buddhism, my words somehow don't come from my brain, they come from out of me. That feels completely different. The words express me. That's a kind of resonance.

It's a western ideal, of a liberal intellectual who knows a great deal about everything, that it's all knowledge, none of it based on belief.

Religion and consumerism makes us feel bad about ourselves.

Only we make ourselves feel bad. We have to take complete responsibility for feeling bad about ourselves.

We have a choice now, but I didn't...we're sat here in Britain studying an eastern religion, you know, and before the war people didn't have choices in their religion. They had to align themselves with the religion that was in their country or they got persecuted. We have choice now and that's difficult for us now.

And their choices were more vital to them, no-one's going to burn us at the stake.

Maybe we find our belief more easily if someone is going to burn us at the stake. We either find the guts to go ahead or we retreat. In the modern world we can kind of try a bit of this or that, that's a different level of belief completely.

I think if you look in these historical changes in religion you can find some kind of kernel of inspiration that was there for people and is what we find by looking at Buddhism, and that somehow resonates with us and makes us feel it's the right thing for us to be doing. And I think there is something for those people at that time.

Initially, before it got too big and controlled by...I think in Christianity there was a great paranoid belief and fervour, but it got taken over by the Roman Empire.

But it continually...the rise of Protestantism in Scotland was not an easy thing, that was because there was some kind of liberation that people found in it.

We don't often talk about resonance, people talk about how you should get there or become a better person.

Resonance is outside, it's not in our mind. Resonance is with our whole body and mind.

Like the moon, you were saying about the moon earlier, it's like that.

Yes. So in a sense what I'm saying is that there is no difference between a muslim fundamentalist and Master Dogen, but they are asserting different things. But the power to assert them is the same. The power to assert, human beings' power to assert their belief is the same in all human beings. It depends what we believe in. What we believe in is very important, and there are two aspects to it: there's a physical and a mental aspect.

In Buddhism we establish our belief by practicing Zazen, that gives our body a certain state. And that state is part of the belief. We study Buddhist philosophy or theory which is intellectual, and that directs us in the same direction as the physical state we get in Zazen.

So there are two halves to Buddhism and both are helping us uncover our fundamental nature, which is where our belief is. And that nature is called here buddha-nature.

The Venerable Kanadeva, pointing to Master Nagarjuna manifesting his own body just as it is says *here the master is fully manifesting buddha-nature for us. How can we recognise this? Because it is said that the immanent and balanced state of a buddha shows the fullness of the moon, and like the full moon, the essence of buddha-nature is transparent and bright.*" And among the many people of the past and present who have seen and heard the Buddha's truth that has spread through all parts of the Universe, who has ever said that buddha-nature is the body manifesting itself just as it is? The Venerable Kanadeva is the only person in the Universe who has said this. The others just said that buddha-nature is not something that can be seen, heard, or recognised intellectually, and so on. The reason they did not say so is because they did not know that the body manifesting itself just as it is, is buddha-nature. Our ancestors never withheld this teaching from them, it is just that they did not take in what they were being taught. Since they never learned how to realise things with their whole beings, they could not understand this principle. Watching from a distance the immanent and balanced state of a buddha showing the fullness of the moon, they prostrated themselves to something their eyes had never seen before.

The "they" refers to the audience.

"His nature is transparent and bright, and the meaning of buddha-nature is clear". Manifesting his own body just as it is was his way to actually show them what the body of a buddha looks like. How could there be a buddha or even two buddhas who don't manifest their own bodies just as

they are? The body of a buddha is a body manifesting itself. Buddha-nature is a body manifesting itself.

Master Dogen is using words to tell us the nature of a buddha and the nature of a buddha is a person uncovered, a person as they are. When we practice Zazen, because we drop off all pretensions, all ideas, we sit just as we are. We might be sitting with pain in the legs so we might shift around, or it might be peaceful. All those buddhas are manifest themselves just as they are. Not trying to be anybody is to be ourselves. Master Dogen also says that we don't need to realise that fact... damn that's just what I wanted! I wanted to see myself being like this bloke's talking about! He says it doesn't matter if you don't notice it, just to be yourself without noticing. The obvious times when we are ourselves without noticing are when we are doing things, when we're acting. When we're acting we can't notice ourselves, when we're busy there's not time to look at what we're doing, just we're doing it. When we're acting we are ourselves, there's no separate us with time to cover up or put any front on what we're doing, just we do it.

When that theme, what we were talking about this morning, how do you abandon yourself without telling yourself you're going to abandon yourself?

You just do it, you step off the top off a hundred foot pole. Very clear examples are for instance, I always bring in skiing somehow, you're at the top of a ski run, you rock backwards and forwards then at some point how do they decide, are they going to rock back again or go forward? Then at some point they just go. We do that all the time, crossing the street, we don't stand there deliberating for ever about it, it's an act. All our acts are like that in the instant. Most of our acts are so familiar to us we don't see them like that.

Getting up in the morning is like that.

Yes, you lie there thinking shall I get up or lie here for 10 minutes. Then suddenly you're up. We do it, all humans beings do it, but we cover it up. We're taught that our brain, our thinking comes before our action. And of course we do think before we act, but we believe that our thinking somehow is the engine of our action. But our action is just action, we think before we act and we think about what we're going to do, but at the moment, all we do is just push ourselves off of the top of the ski run, step off the pole.

That suggests that every instant is like that.

Every instant is like that.

No matter what we might be thinking.

Yes. But we have the power to push ourselves off and then whoa! Go back again. Human beings sometimes act incompletely.

Then in sense there is completeness which encompasses incompleteness?

Everything is always complete, yes.

At another level there is incomplete action, which is what bothers us I suppose.

It's what bothers us. The fact that it bothers us is why we feel incomplete.

I think there's something about that in a DVD, then you can also watch the director's commentary.

Is that what it's like?

It's that kind of, yes, it's a weird experience but it's not watching a film. Like when you're on the ski slope...

What I meant with the example of the ski slope was not to enjoy it, just to act. Not to stop thinking so we can enjoy something, just throw our lives away that's what we do, we die. But if we use this kind of language it sounds strange, but we die and we're reborn. And Ross was telling me that he read something that struck him, written by a Buddhist teacher who said we're like a candle which is burning down, as the candle burns down the flame dies and is reborn at every moment. So it gives you some kind of feeling. Anybody who's been involved in any extreme or competitive sport knows that feeling, you have to throw away your life, or throw away everything to act. And in the extreme situations we remember it, we have a sense of it, but in everyday life we don't. But we're doing it all the time.

Taking decisions in everyday life is not like jumping off the top level on a diving board, it almost sounds as if you're saying we should be forcing ourselves forward to do things.

No I don't mean that, I don't mean taking decisions, I mean the act. The act is different. We have a very deep set pattern of thinking that we take decisions and then we act. So not the taking of decisions, the action, this is at a very much simpler level. Picking up a cup of tea, we pour the tea then at an instant we pick up the tea and at that instant we pick up the tea, we die. We abandon everything else and just for an instant...When we do it in extreme situations we remember that feeling, for instance when we dive into the water for the first time. At that point you throw away everything, so that is obvious to us in extreme situations, what I'm saying is that it's in every situation.

These are our acts, not the decisions, but the acts, the simple acts that make up our life. Whether to turn your head, stand up or sit down, eat, drink. All these are made up of little acts which instantaneously are throwing away everything. It sounds too dramatic, the words make it all too dramatic, this is our problem. My words make it sound too dramatic. Don't trust them.

Things can happen quite quickly, you can often find yourself doing stuff and then your thoughts kind of catch up. You decide to overtake when there's a truck coming and you make the turn, but how did you know you were going to make it?

This might sound stupid but I'm going to say it anyway, I used to race motorcycles, and the feeling of Zazen which I'm just beginning is no different to on occasion, the feeling of flow when you don't think you're riding a motorcycle, you are the motorcycle. 150 miles per hour doesn't feel like 150 miles per hour. Sitting in Zazen is that feeling.

Yes that's it, and racing motorcycles or in my case rock climbing was a way in my case to get rid of my busy mind, so I could be like that. My mind was so busy I had to find something really stupidly dangerous to bring myself into the moment. Other people are much more fortunate.

Can I say something about this idea of completeness, could this be something to do with the fact that even our unbalanced state in Zazen or in the world is also in the present moment?

Yes.

So that present moment encompasses all of it whether we're balanced or not balanced? I wonder if that was what Mike was saying.

(Mike) I'm fascinated by what Mike said in response, that it's our feeling of dissatisfaction which is the separation.

Yes, so we're always in the present, we're always acting, but we cover it up. What we cover it up with is our thinking. That's a psycho-physical state. When our state is such that...I'll explain it by talking about the autonomic nervous system. Effectively we have two nervous systems in the body, or one nervous system with two sub-parts. One is the parasympathetic nervous system and the other is the sympathetic nervous system. They are antagonistic, they act against each other. The sympathetic nervous system makes us think, makes us aggressive, fussy, on edge, it makes us ready to fight. The parasympathetic nervous system makes us passive and decreases our heart rate. These two parts of the nervous system cause our organs to either get ready or to calm down and be passive. These two parts work against each other, they both work at the same time. When they are in balance, then we don't feel too aggressive and we don't feel too passive, we're balanced. But when one is stronger than the other, we might be prone to think a lot, not be able to act simply. In another case we might be prone to be caught by physical pleasure, lie in bed a long time or drink a lot, or eat a lot or have sex, those physical things. So it depends on the balance in our body and it's always changing. So when we practice Zazen we balance those two halves of our autonomic nervous system. We have a state which is neither too active nor too passive. In that state we can and do act more simply, we don't suddenly at the last minute say, "oh I shouldn't do this, oh yes I should", we don't get caught. And that's a physical characteristic as much as a mental one.

So it's a state of our body, it's not through us deciding we're going to act in the moment and be balanced or anything like that, it's down to our physical state.

Is this why posture is so important?

Yes, all the nerves from these two nervous systems come out through gaps between the vertebrae. The parasympathetic nerves come out through the top and the bottom of the spine and the sympathetic nerves come out through the middle. If we sit with a slightly bent posture as we often do in a talk, like Paul is now, if you sit like that for 5 minutes it doesn't have much effect on the body, if you sit like that for half an hour it does. If you sit like that for an hour it has a stronger effect. If we sit in an armchair slumped, after an hour we feel heavier. But if we sit up straight the posture is better. Our posture effects, if we maintain a crooked posture, over a period of time it effects our physical and mental state, very subtly. But everybody knows how it feels when you sit in a chair watching a video for a couple of hours, you feel heavy and uncomfortable. If you sit up straight, although it may be uncomfortable to sit like this you maintain a feeling of lightness. Sitting up straight is important though difficult. Sitting up straight is as much a reason why we act simply as to do with some kind of mental activity.

That's very hard to be...you have talked about when you act then you are unified, but that is only the case if you are 100 percent in that action. If you're having extraneous thoughts to that extent, but others are managing to ignore those

thoughts. But if you are at all caught up in those thoughts you are not 100 percent in your action.

No, but that's the difference between our image of what things should be like and reality. You know, in the kitchen you made those little pastries for the first meal, I guess there's an image of the pastry, with the broccoli in it etc, but what we actually got, all were different, some were burned, some were twisted, that's reality.

Right.

So from the image we create, we put it in the oven and what comes out is not really like, but not really different from the pastry. So life is not like what I'm talking about at all, real life, balance is not like my description. It's sort of like it, it's as near as I can get.

How can you be satisfied if you're not 100 percent into something?

Surely you can't help doing something completely, if I'm playing tennis with my son, I tried an experiment, I tried to think about it, "the ball is coming over the net, I am about to hit the ball" it's absolutely impossible, at some stage you just hit the ball. You can't help doing an action completely.

It's the same as yesterday you kind of talk about acting now but haven't worried about how you're going to do it tomorrow.

The problem we have is that although words can't describe reality, they're almost better than reality. So we look for a reality to match the words and it doesn't. So then we think, "how can we... what does that mean...?" But reality is all there is, so the only pastries we got were the real ones, not the image in the cook book but the real ones, and they were nice. So our actions are all over the place.

I guess you just have to accept it when your Zazen seems pretty crap.

Zazen is never crap. We should accept that even though we think it's crap, it's just Zazen, it's sometimes got burned, sometimes a big piece of broccoli and sometimes a small piece and that's it. That's real Zazen. The other is only an idea, we can never find it. We can never find that idea, this is our problem. So talking about Buddhism creates an idea and that idea itself is an obstruction, but I can't stop talking about it.

Well I can stop.

Thank you very much.