

Buddhism & Action

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To begin, I would like to give a brief description of what Buddhism is, the stream of philosophical ideas in world history, and the relationship between the two.

Buddhism is a religion that is based on training. The meaning of training here is practice and action, or “the practice of action.” This is the distinguishing mark of Buddhism as a religion, and Buddhist theory has developed on this basis.

The nature of Buddhism as a religion based on action is of great significance if we look at the direction in which world history is pointing us. I would like to go into this in more detail, and with that aim, I would like to give a summary of the development of modern western civilization.

Civilization as we know it is believed to have started in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India. Recent discoveries suggest that the oldest civilization in the world existed in Ethiopia. From there it spread outwards in many directions, arriving after a long period in the Aegean Sea area and on to the islands of Greece. In Greece the seeds of modern western civilization as we know it germinated, and modern civilization owes much to these origins.

From among the great thinkers of ancient Greece emerged the philosopher Plato. He developed a philosophy which was centered on the rational workings of the mind, and which we call idealism today. The basic concepts of this new philosophy of idealism spread and were absorbed into the Roman Empire, from where they spread to the four corners of Europe together with Roman civilization. The time was ripe for idealism, and in the closing phases of the Empire, this idealism met the fledgling Christianity.

Idealism as embodied in the thoughts of Plato and Aristotle found a match in Christianity, with its belief in a perfect God living in Heaven, and one strengthened the other. Christianity was able to use the logical strengths of Greek idealism to develop a clear theology, and in turn, the ideals of Christianity came to form the center of a new set of philosophical ideals. The stage was thus set for Christianity to spread on the back of an idealistic view of the world throughout the length and breadth of European societies.

Christianity is a religion centered on belief in God, in whose image man is created. With this basic belief, the people of Europe created societies based on the Christian ideals which they held in their minds, and tried to live their daily life according to these ideals. This was well-suited to the times, when living conditions were poor, and belief in “salvation” provided the ideal escape.

At the end of the Middle Ages, however, productivity started to improve, and the life of people in Europe slowly improved. With this slow improvement in their standard of living, people began to realize their physicalness. Freed from the race for mere survival, they began to see that man has a physical existence. In short, a new way of looking at life slowly emerged.

Objective observation of the stars led Copernicus to the conclusion that the Sun was at the center of our Universe and that the Earth moved around the Sun. This was in direct contradiction to the Ptolemaic beliefs which Christianity supported at that time. But belief in the Copernican view of the Universe slowly took hold, and with it, the development of the first scientific theories. People had started to look at the actual concrete facts in front of them. In these conditions, science developed rapidly, and because of that development, accepted religious beliefs were broken down one after the other. This was unavoidable. European civilization entered a period of renaissance, a period in which society moved back towards a more human-centered existence, as in Roman and Greek times. With the Renaissance, a reformation in the Catholic Church also put a more human face on the nature of Christian belief.

At the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution was significant in breaking the belief in the divine power of kings, and this allowed people to start to see that with the creation of political systems people could govern themselves.

The 19th century saw a strengthening in the power of materialism, and with it philosophers like Karl Marx, who developed his philosophy that all things and phenomena in the world can be explained from the viewpoint of matter and material power. This ultimately led to a situation at the end of the 19th century in which the philosopher Nietzsche pronounced “*God is dead!*” By this he wanted to suggest that the power of spiritual religions had declined to the point where they were no longer effective as a basis for daily life.

But the big question is whether or not human beings can actually live without belief in a religion. To live without a belief is to live without an aim, without any criteria. In this situation, the question of the meaning of life is set into clear relief.

From the end of the 19th century and throughout the early part of the 20th century, a search started for something neither centered on religion, nor centered around the material world of science. Philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, and Heidegger developed an existential view of the world, in which they declared that we exist at the moment of the present. The American philosopher John Dewey asserted his pragmatist views in which the criterion used to judge the value of something is not spiritual, not material, but is in accordance with its practicality: whether it is useful to man’s life. Husserl went further with phenomenology and asserted that any discussions of the spiritual or material is useless. The essential thing is the way we view objects or phenomena as they appear in front of us. Wilhelm Dilthey’s philosophy was centered around the human condition, denying both the spiritual and material realms.

These trends in the development of philosophical thought show us that people in the 20th century were not satisfied with idealistic beliefs centered on spirit, nor were they satisfied with the materialistic beliefs of science. This general dissatisfaction with current belief systems is still with us; perhaps the biggest problem facing mankind as we move into the 21st century is what belief system will we adopt as the criterion for civilization, what beliefs will form the basis of our societies in the future.

In this situation, I would like to suggest that we can look towards Buddhism, and I will explain why. Buddhism is not a spiritual religion, neither is it a materialistic system; it is a way of living based on action. The main characteristic of Buddhist philosophy is that it is constructed around the nature of action itself.

I will tell you why I say that Buddhism can form the basis of a new belief system for the world. When I was a student of 17 or 18, I became absorbed by a book called the Shobogenzo which was written in the 13th century by a Buddhist monk, Master Dogen. For more than 50 years since then I have continued to study the Shobogenzo. During that time, reading it again and again, I translated it into modern Japanese. Going over it again and again to clarify the meaning, I have lectured on the Shobogenzo in different places probably more than 6000 times. This long task has led me to see clearly that what Master Dogen is doing in the Shobogenzo is explaining the nature of reality. His explanation is centered around the nature of action. This has become very clear to me, and it has convinced me that the criteria for living that Master Dogen explains, based not on spiritual beliefs or material facts, but grounded firmly in our action, can form the basis of a new belief system, a new philosophy for the world.

Let me illustrate why I have come to believe this. There is a chapter in the Shobogenzo called Kajo, or Daily Life. In it Master Dogen quotes his own master, Tendo Nyojo:

*“The golden and splendid form
Is to get dressed and to eat meals.”*

The “*golden and splendid form*” here refers to the figure of Gautama Buddha, who is said to have been surrounded by a golden aura. Master Tendo Nyojo’s words mean that our daily actions of eating and getting

dressed contain the golden splendor of the Buddha; that is, those everyday actions are splendid in themselves. This assertion contains the essence of Buddhism. But this essence is not just embodied in words and theory; it refers directly to our real actions in our daily life. Buddhism asserts that actions like getting dressed and eating meals form the very center of our real existence.

There is another chapter in *Shobogenzo* called *Jinzu* or *Mystical Powers*. This chapter discusses the nature of the special power that people get from Buddhist training. Master Dogen quotes a Chinese man called Ho-on, who was a layman studying Buddhism while working in society:

*“The mystical power and wondrous function,
Carrying water and lugging firewood.”*

This says that the Buddhist meaning of mystical power and wondrous function is contained in what in those days were the daily actions of carrying water and firewood. We drink water and use it for cooking. Firewood too was essential for cooking and for heating. So these two things were basic necessities of everyday life. What is mystical and wondrous about these activities is that they actually give life to us—they are our life itself. Looking at Buddhism in this way, we can see that it is not a religion based on something we create in our minds, it is a religion which teaches us clearly how to lead our lives day by day.

Let us now locate Buddhism in its place in the development of belief systems up to the present day. Spiritual belief was dominant in the Middle Ages, but has now given way to the power of materialism in modern times. At the end of the 19th century, people first started to lose faith in the ultimate power of materialism, leading to the current situation in which people are actively studying and sincerely seeking for an alternative criterion for living.

I sincerely believe that in this stream of history, Buddhism, with its basis in action, is at this time exactly suited to become the major belief system in the world. It has a philosophical system which can unify all others. This is my inescapable conclusion after my years of study of the *Shobogenzo*. You might feel, listening to my words, that what I am saying about the role of a theory based on the nature of action in the destiny of the world sounds too dogmatic—and this may be a natural first reaction. But I want to say that I have studied the *Shobogenzo* to the exclusion of all else since I was a young man, and what Master Dogen says about action and the teachings of Gautama Buddha leave me without a shadow of a doubt that the Buddhist belief system centered on action is destined to become the world’s central philosophy.

At this point in time, mankind can no longer believe in mediaeval spiritual systems, and neither can it accept the supremacy of science in providing us with answers. The real situation is that people are searching with all their might. They are searching for something which is neither spiritual nor materialistic that they can rely on. In this situation it is inevitable for Buddhism to emerge as the central influence.

But what does action mean exactly? This is of central import. In *Shobogenzo* there are many explanations of the nature of action. One example appears in the chapter *Shoaku Makusa*, or *Not Doing Wrongs*. A famous Chinese poet, Haku-Raku-Ten, is having a talk with his master, Choka Dorin. Haku-Raku-Ten was also renowned as a politician and was an enthusiastic student of Buddhism. After he had been appointed as governor of several districts in China, he became the student of Master Choka Dorin. One day he asked his master: *“What is the Great Intention of the Buddha-Dharma?”* Master Choka replied, *“Not to commit wrongs. To practice the many kinds of right.”* Haku-Raku-Ten had hoped that his master would give him a scholarly and philosophical answer which would satisfy him. But Master Choka simply told him not to do wrong, but to practice the many kinds of right.

Haku-Raku-Ten was very disappointed with this simple and direct answer to his question, something as simple as not doing wrong, doing right! He said to his master, *“If this is so, even a child of three can say this!”* He meant that the answer was so simple that it could have been given even by a three year old child.

He shows here that he thought that Buddhism was a far more sophisticated and philosophical pursuit, and not just consisting of simple expressions of conduct in our daily life. Master Choka replied to him: “*A child of three can speak the truth but an old man of eighty cannot practice it!*” Of course it is valid to point out that a three year old child can say don’t do wrong, do right, but the point is that this admonishment is very difficult to actually put into practice. Even an old man of eighty cannot do it.

This answer is a very good description of the real situation in our life. The fact that something a three year old child can say, cannot be put into practice even by an eighty year old man shows us clearly the enormous gulf between what we think and say in words, and what we can actually do; theory and action exist in completely different worlds. We do not normally realize this simple fact in our daily lives. At school we are taught to use the viewpoint of a civilization which is based on a way of thinking that has been passed down the ages from the Greek idealists. This viewpoint is based on a belief that it is possible to understand all things and to solve all problems intellectually. Many people today react very strongly to the assertion that problems cannot be solved by thinking about them, but only by acting.

One significant fact which allows us to say that human beings are the most excellent of living creatures is that the human brain has been found to be heavier than the brain of an ape. We have more brain cells than our animal cousins. This capacity for thought is what distinguishes us from other animals. This fact has allowed the human race to position itself next to the gods in order of intellectual ability. This is the position that western civilization has placed man in the chain of development. From this perspective, it is quite natural to conclude that we have the power to understand everything. Science is a child of man’s great intellect, and the many developments in the fields of science have given us unparalleled benefits. Material progress has been so astonishing that we naturally feel that there is nothing that will not be understood given time. This natural feeling has become a well-rooted belief—that the intellect is supreme.

If we look at our daily life, however, we can see that we are deluding ourselves in this. Life doesn’t work like that. We can go to a bookstore and be confronted with hundreds and hundreds of books on every subject under the sun. If we buy one and take it home and read it, it soon becomes clear that it cannot give us the fundamental answers to life’s problems. Although we can accumulate a lot of information and knowledge, we are by and large unable to put this knowledge into practice in our real lives.

Gautama Buddha was confronted by the same kinds of problems. No matter how much we think about something, no matter how much knowledge we accumulate on a particular subject, even though we may make strenuous efforts to solve our particular problem, we find that it is in fact too difficult—we cannot actually do it. On the other hand, our efforts often lead us into doing things that we wanted to avoid doing. Sometimes it seems that we end up just repeating those very things that we were trying to avoid. So looking at our actual conduct in daily life, it is clear that we are actually very weak. Although our heads may be filled with great ideas, when we try to put them into practice, the result in the real world is always different from what we wanted. When we habitually live with the perfection of the ideas in our heads, and try to live our lives based on them, we will always be disappointed with the results of our efforts. This is the real situation.

Some people form an idea, and the idea itself causes them great suffering, because no matter how much effort they make, they can never put their idea into practice. Other people think that a wiser way to get along in life is just to throw away all ideas and aims and drift along following the situation. When people make serious efforts to reach their ideals they are bound to end up in failure, feeling miserable. And people who throw away all ideas and worries often find it difficult to maintain a reason for living. Living day by day just letting time roll on does not give us an aim in life. Although we can get some kind of satisfaction from sensual pleasures like eating, or spending money on fine clothes which make us feel good, there is a limit. Even if we become rich and live in grand houses it is still doubtful whether we really feel satisfied with our lives. This sort of situation is a common problem in life.

Again, Gautama Buddha himself faced the same problem. At the time when he lived, the religion of Brahmanism had been dominant for several hundreds of years. Brahmanism teaches that the ultimate divine reality of the Universe is Brahma, from which all beings originate, and to which they all return. Thus the world in which we live is the image of Brahma. Human body, mind and spirit are all in the image of Brahma. These teachings encourage people to develop the elements of Brahma in themselves and so to become one with Brahma again, the ultimate state of human happiness. Brahmanism is believed to have emerged as a religion around 1200 or 1300 BC. Gautama Buddha lived in the 4th and 5th centuries BC, and so when he was born these teachings had already been established for a long time. Because of this, the teachings had degenerated and been corrupted, weakening the power of the religion when Gautama Buddha was alive.

At this time there was also a very powerful and active school of philosophy based on the teachings of six heretic teachers. Of the six, four were materialists who insisted that the world was based on matter and that ideals had no value. They rejected morality and pronounced that the aim of life was to satisfy the physical body. They denied the difference between good and bad. The other two taught a kind of skepticism in which they denied the existence of any kind of criteria for governing human societies. The school thus consisted of materialists and skeptics. In this situation, there was a confrontation between traditional Brahmanism and the teachings of the six philosophers.

We can imagine that from an early age Gautama Buddha must have anguished in deciding which of these systems he believed. Because of his sincere character, he must have tried hard to believe in Brahmanism, and must have been quite knowledgeable about that religion. But he was very sensitive to the question of whether Brahmanism was really believable, whether it was true or not. However, although he could not in the end believe in Brahmanism, he also found that the materialistic and skeptical teachings of the six philosophers could not satisfy him. In his struggle to find which system was true, he tried asceticism and he tried Zazen. After some time, early one morning on seeing the morning star, he realized that this world, here and now, is splendid. This is written in the Sutras: "*The earth and all living beings are splendid.*"

This total acceptance of all things as they are gave Gautama Buddha a basis on which to form his thought. If we look at the many Buddhist Sutras written on the Buddha's realization we can conclude that he reached this viewpoint or state because he revered action. Action cannot exist at any other time or place than the present moment here and now. Another way of looking at this is in terms of past, present and future: no matter what mistakes we have made in the past, although we may regret them, we can never return to that past moment to put things right. It is clear that we cannot return to the past. At the same time, although we want to attain our dream or reach our aim in the future, we can never go into the future to reach our dream. But if we look at life as centered on acting, we see that we can only really exist in the present. We can never return to the past, and we cannot go into the future.

This is the essence of what Gautama Buddha taught—real existence is the present moment. Gautama Buddha reached the point where he saw clearly that living in the present moment just doing the best we can is the only realistic way to live. As long as we live in this way, there is nothing that we need fear, and no need to worry. The Universe moves forward under the rule of cause and effect. All that we have to do in our life is to live fully in the present. This is Gautama Buddha's teaching. And if we have this viewpoint, we can find nothing insurmountable in our life. Although problems will come and go, with sincere action, things will improve with the unfolding of causality. But we need to make efforts even in happy times to maintain this happy state. This is the real situation, and this is what Gautama Buddha taught. Centered on action, people can solve all their problems.

We are very fortunate that Gautama Buddha's teachings have come down the centuries to us, and we can feel his great benevolence. I urge people to study and follow these teachings with all their energy and live following the criteria of the Buddha's teachings on action.

Action and Daily Life

The main activities in our day-to-day lives are centered around eating, sleeping and working, and include getting up, getting dressed, and so on. In my first talk I quoted Master Tendo Nyojo saying, “*The golden and splendid form is to get dressed and to eat meals.*” This says that the real meaning of Gautama Buddha’s splendor is in our daily activities of eating and dressing, just as it was for Gautama Buddha himself.

This is rather a unique assertion for a religion. Religions usually tell us that activities like eating and getting dressed are second in importance to spiritual faith. We generally think that a religion must value the spiritual side of life at the expense of daily activities like these. These daily activities don’t seem grand enough to be the center of belief in a religion. This is the common perception.

But Buddhist philosophy is based around action, and so the activities of eating, getting dressed, washing ourselves—washing the face after getting up in the morning—these daily activities form the essence of Gautama Buddha’s teachings.

In the Shobogenzo, there is a chapter called *Hatsu-U*, or the Buddhist Bowls. These bowls are called *patra* in Sanskrit, and *o-ryoki* in modern Japanese. In this chapter Master Dogen explains that eating meals is an important Buddhist practice. He says “*The patra is the body-and-mind of Buddhist patriarchs.*” In this way, Master Dogen values the bowls very highly as a symbol of his religion.

Master Dogen also wrote a book called *Fushuku Han Ho* or Rules for Eating Meals. Traditionally, priests in temples in Japan eat rice gruel in the morning and rice at midday. The book sets down the rules of conduct when eating breakfast and lunch. He sets out the details of how meals should be eaten. When he was 23 years old, Master Dogen set off for China and stayed there living in temples for 4 years. During this time, he realized that the way of taking meals that the Chinese priests followed was a tradition, and he wanted to bring this traditional way of eating back to Japan and establish it here. He wanted people in Japan to follow the traditional way of eating exactly. One of the rules states that before starting to eat we should recite *Gokan No Ge* or the Five Reflections out loud. The Five Reflections are:

We reflect upon the insufficiency of our effort in this life.

We contemplate the effort which has gone into the preparation of this meal.

After the cold winter, people are planting rice seedlings and tending them through the summer. Then in the autumn the rice is harvested and threshed to give us grain to eat. If we think about the effort that goes into this, the work involved in pulling out weeds, supplying water to the rice fields when needed, and planting out the rice seedlings at the right time, just producing rice to eat involves lots of work. Not only rice, but also vegetables, and all other foods involve care and labor. We should reflect on how the food comes to our table. This is the first reflection.

We reflect upon our merit.

We know that we are not deserving of this meal.

We are allowed to become monks through the benevolence of many people, and we are thus given the chance to practice Buddhism. If we look at our Buddhist practice, we can never feel that we have done well enough. So we eat reflecting on the insufficiency of our conduct.

We reflect upon the sources of our mental illusions and mistakes.

We must avoid greed, anger, and ignorance.

We try not to be greedy, not to become angry, and not to complain. These are known as the three poisons. In Buddhism, avoiding these three states is part of our training in how to avoid unnecessary thoughts, doing wrong acts, making mistakes. We should avoid these states when we are eating meals.

We reflect upon the reason for eating meals. It is to avoid becoming weak and thin.

Buddhism says that food is a kind of effective medicine to stop us becoming weak, and meals are traditionally called “Great Medicine.” This expression gives us an indication of the importance Buddhism places on eating meals. Although modern medical knowledge is highly developed and techniques are very advanced, meals are of prime importance in keeping us healthy, and medicines can only be of secondary importance. The food which we eat every day nourishes our body and keeps us from weakening. So from the Buddhist viewpoint, food really is good medicine, and we eat meals to stop us getting weak and thin. If we become weak we will lose the ability to work.

We reflect upon the ultimate reason for taking meals. It is only to attain the truth.

When we eat this meal now, we are grasping the truth of Buddhism. We eat not solely to nourish our body, but also as a practice to complete our task of attaining the Buddhist truth.

These are the five reflections.

On these matters, Master Kodo Sawaki, under whom I studied for many years, often said when he was teaching us: “Are we eating in order to work or working in order to eat! Although some people think that eating is the more important, and they work in order that they can eat with work as a secondary aim, in Buddhism the value of a human being comes from the work they do. It is not so important what we eat, it is simply that we have to eat in order to be able to work.” This is what Sawaki Roshi often said. And this meaning is included in the five reflections.

Buddhism also reveres the value of the kasaya, the Buddhist robe.

In addition to its traditional view of meals, Buddhism also has a tradition in what we wear. There are two chapters in the Shobogenzo written about the kasaya: *Kesa Kudoku*, The Merit of the Kasaya, and *Den-e*, The Transmission of the Robe. *Kesa Kudoku* explains what the value of the kasaya is, and *Den-e* describes the kind of kasaya that priests wear, and refers to the robe as the heart and body of the Buddha.

The religion called Buddhism has been practiced for many years in India, Tibet, China, Japan and many countries of South-east Asia. Buddhists in all of these countries wear the kasaya, although the styles are somewhat different from country to country. Wearing the kasaya identifies us as Buddhists.

But the kasaya is not only a uniform which shows that we are Buddhists. Wearing it also embodies the religion itself. People tend to think that clothes show the person, and nowadays there are many different fashions, materials, colors, and designs which allow us to express ourselves. Clothes express the history of humanity and tell us something about the wearer.

In the chapter in Shobogenzo titled *Senmen*, or Washing the Face, Master Dogen says that washing is very important. He quotes from the Lotus Sutra to make his point:

*“The bodhisattva applies oil to the body,
Having bathed away dust and dirt,
And puts on a fresh and clean robe:
Totally clean within and without.”*

Master Dogen comments: “So to bathe body-and-mind, to apply fragrant oil, and to get rid of dust and dirt, are Buddha-Dharma of primary importance.” He goes on to talk about washing the face: “Washing the face has been transmitted from India in the west, and it has spread through China in the east.”

We tend to think that washing the face in our daily life is a small matter of no importance. But in fact, washing the face is a very important expression of our civilization. Looking back into Japanese history, in ancient times there was no custom of washing in hot water. They had the custom of “*misogi*” which was to wash in cold water. Then around the Nara Era, the practice of using hot water came to Japan with Buddhism, and started to become customary. The wife of Emperor Shomu is said to have built the first public bath, and this is the way that washing the body spread from being part of a religious custom into

normal society. Washing our body to keep it clean and washing the face are both close indicators of the level of a civilization.

In this same chapter, Master Dogen also explains how to clean the teeth. He describes how to use a willow twig, a custom which came originally from India. Buddhist priests used to carry a twig of willow especially for this purpose when they traveled. Priests have to carry 18 special items with them when they travel, and the willow twig is the most important of these items.

So in Buddhism we find washing the face and cleaning the teeth set out as essential conduct for priests. Both customs came to Japan from India via China. Master Dogen laments the fact that, in his time, the practice of cleaning the teeth had virtually died out in China. He re-established the practice in his temple, Eihei-ji, and the priests there continue the same custom until this day. Master Dogen felt very thankful that he was able to re-establish these customs. He adds *“Before we have washed the face, to perform any of the various practices is impolite.”* This clearly confirms that washing the face in the morning is a vital part of Buddhist conduct.

In another chapter titled *Senjo*, or Washing, we can find the passage: *“Water is not always originally pure or originally impure. The body is not always originally pure or originally impure.”* This means that it is not whether the body is clean or dirty or whether the water is clean or dirty that is important. The meaning of washing in Buddhism is not only to wash our dirty body in clean water; Gautama Buddha taught us that the action of washing itself is important, and we follow his teachings. These teachings say that washing the body has an important religious meaning.

In the same chapter, Master Dogen instructs us to cut our fingernails. We do not normally think of cutting the fingernails as part of religious practice, but in Buddhism it forms an essential part of religious conduct. The chapter also contains detailed instructions on how to go to the toilet; what kind of preparation, and the way we should use the toilet. These things are written down in great detail.

We are especially told how important it is to keep the important private parts of the body clean. In modern Japan there is no custom to wash the bottom after going to the toilet, but that custom still exists in India. In hotels in India there is always a small hand bowl kept in the toilet for that purpose. You fill the bowl with water and use it to wash the bottom. These customs were transmitted to temples in China and when Master Dogen stayed there, he saw the customs and brought them back to Japan. This is what happened. We may suppose that he established the same customs in Eihei-ji temple too. These days most western countries use toilet paper. There are many different countries and customs. From among all these differing customs, as modern global society adopts the better of these one by one, civilization moves forward.

Looking around the world, we can see many and varied customs, some good, some not so good. In looking at different countries, I use one simple criterion in judging the level of that society—the state of the public toilets in that country. If the public toilets are clean, it shows that the level of civilization in that country is high. We should really make it a priority to keep public toilets clean, and in order to achieve this, people must first realize the importance of personal and public hygiene.

All these sorts of daily activities are clearly described in the *Shobogenzo* as religious conduct. Quoting Master Dogen again:

My late Master Tendo, the eternal Buddha ... says in his formal preaching in the lecture hall, “I remember the following: A monk asks Hyakujo, ‘What is something miraculous?’ Hyakujo says ‘Sitting alone on Great and Mighty Peak.’ Monks, do not be disturbed. Let the fellow kill himself by sitting for a while. If someone today were suddenly to ask, ‘Acarya Nyojo, what is something miraculous?’, I would only say to them ‘What miracle could there be? Finally what is there to say? The putra of Joji has moved to Tendo and will eat meals.’”

So in reply to the question ‘*What is something miraculous?*’, Master Hyakujo says that sitting alone in his hut on the mountain is a most wonderful thing. Master Tendo tells us not to be surprised and to let Hyakujo go on practicing Zazen in his hut. He says that if someone were to come up to him and ask him right at this moment what the most wonderful thing is, he would reply that there are no such things as miracles in our everyday life. In the end he just tells everyone that on Mount Tendo, he is still using the bowls which he used in his old temple, Joji temple, everyday. He expresses this as a wonderful fact!

This kind of example is indeed the most wonderful thing. It shows that Buddhism is centered on action, and it also illustrates the accepting of the real situation in front of us in our day-to-day life—leading a sincere life. These are indeed Buddhist practices.

Nowadays, people usually have one of two basic attitudes to daily life: a positive, optimistic attitude, or a negative, critical attitude. I have the impression that the majority of people in modern societies have a critical, pessimistic or negative outlook: what should we do about nuclear weapons; what should we do to keep the earth free from pollution; how can we solve the ozone layer problem; how stupid humans are to create situations like Somalia; why are eastern European countries always fighting. These sorts of pessimistic worries are negative views and they are fairly widespread. But this is not the Buddhist way. We are living just at the moment of the present. We concentrate on and act in this moment. As long as we live by acting in the present moment, making our efforts to improve the situation, we are free from anguish and suffering.

Generally religions are thought to embrace this sort of “concerned” attitude but it is basically pessimistic. It comes from a belief that the world in which we live is full of sin and impurity. If we urge ourselves onward in making efforts to get rid of the evil face of the world so that only the good remains, we end up feeling anxious or pessimistic. This is the normal face of religion.

But Buddhism has no such outlook. There is no imperative to improve on reality. We accept the wonder of the world just as it is. The attitude of accepting things as they are is our natural or original state. If our behavior wanders away from the natural path, we generate our own dissatisfaction and start to complain. This is what leads us to a pessimistic and negative view of the world. Of course things happen in life to make us feel miserable sometimes, but the question is whether this kind of outlook is the right basic view.

This was the question that Gautama Buddha asked himself. After some years following the severe life of an ascetic, he finally found that this world is wonderfully positive as it is. And he wanted to tell everyone what he had found. He wanted to teach the fact to all people. This is the origin of the Buddhist religion. However many people doubt what I am saying. They believe that Buddhism is based on a pessimistic view, in which the world is full of suffering. They believe that Buddhism says that the world is suffering, and that our role is to accept this and to bear the suffering. They think that this is the Buddhist life. I strongly disagree.

The Shobogenzo contains no such belief. This is my understanding. On the contrary, Master Dogen tells us that we should accept the world in its splendor as it is. This is the fundamental principle in his teachings.

The reason why people think that Buddhism has such a pessimistic view of the world comes from the traditional interpretation of the Four Noble Truths. These four truths form the center of Buddhist belief. The traditional interpretation of these truths gives us a bleak picture of life, as if we should engage in a struggle in a world of suffering to banish all our desires and attain some special state. But this interpretation is not the only one. Here is another interpretation which I believe shows us clearly the Buddhist way in this world, and which is the interpretation consistent with Master Dogen’s teachings.

The first Noble Truth is interpreted to mean that the world is full of suffering, but this truth is only one of four truths which must be taken together. It means that the world is full of suffering when we look at it in a certain way, with a certain viewpoint. If we look at the world from an idealistic point of view,

compared to the perfection of the ideas in our heads, the world is far from perfect. It is this gap between our perfect ideas and the real world that causes us suffering.

The second Noble Truth says that if we leave the idealistic view, we can find an objective viewpoint: this world is just an accumulation of matter. This is a different, scientific view of the world. But solely from this view of the world we cannot find the ultimate value of life. That is, we tend to lose the aim of living.

In order to get rid of both these ways of looking at life, one which makes us suffer comparing our life with our ideals, and the other in which we cannot find the reason for living, we should enter the world of action. This is the third Noble Truth. The third truth urges us to deny the first two viewpoints. To stop complaining and feeling dissatisfied, to stop letting the situation carry us along; relying on our own actions we can start to make our own life. This is the meaning of the third Noble Truth. If we live our lives centered around action we can live in oneness with the truth.

This oneness with the truth is the Path that we follow. This is the fourth Noble Truth. It urges us to follow the path of action in our day-to-day lives; to live our lives in oneness with the rule of the Universe.

If we look at the true meaning of the Four Noble Truths like this, they do not give a pessimistic view of the world; they teach us what we should do in order to be happy. This is the way that Buddhism teaches us to live our daily life.

Buddhism and Zazen

I have explained how the teachings of Buddhism are centered in action. If we think about our actions in day-to-day life, we can see that, although thinking about our actions is easy, the problem of acting itself is difficult. We learn through experience how difficult it is to put an idea into practice.

The conversation between the Chinese poet Haku-Raku Ten and Master Choka Dorin illustrated this fact very clearly. Although a three year old child can say wise words, even an eighty year old man cannot put them into practice. Gautama Buddha realized how difficult it is to put an idea into practice. This is why one of his fundamental teachings is to urge us to live in the world of action.

If we reflect on our actual experience of acting in daily life, often we find that although we wanted to do something, to actually do it was very difficult. On the other hand, we often end up doing those very things that we try not to do, seemingly against our will. To overcome this problem is the fundamental task in our life.

If we look at life from the point of view of what we should or ought to do, if we are unable to do what we should do, we feel that we are not living with dignity. And if we cannot live how we want to live, we feel that we are less than human.

The ability to control ourselves is an extremely valuable thing in daily life. But nobody can deny that to be able to control ourselves as we would wish is extremely difficult. Gautama Buddha himself must have experienced this very human problem. In modern times, there are people who say that it is arrogant to believe that human beings can control themselves in this way, and that therefore we have no choice but to let matters take their own course and to go with the flow. This idea about life is especially widespread in Japan since the end of the second world war.

But Gautama Buddha denied the idea that the only way human beings can live is to follow things that happen in any particular circumstances. He used the word “buddha” to mean someone who is able to control themselves. He asserted clearly that human beings have the power to control themselves. Getting hold of themselves, they should make their efforts to follow right teachings and lead meaningful and happy lives.

People whose beliefs are founded on scientific materialism often have a common idea that, as we human beings are too weak to control ourselves, we should just follow what happens in the world, and

float along with the stream. They feel that it is their duty to bear whatever situation they find themselves in. But Buddhism has no such teaching. Buddhism states that anyone can become a buddha as long as they have right thoughts and right ability, and self-control. In this state they can control their lives with complete freedom.

But how can we learn to control ourselves? Gautama Buddha gave us the practice of Zazen as a means to experience self-control. Zazen did not originate with Gautama Buddha; the history of Zazen goes back to its origins in yoga exercises. Some of these postures were similar to the present Zazen posture, and Gautama Buddha recognized the posture as the most correct posture which human beings could use as a standard. He said that when we practice Zazen we are buddha.

There is a chapter in the *Shobogenzo* called *Zanmai-O Zanmai*, The Samadhi which is King of Samadhis. Samadhi refers to the state in Zazen, the calm and serene state of body and mind. In this chapter Master Dogen asserts that the state in Zazen is the supreme state of calmness and serenity. The first paragraph says,

“To transcend the whole Universe at once; to live a great and valuable life in the house of the Buddhist patriarchs is to sit in the full lotus posture. To tread over the heads of non-Buddhists and demons; to become, in the inner sanctum of the Buddhist patriarchs, a person in the concrete state, is to sit in the full lotus posture. To transcend the supremacy of the Buddhist patriarchs’ supremacy there is only this one method.”

Buddhist practice is not thinking about problems with the brain, or reacting to stimuli from the external world, it is just to act. You come back to your original self by sitting quietly with crossed legs and straight spine. This is Zazen. This is action. You are sitting as a person in reality, practicing and transcending the teachings of Gautama Buddha and the Universe. This is Zazen.

Master Dogen sometimes talked about Zazen as *shoshin tanza*, which means to correct our body and sit right. Zazen is the state in which we sit with right posture, not consciously trying to think anything, not consciously focusing on external stimuli.

In the chapter called *Bendowa*, A Talk about Pursuing the Truth, Master Dogen describes Zazen as *jijuyo zanmai*. He says that the standard state in Zazen is one of *jijuyo zanmai*, or receiving and using the self. This is a traditional phrase of describing the standard state. Let me talk in more detail about what the state of *jijuyo zanmai* refers to.

The basic Buddhist viewpoint is that the world neither consists of mind/spirit, nor of matter/things. The world is a synthesis of these two. Mind and matter are synthesized in reality in an indivisible oneness. They have never been separate.

Human beings are not just minds/spirits, nor are the just physical bodies; mind and body are indivisibly one originally and have never been divided. Thus in Buddhism, at the end of the day, it is impossible to say what a person is. Because in order to describe we must divide. This is Buddhism’s fundamental assertion.

A characteristic of Buddhist philosophy is that every single theory within it has a physical fact with which to back it up. There are no theories in Buddhism for which we cannot find a supporting situation in the material world. In this situation, Master Dogen’s description of the Buddhist state, *jijuyo zanmai* or the state of receiving and using the self, must have a counterpart in terms of the workings of the physical body.

Fortunately modern physiology has developed to the extent that we can now understand more clearly the workings of our bodies and the relationship with the Buddhist state of *jijuyo zanmai*. This was something the ancient Buddhist masters were unable to do. Their assertions were intuitive assertions.

Modern physiology has discovered that the involuntary workings of our bodies are controlled by the autonomic nervous system, which is, as its name implies, beyond our conscious control. Our internal organs, heart, liver, kidney, and so on are all controlled by this system of nerves in a way which we cannot consciously affect. For example, when we are excited our heart rate speeds up and it is impossible to make

the heart beat more slowly by a simple act of will. We cannot stop our heart from beating, and in normal circumstances it goes on and on beating without our efforts until we die. The rhythm of the heart, now fast, now slow, is controlled automatically by our nervous system.

Physiologists have found that there are in fact two opposing systems within the autonomic nervous system which control the “fight or flight” reactions in the body. One system of nerves are called the sympathetic nerves, and they are responsible for our “fight” reactions—for stimulating our metabolism and making us more aggressive. They make the heart beat faster. The other system is called the parasympathetic nervous system, and these nerves are responsible for our “flight” reactions—they calm us down and make us more passive. They make the heart beat more slowly. All internal organs are controlled by both groups of nerves and can thus be stimulated or calmed, or something in between.

What Buddhism says is that our standard or original state is the state in which these two systems of nerves, the sympathetic nerves and the parasympathetic nerves, are balanced. In this state we are neither too aggressive, nor too passive.

Again, in *Shobogenzo Bendowa*, A Talk about Pursuing the Truth, Master Dogen says: “*the samadhi of receiving and using the self is its standard.*” The state in which the functioning of the sympathetic nerves and the parasympathetic nerves are balanced, something that we cannot consciously control, is the balanced state, the same as the state in Zazen. This is the standard of Zazen and the standard of the Buddhist path. However, it is impossible for us to reach this balanced state just by our will, because we are unable to control the balance of our autonomic nervous system. Gautama Buddha, through his own experience, found the fact that when we sit in the Zazen posture, the actions of our parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems become balanced. This is the standard or original state of human beings. Gautama Buddha urged us to adopt this method of Zazen as a practice that enables us to get back to our standard original state.

On this point, Zazen is a practice—something we need to do. We cannot balance our autonomic nervous system just by thinking, no matter how excellent our intellect is. But immediately we start to practice Zazen, the balanced state appears instantly. In the same chapter in *Shobogenzo*, it says: “*If a human being, even for a single moment, manifests the Buddha’s posture in the three forms of conduct, while that person sits up straight in samadhi, the entire world of Dharma assumes the Buddha’s posture and the whole of space becomes the state of realization.*” This sentence means that when we practice Zazen, we can become buddha immediately; the state in Zazen is *being Buddha*. This is why Master Dogen says “*...even for a single moment...*” He wants to emphasize that Zazen itself is *instantaneously and immediately the state of buddha*. Some people believe that practicing Zazen is a way to become enlightened, but Master Dogen asserts that while practicing Zazen we are in the state of Buddha, the state of a balanced autonomic nervous system. All that we have to do to attain buddhahood is to practice Zazen. The idea that if we continue to practice Zazen, we can sometime in the future become a buddha is not Buddhism.

There is a story which illustrates this point. Master Baso Do-itsu, who was a disciple of Master Nangaku Ejo lived alone in a small hut. His master visited him one day and asked him “*What are you doing these days?*” Master Baso replied “*These days I just practice Zazen.*” Then Master Nangaku asks him “*What is your aim in sitting in Zazen?*” Master Baso replied “*The aim of sitting in Zazen is to become buddha.*” Master Nangaku promptly picks up a tile and polishes it on a rock near Baso. On seeing this, Baso asks “*What are you doing, Master?*” Nangaku says “*I am polishing a tile.*” Baso says “*What is the use of polishing a tile?*” Nangaku says “*I am polishing it into a mirror.*” Baso says “*How can polishing a tile make it into a mirror?*” Master Nangaku replies “*How can sitting in Zazen make you into a buddha?*”

Master Nangaku’s final reply is his assertion that we cannot make ourselves into a buddha by practicing Zazen, since the state in Zazen is the state of buddha already. He wanted to show this to Master Baso clearly and unforgettably with his demonstration of doing the impossible by polishing a tile to make it a mirror.

At present I run a Zazen Dojo or Practice Center on the outskirts of Tokyo. When I look at the general situation in society here, I feel that Zazen practice in Japan has greatly deteriorated. I feel that if we are not able to revive the practice of Zazen, to make it flourish again, Buddhism will never prosper. I think that to set up many Zazen Dojos like ours throughout the country and throughout the world is the best way. To do that, to ensure that Zazen will flourish, we need the sponsorship of many companies and organizations. Unfortunately the situation here has still a long way to go. My great hope is that slowly, step by step, Zazen Dojos can be established, and that they will spread the practice of Zazen through the world, and Buddhism will flourish. The company which employs me organizes *sesshins* or Zazen retreats in a temple named Tokein in Shizuoka prefecture in May, June, August, September, and October. At each retreat, 40 or 50 of the company's employees spend two nights and three days in the temple practicing Zazen. If Zazen retreats like these, organized by companies, became popular, then the personnel managers in those companies would notice the benefits.

Let me tell you about my company's experience with the retreats we hold. For the duration of each retreat, participants have to follow the Buddhist traditional way of taking meals. When, for instance, one of the senior managers has his turn as a meal server, he has to bow to his newest and most junior members of staff and fill their bowls with rice or soup. The recipient bows down with hands joined in return. When I watch these customary ways of doing things being acted out between managers and junior staff members at mealtimes, I feel that it has great personal dignity for both sides.

Without having to give lectures to new junior staff members about how they should behave to their bosses, or to give management seminars to explain to managers how to treat their younger staff members as individuals and with respect, participating in a religious retreat together for a few days in shared circumstances teaches both sides naturally and practically how people in different positions in the company should behave towards each other. This is a direct teaching resulting from action in day-to-day life. This inevitably establishes a relationship between them based on mutual respect and dignity. It is far better than having to instruct people not to do this or to do that.

While on the subject of Zazen practice I would like to say something about the use of the *kyosaku*, the wooden stick used by some people to strike participants on the shoulders during practice to stop them dozing off. I once watched a documentary on the TV about new company employees straight out of school who were sent to a Zazen retreat as part of their induction course. During the retreat, someone was using the *kyosaku* while they practiced. Later in the program, one of the participants was telling of his experiences on the retreat, and he said that he never wants to join a retreat again because of the indignity of receiving the *kyosaku*. I think that teaching people Zazen in this way is utterly wrong. Although the *kyosaku* is much used in Zazen practice today, I never use it. My reason is that Master Dogen never once mentioned the use of the *kyosaku* in any of his writings. He was meticulous in his descriptions of all the Buddhist customs and traditions. If he had approved of its use, he would have written about it, describing in detail its form and the way it is used. There is no such description in any of his works. This convinces me that the *kyosaku* was not used at all in his time. It is likely that people started to use it at a much later date.

Another reason against using the *kyosaku* is that it disturbs our practice. It is essential that we individually take responsibility for our own posture during Zazen as far as possible. Practice in which an authority figure makes us do it has little value. We must make ourselves practice. It is up to us to make sure that we are sitting straight. To use the *kyosaku* to wake practitioners up so that they will not embarrass themselves before the others is not useful.

Our Zazen Dojo is fairly small; about 12 or 13 people live there. One of my basic principles is that everyone there has their own private room. If people do not have their own private area, they cannot live as dignified individuals. When people come to practice over a period of several days they are able to stay

together in a large guest room, where they can get to know each other. But for the people who live there permanently, privacy is essential. At the present time, the members of the Dojo include 2 Americans, one of whom is a priest, 2 Canadians, 1 British priest, 1 Australian, 1 German, 1 Israeli, and 4 Japanese, 2 of whom are nuns who belong to the Soto sect.

One thing that I have observed in common among my overseas students is that they are no longer able to believe in and follow the teachings of Christianity or Judaism. Although some still think of Christianity or Judaism as their religion, they have a strong urge to study some other religion. I think that this illustrates clearly the point I made in my first talk. It shows the current of history in the west moving away from the idealistic religious period, to the emergence of the materialistic scientific period, with belief in religion losing its power towards the end of the 19th century.

Young people in the west today are faced with a situation in which they are unable to commit themselves to belief in the teachings of any of the existing traditional religions, and at the same time they find scientific materialism to be unfulfilling. They are seeking for a solution to that problem. I have met more than a few young westerners who have come to Japan because they have been anguishing over that problem. This is the situation today.

We need to set up many Zazen Dojos all over the country so that foreigners as well as Japanese people can study Buddhism and practice Zazen in day-to-day life. Some of those people would become monks and they would form the basis for leading the daily life based on Zazen. I hope also that ordinary people would then start to practice Zazen in their daily lives in society, so that slowly the number of people living this life would increase. I am looking forward to the time when many companies and organizations will want to provide facilities where people can come to enjoy the practice of Zazen.

In the last few years I have been studying a book written in Sanskrit by a famous Indian Buddhist, Master Nagarjuna. I have confirmed in his writings in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* exactly the same teachings based around action. Two great and revered thinkers, Master Nagarjuna and Master Dogen both base their teachings around the same center of action. In today's world, there are many interpretations of Buddhist thought, but I am convinced that, at the highest level, Buddhist theory is based on a philosophy of action.

The Cold War has ended, and the United States and the Soviet Union are on friendly terms. In the not too distant future, the world is going to become one politically and economically. With the emergence and implementation of the concept of political integration throughout the world, the realization that from all the ideas and philosophies which have emerged from the human mind, there is only one true viewpoint on reality, will also become clear. I believe firmly that the time has come. Instead of centering our way of thinking only around ideas, ideals, and spiritual aims, or only around the scientific and objective view of the material world in front of our eyes, human beings will start to look at reality centered on action. Our philosophical thought will reflect this, and gradually it will become embedded in our societies throughout the world. Then we can truly say that the world has become one.

Japan is one of the few countries in the world where true Buddhism still remains, particularly in the teachings of Master Dogen in the *Shobogenzo*. These teachings explain the philosophy of action. If people here can understand his teachings and learn to explain them to people in other parts of the world, it is possible for those teachings to spread through the world. If the philosophy of action spreads through the world, then the world can become stable and peaceful. If I think about the direction in which the world must move to attain peace, there is no other way.

I am sure that many people feel that what I am saying sounds too optimistic, that the world is a very complex place and the answer to world peace is not so easy. But the fact that the world is moving towards a single political system suggests very strongly that the way that people in different parts of the world view life is also slowly becoming unified. On this point, it is very important for people in Japan to try to

understand the ultimate philosophical viewpoint of Buddhism and to teach it to the people of the world. It may be the most important historical task that we have here in Japan.

Buddhism, of course, is not only a philosophical system, but teachings based on the practice of Zazen. By practicing Zazen people can find the basis for the philosophical viewpoint of Buddhism. When someone has grasped what Zazen is through experience, and if they study and understand the ultimate philosophy of Buddhism, then they are able to explain to the world why practicing Zazen is so important to mankind. At every moment I reaffirm my hope that people will be able to follow this path. Of course it will take decades, or maybe even centuries to achieve. I do not think that it will happen in my own lifetime. But I have no room for doubt that the time is coming when all the world shares a common viewpoint, and that from this fact, all the world finds stability and peace. It is the natural result of the thousands of years that mankind has spent searching and building without cease.

Talking like this—some would say like a Don Quixote—living every day with this hope, I have come to believe that one day it will actually happen here in this real world in front of us—that it is mankind's common destiny.

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