

Lecture 3

Zazen Retreat 1995

(Nishijima Roshi outlines the origins of various Buddhist sects in Japan, and compares the two main sects which practice Zazen, the Rinzai sect and the Soto sect. He also describes Master Dogen's explanation of Zazen using four principles which Master Dogen liked to explain: 1. not thinking; 2. regulating the body and sitting in the right posture; 3. getting rid of body and mind; 4. becoming one piece.)

There are several Buddhist sects in Japan. In Japanese history, the Japanese capital moved several times due to the political situation, and in ancient times there was an age when the capital was in the Nara district. At that time, six Buddhist sects existed. The six sects were: the Kegon sect, the Hosō sect, the Ritsu sect, the Jyōjitsu sect, the Sanron sect, and the Bishō sect. Three of these sects still exist today in Nara prefecture even though they are not so big. The other three sects now belong to these existing sects.

At that time, Buddhism was a kind of civilization which had been introduced from China and Korea. Therefore, in those days Buddhist monks had miscellaneous kinds of scientific knowledge, medical knowledge, knowledge regarding therapy and so forth. But they did not practice Zazen, their Buddhism was just theoretical Buddhism. They studied the meaning of the sutras but their Buddhism was not practical.

After the Nara era the capital moved to Kyoto, and in that era there were two large Buddhist sects; One was the Shingon sect, the other was the Tendai sect. In the Nara era, the power of the Buddhist sects had become extremely strong, and in order to avoid the strong influence of Buddhism the government moved to Kyoto. Also, the Japanese emperor ordered two excellent Buddhist monks to go to China to study Buddhism and to bring back to Japan Buddhist sects which were different from the Nara era sects. So two famous Buddhist monks called Saicho and Kukai went to China, and Saicho brought back the Tendai sect, and Kukai brought back the Shingon sect.

But those two sects were also scholastic. They studied Buddhist sutras very diligently, particularly the Tendai sect. In the Shingon sect they did have some kind of practical training, but at the same time the Shingon sect was still rather mystical. They used fire and prayed using a special method. Also, because the Tendai sect and Shingon sect belonged to professional Buddhist monks, common people did not have much relations with these two sects. The government and officials had contact with these sects, but common people did not have much contact with them.

After that period, the political power of Japan moved to the warriors. At that time, Buddhism experienced a very strong change because the Japanese social situation had changed enormously and people wanted to know another philosophy, different from the philosophy of former times. Therefore, around that time several very strong Buddhist sects appeared.

At that time the government was in Kamakura, therefore those Buddhist sects are called “Kamakura Buddhism”. Among them was the Shin sect, the Jodo sect, and the Giin sect. These three sects insisted reciting the Buddha’s names many times. Also, there was the Soto sect and the Rinzai sect which practiced Zazen diligently. Another sect was the Nichiren sect. These six sects are called “Kamakura Buddhism”, and of these six sects, two sects practiced Zazen.

So even though there are many Buddhist sects in Japan, there are not so many sects which practice Zazen. In the Kamakura era there were two, the Rinzai sect and the Soto sect. At the beginning of the Edo era the Obaku sect, another sect which practices Zazen, was established. The Obaku sect was established by a Buddhist monk called Master Ingen who came to Japan from China as a refugee after the Chinese Ming government was destroyed by the Shin government. Master Ingen received strong support from Japan’s government of the time, the Tokugawa government, in establishing the Obaku sect. Therefore, in Japan there are three Buddhist sects which practice Zazen diligently. Now, I would like to compare these three sects.

The Obaku sect, which was established at the beginning of the Edo era, is similar to the Rinzai sect because Obaku is the name of one of the teacher’s of master Rinzai, who founded the Rinzai sect. Therefore, it is interesting to compare the other two sects, the Rinzai sect and the Soto sect.

The main difference between the Rinzai sect and the Soto sect is their interpretation of Zazen. In the Rinzai sect they believe in enlightenment, and they think that the reason for practicing Zazen is to get enlightenment. Therefore, they practice Zazen diligently and expect to get enlightenment. But the Soto sect, which was established by Master Dogen, think that the state in Zazen is just enlightenment. So to practice Zazen is just enlightenment. The Soto sect believe that we should not expect any enlightenment other than the practice of Zazen itself. This is the idea of Zazen in the Soto sect.

Regarding the two sects different interpretation of Zazen, there is a rather famous story from the ancient time when Master Daikan Eno lived. Master Daikan Eno was the sixth patriarch of China. He had two excellent students, one was Master Seigen Gyoshi, and the other was Master Nangaku Ejo. Master Seigen Gyoshi is the ancestor of the Soto sect, and Master Nangaku Ejo is

the ancestor of the Rinzai sect. The following story suggests that in ancient times even the Rinzai sect lineage believed in the oneness of practice and experience.

One day Master Daikan Eno asked Master Nangaku Ejo, “Do you rely upon practice and experience?” Master Nangaku Ejo replied, “It is true there are practice and experience, but those two cannot be tainted.” And “those two cannot be tainted” suggests that, those two should be separate but they are just one in actual practice. Therefore, at that time even the ancestor of the Rinzai sect, Master Nangaku Ejo, had the idea of oneness between practice and experience.

So we can think that oneness between practice and experience is fundamental Buddhist philosophy. Buddhism is established on the basis of action, and action has the characteristic of oneness between practice and experience. So in ancient times, Buddhist thoughts were based on oneness between practice and experience.

In a later age, in the Sung dynasty in the twelfth century, there was a Zen master called Daiei Soko. We can guess that he was a very intellectual person and therefore he insisted that Buddhist truth should be understood by the intellect. To arrive at that aim, he insisted the usage of koans in practicing Zazen. He believed that we should practice Zazen while thinking about the meaning of a koan, and then we can get enlightenment. This opinion became rather strong at that time, and therefore after that age Buddhist monks who practiced Zazen followed Master Daiei Soko’s idea to get enlightenment. They used stories, koans, in practicing Zazen.

But real Buddhism is different, and this real Buddhism has also been maintained. One master who received the true Buddhist thoughts was Master Tendo Nyojo. Master Dogen met Master Tendo Nyojo and succeeded to the true Buddhist theory that practice and experience are one, and Master Dogen introduced this Buddhist idea into Japan. Relying upon his Buddhist theory we can understand Buddhist philosophy very clearly and theoretically. Therefore, I think his idea about Zazen is rather important.

So when we think about the meaning of practicing Zazen, whether we believe in the existence of enlightenment which is other than practice or not, is a very important point. Many people believe in the existence of enlightenment, but in real Buddhist theory we think that practice and experience are one. Therefore Master Dogen insisted, just to practice Zazen. Just to practice Zazen is expressed in Japanese as “Shikantaza”.

The word “Shikantaza” is rather famous even in western society today. People think that Zazen which is based on “satori” (enlightenment) and Zazen which is based on “just to practice” are both Buddhism, but I do not agree with that idea. Thinking about Buddhist philosophy exactly, I

think only just to sit is Buddhist thought. Zazen to get enlightenment is a kind of idealistic philosophy, and idealistic philosophy cannot be Buddhism. So when we think about the meaning of Zazen, we should not expect the existence of enlightenment other than practice. This is one point in Zazen.

Next I would like to describe Master Dogen's explanation of Zazen. In this explanation, I will also use the four principles which Master Dogen liked to explain. The four principles are: first, not thinking; second, regulating the body and sitting in the right posture; third, getting rid of body and mind; fourth, becoming one piece. I would like to explain each of these principles one by one.

First, he insists that Buddhism is not to think. And he sometimes quotes a famous story about a Chinese Buddhist master called Yakusan Igen. One day Master Yakusan Igen was practicing Zazen when his student asked, "What are you thinking in such a stable situation?". Master Yakusan answered, "I am thinking the state of not thinking". So the student asked again "How can we think the state of not thinking?". Then the master replied, "It is not thinking". This is a rather famous story to explain the meaning of Zazen. In the Rinzai sect some people think that the aim of Zazen is to consider some philosophical theory, but in the Soto sect we think that Zazen is different from thinking. And "different from thinking" suggests, Zazen is a kind of action. So not thinking is the first principle of Master Dogen's idea about practicing Zazen.

The second principle is to make the body right and sit regularly. Zazen has a characteristic to make our body right. In Buddhism we have belief in oneness of body and mind, therefore according to this theory, if we make our body right our mind cannot but be right. In other words, when we make our body right our mind must be right. So Master Dogen explained Zazen is to make our body right and sit regularly.

When we make our body right or keep our body in the regular posture, our autonomic nervous system becomes balanced. This effect is very important in Zazen. The autonomic nervous system can never be changed by our mental effort. Even though we may be anxious to make our autonomic nervous system balanced, it is impossible for us to make our autonomic nervous system balanced through our mental anxiety. This is why the nervous system is called "autonomic". To make the autonomic nervous system balanced we need action, we need to make our body right.

The second principle of making the body right and sitting regularly suggests that Buddhism is also a kind of physical training. Relying upon the physical training we can make our body right, through this we can make our mind right at the same time. Understanding this meaning of Zazen

is also important. Even though we may have much anxiety, anxiety can never solve anything. To solve the problems in our daily life, making our body right is a very important point. Zazen has this meaning. So Master Dogen insisted the second principle, to make the body right and sit regularly.

The third principle is getting rid of body and mind. Getting rid of body and mind suggests forgetting body and forgetting mind. That suggests, concentrate ourselves in sitting, concentrate ourselves in action. So Zazen is to enjoy action itself, not thinking, not feeling, just concentrate ourselves in the training, in action. This is the third principle of Zazen.

But these words are sometimes misunderstood by many Buddhist students. They think that getting rid of body and mind suggests a kind of enlightenment, and therefore Master Dogen insisted a kind of enlightenment. But this interpretation is wrong. Master Dogen recognized the action in Zazen. And to express action, he used the words “getting rid of body and mind”. These words come from Master Tendo Nyojo. Master Tendo Nyojo expressed these words relying upon his lineage in which they insisted the oneness between practice and experience. So the principle “getting rid of body and mind” is also important. Getting rid of body and mind suggests “enter into action”, and “enter into action” is very important in Buddhism.

In Buddhism we think about two areas, one is the area of intellect, the other is the area of action, the area of reality. Our intellectual thoughts are always working in the area of intellect. Human civilizations are based on such intellectual thoughts, even today. But, in Buddhism we insist the other area which is different from the area of intellect. The other area is the area of action, the area of reality, the area of life.

The power of the intellect is extremely strong in human civilization. Intellectual thoughts govern our mind almost perfectly, therefore it is rather difficult for us to find an area other than the intellectual area. But Buddhism found the area of reality, the area of action. So, in Buddhist training we have to enter into the area of action, the area of reality, by practice. If we do not practice Zazen in our Buddhist study, we can never get rid of intellectual thoughts. In that situation we can never enter into the area of Buddhism, the area of reality, the area of action. Therefore, to get rid of body and mind is a very important point in studying Buddhism.

Master Dogen expressed the fourth principle as “becoming one piece”. And to become one piece is his own real experience in Zazen. When we are practicing Zazen, sometimes we experience the state where our body and mind have become one and we are just sitting, there is nothing other than sitting. That situation is called “becoming one piece”. So becoming one piece

is the experience in Zazen. It is a simple expression of the state, and that state is described by Master Dogen, therefore we also revere this expression.

So when we think about Master Dogen's Buddhist thought we can select four principles, the first is not thinking, the second is make the body right and sit regularly, the third is getting rid of body and mind, and the fourth is becoming one piece. Relying upon those principles Master Dogen described his thoughts about Zazen.

Master Dogen wrote many books about Zazen. The first book he wrote is called *Fukanzazengi*. "Fu" means universal, "kan" means to recommend, Zazen is Zazen, and "gi" means posture or form. He wrote this first book, *Fukanzazengi*, just after coming back to Japan from China. Master Dogen also wrote a book called *Shobogenzo*, and in *Shobogenzo* we can find many explanations of Zazen. Another book he wrote is called *Bendoho*. *Bendoho* is also a book about the method of practicing Zazen. And he wrote *Eiheikoroku*. *Eiheikoroku* is a collection of his Buddhist lectures, and in *Eiheikoroku* we can find many explanations about the concrete method of practicing Zazen, for example, how to breath. By reading his books we can know the exact meaning of Zazen very clearly. Relying upon these books we can grasp the true meaning of Zazen, that is the true meaning of Buddhism. Then we can follow true Buddhism relying upon his Buddhist theory and our own practice of Zazen.

Now I would like to stop my talk and have the time of questions and answers. Are there any questions?

Q. In your talk you talked about practice and experience being one. The words practice and experience, it's quite difficult to grasp what they mean.

A. Practice and experience are concepts. We usually think of them as two parts, but action is only one, even though in the intellectual area we distinguish two, practice and experience.

Q. In English, the word experience is not so clear as related to practice.

A. We can replace the word experience with enlightenment. Practice and enlightenment.

Q. Practice with some separate result from practice?

A. Actually there is no distinction, but in our intellectual thoughts we usually distinguish the two. To do something and the effect.

Q. Practice and the effect of the practice?

A. Yes. But actually there is no separation.

Q. So the practice is the same as the effect of the practice?

A. Yes. Therefore Master Dogen insists just to practice.

Q. So we can't get something and take it away?

A. There is nothing other than practice.

Q. Sometimes though, if we practice Zazen every day the state stays with us. The state stays in our body and mind. So in that sense we have some kind of result of practice.

A. Yes, so coming back to ourselves. And coming back to ourselves is coming back to the universe. We are part of the universe, so relying upon the practice we can come back to the universe. We can come back to ourselves. This fact is a very nice situation.

Q. So, not getting something different?

A. Not getting something different.

Q. But throwing away something?

A. Yes. So Master Dogen said "getting rid of body and mind".

Q. The idea of coming back to the universe, isn't that a spiritual idea?

A. No, not a spiritual idea. Both mental and physical. A realistic idea.

Q. Coming back to ourselves?

A. Yes, coming back to ourselves.

Q. When you say "universe", what do you feel is the universe?

A. Everything.

Q. Everything here and now?

A. Yes.

Q. Or everything which we imagine?

A. The fact here and now, and it expands endlessly. So this endless something is called “the universe”, in my mind.

Q. So coming back to here and now, but expanding?

A. Yes.

Q. So exactly how we feel when we sit in Zazen.

A. Yes, so that is a rather interesting point. We usually think “I am sitting in the temple”, or “I am living as one member of a family”, or “I am Japanese, I am American”, and so forth. People have this kind of area. In another area, people think “I am living in Tokyo, I am living in Japan”, people have this consciousness. But, we are living in the universe, we are living in the endless world.

Q. Can you say that in other words we come back to one element of the universe?

A. Part of the universe, but there is no distinction between a part and the total universe. So we come back to the universe, or we become the universe.

Q. I’m about to say something which sounds a bit strange. I come from England, but when I am in Japan, I have a picture in my mind of where England is. But recently I began to notice that besides that picture, “England is around there”, I have no idea where England is really. I notice that the real situation is, England is somewhere but the picture in my mind may be true or may not be true, I don’t know.

A. I think we are the same as the universe. So when I went to China, the universe moved to China, when I go to the United States, the universe goes to the United States.

Q. But the picture which science gives us is so strong that we have a very clear picture of the world. It’s round, because we know it’s round, because we saw photographs and people told us and we believe it. And we believe that everywhere is situated where it is.

A. So what I call the universe is much bigger. Not only the earth, not only the solar system, but an accumulation of so many systems like the solar system.

Q. I don’t mean to say that our picture is wrong, just simply that there is no way to prove that the picture we have is like that. My only experience is here, now.

A. In my practice I feel that this area expands limitlessly. Far beyond the solar system, and far beyond the milky way.

Q. So if I become one with the universe, and you become one with the universe, and everybody here becomes one with the universe, does that mean I become one with you?

A. Yes, there is no distinction. So that big something is called “Dharma”.

Q. So we have a connection.

A. Yes.

Q. If the situation is such that we have this connection, and Master Dogen seems to be saying that this connection is always there, even right now at this very moment, then why is it that I feel I’m sitting over here and you’re sitting there and he and she are sitting over there?

A. This is the situation or relation in the universe. In total all are common, so you and I are a kind of relation. We intellectually think that you and I are separate, but when we think about the total universe, there is no distinction.

This thought sounds strange because we are competitive in our secular society. But which of the following is true: There is no distinction, or, there is individual distinction? Buddhism insists that there is no distinction, the whole universe is only one. That idea also sounds strange, but in modern physics the quantum theory says a similar idea. The universe is a kind of stream of energy, there is no distinction.

Q. So the distinction is an illusion within our own mind.

A. Yes.

Q. I read something the other day about people who are watching the way that babies develop. And very, very young babies don’t seem to make distinctions like we make when we’re older. So when somebody goes, that person has gone, and when that person comes back it’s a different person as far as the baby is concerned. So they haven’t yet made the kind of structure which we make in our minds.

A. That idea is very strong in Master Nagarjuna’s book, *Mulamadhyamakakarika*. The first words of the first chapter are, “there is no subject, there is no object”. And that means he believes in the existence of total Dharma, and in Dharma there is no subject, there is no object.

Q. Then what should be our attitude to our normal way of thinking? I am sitting here, he is here, his name is John, etc. What is your attitude?

A. So, we need not fight, we need not compete. In Eastern Europe there is a war, but actually thinking, really thinking, they need not fight. They believe it is necessary to fight, but objectively looking at their situation they do not have any necessity to fight. But, with human beings, there are so many stupid situations like that on the earth. Lately, these kind of stupid situations have decreased, but still there are many very stupid situations. People believe that “we have to fight”, then they start fighting against each other. It is a rather comical situation.

Q. On a more practical level, you say that Master Nagarjuna talks about the very, very simple facts in front of us before we start to think. But, we all think in terms of what society has taught us. So, for instance, you say that time is now, for example, but we all have a way of thinking which is different from reality.

A. Different from reality suggests what?

Q. A habitual way of thinking.

A. Yes, it’s true. Therefore, to change these habitual thoughts into Buddhist thoughts is our efforts.

Q. So we should change our habitual thoughts?

A. Yes. So we have to explain to all people that we are living in reality. People usually think they are living in their own thoughts.

Q. A lot of our civilization is in our thoughts. Countries are in our thoughts. The border between two countries doesn’t exist until we think about it, or when we make up something.

A. Yes. So the world is going to become only one state. There is much separation still, but many countries are going to become one state, I think. It takes a rather long time, but the tendency is not to divide, but to merge into one.

Q. Do you mean that as we notice the simple things in front of us, then we can change the situation?

A. Yes, I think so. So I especially felt that fact in the ending of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Human beings have to become one. I also rely upon the G-7 and the United Nations. Those powers will make the world only one in the future. And in that

situation, Buddhist philosophy is necessary. We should recognize that all are only one and therefore it is not necessary for us to make distinctions.

Q. How do you think when you say there's no distinction between people, between the people in this room and so on. How does that explain things like family. How should I think about my father and my mother and things like that?

A. I think all people are common.

Q. When you say that there's no distinction, do you mean that that's the real situation, so when we habitually think about our daily lives we shouldn't lose sight of the real situation. Using our intellect to always look at the real situation without forgetting it?

A. Yes. For example, because of being Japanese, I really exist. So individual difference is a kind of reality. But, even though there is that kind of individual existence, such individual existence is included into universal existence. So universal and individual, both are necessary. In his book *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Master Nagarjuna suggests this idea using one chapter, universal existence and coexistence. He described those two concepts in distinction. But those two concepts have the common parts. So, because of being Japanese I can exist on the earth.

Q. So we're all brought into this universe with a purpose, and our purpose is to find our way, find our purpose, for the benefit of the universe or part of the universe. Is that right?

A. In Buddhism, we revere the state at the present moment. The purpose or aim exists at the present moment, it is the direction we have. We usually think that the aim or purpose exists at a distant place, but the aim or purpose exists at the present moment in our action, and we decide which direction our action has. So one time I go in one direction, then another time another direction. That state at the present moment suggests our aim, suggests our path. Intellectually thinking, the aim exists in a distant place, so we go to arrive at that destiny. But the real situation is not really like that. We are living just at the present moment. How we behave includes our aim, how we behave includes our purpose. The existence of purpose and the existence of aim are like this I think.

Q. So can the intuition at the present moment help us choose the right direction?

A. Yes, I think so.

Q. That's why we do Zazen?

A. Yes.

Q. So in that way we don't know where we're going, but we can feel where we're going?

A. Yes, that's why the state at the present moment is very important. Whether we are spiritual or whether we are materialistic or whether we are Buddhist, which of these three directions we select decides our life. People who do not believe in Buddhism do not believe in this idea. But people who believe in Buddhism, we think that whether we are spiritual, or whether we are materialistic, or whether we are Buddhist, is the main selection in our life.

Q. So the important point is to develop the intuition?

A. Yes, that is Buddhist idea I think.

Q. So that we can go on the right path?

A. Yes. To promote intuition, to keep balanced is the best way. Keeping balanced, we can always keep the intuitive ability.

So I think Buddhist theory is very simple and very clear, but it is rather difficult for people to think about such a strange theory.

Q. I think that one problem is that in the west we have a very strong intellectual tradition, and we can't even notice it.

A. Yes, so to connect western intellectual thoughts with Buddhist philosophy is a very important point, a very interesting matter.

Q. You've often said that people live in the world of the intellect, or we live in our minds, or we believe our mind is reality, but most people, we don't notice that fact. Just we think, tomorrow I'm going to do something and now I'm going towards it, and we don't notice that that's not true or it's just patterns in our minds. To notice it is very difficult.

A. Yes, so it is necessary to change the thinking method. Buddhism is a kind of different thinking method. So to change our ordinary thinking method into the Buddhist thinking method is necessary, but it is very difficult.

Q. Also, it feels like throwing away something very valuable. For instance, in Britain when children go to school we're encouraged to be clever and to think, "think before you speak, and think before you act". And then you say "throw it away!". We think, "But it's very important,

my mother told me it's very important and my schoolteacher, and now you tell me to throw it away. Oh, I don't think I can throw it away." That kind of feeling.

A. Yes. So that is the difficulty to explain Buddhism, to spread Buddhism.

Q. You recommend that we should get rid of our habitual ways of thinking, the wrong ways that we learned in secular society or through our childhood, externally, school, our parents, TV and all that. For many of us this kind of thinking has become a pattern. Of course it's hard, but if you really want to change the thinking patterns it's possible by training. But my question is, how do you change those habits that have become subconscious?

A. The answer is very simple. The best way is to practice Zazen. But many people do not like to practice Zazen. That is a problem.

Q. It'll empty out the subconscious things too?

A. When we are practicing Zazen we throw away body and mind.

Q. So really Buddhist theory emerges from Zazen?

A. Yes, I think so. Even though Master Nagarjuna said nothing about Zazen in his book *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, I think his idea in *Mulamadhyamakakarika* comes from the practice of Zazen, totally. Without practicing Zazen, he could never arrive at that idea, like Master Dogen. So Zazen has enormous power to suggest the real world.

Shall we stop here?