

CENTRE DURCKHEIM

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

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Being on the Way, is continually changing.

Dürckheim Centre in Mirmande (Drôme) has not changed since our last visit in 2019. Neither has its founder, Jacques Castermane. Despite the effects of ageing, he still is animated by the same inflexible guideline, with always his share of humour, rectitude, and perfectionism.

Let us remind he has a physiotherapist degree, followed for over twenty-years Graf Dürckheim's teachings, and founded this centre in 1981.

We met with you right here about ten years ago. Has your teaching evolved?

Yes. On the condition that the verb evolve corresponds to a transformation. Being on the Way, is changing; Graf Dürckheim speaks of a Way of maturation. When we accompany people who have decided to truly follow the Path, we can observe a change in their way of being.

Does the teaching evolve on its own?

Contemplate a cherry tree. The cherry is white, it ripens, it turns red. It ripens further, it turns black. It is a process of continual maturation. The teaching evolves in parallel of the one teaching, with his/her transformation. Today, at over eighty years old I am beginning to understand what Zen master Hirano Roshi said when coming to the centre for ten years or so: "On the Way of Zen, you do not teach a knowledge or a know-how. The Zen master shares his awareness". To share one's awareness is to rely on, not theories, but his/her own experience, on intimate experiences that punctuate the practice of an exercise, on what we have personally felt, sensed, while practicing this exercise during numerous years. I will gladly repeat Graf Dürckheim's expression: "The teaching I offer here in Rütte, does not engage a face to face, but a body to body". The word body here designates the body we are, *Leib* in German; not to be confused with another German word, *Körper*, the body Man has (the body we think we have).

Is awareness an experience?

Yes. When I moved to the Black Forest to follow his teachings, Graf Dürckheim said something that troubled me: "Jacques, I have the impression that you dispose of a large amount of knowledge on what I call the body Man has; but I have to say that you do not yet know anything about what I designate as the body Man is".

The distinction between knowledge and awareness is effective.

During the five years spent I Rütte, Graf Dürckheim and his collaborator Mrs Pelzer, accompanied me on a Path which shows that the living body, in its globality and unity, is a field of action, of conscience and a field of experience. On this matter, I would like to specify what I mean by field of conscience, which is a field of awareness.

[The awareness perceived by the living body.](#)

Our usual approach of reality happens through our use of conscience, of our conscience which objectifies what is perceived by our senses and engages the mental process which is our intellect. The living body can be considered as being the conscience WITHOUT. Which should interest all who teach an exercise rooted in the East or far East. An example is more eloquent than theories. In practices such as yoga, tai chi like in practices of self-development, the student is invited to concentrate on something: The breathing. This recommendation which engages the intervention of our mental process, our conscience, our conscience of something. There is Me, subject, which is concentrated on an object, the breath. Hence a dualist view which opposes the I, to what is not I. In this example, it is important to realise that what we call breathing is not something. Thousands of times Graf Dürckheim, to whom I asked questions on ... the breath, reminded me that “the breath does not exist, someone breathes”. When he accompanied the practice of zazen, he would invite us to practice our full attention on the fact that: at this moment I breathe In... I breathe Out...! It is a question of involving the conscience WITHOUT, our sensitive conscience which does not oppose subject and object but generates the experience of unity.

Does your practical teaching evolve continuously?

Yes. I have the impression that my personal practice as well as my teaching are subject to the laws of impermanence. A word that does not mean that all life has an end but that everything that lives is subject to the laws of change, of passing.

While at the beginning of this Path, fifty years ago, I thought I would need to learn a lot of things and do many different things to progress and then help others progress. The idea that Aikido was comprised of 84 000 techniques did not scare me, on the contrary, I found this enormous number stimulating. Up to the day I heard Graf Dürckheim tell an episode of his Japanese experience: “During my first year in Japan, I practiced zazen alongside an old monk, always the same one; he was over 80 years old. One day, I asked him what it was he did after more than half a century of zazen practice. The old monk replied: “Well, the same thing anew. It is difficult, I try to reach this point where I feel the breath coming and going naturally. It is mysterious, but when I succeed, all in me becomes calm”.

Kyudo master Kenran Umeji Rôshi, director of an archery school (traditional archery) had said to Graf Dürckheim: “If you practice an exercise thoroughly, all areas of your existence will be nourished by this depth”.

If you ask me if the teaching I provide evolves, I answer yes, I free it from... the excess.

More and more I find interesting this law of renewing always the same thing, which should not be confused with rote repetition of one technique or another. The law of the Way, each artist, each craftsman, which ever may be the Eastern or Western tradition, knows and accepts it; learn a technique... do well what has been learned... master what is known well... perfectly master what has been mastered; this progression demands an engagement from the ego. We need determination, courage. Up to this unexpected experience which makes a musician leaving the stage say: “I do not know what happened tonight... but it was not I that played!”; a dancer will say: “I do not know what happened tonight... but it was not I that danced!”.

[We cannot stop, fix a teaching.](#)

We can understand that the kyudo master ceaselessly repeats to his disciple: “Do not shoot, let it shoot...!”

On this Path, which is not a Path to be followed but a Path to be drawn, there is no halt, except when all comes to an end...

And when it comes to an end, is it another passage?

Your question reminds me of the answer to the question given by Dürckheim when I asked him if he considered life after death? Calmly he replied: “Not having experience this yet, I cannot answer your question”.

In the Christian tradition, life after death is suggested and hoped for.

I should admit that such affirmation – life after death – seems excessive. There are people who believe in life after death. But it so happens we also know that, what we think, only exists in our thoughts. There are others who believe there is a life after death. But as C.G. Jung said, belief is a process of our psyche which does not guarantee that what we believe in, is real.

Confronted to your affirmation my answer is: “I do not know”! And I can add in accepting a true “I do not know” is more comforting than a thought or a belief. There are some “I do not know” that can be verified. Is my wife Line at home? I do not know. But I can go around the house to see if she is there or not. Is there life after death? I do not know. It is a true I do not know.

Thought, belief!

It seems important to distinguish what Jinen San Rôshi¹ designates as truth within the concept and the real truth. To state that all human beings breathe is a truth within the concept. To feel that, at this moment, I breathe In, is the real truth. To think that the person who practices zazen can feel calm is a truth within the concept. To feel, during the practice of zazen, pain in the legs, and to ask myself if this exercise has a meaning, is to face the real truth.

Zazen? I am cold... yes. I am hot... yes. I feel pain in the back... yes. I feel happy... yes. I feel sad... yes. I feel worried... yes. I feel in order, simply in order... yes. Experience plenitude, order and unity... yes.

The real truth is a face to face with everything I am facing. That is Zen.

Where you see a tree, I see a gesture of life.

During the five years spent in the Black Forest, I often looked at my suitcase wondering if I should return to Brussels (to my old life) today or if I should wait tomorrow.

What made you stay?

The desire to live in the real truth. By accepting little by little that life was not like I imagined it and how I thought and desired it should be.

Graf Dürckheim was a master of paradox, of contradiction, improbability. At the beginning of my sojourn in Rütte I projected on him qualities that I imagined should be the ones of a sage: benevolence, mansuetude, indulgence, compassion, tenderness. All things considered, he was all that, but at the same time he could be strict, abrupt, demanding, scathing. One day he got angry at me in his office. A cold anger. I was stunned. I go back to my room disconcerted. The phone rings. “Hello, this is Dürckheim. You see how I can get angry? It is interesting, isn't it? Well, good evening.”

¹ Jinen San Rôshi teaches in Brazil and Australia.

Master Noro has recounted that master Ueshiba, founder of Aikido, could get very angry at times. To someone's surprise, to what seemed a reaction of the ego, he answered: "If a fair anger should last two minutes, one minute is too little, three minutes is too long."

You were in Japan only once. Never did you feel the need to go back?

No. First of all, I should say that if I had met Graf Dürckheim wearing an orange, yellow or black robe, I would not have followed him. It is wearing a blazer and a tie that he said: "What interests me in Zen, is what this tradition reveals of universally human."

During my sojourn in Japan and thanks to my Chado master (tea ceremony) who organized this trip, I had the occasion to be welcomed in different zen monasteries, to take part in No theatre rehearsals, practice archery in master Sagino's school, etc... I was thus able to discover what is universally human in the cultural and traditional context of Japan. This sojourn in the country of the rising sun allowed me to realize how deeply rooted in every human being the teachings proposed by Graf Dürckheim were, in its true essence, which is not the privilege of the Eastern or Western man. This sojourn enabled me to better perceive how his proposition, the Way of Action, concerned the Westerner. How many times in Belgium, in Germany, in Holland, in France, did I hear him express his singularity: "The Path I offer is not Christian... but neither non-Christian; the path I offer is not Buddhist... but neither non-Buddhist. I am interested in the human's depth of being, his true nature, what I call his essential being".

Is it important for you that a filiation continues?

I took conscience of it the day when, during a stay in Rütte, Graf Dürckheim suffering from a severe flu, welcomed me in the small cottage where he lived alone, with an immediate and unexpected question: "What next?".

During the long silence that followed, I understood his question concerned the transmission of the Way he had paved. He then said: "I do not want a training (ausbildung). In Japan, we do not train a kyudo master, a zen master. The master, in artistic, martial or arts & crafts disciplines has many students. And among them, there happens to be a disciple ready to assume the transmission. Reflect on it!"

During the following encounters² we put in place a teaching intended for the ones who desired to get involved further on the way of transformation. The transmission of a teaching which has for only goal, the awakening of the human being to his own essence, cannot be done through words.

The zen master, the archery master, the tea master is not a master of life who decides of what is good and what is bad, who decides of what is allowed and what is not.

He is a master of exercise!

His method? The Way is the technique, the technique is the Way".

But the awareness he has of the exercise, to which he has dedicated his existence, allows him not to fall into the illusion that an exercise can give access to inner calm, to serenity, to self-confidence, cruelly lacking the contemporary man.

² After the five years spent in Rütte, I had made the secret vow of keeping contact with Graf Dürckheim every month. I never regretted the 800km round trips from Haute Savoy, and the 1600km round trips when the Centre was transferred in the Drôme.

The access to this way of being to the world, is not the fruit of what we call the technique, but the expression and the testimony of a man transformed by the technique”.

(K.G. Dürckheim)

As it turns out, for the past few months, the transmission of the Way of Action proposed at Dürckheim Centre is ensured.

Which advice would you give someone who would like to start zazen?

The one given by Hirano Rôshi to anyone who understands or has the intuition that “to try and deeply understand Zen is nothing else than practice zazen”.

And he adds: “To learn the practice of zazen, it is important to meet an authentic master. The master is there to remind us we should not separate body and mind, and instruct us on a calm and harmonious spirit, the correct behaviour to adopt at all times of our daily life which is designated by the expression of the Four dignified attitudes (Shiigi), walking (gyô), standing (jû), sitting (za), lying (ga).

If we do not learn with an authentic master, not only will we not be able to attain real stability, but we risk of misinterpreting the teachings of Buddha. (I allow myself to inform that Buddha was not... Buddhist.)

We will perhaps think we have attained awakening, while we have only changed our way of thinking, as a result we lose ourselves more and more by engaging in an opposite way.”³

³ These few indications resume what K.G. Dürckheim developed in most of his works amongst which:

- *Marvellous Cat and other Zen texts* – Courier du Livre Ed.
- *The Way of Transformation* – Daily Life as Spiritual Exercise
- *Vital Centre of Man* – Albin Michel Ed.

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