

CENTRE DURCKHEIM

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

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I breathe; therefore, I am!

If you doubt it, stop breathing. You'll see it is not as easy as we think. Because we need to breathe, moment after moment, day and night.

When I met Graf Dürckheim in 1967, my know-how as physiotherapist was: there are dozens of breathing exercises, and each has a specific therapeutic objective.

During my very first zazen, I engaged in what seemed to be an adequate respiratory exercise. When Graf Dürckheim perceived this mental scam, he invited me to follow his instructions: “*Jacques, carefully, slowly breathe-in completely, then carefully, slowly breathe-out entirely and... STOP! Do not breathe anymore, engage all your will not to breathe, without cheating, without letting a tiny bit of air into your lungs. Resist! Longer! Longer!*”

Until an inner strength of extreme power overran all of my resistance and freed the intention of the living body in its unity and globality... in the act of breathing-in.

“*There! You just experienced the force we are.¹ The act of breathing is not incumbent to the I which -does- one thousand things amongst respiratory exercises. Breathing is not something; the act of breathing is life in action.*

*During my first year in Japan, I regularly practiced an exercise named zazen next to an old Zen monk. Intrigued, I asked him what it was he did during the course of this exercise he had been practicing for half a century? Smiling he says: - It is difficult... I do my best to avoid disrupting the natural flow of breathing, letting it come and go effortlessly and it is very surprising, when it happens, all in me becomes **calm!***

“*When you are angry or sad, or when you laugh, observe the way you breathe. It is a mirror of your state of mind.*” (Hirano Rôshi)

When you are agitated, worried, observe the way you breathe!

To think that when you practice an exercise invented by man it should be possible to pass from agitation to calm is pure illusion. Even more, since the quality of this inner life we name calm is not the opposite of what we name agitation. There are days when the waves on the ocean's surface are calm, others during which they are agitated. But the calm referred to here by the Zen master is the one discovered by the diver below the wave level.

¹ *Le Centre de l'Etre* – K.G. Dürckheim - Ed Albin Michel - page 119 : deux forces

Zazen? Sitting in absolute immobility, I exercise my full attention to breathing coming and going naturally. Breathe-in, breathe-out, breathe-in, breathe-out. And the I oversees nothing.

Slowly or suddenly, I perceive the body in its globality and unity (Leib) led into a rhythm: tension... relaxation... tension... relaxation. In doing so -without doing anything- it so happens I can experience great calm; the calm that is always present in the deepest of ourselves.

During the 7th century, Hui-Neng, Chan master, summarises his path on the Way Buddha paved with these words: *“My method is calm and wisdom. Where there is calm there is wisdom; where there is wisdom there is calm”*.

We can understand why today, thirteen centuries later, the word MEDITATION attracts many of those confronted to burn-outs and depression.

“Is meditation the key?”

To the question asked by a student, Zen master Jinen San² answers: *“It is the reason for meditation. But when we say -meditation- it would be fairer to say ZAZEN. When we say -meditation-, it is a practice through a concept. Zazen is without concept. We use the same position (za) for zazen and meditation, but the way of practicing is very different if we meditate and if we practice zazen”*.

It is precisely what Hirano Roshi repeated during the sesshin he animated at the Centre; *“There are thousands of ways to meditate but there is only one way to practice zazen. We do not practice zazen with the mind”*.

Zazen? **Do nothing!** And during the course of this doing nothing, the person exercising discovers and liberates the undoable intentions engaged by our own essence.

Jacques Castermane

Translation from French: *Céline Jouenne*

² Jinen San Rôshi teaches zazen in Brazil and Australia.