Lecture 14: No Dependence on Words and Letters - Edited Version

This week we are faced by a difficulty. `No dependence on words and letters,' declares the second line of our verse, continuing its definition of Zen. This means I shall have to talk about not depending upon words and letters, but in so doing I shall in fact be dependent on words and letters, or at least upon words and sounds. This is self-contradictory. Ideally I ought to expound the line by sitting in absolute silence for an hour. And an excellent exposition it would be! But if I did this you would probably all become restless and dissatisfied, and wouldn't put anything in the collection plate when you left, or at any rate not so much as usual. People value words; they do not value silence. So I suppose I shall have to try and do my best with words.

`No dependence on words and letters.' The line suggests that usually there is such a dependence. Let us examine the matter a little, first with regard to our dependence on words and letters in a general sense, and then with regard to our dependence on them where spiritual things are concerned.

Take the case of what we call our knowledge. We say we know this or know that. But what do we really mean? We mean, surely, that we have read it somewhere, or heard about it, or seen it on television. We have no direct knowledge. It is all based on hearsay, on second-hand, third-hand, and tenth-hand information, on conjecture and gossip. We consider, for instance, that we know what is going on in the world at large, what is happening in distant places - India, Rhodesia, Indonesia, etc. But whence is our `knowledge' derived? From words and letters. From the radio and the newspapers, from snatches of conversation overheard on the tube, from chance remarks at parties. How great is our dependence! The thought is quite a horrifying one. Supposing there were no radios, no newspapers, we would `know' very little of what went on in the world. We would have fewer thoughts, fewer ideas. Being less cluttered up mentally, we would be better able to concentrate on things near at hand. We would be able to live more intensely. Perhaps we would be closer to Reality.

This was, of course, the condition of our ancestors in bygone days, even as it is still the condition of many people in the `undeveloped' countries. Compared with us, our ancestors knew very little of what was going on in the great world that lay outside the gates of their own village or township. Vague rumours reached them from the distant capital, and usually that was all. Sometimes, of course, they saw armies marching past, and sometimes armies devastated with fire and sword, but despite beating drums and flying colours ordinary folk did not understand what the war was about or who was fighting whom. Occasionally men were conscripted. Otherwise, apart from natural calamities, the stream of life flowed on placid and undisturbed from year to year and from generation to generation. I am not trying to idealize the past. I am only trying to point out how much our knowledge depends upon words and letters and how little on direct personal experience, and that this dependence is, moreover, both proportionally and absolutely, greater now than ever before in history.

This is true in all fields. Take any subject that we think we `know'. Take botany, or the history of art, or any other branch of human knowledge, from astronomy to zoology. By far the greater part of our knowledge of these subjects, if not the whole of it, is second-hand. Hardly any of it is original, the result of our own independent thought and discovery. Inheriting as it were a great stockpile of knowledge from the past, we go through life, for the most part, without adding to it so much as a single grain of our own. Originality would seem to be the prerogative of genius.

In everyday life all this, though perhaps regrettable, does not matter very much. We manage to get along somehow. From the Zen point of view, however, it is nevertheless important to realize what is actually happening. It might be interesting to perform an experiment. As you sit here, fold your hands and close your eyes, just as you do for meditation. Forget all you have ever learned from books, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and advertisements. Forget even talks, lectures, and discussions. How much knowledge would you then have left? Very little indeed. If we were to perform the experiment regularly the experience would be a very salutary one. We should then realize how little we really know. To know that we do not know is the beginning of wisdom.

From our general dependence on words and letters let us now turn to our dependence on them where spiritual things are concerned. We have, let us assume, a certain amount of religious knowledge. We know about Buddhism. We know about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path; about karma and rebirth, nirvana and dependent origination; about shunyata, bodhisattvas, and the Pure Land. What a lot we know! We even know about Zen. Now where has all this knowledge come from? From books and lectures. Ultimately, of course, it comes from the scriptures, a survey of which I attempted to give last

week. Now the scriptures consist of words and letters. On words and letters, therefore, is our knowledge of Buddhism dependent. Hence it is all second-hand, not based on direct, personal experience and perception.

Let us perform another experiment. Let us put aside all knowledge of Buddhism that depends on words and letters, all that we have not experienced and verified for ourselves. Probably we shall have to discard quite a lot. Do we really know what nirvana is? What about shunyata? Put them aside too if necessary. At the end of the experiment how much real knowledge is left? Perhaps none at all.

We should not think we have lost anything, however. In fact there is a great gain. As we saw last week, Zen is concerned with the experience of the living spirit of Buddhism, and with the transmission of that spirit. For Zen nothing else matters. Nothing must be allowed to stand in the way. This is what makes Zen so `ruthless'. Zen has no hesitation about burning holy Buddha-images or tearing up sacred books if these come in the way. But what is it that comes in the way more than anything else? What is it that most of all prevents us from having a real knowledge of Buddhism, based on our own experience? Can anybody tell me?... You are all silent. Surely the greatest obstacle is to think that we know. Until this obstacle has been removed, no progress is possible. Here, more than anywhere else, is the beginning of wisdom. It is also the beginning of Enlightenment, the beginning of progress: to know that we do not know.

Such knowledge involves distinguishing between what we know at second-hand, from the scriptures, and what we know from experience. This is what Zen means when it urges us not to confuse the two kinds of knowledge. If we do confuse them no spiritual progress is possible. Unfortunately we are guilty of this confusion all the time. It is, in fact, part of our general psychological conditioning. Having failed to distinguish thoughts from things, we then fail to distinguish words from thoughts. We think that if we can label a thing we have understood it. Take, for example, nirvana. This is essentially a spiritual principle, or transcendental Reality, and can be thought of in various ways. For instance, it can be thought of in terms of the complete cessation of craving. Since we understand what is meant by the words `cessation of craving' we think that we know what nirvana is! When, therefore, in some non-Buddhist work, we come across the idea of freedom from craving, we at once triumphantly exclaim, `Ah yes, nirvana!' At once we slap on the label. We think we `know' that the state of freedom from craving mentioned in the non-Buddhist work and the Buddhist nirvana are one and the same. All that we have in fact done is to equate thoughts and words. We are not dealing directly with things, with realities, at all. At best we are dealing with thoughts about things, or often with just words.

Conceptualizing and verbalizing activity of this sort is only too common in the West. People talk far too much. They always want to affix ready-made labels to their experiences. It is as though they were unable to enjoy the beauty of a flower until they had given it its correct botanical classification and a Latin name. We have to learn the value of silence, not only physical silence but the silence of thoughts, the silence of the mind. In this connection I remember an anecdote told me, many years ago, by an Indian friend of mine, an elder brother in the Order. Some years previously this friend had paid a visit to Germany, where he gave some lectures on Buddhism. One morning a German Buddhist lady came to see him. As he was in the midst of writing a letter, and wanted to catch the post, he asked her to wait in an adjoining room. He had only been writing for a few minutes, however, when the door suddenly burst open, and the German lady violently exclaimed, `I shall go mad if I stay here much longer. There's no one to talk to!' As he came to the end of the story my friend threw up his hands in mock despair, as if to say, `What hope is there of spreading Buddhism among such people?'

Some things there are which can be experienced and also thought about and described in words. Others, though capable of being experienced, transcend thought and speech. At best they can only be indicated, or suggested, or hinted at. Such are the realities, or aspects of Reality, of which we speak in such terms as `Enlightenment', `nirvana', `Buddhahood'. All these terms are used only provisionally. They give us a certain amount of practical guidance, some idea of the quarter in which to look, the direction towards which we have to orient our spiritual strivings, but their validity is only relative. They do not really define the goal. In using them we say, therefore, in the absolute sense, nothing at all. Hence in the Lankavatara Sutra the Buddha declares that from the night of his Supreme Enlightenment to the night of his final passing away he has not uttered a single word. Between the two events lay forty-five years of untiring earthly ministry. During that period he had taught thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of people. Hardly a day had gone by without discourses, dialogues, answers to questions. Yet in reality nothing had been said because nothing can be said about Reality. All his words had been pointers to what is beyond words. As Ashvaghosha says, `We use words to get free from words until we reach the pure wordless Essence.'

Even better known and more striking is Vimalakirti's `thunderlike silence'. Vimalakirti, the great householder bodhisattva of Vaishali, is sick, and the Buddha asks Shariputra to go and enquire after his health. The great disciple declines, however, as he had once been admonished by Vimalakirti and feels unworthy of the mission. All the other disciples, including the bodhisattvas, also protest their unworthiness, and for the same reason; all have been severely discomfited by Vimalakirti at some time or another. Eventually Manjushri, the great Bodhisattva of Wisdom, agrees to comply with the Buddha's request, and goes to see Vimalakirti with a vast retinue. There is a great deal of discussion, and much subtle dialectic. Eventually the nature of the Not-Two Doctrine comes up for discussion. Various interpretations are given by those present. One says, `Purity and impurity make two. If you see the real nature of impurity, then there is no state of purity, and you conform to the state of purity. This is entering the gate of the Not-Two Doctrine.' Another says, `Samsara and nirvana make two. See the (true) nature of samsara, and then there is no samsara, no bondage, no liberation, no burning, and no cessation.' Finally Manjushri is asked for his opinion and replies, `According to my idea, to have no word and no speech, no showing and no awareness about any of the dharmas, and to keep away from all questions and answers, is to enter the gate of the Not-Two Doctrine.' His interpretation is greatly applauded. Manjushri then asks Vimalakirti to speak. But `Vimalakirti kept silent, without a word.' This is the `thunderlike silence' of Vimalakirti.

So long as we are dependent on words and letters, allowing ourselves to become enslaved by them instead of making use of them, we shall be unable to realize that which transcends words and letters. We shall, at the same time, confuse the two kinds of knowledge, thinking that we know something when we have merely heard it or read about it. For this reason Zen insists that there must be `No dependence on words and letters'. Not that words are entirely useless. As I have said at the beginning of the talk, in communicating the truth of no dependence on words and letters one is inevitably dependent on words and letters. Thus we find ourselves back where we started from.

At this point an important question arises. If in Zen there is no dependence on words and letters, then on what are we to depend? This question will be dealt with next week, when we consider the third line of our verse.