

Right and Wrong
Talk given at Padma Farm
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This afternoon I want to talk about right and wrong. In Master Dogen's writings, he wrote an essay called "Not Doing Wrong", but actually the chapter is about the meaning of right and wrong in Buddhism. In our normal lives, we know the meaning of right and wrong. We hold in our minds a concept of what is right and a concept of what is wrong, and we spend a lot of time trying to decide whether we're doing right or wrong. We're always thinking, 'Should I do this?', or 'Should I not do this?', 'If I do this, is it good or is it bad?' Although we don't think this so consciously, we're always trying to decide what is the best thing or right thing to do. But in Western society we have concepts of right and wrong, and in Eastern societies they have concepts of right and wrong, and sometimes they're different. So we can say that right and wrong sometimes depends on the society we live in, but also there are some things which we can agree even though we come from different societies. In Western societies, most of our moral code is based on Christian ideals. And Christianity teaches us that there is right and wrong in the world, right is good and wrong is bad, and God is right and the Devil is wrong. So Christian religion splits good and bad, or right and wrong, completely. We can see this in the belief in heaven and hell, completely separate, and poor human beings in the middle. And if we do right, OK; if we do wrong we are punished. This belief is very deep in us. So for that reason we think a lot about right and wrong.

But in Buddhism the meaning of right and wrong is rather different. Of course, there is right and wrong in Buddhism but, according to Dogen's teaching, there is nothing called right which is existing somewhere waiting for us to find it. Or, in other words, he says the concept of right is just an idea. And he says that wrong is not waiting somewhere, waiting to come in to us. So this is very different from, for instance, a Christian belief – right or good is waiting there for us to find it; the Devil or bad or wrong is waiting to come and get us. In Dogen's teaching of Buddhism, those ideas don't exist at all. He says that we can agree in our minds something that is right - for instance, we can all agree that we shouldn't kill. But, unfortunately, agreeing or believing that we shouldn't kill is completely different from not doing it. So, for instance, in Christian societies there have been many wars, and in other spiritual religions, for instance Islam, there have been many wars. So spiritual religions like to fight for what is good, and even to kill people for what is good seems to be OK. However, in Buddhism, what we *do* is important, not just what we believe. So whether we believe this is right or whether we believe this is wrong, what we *do* is the only important thing. In other words, right and wrong exists in our action, not just as ideas in our mind. Very often we can have an idea, something that's good or something that's bad, and then when we act we do the opposite. So Buddhism recognises the very large human problem that even though we know in our mind what is right and what is wrong, often we can't do what is in our mind. And there's another of the Chinese stories about this subject.

In ancient China, there's a man called Haku Kyo-I. He was a kind of government official, so he was rather important, but he studied Buddhism with Master Nyoman. And this very important man wanted to know about Buddhism, so he said to his master, 'What is the essential point of Buddhism?' And his master said, 'Not doing wrong, doing right.' The important official replied, 'Can that be true? Even a three-year-old child can give me an answer like that!' Then the master replied, 'Yes, even a child of three can give an answer like that, but even an old man of eighty like me cannot *do* what the child says.' The official prostrated

himself to the master and then he left. And it seems that the official was rather upset, because he wanted some kind of very detailed answer about Buddhism but he got that very simple answer.

But the problem in that story is my problem, and maybe your problem. How do we *do* right? We can decide what is right, but we can't do it. We can decide what is wrong, but we can't stop doing it. Master Dogen says that the basis of doing right in Buddhism is not a moral, intellectual decision, but a decision we make intuitively with our body and mind. So what we do depends not only on our mind but also on our body. This is quite clear if we think, for instance, if we feel ill or we have a headache, we find it difficult to act. Or if we're very angry, we may act in a very unbalanced way. Or if we're very much in love, we may act in an unbalanced way. Master Dogen says, 'Not only our mind, but our body as well.' So, if we want to do right, we need to look after our physical state, not only our mental state. So he says something very surprising - he says, 'Just practice Zazen and we can get a balanced state. In the balanced state we cannot do wrong.' That's very difficult to believe, but that's what he says.

But in our mind we can always separate right and wrong. So if I say 'In the balanced state we can do no wrong', immediately we can think another example - 'Oh, that doesn't make sense', or 'What about so and so?', 'What about somebody who practices Zazen and then shoots somebody with a gun?' We can think about lots of different examples. But actually what Master Dogen is saying is, when we're in the balanced state - not some perfect balanced state, but a real balanced state, for instance like everybody here. 'Oh no, not me! Maybe after ten years, not now!' Always we're choosing, always we're deciding, 'I'm not good, I'm bad!', 'I'm not good enough!' - But he's saying that people like us, here, when we act, our actions are *really* balanced. Not extreme, in the middle. And that is the real meaning of right.

If we try to do some ideal meaning of right, we create wrong. If we try to do something ideally good, we create bad. So we can say, for instance, Christianity created the Devil, Islam created the Devil. But in Master Dogen's thought, good and bad are something human beings separate. Reality in front of us doesn't contain anything called good or bad. If we act in a natural balanced way, this is the best we can do. Of course, we will have problems in our life, but problems are not the result of good and bad. Just, they're like waves on the sea, they're our life itself. So Master Dogen's teaching is very optimistic. And he's teaching a kind of freedom - if we practice Zazen and get the balanced state of our body and mind, we can do what we want. You can do what you want. Of course, we can't deny the abstract moral code which society lays down, so we have a precept to follow the rules of society. But, within following the normal rules of society, we can do what we want. We don't need to worry about being selfish or not being selfish, or making a mistake or not making a mistake. Just we can do. But my words sound too easy, and it's true, they are. So I'll stop talking now.

(Laughter)

'Can I be balanced so I can do what I want? Really? Me?'

(Silence)

That's it!

(Silence)

'I wonder if it's OK to keep quiet? Maybe I should talk? Which is best?' Are there any questions? Comments? Can you believe it?

In a given situation, if I don't know what to do, don't know what is right and what is wrong, do I somehow follow my intuition? Is to follow my intuition the best way?

To act.

Not to think too much about doing something?

Yes, take one step.

In the moment of decision, if you are not quite balanced, emotions can influence your decisions. What to do about that?

Just to do.

Even emotionally?

Can we stop the emotion affecting the decision? This is the point.

Emotions can be misleading - if I'm led by my emotions, I feel that I don't know how to decide in the moment. Are you saying that even if my emotions are pushing me in some direction I can still decide whether to follow this or just don't do it? And do you recommend to follow the emotion, or...?

Ah, no. In your real situation, no recommendation is any good. Just you have to solve the problem at that moment. At that moment, whether you do according to your emotion or not, depends on your state at that moment. So we can't guess which way are you going to do. We can discuss it, but we don't know *really*. After you act, then we can say, 'Ah, Karl made a mistake!' But it's too late! So, next moment.

We make mistake after mistake.

Yes. 'Oh, again!'

(Laughter)

So is it advisable to postpone the decision?

Ah, yes, sometimes. Sometimes not. Which is right? Which is wrong?

After the decision I'm not sure if I did right or did wrong.

Yes, that's true. So, we don't need to know, because it's past and we did it, so now we're here. But we can't forget, we can't have a clear mind, so we have something called a mistake, and we have something which we think is wrong and something which is right. But actually our life is always decided by our action now, now, now, and we don't know if it's a right one or a wrong one. So Dogen says, 'Act. Act.' But it's very difficult for us. It's easier, for instance, Japanese people don't have a Christian background, they don't think about right and wrong so much as we do. But they have another problem – they think about whether they're doing the same thing as their group or not. If their group is doing something they do it, even if it's terrible. If their group is not doing something they don't do it, even if it's good. So they have a different problem. Our problem

is, 'Was it best? Was it good? Did I do right?' We want to do it and afterwards we want to know whether it was good or bad. We want to see ourselves doing good and not doing bad. But this is only a kind of habit. Our life is more simple, actually, but it's very difficult for us to see it simply. So we practice something called Zazen which is very stupid, just sitting, and we face our stupid selves, and many thoughts come about the stupid things we did or the things we're going to do. But doing this simple, stupid practice is the best way we can do right. Not best in our head, but best really. Zazen's not the only way, because we can balance our body and mind with many activities - for instance, playing music, playing sport. But those pursuits have extra things, for instance, in sport, whether we win or lose. But Zazen doesn't have anything extra. It's just a pure practice of making our bodymind balanced so we can do right and not do wrong.

I think we always have emotion coming and going in our life. Sometimes it moves us this way, or that way; it's like a kind of current in the sea. But we can just go with the current - happy, sad, brave, frightened, all these things. But not extreme. So Zazen doesn't mean we're never moving with emotions or never becoming angry, or so on. Just we're wobbling. But if I didn't practice Zazen, I'd go like this - *very* excited, *very* depressed, *very* happy, *very* sad. In England, many young people go out to drink on Friday and Saturday evenings, and they get very, *very* drunk and *very* happy. On Monday morning, these happy people are very, *very* depressed. Then for one week they're working (unhappy expression) ... Thursday (bored expression) ... then again on Friday, 'Whoa!' So their living life like this (wobbling from side to side), 'Zzoomm!! Wooo ... ohh ... ughh!!' And many Japanese businessmen do the same life, only they do every day - morning depressed, evening happy. So, if we practice Zazen, we can go like this (just wobbling slightly). 'Oh, it's so boring!'

(Laughter)

How can we cope with the whole concept of mistakes, previous mistakes which one made in the past?

We can forgive ourselves. Often we say, 'Oh you stupid person, you did it again!' But we can be kind to ourselves, because if we are angry about our mistakes we can't change anything. And our anger is only against ourself. I think everybody makes many, many mistakes in their life. I made some mistakes again and again and again and again and again for thirty, forty years. Then I realised, 'Ah!'

Can I ask a question about Zazen? Should my view be fixed, so that I don't move it the whole time?

If your head is fixed, your view ... You mean moving your eyes?

Yes.

Ah yes, you can move your eyes.

So I'm not to be fixed on one point?

No. Again, there's always two opposite situations in Zazen. Because Zazen is a balance, it's a balance between two things. So one is to fix on looking at one point, the opposite extreme is to intentionally look at different places. So between those two is a natural way - there's a noise so maybe our eyes go this way, or somebody moves here so maybe our eyes move over here. So natural is best. If we try to fix ourselves we lose any freedom. If we try to fix our life according to a

plan we lose our freedom and opportunity. So in Zazen, if we try to keep still, perfectly still, we become stiff. But we don't need to intentionally move.

If you become stiff you can't do right?

Yes. If we have very strong belief and we want to do that belief, we become stiff, and we have very strong principles and we don't want to move, we don't want to compromise. But it's difficult to live in society like that. It's difficult to live with another person like that. So Master Dogen's writings about Zazen make Zazen sound like a kind of magical practice, if we think about it; but if we do it, if we practice Zazen, we can realise what he means in reality. But if we just read some of the writings - 'We practice Zazen and we can't do any wrong'; 'We become one with the universe'; 'Our influence spreads through the whole world' – if we read phrases like that in his writing it sounds something spiritual. But if we practice Zazen, regularly, we can realise that he doesn't mean in a spiritual way, but in a very simple, practical way.

How much is 'regularly'?

For monks living in the temple, he says four times a day. But it's impossible for most people, so once or twice a day. If you practice for thirty minutes every morning and thirty minutes every evening, it's very nice. But if you practice ten minutes in the morning and you forget to practice in the evening, it's nice too. So if we say, 'After this retreat is over, when I go back home, I'm going to practice every day for thirty minutes!' – then Monday, OK; Tuesday, good; Wednesday, twenty minutes; Thursday, 'Ah, I don't have time'; Friday, 'Ah...'; then it's gone. So it's better maybe ten minutes, five minutes, every day, every day, every day.

Do you have some secret tricks or something for how to make it more enjoyable for people? More fun?

(Laughter)

Ah, no!

OK, I will try my best!

Some Buddhist groups have a dojo - I think in Pilsen? you have a dojo for sitting regularly - then people can visit regularly. But you can do it at home, just on your own. Sitting with other people is very nice, and it's a kind of discipline. But sitting alone is also a kind of discipline. ... If you have a coloured cushion it may make it more enjoyable! You could have different cushion colours for every day!

(Laughter)

You sometimes hear some teachers say that there is a difference after five minutes, there is a difference after thirty minutes, there is a difference after one hour. And sometimes people attach to this idea, 'After one hour of Zazen I will feel much better'. Could you say something about this, that it's not necessary to attach to the idea of how we change after one hour. Or do you feel any difference between five minutes and one hour? Do you have any experience when you compare five minutes and one hour?

It's the same as walking. If you go for a walk in the country for twenty minutes, after twenty minutes maybe you've stopped worrying about tomorrow, and you can enjoy the scenery; but when you return home, you didn't have a complete exercise. But if you go for a hike for two or three hours, you can get rid of all of

your tension and return home feeling satisfied. So if we practice Zazen for five minutes, we can get a five-minute nice state. And if we practice for thirty minutes, we can settle more. And if we practice for one hour, we can get very painful legs! So we can choose. With very painful legs we might feel something peaceful, so we can choose which is best. I think thirty minutes is quite good. But sometimes in the evening, before bed, I practice just five minutes.

I've had this prejudice, because of some teachers, that Zazen should be one hour otherwise it's not complete Zazen. But your teacher, Nishijima, mentioned somewhere that in the morning half an hour is good. And I've started to work as a teacher at high school and I have to get up at seven, or I have to start teaching at eight. And because I found out about this possibility of practicing Zazen for only thirty minutes every morning, I started to practice every morning for thirty minutes and it really helps me to work, and I can't imagine how I could have this job without this morning Zazen.

Yes, thirty minutes is alright. ... But we should notice that Zazen is not a practice to get something. It's a practice to lose something. So usually we want to get something, and get things, get knowledge, and get skills, and we pile them on top of ourselves. In Zazen, we take them all off, and underneath is our natural self, which is quite satisfied, or maybe happy. So it's throwing away, or taking away, or taking off. So if we take off for five minutes, or if we take off for thirty minutes, thirty minutes we can take more off.

Thank you.

(End of talk)