

Reality is the present moment

All Buddhist masters have affirmed that reality is the present moment - here and now. They affirm that the truth of this world is just that the universe exists at this time and at this place.

This statement is the sort of statement that, when someone makes it, we hear it and vaguely wonder - hmmm. But what do they actually mean by this statement. What is the present moment? How long does it last for? Does it have a length? For example, what part of what I am saying is the present moment, and why is it that, if Buddhist masters can make such a definite statement, the present still feels such a vaguely defined thing? The common understanding of the present means vaguely “round about now”

But Buddhist masters go further than making a vague statement. For instance in Shobogenzo Genjo Koan, Master Dogen insists that

“Firewood becomes ash; it can never go back to being firewood. Nevertheless we should not take the view that ash is its future and firewood is its past. Remember, firewood abides in the place of firewood in the dharma. Although it has a past and a future, the past and the future are cut off. Ash exists in the place of ash in the dharma.”

Here Master Dogen wants to emphasise that the present moment is instantaneous, cut off from the past and the future. Again this is not difficult to listen to, but can it really be true? Are we really living in a situation where every moment is cut off from every other moment? Most people would find this very difficult to believe. Buddhist masters urge us to practice Zazen to experience the true nature of reality and it is from this experience that Buddhist belief emerges.

One reason that people find it so difficult to believe this, although we may hear it said by Buddhist masters of all the times, is that in modern times, societies follow the religion of science. In the religion of science, we believe in the absolute rule of cause and effect. Everything has its cause, and science endeavours to find the links between causes and their effects, usually in terms of mathematical equations and theories.

Now in fact, if we think of science as a religion for a moment, that is, something with beliefs upon which we base our daily actions, then we can find that science has several really fundamental beliefs, without which science cannot exist. One of these fundamental beliefs is the belief that the present is a point upon the line of time. Time is a real thing which, like the hands of a watch, is always proceeding from past to present to future. The present just happens to be the point where we are now on the continuing conveyer belt of time. If this fact is not true, then science has a big problem. The scientific view of the world does not fit real experience.

Another of science’s fundamental beliefs is that space, this stuff around us, is something real and separate from time. Of course it is, you say! Using these two beliefs, science has created a believable picture of the world, which is embedded in the world view of everyone in the modern world, whether we are aware of it or not. This view is powerful because it appears to work. When we believe in a continuing

line of time from past to present to future, it becomes very easy for us to construct mental pictures of the world, to construct theories about how the world works.

And because those theories, the theories of Newton and Darwin seem to describe our real situations very well, we believe that they are true. We believe in the religion of science.

But in recent years, in the area where scientists are trying to construct new theories about the universe, in areas like sub-atomic physics, those long-held beliefs appear to break down. They can no longer help us to explain the nature of this world. In most areas of science, there is no such problem, and science can continue as it has for hundreds of years, in giving us new ways to describe how the world works.

But although the area of atomic physics sounds so remote to people, the effect of this impasse in explaining the nature of reality is going to be enormous. It will in fact, after fifty or one hundred years, change the way modern people view the world around them and themselves.

So what has this got to do with Master Dogen and the Buddhist belief in reality being the present moment?

We have found a link between what Buddhism insists is the nature of reality and what science says. That link is a person. His name is David Bohm. For more than 50 years he has been one of the leading theoretical physicists in the world. He is no longer living, but he has written several books about the nature of the problems facing scientists and his own solutions to those problems.

Let me read you some of his conclusions from a book which he has written called "Thought as a System" This book is basically about the way that our thoughts appear to be reality to us. In studying physics, he faced the fact that the everyday scientific concept of time which we all take for granted cannot fully explain the fundamental nature of reality. David Bohm realised that scientists have started to mistake the concepts they use to describe reality for reality itself. In talking about time, for instance, David Bohm has this to say:

We always take time for granted. And we take for granted the notion that everything exists in time. We don't realise that time is an abstraction and a representation, but we believe that time is of the essence - reality - and that everything is existing in time, including thought.

*But what suggests itself is that psychologically - and perhaps eventually for the deepest level physically - we can't use time as the essence. Rather the moment now is the essence, because all the past and the future that we will ever know **are in this moment**. The past and the future are now, in so far as it has left any impression, whatever has happened is now. And our expectations are now. Thus we could say that now is the starting point.*

Now of course he says a lot of other things in his book, but the fact that what he says here agrees with Buddhism is a great and wonderful fact. Because it means that one person has been able to break through the impasse in atomic physics and his conclusion is the same as Buddhism.

However, in reaching his conclusion about the fundamental nature of time, David Bohm has stepped beyond the boundaries of science. In doing so, he faced strong disagreement and disbelief from many of his scientific colleagues. To say that time does not exist in the way that we know it is heretical in science. But David Bohm is a very sincere scientist, and so his conclusion is to him inescapable.

In addition to the concept of time, David Bohm also writes about the nature of truth or reality itself, another central theme in scientific research.

David Bohm uses the word truth in the same way that we use the word reality. He uses the phrase *what is* or *that which is* as we use the word Dharma.

*I think that the idea that there is an abstract truth - somewhere, somehow, sitting there waiting for us to get hold of it - is the same as the idea of ultimate knowledge. Truth is something more vital. It has to be that sort of movement which doesn't deceive itself. And then it has to fit, cohere with 'that which is.' Truth is a perception, and is simultaneously an action. Truth is not information **about** what is. But rather truth is a key factor **in** what is.*

The source of truth must be like the source of insight - beyond that which thought can grasp.

*Truth is not just floating out there abstractly, but truth actually **is**. That is to say, truth is a factor in actuality. Truth meets that which is, it touches that which is. Truth is a part of that which is. Truth is a movement or act within that which is. It actually **is**.*

*The perception of truth is an actual act which changes things; its not merely that it is the truth **about** something which is different.*

Truth acts from moment to moment is what I am trying to say. Truth is the action from moment to moment.

You can see how similar what David Bohm is saying is to what Nishijima Roshi's teaches, to Master Dogen's teachings. To me this means that eventually the modern scientific worlds will be able to realise the fundamental nature of reality. This is a very important fact. It affirms and verifies Buddhist teachings.

At the same time, Buddhism can show people the way to experience the real nature of reality. When we practice Zazen, sitting quietly facing the wall, we can recognise the true nature of reality, the true nature of time intuitively with our whole body and mind. We can accept David Bohm's thoughts within Buddhism and we can add to them, broaden them, and use them to support Buddhist teachings.