

Lecture 1

Zazen Retreat 1995

(Nishijima Roshi talks about his fundamental ideas about Buddhism and civilization today. He discusses the relationship between religion and western philosophical thought, and how Buddhist theory can solve the contradictory situation between idealistic and materialistic thoughts.)

After thousands of years the world is becoming one civilization. In this situation, western civilization, western thoughts, are governing the world. So I would like to reflect, in short, on the historical situation of western thoughts, which is very much related with Buddhism today.

In western thought in the Greek age, there was a very famous philosopher called Plato. He insisted that our mental function is reality, idea is reality. He thought that matter which is different from ideas is not reality. Relying upon this theory, he established a very large philosophical system which is called idealism. Plato's theory had a very strong influence on western thought, because relying upon idealistic philosophy people revered mind, spirit, the intellectual function, and intelligent ability very much. Relying upon this reverence of the mental function, western civilization was established.

At the end of the Roman empire this idealistic philosophy met with Christianity, and Christianity utilized the idealistic philosophy of Plato to confirm Christian belief. The philosophy of another famous philosopher, Aristotle, a student of Plato, was also utilized to base Christianity. Both Plato's philosophy and Aristotle's philosophy were very powerful for encouraging Christianity. And in the mediaeval ages in Europe, Christianity was extremely powerful. People usually revered mind, spirit, belief, God, meditation, and prayer. Consequently, western society in the mediaeval ages was governed by spiritual tendencies.

But in the thirteenth century, there was a movement which is called the Renaissance. "Renaissance" means re-born, and re-born indicates the rebirth of Greek civilization or Roman civilization. In the Renaissance, people found out that the earth is moving around the sun. This idea was opposite to the idea insisted on by Christianity. Therefore, the Christian church wanted to stop this new idea. However, it could not do so, because a fact is a fact, and the new theory that the earth is moving around the sun had come from scientific data, scientific facts. After the Renaissance, European civilization entered into the scientific age. People revered matter, people revered facts, people revered the physical body. In the modern age this tendency was promoted more and more, and at the end of the nineteenth century this materialistic tendency arrived at its culmination.

Now even in the twentieth century, we have broken religious belief through scientific knowledge. But nonetheless, scientific knowledge cannot save human beings. In the mediaeval ages people thought that religions saved people, and in the modern age people thought that science would save people. But both

are not sufficient to save human beings, because due to the excellent technology of modern science we have produced nuclear weapons, and nuclear weapons are extremely powerful. If any country uses them, there may be a disastrous situation on the earth.

So now we are living in the age when religion is not so powerful, and where scientific knowledge cannot save people. In this situation, we can find some tendency which is based on the oneness between mind and body. Recently in scientific theory many scholars insist that mind and body are not separate, they are only one. Thinking about this situation, I usually think about an age two thousand five hundred years ago. At that time in India, there was a religious person or philosopher called Gautama Buddha. Gautama Buddha also insisted that, this world is only one, the universe is only one. In Sanskrit, this is called "Dharma". Recognizing only one Dharma, he also thought that body and mind are one. Body is one face of the universe. Mind is another face of the universe. Relying upon this theory he established Buddhism, and he insisted that we practice Zazen to get oneness between body and mind. Of course, originally body and mind are one, however, in our thoughts we usually think mind and body are separate. But Gautama Buddha insisted body and mind are one, and he recommended us to practice Zazen to recognize the oneness between body and mind.

I have studied Buddhism a rather long time and I noticed that the Buddhist insistence is related with the autonomic nervous system in our body, so I usually explain the relationship between religion and science and Buddhism relying upon a theory about the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system has two systems, one is the sympathetic nervous system, the other is the parasympathetic nervous system. The sympathetic nervous system is related to the human mind, the parasympathetic nervous system is related with the physical body.

Regarding the relationship between the two nervous systems, when the sympathetic nervous system is stronger than the parasympathetic nervous system, people are prone to be spiritual. Therefore, there are many people who like to be spiritual, especially, religious people. Religious people insist that the spiritual state is important, so they hate the physical body and revere a symbol of spirit like God, and their aim is to be spiritual. However, that situation is related with the stronger sympathetic nervous system in human beings.

Against the spiritual attitude, human beings have another attitude, that is to be comfortable, to enjoy physical stimuli. When the parasympathetic nervous system is stronger than the sympathetic nervous system, people are prone to be like this. In this case, people pursue only physical pleasure, physical enjoyment, and they dislike the spiritual situation, they dislike religions and they laugh at meditation and so forth. In western societies, these two tendencies have been contradictory for many years.

This same situation existed even in ancient India. When Gautama Buddha was born there was a very spiritual religion called “Brahmanism”. Brahmanism believed that this world was produced by God, and that people have some kind of spirit and should identify their spirit with God. Brahmanism also hated the physical side. But there was also another tendency when Gautama Buddha lived which was called “The Six Thinkers”, and The Six Thinkers usually believed in materialism.

So in the age when Gautama Buddha lived there were also two tendencies, one was very spiritual and the other was very materialistic. Therefore Gautama Buddha made his efforts to solve the contradictory situation of these two tendencies, and he found a new religion or a new philosophy which is called Buddhism. He practiced Zazen and he recognized Dharma. Dharma is something which exists. Relying upon Dharma, he could not rely upon only spirit or only matter. According to his idea, spirit and matter are one. Therefore if we rely upon only one of either spirit and matter, the theory we rely upon must be wrong. Relying upon this situation he established his philosophy based on the practice of Zazen. Practicing Zazen is a kind of action. He established a new philosophy which is based on action itself. Relying upon this philosophy, he insisted that action exists only at the present moment. So to have right action at the present moment is the most valuable matter in our life. Therefore, Buddhism insists the importance of morals or ethics. So Buddhism is different from the usual philosophies, idealism or materialism.

But as I said, since the end of the nineteenth century human civilization has been suffering from the contradictory situation between idealistic thoughts or religion, and materialistic thoughts or science. Our civilizations are separated between religion and science. Without solving this contradictory situation we will be unable to find a peaceful situation. Thinking about this situation, I usually remember the existence of Buddhist thoughts. Relying upon oneness between body and mind we can establish a new philosophy in this world today. And relying upon that new philosophy we can harmonize religions and science, and we can find a harmonized new life on the earth.

That is what I think about Buddhism. I think relying upon Buddhist theory we can expect a new civilization, a new age, which is very peaceful and very organized.

Are there any questions?

Q. I think the word “Renaissance” means “to be born again”. People in the renaissance time felt that they were returning to something.

A. “Re-born” suggests the re-birth of Greek and Roman civilization, humanistic civilization.

Q. It's difficult to imagine what people believed in those times. Although we can read in history books that people in mediaeval ages were spiritual, it's difficult to imagine exactly how spiritual they were.

A. I think the situation comes from the human physical condition, especially from the condition of the autonomic nervous system. People like physical pleasure, but sometimes they hate physical pleasure and want to be spiritual. This kind of wobbling between physical pleasure and spiritual feelings shapes human civilization I think. Human beings originally have this tendency. They want to be very spiritual, but sometimes they are very physical. This wobbling is the pain in human life. So to solve that situation, Buddhism occurred. If the two factors, spirituality and physical pleasure, are balanced we do not go to the right side, and we do not go to the left side. But human civilization has a strange wobbling from right to left, from left to right. However, relying upon Buddhist philosophy we can notice that to maintain the central point is right. Buddhism's insistence is, just to maintain ourselves at the middle way is best, it is the criterion. However, people with a religious tendency dislike this middle way. They want to be spiritual so they insist on the importance of being spiritual. But human beings also have another tendency, so even though they want to be spiritual, sometimes they come back to the physical side. Therefore they are sometimes spiritual, sometimes physical, and such wobbling is human civilization. To stop this kind of wobbling, Buddhism insists that the criteria exists at the center.

Q. In the everyday situation, when we're at one extreme our ideas seem very real or our problems seem very real, and when we're at the other extreme the physical world seems very real. But when we're in the middle it's as if everything disappears.

A. Yes, it's true.

Q. It's rather subtle. I don't know how to put it into words, but when we're in the balanced state it's as if the problems which we had before can't be found anywhere.

A. Yes, it's true. Gautama Buddha recommended this situation to us.

Q. And do you think when societies become balanced, what we see as problems now will not exist as problems?

A. Yes, I think so.

Q. The situation doesn't change?

A. So for example, wars occur because of thoughts. In Eastern Europe there is a war, but if they rely upon the middle way they will feel that it is not necessary to shoot guns. However, without recognizing the real situation as it is, their thoughts make them shoot guns.

Q. The religious cult Aum Shinrikyo has a gift shop. When I pass by I always notice that they sell T-shirts, most of which are written in English. Some of them say things like quotes about the middle way, or things that are quoted directly from Gautama Buddha or sound very much like some of the things that you say. How do you think something like that which is very true or right, becomes so wrong.

A. Regarding that problem, we should recognize the two areas. One is the intellectual area, the other is the real area. For example, the phrase “middle way” is words, “middle way” is an idea. So we can think about the middle way, but to maintain the middle way is different, to maintain the middle way is fact, not idea, not words. So without any image, without any words, we can maintain the middle way in the real area. When we think about Buddhism, it is very important to recognize two areas, one is the intellectual area and the other is the practical area. Aum Shinrikyo sells T-shirts on which they write “the middle way”, but these words are only an idea. To wear such a shirt does not mean to be at the middle way.

Q. So you need both the philosophy and the action?

A. Yes, so we have to study Buddhist philosophy. Buddhist philosophy clearly divides the area of intellect and area of reality.

Q. It seems the way we go wrong is by just having the idea but not actually putting the idea into action.

A. Yes, that’s true. Idealism and materialism belong to the area of intellect, but reality exists as it is. It’s different from ideas. This fact is very important. Reality is sometimes called action, and action exists at the present moment. So, we should study action, we should study the present moment, relying upon practice. And one kind of practice is Zazen. And, for example, tennis or sports is another kind of practice. So to do something is Buddhist philosophy. We usually worry about many matters, but worrying about things does not have any value. To do something to solve the problem, that is the only solution which can exist on the earth.

Q. When we do something, when we act, do we need to have any idea what we are going to do?

A. Yes. Before acting we need an idea, but at the present moment when we are acting there is no idea. There is just action. And Gautama Buddha suggests this fact.

Q. Ideas, for instance, of a religious organization urge us to do something, and for instance, sports psychology may direct us to do something else. They are both ideas. What kind of ideas do we need in order to act ?

A. We need intuition, not thoughts but intuition. When our autonomic nervous system is balanced intuition takes effect. Intuition is called “Prajna” in Sanskrit. “Pra” means before, “jna” means to know, or knowledge. So Prajna means “before knowledge”. This is intuition, and Buddhism esteems the value of intuition very much. Therefore Buddhism insists that we should be balanced at every moment.

Q. How is a person to recognize intuition from any other thought that might cross their mind in a very subtle way?

A. As Buddhism says, it is impossible for us to notice the balanced state. So to act is the only method. To practice Zazen is one way, and even though we practice Zazen we cannot recognize whether we are balanced or not. So we have to rely upon action. It is a rather strange situation. Because people have a strong reverence of the intellect, we believe everything can be noticed. But, in fact, this kind of balanced state cannot be recognized. Buddhism believes in the existence of the balanced state, but the balanced state cannot be recognized because at that time we are just acting. In action there are no thoughts.

So Buddhist philosophy is a rather strange philosophy, a rare philosophy. But I think day by day, the two fundamental philosophies, idealism and materialism, are moving towards this strange philosophy. Spiritual thought and materialistic thought are moving towards the one point. That is the middle way, action.

Q. Are you saying that materialism and idealism are part of it?

A. Yes, those two philosophies are going to the same destiny, and the destiny which they are going towards is different from idealism and different from materialism. Therefore I expect human beings will find only one criterion in the future.

Q. We’re normally quite used to doing something, following some aim, then when we do it we want some kind of confirmation that we got nearer to our aim. You say we can’t tell when we’re balanced, so we act blindly, and when we act blindly without intention we may be balanced. How can we get something from that to believe? Where does belief come from?

A. For example, by practicing Zazen we can notice something exists or the existence of this world.

Q. So we notice something, and that something which we notice we start to believe in it?

A. It is not notice, but the state of balance. Keeping the state of balance we can have criteria.

Q. And those criteria, we notice them and we accept them and believe them?

A. It is based on belief. Believing in Buddhism we get that idea. Without belief it is impossible to insist that the middle way is criteria.

Q. Normally, in spiritual religions the word belief means something very strange and mystical. I feel in Buddhism belief is actually quite a simple thing.

A. Yes, the belief in reality. Whether it is called belief or not is the problem.

Q. Like when someone said earlier that after ten years playing tennis in the sun they are sure that the sun is hotter, I felt, ah, that's kind of belief based on experience. So is that the kind of belief that Buddhism talks about?

A. Yes.

Q. Very simple, something based on experience which we say must be true?

A. Yes.

Q. That's very different to spiritual belief.

A. Yes, very different. So I think spiritual people feel very strange when they listen to Buddhist theory. Therefore, I think the relationship between the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system is very important. There are three kind of thoughts, one is spiritualism, one is materialism, one is Buddhism. Which of these three thoughts we prefer is the problem.

Q. So Buddhism is kind of to bring the extreme sides together?

A. It is to avoid the extreme sides.

Q. You said quite often recently that Buddhism is not a religion. I guess you mean that it's so far away from spiritual belief, that it's in a completely different area and you use the word "philosophy". I also feel that Buddhism has some kind of a part of science, because we're experiencing something, we're noticing something, and that procedure is also part of the scientist's.

A. Yes, I think so. Buddhism is rather inclusive. It includes both sides, not only one side. And this attitude is very important. But people usually do not like this attitude, because it seems too compromising and too boring. People sometimes like to be extremely spiritual, and people sometimes like to be extremely materialistic.

Q. I think you have to invent a new word for Buddhism because you can't call it religion, and if you call it philosophy I feel something is missing.

A. So to select the word is rather difficult.

Q. Buddhism has some kind of psychology, philosophy, and science altogether.

A. In my English translation of Master Nagarjuna's book *Mulamadhyamakakarika* I used the word "conviction". But I do not know if "conviction" is an adequate word or not. In the Japanese translation it's "shinko naiyou", "contents of belief".

Q. Is the contents of belief in Buddhism what is in front of us?

A. Yes, and *Mulamadhyamakakarika* clearly suggests four things. First is reason, second is the external world, third is the present moment, and fourth is reality. I was rather surprised when I was reading those lines. Master Nagarjuna insists that the contents of belief are four things or matters. And he insists that there is no fifth.

Q. There's nothing else other than those four?

A. He believed there were four things or matters. His insistence is very strong and very clear.

Q. If many people understand Buddhist theory, I guess it must be necessary for them to be conscious of when they're too materialistic or too spiritual?

A. To avoid the too extremes is very important.

Q. So they need some kind of consciousness or awareness?

A. When we are acting, I wonder whether we can recognize consciousness or not? I do not insist the value of consciousness or mindfulness and so forth. In action, it is rather difficult for me to find consciousness. Just that we are doing something, like sports.

Q. Although we're just doing something, we need something to tell us?

A. We have words, we have intellect, we have reason. Therefore Master Nagarjuna suggests, first reason.

Q. Yes. But it's amazing, the world for so long has tried many different ways to explain what reality is, and we usually believe the explanation. You said for instance, that in the middle ages the world was very spiritual because people believed the words or the talk. So I suppose in modern times if the words describe reality, people will believe them. In that way, Buddhist theory and the theory of, for instance, acting in sports, or acting in business are the same thing, aren't they?

A. Regarding that point, there is a difference in the area. We can say that the mediaeval ages were the age of mind, and that the modern age is the age of matter. Mind and matter belong to our intellect. But action is a different area. So to get out of the area of intellect is to enter into the area of action. This is a very important point, and the difficulty of Buddhism comes from this situation.

Q. In which area are the words?

A. Words exist in the area of mind.

Q. So the theory is in the area of the mind?

A. Yes, I think so.

Q. And it tells us to get out of the area of the mind?

A. Yes, and to get out of the area of the mind, to act is the point.

I think Buddhist philosophy has a very interesting point. But, unfortunately, people do not recognize this interesting point yet.

Q. I think people will, because it's describing what people can experience for themselves. I guess the problem is finding the way to explain.

A. I think the situation is very clear if we explain it on the basis of Buddhism. But, it is very difficult for people to notice the existence of two areas, the area of intellect and the area of reality. To find the area of reality, action is the best way. Therefore the practice of Zazen and playing sports will be important in the next age.

So I think the existence of the two books, *Shobogenzo* and *Mulamadhyamakakarika* is very important. Without those two books I could never understand Buddhism. And the reason why I could understand the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* is because I have read the *Shobogenzo*. Without reading *Shobogenzo* I could never understand *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. For example, in *Mulamadhyamakakarika* Nagarjuna insists that the 4 convictions are, reason, the external world, the present moment, and reality. But if I did not understand the meaning of the *Shobogenzo*, I could never understand the meaning of these 4 convictions.

Q. So you feel Buddhist philosophy will spread more and more throughout the world?

A. I think that world civilization is becoming only one. Previously, there was a contradictory situation or conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, but it was solved. Therefore, I think the whole world is going towards the one aim. The so-called "G-7" are going towards the

common aim in world history. Because of this situation I am rather optimistic about the future of the world.

Q. In your thinking, the G-7 and everything is working for religion.

A. They believe in something, and I think we can call it “humanism”. And that direction is similar to the Buddhist movement I think.

Q. So you feel that even governments and so on are moving forward in the direction of unifying?

A. Yes, they have not found the clear image of their aim, but they are going towards the same aim. It is not so clear, but they are pursuing the common aim. That is the situation today.

If they notice the Buddhist principle or Buddhist theory and if they accept it, I think the situation in the world will become much more peaceful and much more harmonized. Also, I expect there may be a very strong power that will govern the whole world. Without such a power we can never keep the perfect peace. That is my very pessimistic idea. Just an idea can never govern the world, only power can govern the world. Power and the truth, those two govern the world.

Therefore I want to explain the truth. I expect the existence of a very strong power on the earth. However, the world is rather far from having the clear idea. Therefore it is very important to explain the Buddhist principle. Relying upon the Buddhist principle people can cooperate for the same aim. Without the principle, people go in miscellaneous directions, and there is no cooperation. In that kind of situation there is only confusion.

So the existence of the G-7 and the existence of the United Nations, makes me optimistic. And the ending of the cold war and beginning of cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union made me very optimistic. Before that time I was very pessimistic. I thought that it was impossible for us to avoid a third world war, and because the United States and the Soviet Union hold nuclear weapons, I believed there was a possibility that the world would be almost completely destroyed. But the avoidance of that war occurred in human history, so I think that human beings are not so stupid. That is the reason why I am so optimistic.

Q. Stupid, but not so stupid?

A. Yes, sometimes stupid, but not so stupid.

Shall we finish here. Thank you very much.