

Dogen Sangha Winter Sesshin 2007
Talks on Master Dogen's Kuge
By Eido Mike Luetchford
Talk number 5

Today, I thought we'd have an open talk about anything you'd like. But I'd just like to start off with something that I'd like to say, just an observation of my own experience and the experience of others.

When we come on a retreat, sometimes we feel very happy, sometimes we feel quite lonely, sometimes we feel quite depressed. We shouldn't worry about our mood changing when we're on a retreat, because a retreat or a sesshin is a very strange kind of holiday, in the sense that it's formal – it has a beginning and it has an end. And the reason it has a beginning, an opening ceremony, and a closing ceremony, is to create a certain kind of 'isolated from the world' atmosphere. Now, what's the point in having an 'isolated from the world' atmosphere? Well, one point is that we're thrown into situations that we don't normally live in, when we're all together. Some of us have met for the first time, some of us know each other well, some of us know each other a bit, and we're all making our efforts to do something, but none of us are quite sure what it is we're doing. (Laughs) We're here, we're studying Buddhism, we hear talks from me, sometimes they make sense, sometimes they don't make any sense, and sometimes we feel quite puzzled. But in all those kinds of unusual situation, where we've got some kind of formal structure, we have a chance to notice ourselves. And to notice ourselves, particularly in my case, is not always pleasant. What we do, and the results of what we do, here within the sesshin, appear writ large. We can see ourselves. And there is a Buddhist precept which says, 'Don't criticise other buddhists.' And it's very important, not because 'we shouldn't criticise other people, it's wrong,' but because, if we make our efforts not to criticise others, especially in a sesshin, we can see ourselves. And that's unpleasant, sometimes. And very, very valuable. In my case, I've got quite a sharp tongue - I'm getting softer as I get older, but in trying to restrain myself from saying what I want to say, when I'm annoyed or something, I see myself writ large. And this is immensely valuable. Sometimes it's a bit disturbing, but always very valuable. So that's one reason why we have this kind of strange formal structure, where we begin and we end, and we don't talk during meals, and we make efforts not to chat about silly things, and we try and restrain ourselves. Because in restraining ourselves, we notice ourselves. And there's no chance to do that in daily life, because we can run off to the next thing. Does that make sense? Good. That's what I wanted to say.

In what sense do you mean restrain ourselves?

Restrain means to hold back. If you restrain somebody, you hold them back. If you restrain yourself, you hold yourself back.

(Inaudible)

Yes. And also the opposite – we don't get too excited, we hold back. We might feel, you know, 'Whoa! That was fantastic!' and we want to express ourselves, so we hold back. ... So, that's the end of what I wanted to say. Now we can have an open discussion, about anything really, anything at all.

How do you see your relationship between that experience and real life outside of this context, the lessons that you've learned? Although you just said, or you implied, that it'd be a bit of a strain to try and exercise that self-restraint throughout one's entire ordinary, everyday life, nevertheless, if we don't take

some of the lessons we've learned in here out there, then there's not much point doing this in the first place, is there?

Yes, there is. There's always a point in doing something for itself. We don't have to have some result that you can carry off with you. So just, for instance, for me to restrain myself here, is enough. I don't have to carry it elsewhere. When I'm in my daily life, if I never get excited or get angry, that's a very kind of suppressed life. So I don't mean suppression. But here, we're kind of cut off for three and a half days, and in that period we set up some kind of unusual situation, or it feels unusual because it's different from normal life. What happens in this period for itself has value, we don't need to carry it anywhere else. So, thinking about 'How can I take this into my normal life?' – we don't need to learn lessons, just we need to experience what's happening to us. Learning lessons is a kind of intellectual activity, where we think about what we did and try and remember not to do it again. We can do that, if we want, in our lives, but that's not the purpose that I'm talking about. Does that make sense?

Yes, it does. I mean, I just think that the way everyone's cared for each other, the politeness and the pleasantness, you know, if I can just treat my family a bit more like that, my family home is just going to have a nicer atmosphere. Not that I go around bludgeoning everyone over the head with a baseball bat, but, you know ...

Yes, so you can notice yourself.

Because you become more aware, that's all. Not in a sort of suppressed, hung-up kind of way, but, you know, in the sense that we were talking about yesterday, in a sensitivity way, that's all I meant.

I just wondered what people think about compassion. Because that's something that turns up a lot in books about Buddhism, whereas when I first met you Mike ...

Yes, it does, doesn't it? Isn't it one of 'the three pillars of Zen'?

When I first came across these translations of the Shobogenzo, the word compassion doesn't make much of an appearance.

Yes, it's true, Master Dogen doesn't talk much about it. He gave a talk, wrote a chapter, called "Kind Words", where he talks about speaking kind words to people; but compassion itself he doesn't mention so much. Why is that?

Well, it's quite difficult, really, because the notion of compassion is just that, it's a notion, it doesn't have anything you can smell or touch. I think the difficult thing is that the thing you can call compassion doesn't bear any relationship to our notion of it.

It has something to do with feeling, doesn't it? Com-passion.

More like empathy?

Yes, but strong.

If you care for somebody, you're aware that somebody has needs. And the nature of compassion is, 'How can we react to that?' It's not just like, 'Oh, I care about that.'

Somebody was making the very opposite point yesterday, that they thought the Shobogenzo is full of compassion. And I think it is, too, even if it's not actually explicitly stated often.

I'm not sure I quite understood what Mike (Tait) was saying. Do you mean that just sticking a label on one of your attitudes and calling it 'compassion' is neither here nor there? Is that what you meant?

No. No, don't put a label on any of your attitudes. But it seems to me that if you experience another person, as we're doing now, then there's the possibility for something real to happen. We might label that, at another time, as 'compassion' or something. But that's what makes it a difficult thing ... (inaudible).

I think compassion is direct action, just a concept that we have of direct action.

What kind of direct action is compassion?

Can I give you a personal example? I'm here on this retreat because somebody asked me to come. I probably wouldn't have come if I hadn't been asked, and I felt that action was very supportive.

For you?

For me.

I think compassion is things just being as they are ... (inaudible).

(Inaudible comments)

Can compassion be firm? Can it be strong?

Yes, and ruthless.

(Inaudible.) 'Tough love'.

I think that's my view of Master Dogen - he cuts right to the core of where he wants you to be ... (inaudible).

So compassion can be quite strong and forthright. And can it be gentle and kind?

(Inaudible comments)

I think compassion for people is a natural side-effect of practicing Zazen, rather than something where you sit down and say, 'Right, I'm going to be more compassionate.'

What causes you to be like that?

Just from being aware of what's around you. I've found that that has effects. For example, you were saying the other day that when we sit in Zazen sometimes you can feel the pressure of the day, and rather than trying to fix it, just try and realise the fact. Similarly, in my own experience, just realising how I am and noticing myself, it changes things subtly and makes me more open to things.

Even in the short time that we've been discussing it, the different views about what compassion is are immense, aren't they? So, if somebody says, 'Buddhists should be compassionate', what does that mean? We should be tough when we

need to be tough, be gentle when we need to be gentle, direct when we need to be direct, but stand back when we need to stand back, take action when we need to take action, but keep still when we need to keep still. Is all that compassion?

Well, yes. I think compassion is having the skilful means to know when to do ...

What is 'skilful means'?

It's attentiveness to what the other person might need.

And that's called 'skilful means'?

Yes. (Inaudible.)

How do we exercise skilful means?

Being receptive to what's going on.

How do we make ourselves receptive to what's going on?

By being open.

How do we open?

I don't know how to explain ...

I suppose Zazen is a process of becoming aware of ourselves, then openness is a by-product of that, isn't it? But I can't understand the way you extend your awareness and your sensitivity to other people, rather than turn inwards.

(Inaudible comments)

Well, I've been to maybe more than a hundred sesshins and, you're right, gentleness you notice, along with all the other things. I find that everything emerges. For me, everything about me emerges. It's not only gentleness.

(Inaudible comments)

I'm Catholic, and I used to go to Catholic retreats, and, when I was a teenager I always remember thinking 'It's so easy to be good on retreats,' but it's when you go back home and realise that things are done differently. And I would agree absolutely that there is this sense here. But what happens is that when we dissipate back into our ordinary lives, there is that sense of compassion in small ways – 'I haven't seen so and so in a long time, I must phone him', that kind of thing. You know, just that sort of basic, practical thing (inaudible). It's meeting other people's needs.

(Inaudible comments)

Should we be outward looking rather than inward looking?

I think we should try to be both.

Both?

(Inaudible comments)

Do we have to help other people? Do we help other people first or second?

It depends on the need, really.

So how do we decide whether we should help ourselves and be selfish, or help other people and be altruistic?

(Inaudible comments)

So both things are the same? I think that's what Dogen expresses in the *Shobogenzo* – not selfish, not altruistic, but both, or neither. Not helping others, not helping ourselves, but both. So, always taking the two opposites, the two things we're always choosing between, and putting them together.

Your attitude, Mike, the way you come across a lot of the time, is like letting go of things. I find it so attractive, this idea, and this has helped me so much, in the sense of getting over this hurdle of a gaining idea that Suzuki talked about, which attracted me to Zen and to Dogen in the first place through him. He talked again and again about giving a cow or a horse a large field, you know, as an analogy in terms of control. He said that the best way to control something is to give it a large field, in other words, to give it plenty of room. And I thought I was doing that. But what I was doing was kind of getting a big stick out and saying, 'You're doing this, you're doing that, your back's wrong,' you know – by the time I'm finished it's like being in a concentration camp. (Inaudible) But just now you mentioned sort of not taking all this out there in a big kind of 'Let's do it all out there' way. But, again, I felt that feeling of (inaudible).

Yes, well that's my lesson. If it's yours, too, then I'm very happy.

It comes across.

Oh, good.

Yes, that's what I like about your teaching, about Master Dogen's teaching – just sit Zazen and get on with your life. You don't have to ... (inaudible).

So you do intervene or you don't intervene?

(Inaudible)

That's another important aspect of Master Dogen's teaching – we can, in our minds, discuss and decide what we should do; but to actually do something is totally different from discussing what we should do. If we make a rule, 'I'm going to be compassionate,' then we've already limited our freedom to act, because the next time we act we're trying to be something. But Master Dogen's teaching is to have freedom in action. And freedom in action, to him, is a result of Zazen. So when we practice Zazen we balance our body and mind. And then we're free to act. So, in that freedom, we choose, but the choice is not an intellectual one, but in the act itself. So it's a very simple kind of teaching, which seems to negate all kinds of morality that we're used to discussing, but it doesn't actually negate it - it puts morality where it belongs, into what we do rather than what we think.

(Inaudible comments)

Talking of 'freedom of action', is that why we create these formalities on retreats, because we assume we need some sort of instruction for freedom to emerge? For

instance, we all bow going in to the dojo, and that, to some people, would seem to constrain their freedom, 'Why do we have to do that?'

Well, you don't have to do it. We all made a silent agreement with ourselves to do it. Even stranger, we all make an agreement to sit without moving. Waiting, waiting. We've all made an agreement to do it.

Do instructions make you actually more free? I mean, for example, if each member of a film unit says, 'Today I'm not going to be the cameraman, I'm going to do the clapper-board instead,' and the soundman says, 'I'm not going to be the soundman, I'm going to be gaffer,' you'd have total chaos and the film would never get shot. But because everyone knows what they're doing and how to do it, the thing runs smoothly and therefore you have more freedom to actually choose how the thing goes. See what I mean? Because of the structure.

(Inaudible comments)

The thing I like about Zen is that the Universe has a completely wacky element somewhere.

Yes, we're all wild cards, we are. We're all wild cards; but we have to fit together as much as we can bear it.

(Inaudible comments)

There's a creative element that we can find in artists, but I think that the world, the more you trust it, the more it kind of supports you. But when people create something which is new ...

Are there creative people and non-creative people?

Well, it's a scale.

I think everyone can create.

What I'm talking about is creating something new – what you've created is something which has never been there before, so there's no rules for doing it.

(Bell rings)

Right. Thank you very much.

(End of talk)