

Lecture 4

Zazen Retreat 1995

(A open discussion between Nishijima roshi and the retreat participants during which he answers various questions regarding Buddhism in daily life.)

Q I enjoy playing sports, and I am wondering if you think playing sports can help our understanding of Buddhism?

Nishijima Roshi I feel that even playing sports can work as Zazen practice. Therefore I think your sports training and play in the past have contributed to forming your philosophical idea, which is very similar to Buddhism. So I expect all kinds of sports can work like the practice of Zazen and help us to realize Buddhist philosophy. That is my feeling.

Q I think in order for Buddhist philosophy to develop to embrace sports philosophy, and other kinds of philosophies, it has to be transformed slowly. And I have a kind of question in my mind in that respect; for us how much in Buddhist tradition is important, and how much we can change naturally?

A Following Buddhist tradition we can study Buddhism. However, in studying Buddhism the most important matter is practicing Zazen. Of course to follow the traditional lifestyle is also nice, but not fundamental I think. The most fundamental matter is to practice Zazen. In comparison with practices other than Zazen, I think Zazen is the easiest one. Everyone can practice Zazen. But in things like tennis, people have different levels of ability and they must train hard in order to win. But I think, even in sports, whether we win or not is not so important. To play sports is important, not winning or losing.

Thinking about societies today, many kinds of sports are very popular, so utilizing them people can study Buddhist philosophy. To clarify what Buddhist philosophy is, is a very important point. If we get the very clear Buddhist philosophy, then all people can study the theory of Buddhism. And if they rely upon some training, they can realize Buddhist philosophy in their daily life too. Of course Zazen is the fundamental practice which everyone can do, but at the same time playing sports can help promote Buddhism.

Q What I mean is, for instance, somebody who plays a sport may have great interest in the philosophy about action. But, they're not likely to read it if it's in a book about Buddhism. But if the book says "action in tennis" or something, then they may read it. So to what extent can we think Buddhism is a nameless religion?

A Yes, I think Buddhism has the name “Buddhism”, but Buddhism is very different from usual religions.

Q Personally, I feel coming to the temple now I feel some value in being in the temple. But the tradition for me doesn't have such deep roots, and I have some feeling to claim back Buddhism from scholarly areas, and that's what you do. For me, you took something called Buddhism out of some kind of mystical area and put it in a real area. The real area today may be tennis shorts or other sports outfits, so what role does Buddhist tradition have in that area?

A I like the Buddhist tradition, so I enjoy that feeling, that atmosphere.

Q If I don't like it so much, is that important?

A If we practice Zazen, and if we study Buddhist theory, we can get Buddhism.

Q I think many people are kind of put off if they see the temple or the statues and the symbols of Buddhism. Immediately a lot of people don't even want to listen to any more. They see it and they say “I don't like that”, and go away.

Q1 There are so many strange theories which are called Buddhism, and which are associated with temples and so on that it's quite difficult sometimes.

A So to spread Buddhism throughout common society is a very important point I think.

Q So if we think like that about the Buddhist tradition, I feel some kind of way Buddhism can be spread. I can imagine, for instance, tennis professionals sitting down to Zazen before playing a match or something. I think that's something possible. But I can't imagine tennis professionals coming to the temple and studying the Buddhist way so easily.

A In my idea, to play tennis is just Buddhist training. Therefore, I hope tennis players will study Buddhist theory, and connect Buddhist theory with tennis play. That is my hope. There are many kinds of sports, and in all such groups if they study Buddhist theory and if they understand Buddhist theory in their own play, then Buddhist expansion will be faster. That is my hope.

Q We can practice Zazen at home everyday, but people who enjoy playing sports, they don't play sports everyday continuously to the end of their life. They can play maybe a couple of times a week, and that's usually when they are reasonably young or middle aged. But if you get weak knees or some physical trouble, then you can't continue to play sports.

A I think if we use some sports training as a method of Buddhist training, it should be done everyday. The intervals should be short. In the case of Zazen, we have to practice Zazen at least once everyday. The Buddhist state is just a state, so it is necessary for us to realize it with short intervals between practice.

Q We have a phrase in English “to make something my own”. To make something my own means to take something and understand it in my own situation. When I first listened to you talking about the book *Shobogenzo*, I couldn’t understand anything. Then I slowly realized that the theory which you were preaching, Master Dogen’s theory, is about everyday life here. And at that point, I could make it my own. And I think in sports, if people associated with sports can take Buddhist theory and make it their own theory, then it will spread. Can you imagine tennis players, for example, practicing Zazen?

Q1 There’s already a lot of players that do a type of meditation. They follow a type of ritual before a game, they do a certain type of stretching etc. All that ritual is in a way a type of Zazen, it’s a routine and it helps them to keep focused on the present. It keeps their focus only on now; now I’m stretching, and when stretching time is over, now I’m doing the warm up etc.

Q So simple action?

Q1 Yes, very simple action. Basically, Zazen is to help you think about the here and now isn’t it? So any kind of routine that someone does will help. But they must be mindful of what they are doing, for example, not doing something and thinking about something else. So they must be doing something and they must be there in that thing?

Q Wholehearted?

Q1 Yes, so I think that’s a very important point.

Q Certainly, in my case, practicing Zazen is exactly the same sensual experience as when I used to climb mountains. But, people don’t usually think that Zazen is a sport.

A This idea is not so popular in societies today, because people sometimes expect some kind of very beautiful religious image in Buddhism. Buddhism is different from secular society, and Buddhism is completely different from sports, therefore my Buddhist idea is not so popular in society now. Thinking about world history however, Buddhism should work in secular society.

Q Yes, in my mind I have to picture taking Buddhism back into life. The Buddhism you preach is in the real area, but there’s a whole field of Buddhism in the world, thousands of

scholars and conferences, and what they're talking about is in a completely separate area. So even by using the word "Buddhism", people think your Buddhism is the same as the Buddhism of the scholars, if we use the word "Buddhism".

A That is a rather difficult point. People usually like what seems to be excellent. Therefore, a very monotonous theory is not so popular.

Q During Zazen, how do you focus your eyes?

A I look at something at the place where my eyes are focused.

Q Sometimes I find my eyes going out of focus.

A In Zazen, looking at something clearly is nice. If we lose focus, it means our mind is a little sleepy or thinking something.

Q So we should be able to see clearly?

A Yes.

Q When you were talking about secular society, I couldn't help thinking about my first Zen teacher's mother. She believed that because her son was sitting in Zazen the devil was going to come and take over his body. There are many people with beliefs like that about any kind of meditation. They don't want to know about it, they don't want to hear it, they don't want to see it, it's something bad. So I wonder what you think about that kind of situation.

A Have you had the same experience?

Q Of meeting people like that?

A Like people who think that during Zazen the devil will come.

Q I've met people who really thought like that. They thought it was very dangerous for me to do Zazen.

Q1 It's the reaction of Christianity.

Q2 Anything outside of what is the normal Christian faith is seen as evil.

Q1 My sister was a Christian missionary in Thailand for twelve years, but her efforts didn't have such a big effect. So when she came back, she said that in Thailand the devil was very

strong. The reason she thought so was because Christianity didn't become popular, so that meant the devil was very strong. So it's quite a common Christian attitude, and Christianity is very deep-rooted in many western societies.

A I think a very important point is the relationship between Christianity and Buddhism, Judaism and Buddhism, and Buddhism and other religions. To think about those problems and to get the clear idea is very important I think.

Q Regarding Buddhism and Christianity, I think the most difficult problem in Christianity is "good" and "bad". And I feel the Buddhist explanation of good and bad is quite helpful for Christians, because Christian people divide themselves and the world into "good" and "bad". Bad or evil is outside, and good is inside. Therefore they cannot see the good and bad in themselves, so they make an effort to be good, and using your simile, they're pushing the cork which is floating on the surface of the water under the water's surface but the cork pops up again, so they do something which they think is bad, and then they try to be good again. So I think the Buddhist explanation of ethics, morality, and what good and bad are, can actually be a kind of relief for Christian people. If they can catch the explanation, they can see the real situation in themselves.

A To think about such problems is very important. Without such consideration, we cannot say anything to people who believe in other religions.

Q When we were in England, we gave a talk to students of a religious department of Bath University. One of them said, "Buddhism doesn't have any sense of morals. Buddhism doesn't tell people good and bad."

Q1 In western society, in many people who still believe in Christianity, their religion is very primitive. For instance, I have a cousin who is a very sincere Christian, and she divides the world, "oh, that's good, God is helping this, that's evil, that's bad". All day, everyday, everything she does, "this is good, this is God's work, God is helping us here". And for something else, "this is the devil". And for people too. I think it's quite a primitive way to view the world.

A To explain Buddhism in that kind of Christian society is important, but very difficult. Thinking about Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism, I think Judaism is a little nearer to Buddhism than Christianity.

Q I don't think Judaism has the kind of strange, sharp divisions between good and evil. They have good and evil, but it's in a very much wider context. They are very much more practical. I suppose the history of the Jewish nation kept the religion very practical.

A Yes, I think so.

Q Certainly Christian nations feel that the Jewish religion is different from Christianity. I think one reason the Jewish religion is nearer to Buddhism is that in their book, the *Talmud*, they have descriptions of practical processes, for example, "This is how you should conduct a funeral service.". But if you read the Bible you can find hardly any description of practical processes. You can read very many spiritual stories and similes, but a lot of the Jewish writing is practical procedures for their religion, even how you should tie your shoes, how you should put on your clothes and so on. I think any religion which has that kind of detailed day-to-day habits must be quite strong.

A The problem is very interesting, but the area of the problem is so big. It is rather difficult to know only a part of it.

Q When you say Buddhism will pervade throughout the world, sometimes it seems hard to imagine.

A Yes. So if Buddhism pervades throughout the world, religions will vanish. That is my idea. Religion is a kind of belief, but Buddhism is believing in the fact in front of us. So the attitude is different.

Q When you say pervade, it has the kind of image of coming from here, and going outwards. But I think in fact, many people in different areas, in sports and in other areas, are looking at the facts in front of them and doing more "linking up". The way that it pervades, whether it goes out or comes this way, is impossible to say.

A I think human history is going to enter into the age of reality.

Q And the age of reality means the age of looking at what's in front of us?

A Yes, based on the fact at the present moment. And in that situation religious thoughts cannot exist.

Q I think there are people who sort of see one glimmer or one small amount of something true, and from that they draw all kinds of very strange conclusions that seem to be missing the

point. I'm thinking specifically of a book I read where several different physicists had looked at some problems of physics, and because of the mathematical problems they had come up with they seemed to be on the track of discovering something of the nature of "at this moment is the only reality", but instead they ended up drawing these mathematical conclusions that there are thousands of different alternate universes or those sort of strange conclusions.

Q1 They follow their ideas instead of reality.

Q But they'll see something that's probably very true, and that little bit of insight then just goes in a strange direction.

Q1 Like they see the handle of a kettle, and then they say "oh, there's a handle, so maybe there's a big thing out here and over there". But, they don't look and see "oh, there's a handle and there's also a kettle". They take one part and then using theory they build a huge picture, following their ideas.

Q2 There are some very popular books I've seen lately that seem to have a little bit of something Buddhist to them. One in particular, a book entitled "The Celestine Prophecy" had ideas which sounded a bit like some of the ideas of Buddhism. In the book there are nine insights, and insight means kind of way of being, how to be, how to act. It goes kind of step by step, and at the end you reach a kind of spirituality. Anyway, it's a best seller in the USA.

Q Some book which has a spiritual theme and which is exciting or heroic, when people read it they feel wonderful.

A Yes, the area of intellect is perfectly free. We can think everything, so we can enjoy every kind of idea.

Q But there are many different theories or techniques which start in a realistic place. I'm thinking in particular about a technique where some business people have kind of meetings, lots of people go, and based on the meetings they find out how to cooperate. And although these meetings start in a very practical way, when people leave the meetings after three or four days, they have got some kind of spiritual enthusiasm, "Oh, I can be a different person! I'm different! I solved all my problems!", and they go away from the meeting very happy. There are many meetings and seminars like this and maybe for one week or two weeks afterwards people feel, "Oh, I'm a different person! There's something I got out, it's gone and now I can move on to.....". Then slowly they come back to reality and they're disappointed. So there are many techniques that start in a realistic place, and then they float into space.

A So I think many people think that Zazen is too monotonous and it seems useless.

Q And the reason it seems so monotonous is, it always brings you back to the same place.

A So for many people, their thoughts are sufficient. They do not want anything other than their own thoughts. Even though their thoughts are sometimes different from reality, they do not get rid of their own thoughts.

Q I told you that the latest book I was reading was written by David Bohm. He has a discussion with many people and his ideas are realistic, but the other people in the meeting have all different kinds of ideas, and slowly the contents of the conversation moves away from reality. And David Bohm has to insist, "No, reality is here." So like that, slowly people build their theories away from the simple fact.

A So David Bohm has to follow them.

Q That's right. So then I realized, "Ah, so Zazen brings us back to a common experience. So without a common experience, there's no place to come back to."

A I think it is very clear that world civilization is becoming realistic. This tendency is very clear, but to realize it takes a rather long time.

Q But we're all realizing it.

A Yes, therefore I am optimistic, because the world is approaching reality even though the speed is very slow.

Q When you say the world is approaching reality, you mean that we can see the real situation in front of us, rather than the idea in our mind or the physical fact?

A My idea is a little historical. People experienced the area of spirit so perfectly in the mediaeval ages, and people experienced the age of matter so strongly in the modern age. But the age of matter has arrived at its culmination, so people need the next criteria and I guess the next criteria may be reality. People are looking for something blindly, but human history will arrive at reality eventually. That is my image.

Q In the case of Japan, before the Second World War would you say Japanese society was in a spiritual phase?

A Yes, it was very nationalistic and there was a kind of religion to the emperor and to the country.

Q So Japanese society entered a very materialistic phase after the war?

A At the end of World War Two we lost that spiritual belief completely. So nowadays Japanese people are very materialistic and work hard to get economic profit, and we are rather successful. But we do not have any criteria other than economical value. It is a very sad situation.

Q You don't think people are getting tired of it?

A Yes, I think they are.

Q Zen has been around in Japan for a long time and I wonder if you think it has had any influence. Westerners always like to point out what they feel are the Zen influences, the Zen aspects of Japanese business or something. Do you think Zen has had any influence?

A For hundreds of years Buddhism governed Japanese society, so in Japanese society there are many customs and habits which are based on Buddhism. Recently Japanese people forget Buddhist theory, but the Buddhist habits and customs exist in our daily life so this tradition makes us Buddhist. That is a fact, so we need to recover Buddhist belief or theory again. We lost belief in Buddhism completely. We have Buddhist habits with Buddhist tradition with Buddhist customs in our daily life – that is the situation. But we do not know what Buddhism is.

So I hope Japanese people will have an interest in Buddhism and begin to study it again. But I wonder whether it is possible or not.

It was a very nice talk. Shall we finish now.

Thank you very much.