

**Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2007**  
**Talks on Master Dogen's Kuge**  
**By Eido Mike Luetchford**  
**Talk number 4**

In the second paragraph on page three, Master Dogen says something which seems to be strange: although the poem by Gautama Buddha sounds as if "clouded eyes" are something to be got rid of, and when we get rid of clouded eyes we don't see flowers in space, whatever they are; in that second paragraph, before the poem, he seems to say that clouded eyes and flowers in space are OK.

**The truth about the clouded eyes and flowers in space of which the Buddha speaks cannot be perceived by ordinary people or non-buddhists.**

Well, we're OK, because we're all buddhists. So we should be able to perceive the truth of flowers in space.

**But by practicing this flower of emptiness, buddhas and tathagatas receive the robe, the position of teacher and a place to teach, and realise what reality is and receive the benefit.**

So he seems to suggest that buddhist patriarchs somehow need clouded eyes and flowers in space.

**The Buddha indicating reality by picking up a flower and winking at Mahakasyapa was clouded eyes seeing flowers in space.**

I think almost everybody is probably familiar with that story of Gautama Buddha picking up a flower and twirling it, which is said in the scriptures to be Gautama Buddha signalling that Mahakasyapa had understood something.

**The essence of Buddhism and the serene and clear mind that are passed on to the present without interruption embody clouded eyes seeing flowers in space. Awakening to reality, being in the serene and peaceful state, embodying reality, returning to our original nature, are just a flower in space opening some of its petals.**

So he seems to be saying that it's OK. He seems to be disagreeing with the simple interpretation of Gautama Buddha's poem, and saying that clouded eyes and flowers in space are where it's at. Without them, we can't see what the truth is. What do you think?

(Silence)

Just as I thought. (Laughs)

*I think what he's saying is that what we do is, we replace one concept with another. For example, when I heard about "flowers in space", it was a new concept, which I thought was a better picture than the one I already had. So what we do is, we go through our lives adding concepts and taking a better concept, and we have this whole process, which is questionable. But taking that concept, the concept of "flowers in space", it's still conceptual.*

But you think he's saying that conceptual thinking is OK? That delusions are part of reality?

*(Inaudible comment)*

That kind of ignorant person is still around, because there are still lots of books on Buddhism that say you can get rid of all your delusions, get rid of all your attachments, get rid of all your desires, and enter some serene and peaceful state. And, whereas I dare not contradict the experience of somebody else, from my point of view I feel that's utterly impossible. Not only is it impossible, I don't want to do it. To me, what he's saying in that first paragraph is, there's these funny people around who have imagined that there's something to be got rid of, and when we get rid of it everything will be OK. And what he says in the second paragraph is, what they're trying to get rid of is all there is. And he may be, if we go back to what we originally talked about Kant, he may also be affirming that the phenomena that we see around us - all the phenomena, not only physical but mental, too - are all real. There's lots of people who have said that they weren't real. There's a whole school of Buddhism that started to say that 'everything is empty', so what we see around us is some kind of illusion and, actually, all is emptiness. And they used the word *sunya*, or *sunyata*, in Sanskrit, which was translated into Chinese and Japanese as *ku*. Those people interpret the Buddha's poem as meaning we can get rid of all these worldly things and enter into *nirvana*, a pure and peaceful world, where all these objects which are delusions don't exist. And he's saying, 'All these illusions are our life. The fact that we're all sitting here, thinking, making up thoughts, saying our thoughts, thinking again, reading a bit, and so on, is reality. There's not another reality.' So, he's denying lots of things there. He's denying that there's another state different from the life that we see, another world different from the world that we're in. And, especially, he may be denying the teaching of 'emptiness', 'the world is empty', which is a kind of nihilism. What do you think?

*To me, it's also a kind of reaction to the sort of Zen that was prevalent in China, which was (inaudible).*

(Inaudible) and you can get some kind of special state. And not only that, then everything that's written and spoken about becomes pointless. The only thing that has value is attaining this state of emptiness.

*And the other way as well – mental constructs are sort of clouds, stopping you seeing reality. That sort of idea was ...*

Yes, that's right. 'Mental constructs stop you seeing reality.'

*Yes, so then you set up a sort of war, between 'real reality' and ...*

And 'mental reality'.

*I've been getting mystified all day about the content of this talk. What you're saying to me now makes sense as an interpretation of what he might mean. Was there a very strict demarcation in Dogen's day about buddhists and non-buddhists? I mean, did they believe that they were the elect, as it were?*

Dogen certainly thought so. And the reason he thought so was because he valued people who were searching for the truth about the world. He was brought up in a court, the royal court, and his parents were part of the royal court, and it was all fighting for position and fighting for power and fighting for money. And then the common people in Japan, in medieval times, were serfs (inaudible). ... the true way to live, they were interested in money, power, and so on. So, he seems, very often in the *Shobogenzo*, quite venomously to criticize ordinary people, or certain kinds of monks who were not pursuing the truth but pursuing something else. I suppose that's what it was like then.

*So is he saying that Buddhist practice isn't about getting rid of anything? If I'm delusional, that's what's going on right now.*

You can say so.

*So, if I'm sat there, lost in thought, I am actually sat there, at that moment, lost in thought? That's what's going on?*

Well, yes, when you put it like that and we think about it, it sounds right. But when we're lost in thought, we're lost in thought.

*So, it's about realizing that?*

But we can't realize while we're lost in thought. This is the point. We can't get rid of being lost in thought; but we can notice gradually what kind of beings we are. We're beings who sometimes get lost in thought, and sometimes reappear into the real world again. And that's the way we are. But, if we try and get rid of thinking, or try and get rid of concepts, we can never even talk about what's real and what's valuable.

*It reminds me of Blake's poem, roughly, where he talks about 'seeing with, not through, the eye, which was born in the night, and perished in the night, whilst the soul slept in beams of light.' And then the great painting where you have a painting of a view out of the window, and the painting is of the view that's beyond the window, so that one minute you're looking through the window and the next minute you're looking at the painting in front of you. Do you know what I'm talking about? I thought that what he's talking about is that "flowers in space" - as manifestations of various things happening in the real world, in the Universe - is the Universe, moment by moment, second after second. And, also, delusion is "flowers in space", which is us looking at images of the mind, as if they were reality outside of ourselves. And that sometimes one blocks out the other. So, sometimes you're not looking through the eye, you're looking with the eye. And when I sit in meditation, I get flowers in space, I get this kind of effect ... It's like you see things in front of you which aren't there. It's actually a phenomenon in meditation for me. And sometimes it vanishes, and you see things as it is, just a moment as it is. So you're no longer looking with the eye, you're looking through the eye. Do you see what I'm trying to say?*

Kind of.

*I thought that's what it was about. I thought it was ...*

And what do you think now?

*Well, I don't think it's that kind of writing that you can pin down into nice little categories at all.*

Nor do I. I'm interested in why you said you misunderstood, and what it was you said you thought it was about.

*Yes, I just saw it a different way, but it's pretty much the same thing.*

OK. We all have our own interpretations. Letting people talk, today, about this paragraph, it's amazing to me, and must be amazing to everybody, how we all read into one sentence very, very different meanings. And even if I give my meaning, we still fit that into our own meaning. And even if you say your

meaning, I fit that into my meaning. And this is the way we are, isn't it, really? I sometimes feel, 'Oh, I guess everybody must have understood what I'm trying to say.' But I don't think it's true! (Laughs)

*(Inaudible comment)*

Filtering, yes. Well, that's fine. That's the way we are. 'Mm. Maybe he's talking about that. Maybe ...' That kind of attitude somehow leaves a scent of a flower; but if we try and grab the flower, it's gone. 'Oh dear, the petals have fallen off!' That's my feeling.

*Another thing we do is we look at it in the context of the modern world. This was written in the thirteenth century, and some of the sutras go back two and half thousand years. (Inaudible) I'm putting a modern interpretation on to something which Dogen wouldn't have known about.*

*(Inaudible comment)*

*I'm reminded, sitting here looking out the window, about the koan story about the mountain. You know, at first you see a mountain; and then you come to understand in practice that it's a concept, a conceptual mountain, and then it's not a mountain anymore; and then somebody says, 'What's that out there?', and you go to answer them - you can't say, 'It's a pair of slippers,' so you say, 'Well, it's a mountain.'*

*What's new is what you were saying about the value-judgments. I hadn't really ...*

I haven't mentioned value-judgments; but you mentioned it twice.

*Well, I thought that's what the conclusion was, sorry.*

No, I didn't mention value-judgments once. You've mentioned it twice. But you just said to me, 'what you said about value-judgments'. That's very interesting, isn't it?

*Well, yes. What I mean is, the fact that ... I didn't mean that you'd said value-judgments ...*

No, I'm not making a value-judgment.

*... but the fact that I tend to make value-judgments about what is, sort of, a more pure form of perception compared with what is illusory, what is conceptual. I think what you've said is quite liberating - the interpretation that we shouldn't flog ourselves over the head over the mistake of illusion, or the mistake of perceptions. You know, that we're chasing this pure state. Because it's quite exhausting, that kind of thing.*

Oh, give it up!

(Laughter)

When we sit in Zazen, what makes us clear is nothing to with our mental person, really. It's the posture. It's the actual effect of sitting straight on our nervous system. So we can look at it from a completely physical side. So when our posture is right, we are clear.

*(Inaudible comment)*

Ah, that's the kind of thing we do, though, isn't it? You say, 'tons of stuff, too much to look at' – that's, and I'm not criticising, that's actually your imagination. We say, 'tons of stuff to look at,' and 'I felt ...' – that's imagination, isn't it? I mean, I do the same thing – 'I've got loads of work to do today, and it's pressing down on me.' Then I start, and a couple of hours later I feel the mountain of work disappeared somewhere. It's imaginary, I created it. And the 'tons of stuff' is the same thing.

*Well, it's in your imagination at that moment ...*

Yes, in that moment.

*... but, it's still things that are there.*

Yes, but they're not anywhere, really, They're in our imagination.

*(Inaudible comment)*

*So it's the imagination because it's not happening at that very moment?*

Yes.

*Whereas, if it's actually happening, it's there?*

It's real, yes.

*(Inaudible comments)*

Ah, not about something that happened to me, but a generalisation. 'If we try and grab a flower ...' – so, to be delicate. We can't grab a flower because there is no flower, because what I'm talking about isn't flowers. But, at the same time, what shall I call them?

*So it wasn't with your hand?*

Well, what shall I call it, then, that I grabbed a flower with? If I say 'I grabbed the flower with my' - what shall I say? – 'grabbed the flower with my mind.' 'But you can't grab a flower with your mind!' So we're stuck with these words, and we can't get rid of them. And we're stuck with our symbols, and our metaphors, and our pictures, and our flowers.

*And they're good!*

Yes, very good.

*I've been listening to this today, more and more, and where I've got to, where I am with this, is just like, 'What!?'*

Right. That's alright. ... Well, you're not telling me very much in saying this.

*Yeah, I know, but that's what I'm thinking. It's just quite ... well, 'What!?' That's all there is to it.*

Does that mean, 'I don't know what this means, it doesn't make any sense to me! It's a load of bloody rubbish!?'

*I'm not sure if it's that.*

Oh, that's OK!

(Laughter)

Well, maybe it is, maybe you're right.

*It might be a load of bloody rubbish, I just don't know any more. So I've just sort of given up.*

OK. And did you say that it feels relaxed to have given up? Well, that's nice.

*Yeah, it feels alright. But I don't know if 'relaxed' is the right word for it. I just feel like I've come to the end of the line with it.*

Right, OK. I can't help you really, but I'm quite happy ...

*Yeah, I don't know if I want to be helped! I don't know what it is, but it just feels like the writing has kind of ... I just don't have the inclination to follow it any more. I don't know what I want to do, but I don't feel like following it anymore, really.*

That's OK. If you don't want to follow it anymore you can go for a walk or something.

*Maybe I will. I just feel like I've got this place where it's like, 'What!?!'*

You're fed up with it!

(Laughter)

'We're talking all this rubbish about flowers and space and emptiness and all that. What's it all about!'

*(Inaudible)*

Yes. So, what shall we talk about?

*That's just me! You know, I'm not saying that's the same for any of the others.*

No, it's very valid. You know, 'What's this all going on about? We're only sitting in a room on the banks of Loch Lomond.' What more can I say?

*Go on.*

Go on? Well, let's see if it makes this more 'What!?!' or less 'What!?!'

(Laughter)

**Sakyamuni Buddha said**

- and we've seen the poem -

***It is as if a person who has clouded eyes  
Sees flowers in empty air/space;***

*After the sickness in their clouded eyes is cured  
The flowers in empty air/space vanish.*

No scholars have clearly understood what was being said here. Because they do not know what space is, they do not know what flowers in space are. And because they do not know what flowers in space are, they do not know who has clouded eyes, they cannot decide who has clouded eyes, they have not met someone with clouded eyes, and they have never experienced clouded eyes themselves. By meeting a person who has clouded eyes, we can come to know what flowers in space are, and then we can see flowers in space.

Once we have seen flowers in space, we can also see how flowers in space vanish. The idea that once flowers in space vanish, they will never reappear is a flawed belief. But if we don't see flowers in space, what is there to see? If you only know flowers in space as something to get rid of, then you will never come to know the profound matter that follows from flowers in space, or the process by which they germinate, blossom, and fall free.

What!?

(Laughter)

Yes, it's perfect!

Among the scholars of the day, most think of space as the sky – the place where yang-energy resides, and a void in which the sun, moon and stars are suspended. For example, they probably think that *flowers in space* refers to colourful shapes floating along in a clear sky like clouds; like floating blossoms being blown here and there by the wind. They do not realise that the constituents of all created things and the things created by them, all that is known in the Universe: our original state of balance, our original nature, and so on, are all called flowers in space.

Does that make any sense?

*I think he's saying that everything is our real life. That through the difficulties ... well, not 'through' the difficulties, they are part of our life. Without them ... We somehow need to accept not just the nice things in life. All the different aspects of life are all very much part ... That is everything, and that is the reality of our lives right now, and there is no escape from it.*

Is that positive to you? Encouraging?

*I think it's very, very positive.*

Oh, that's good.

*And joyful. I mean, I think it's, you know, that we have everything, we are everything, we don't need to chase anything.*

*I think his repeating this "flowers in space" – it's such an out-there sort of ... You can't grasp it, can you, this thing "flowers in space". And he keeps referring to it as the central part of the discussion of what he's trying to talk about.*

Well, "flowers in space", to him, is everything. What is everything to us?

*Yes. What he's saying is, 'This is it.' The whole process of creating a flower opening is petals. I mean, it's not a process, it's a whole thing. And it's no different to the way we are, when we look at the world, or think 'This is our life', or wonder 'What's that over there' – it's all part of ... something.*

It's very difficult to say, isn't it? Every thing, each flower in space is everything. 'Every-thing' - so the world, to us, is things, isn't it? But, although the world to us is things – I mean, 'things' is objects, people, and all the things that we've seen, but also all the concepts that come and go in our minds, the things we build up in our minds – all that, are all flowers in space. So, all phenomena are like flowers in space. People might think that they are something to be gotten rid of so we can see the true world above or beneath or behind. They are the world itself. So, the way we perceive the world itself is through phenomena. That's the way human beings perceive, experience, and talk about, think about, the world.

*I'm looking out the window behind you, as I face you just now, and I'm looking at the mountain there. But, as I do so, I'm interpreting the mountain – so that mountain could be 'a bloody irritating, looming mountain', for example. But when I get rid of my imagination, my emotion, the mountain is something else – I'm still looking at it, it hasn't changed, so what is it? It's a mountain!*

Right. I agree. Although I can't see it. I'm looking at my mountain in you.

*(Inaudible question)*

All those are flowers – the real mountain, the mountain in Mike's description, the mountain in my mind that he created, are all flowers blooming.

*What does he call the 'bloody, looming mountain', or the 'terrible, awful mountain'?*

Ah, I don't know.

*(Inaudible comments)*

Is the 'bloody irritating' in the mountain or in you?

*Exactly. (Inaudible)*

*(Inaudible comments)*

### **Furthermore, they**

- that is, the "scholars" who think about reality in order to try to learn about reality, rather than learn what reality is in practice –

**do not know that the constituents of all created things exist because of those things, and they do not know that the material world exists stably because of the existence of the real things in it. They only think that real things exist because of the material world they are in.**

That's a kind of seeing the world as a container, and everything's in it. But Master Dogen says the opposite is true, too. The things that are in the world make up the world. And these scholars:



**They understand that flowers in space exist only when eyes are clouded, and do not see the truth that it is flowers in space that cause clouded eyes to exist.**

Oh, another one! What!?

(Laughter)

I must remember that. I think that's a really good phrase! It's got so much in it, hasn't it!

**Remember, as long as you are following the Buddha's way, when your eyes are clouded, you realise your original nature, you realise something subtle, you are a buddha, a person of the three worlds, transcending the state of buddha. We should not be as stupid as to believe that clouded eyes are to be avoided and that reality is to be found somewhere else. That is a restricted view. If clouded eyes and flowers were delusions, the person attaching to that wrong view must also be a delusion, and the attachment must be a delusion. If all is delusion, we can never establish anything true. If we cannot establish what is true, there is no way that we can assert that clouded eyes and flowers are delusions.**

(Laughter)

*Don't say it, Margaret!*

*I think that's a key statement, isn't it? "We should not be as stupid as to believe that clouded eyes are to be avoided and that reality is to be found somewhere else."*

Oh, yes. What a relief.

*What Dogen's saying here, I think, is that we have our concepts and our faculties to discuss and to pursue the truth, and those include clouded vision, and emotional states, and so on. And we shouldn't be foolish enough to think that we'll escape those things, because we won't. But, the practice of Buddhism manages to put a perspective on those things.*

Yes, it's true, isn't it? And Zazen teaches us that. We can sit in Zazen in the morning and notice, 'I feel kind of thick-headed today,' or we can notice, you know, 'I feel very nice,' or, 'Already, although I haven't started the day yet, I feel pressure.' All these things we notice immediately in Zazen. So we can see what kind of human being we are today. And that's real. And that's very valuable. And also, in realising it, it has some kind of strange effect, sometimes, of releasing our state. Noticing our state sometimes releases it. I'm sure that there's some therapies based on that, and psychologists can talk about that in a little more detail; but, to me, it's quite clear, in Zazen, noticing how we are has some kind of resolving effect.

*(Inaudible comments)*

Yes, we all are, too, aren't we. Sylvia, David, and others, are all trying to say something. But something gets expressed as a sign, doesn't it, in an expressible expression. And, for me, something in this chapter is very strange. It's as if the chapter itself unfolds. So, there's no real way I can go through the chapter and tell you what it means, anyway. I can't do it. If anybody else can do it, I'm quite happy for them to do it. But, for me, something in this chapter unfolds like a

flower. What it is, I don't know. I know what it is for me, I don't know what it is for you.

*There's a quality of compassion that I get from it, which I can't really explain either. And I got that ever since I first picked up his books, picked up his work and looked at it. It's this human compassion, and it's the feeling of increasing sensitivity that's actually the most valuable thing. And that this sort of great idea that you're going to get rid of this and rid of that and rid of the other, is a sort of brutal approach, which I've fallen into many times. And there is a kind of superficial ... I mean, you do get a buzz from it, you know, and you can see all kinds of flowers in space sparking around; but at the end of the day it's this sensitivity and compassion towards yourself and other people in the world around you that this is really speaking to me about. And I can't really explain how, but it sort of, it has that effect.*

*(Inaudible comments)*

*Would you have a completely different experience of this with a different group of people?*

Don't know. But, you know, that flower in space that you just created in your mind, in my mind, and in everybody else's mind, 'me with a different group of people, would it be the same?' - it's a flower, isn't it? Yes, it'd be different, wouldn't it? I couldn't possibly remember what I said this time! (Laughs)

*Would it be close, or would it be different because what people would say would be different, because they're different people?*

It'd be different, yes. Just like Mike may make the same dish at two different retreats - is it the same dish? Well, it is; but it's not. A bit brown round the edges.

*Ah, you noticed!*

*(Laughter)*

*I don't think we're sharing any flowers in space! I think there's twenty-eight of us and we're all sharing twenty-eight flowers, twenty-eight different flowers in space. Because you just don't know what's inside any one of us. What each one of us is seeing is their way of processing the information. And even from, maybe, the scant knowledge of some people, you know what they're concerned with, whether it's doing what needs to be done, or just dealing with reality, or escaping from reality, and so on. That's what's fascinating me about the discussion.*

Yes. We just shared a flower then, didn't we?

*But how do you know (inaudible).*

*(Inaudible comments)*

Well, he was a kind of genius philosopher. And, you know, philosophers are strange people. I mean, you read about the philosophers in this book - Kant, for example, we talked about. The whole of his life he spent writing about what time is, you know. He went out in the morning, walked round the block, went back in, opened his book and started writing. And he went on and on for about sixty years doing that! They're strange beings, aren't they? So, we have to do what we have to do. But it's no more strange than somebody deciding that they're going to pull

a piece of horse-hair across another piece of horse-hair, backwards and forwards, and make noises, and do that for fifty years. So we're all doing strange things. And, yes, Master Dogen's life was very severe, and he lost both his parents when he was a child. I guess he didn't have anything in his life that he could rely on, so he wanted to find out what is true in this world. And he found the practice of Zazen, and he taught that practicing Zazen balances our life.... If you sit regularly, in that posture, it balances you. As a balanced human being, that's it! You don't need to worry about anything! Anything at all. You can do what you want. That's what he says. And that's very liberating. Especially if you compare it with spiritual religions, you know, that say you've got to get rid of the sin you were born with and strive to get up there. All that Dogen says, at heart, is, 'This is the world; it's beautiful. Practice Zazen, and it's yours.' But, because of his own nature, he wrote all this stuff. Poetic and flowery, and sometimes severe, sometimes critical. And he went on and on and on doing it. That was his life. He was true to himself. That was him. We can get a picture of him through his writing.

*I've always understood that he rejected all the sort of paraphernalia of Buddhism, and emphasised just the Zazen. That he rejected, you know, all the robes and all that sort of thing.*

He did wear robes, because he wrote two chapters about how to make them, and how to fold them up when you go to the toilet.

*(Inaudible comments)*

When we has in China, he learned how people in temples looked after their hygiene – they cleaned their teeth with a willow stick, they folded up their clothes, they washed their robes regularly, when they cooked in the kitchen they were careful how they washed the rice and they didn't waste food. All those things, for him, were Buddhism. They didn't exist in Japan, he brought them all back. They didn't have that kind of culture in Japan at that time.

*So, the stuff about washing, and the instructions for the cook, that came from China?*

From China, yes. There's a couple of books about Dogen's life, and one of them quotes a little story, which I guess he must have recorded. When he first came back from China and he went back to Kenninji, to Kennin temple, which is where he was before he left, he was sitting in the kitchen, and the cook was in the kitchen, and somebody, the assistant cook or somebody, was sitting next to him, and they were kind of joking around, you know. And somebody came and said, you know, 'What shall I do with the rice?', and they said, 'Oh, buggger off, we're talking.' And he was absolutely disgusted. And that kind of thing, what he saw in temples in Japan, which was called Buddhism, disgusted him. And that's where you get the strong feeling of his criticism.

*So, was he looking at the pomposity of the religion of the day and actually feeling it was a sacrilege?*

*(Bell rings)*

Thank you very much. Tomorrow, we'll have a kind of open discussion, or whatever, but we won't go on with this chapter anymore, because it's not finished anyway. There's a very nice translation of this chapter, which I think is better than the one in our book, on the Internet. If anybody wants to get it and read it I can tell them where to get it from. It's a Buddhist group in Canada, and the guy there

translates *Shobogenzo* chapters. I just, by chance, found a translation by him, and it's very nice. It doesn't explain, but it's a nice translation.

Thank you very much.

(End of talk)