

CENTRE DURCKHEIM

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

Letter N°118 — October 2023



Zen? When I sleep, I sleep!

Is happiness the major undertaking of our existence?

A few days ago, the show “Much good may it do you”¹ was about: HAPPINESS. Is it the great undertaking of our existence? The concept’s definitions, the opinions as well as the methods for accessing happiness are far from making unanimity. The point of view of its representants in personal development is opposite to that of psychotherapists. The amalgamation made between happiness, well-being, pleasure, joy, to which is added the opposition of the body, mind, and soul, does not facilitate the debate.

I am pleased I listened to it. It helped me realize that during the thirty or so years I was in contact with Graf Dürckheim, the question about *happiness* was never a subject of our discussions, nonetheless centred on the project of our existence.

Etymologically the expression *happy ness* is a good omen, the *foreshadowing* of a state of satisfaction linked to desire, an ideal of our imagination for later, the future. “*Happiness. Is hoping for it tomorrow, where we are not yet, preventing us from experiencing it today*” writes André Comte-Sponville²

You are unhappy, you feel insecure, you are seeking for meaning in a world of nonsense?

Concerning the project of our existence, Graf Dürckheim asks an unusual question:

When will you cease avoiding the essential?

A question drawn from his immersion in the world of Zen in Japan (1937-1947).

“What interests me in Zen, is what the tradition conceals of universally human”.

Upon his return from the Land of the Rising Sun, he will offer the Western man in quest for meaning, what he calls “The Way of Action”. While serving an uncompromising spirit of Zen, Graf Dürckheim was able to differentiate the essence of Zen from the cultural and Japanese traditions of the cult.

¹ France Inter – “Grand bien vous fasse” – Can we learn to be happy ? (Tuesday October 3rd, 2023)

² André Comte-Sponville - Philosophical Dictionary.

The answer of the Zen master to the question ‘What is Zen?’ remains an enigma for the Western man who is interested in this way of wisdom rooted in the Far-East.

“If you wish to know what zen is, you need to practice the exercise named zazen”.

Questioned on the practice he teaches, HuiNeng³ answers: “My method is **calm** and **wisdom**. Where there is wisdom there is calm; where there is calm there is wisdom”.

Could calm be the major undertaking of our existence?

The calm in question is not a good omen, a way of being to the world we should build. It is not the relative calm giving way to its opposite, agitation. It is *great calm*, which is the *absence* of agitation. Speaking of *ataraxia*, *this greater good man can access during his existence*, Graf Dürckheim writes: *“We do not suffer from a lack, we suffer from **ignoring** what is not lacking!”*

Zen masters and Graf Dürckheim, converge with what Epictetus adds: *“In order to attain this greater good, man must strive”.*

Strive? The Way paved by the old sage from the Black Forest is not *a way to follow, but a way to draw*, in order to free ourselves from the ignorance of the presence in the deepest of ourselves, of our essential nature; our true nature which is the source of the qualities of being man presently lacks: calm, serenity, simple joy of being.

I understand that such a project could seem chimerical, as we are confronted during this twentieth century to frightening disruptions: droughts, floods, forest fires, the melting of glaciers, earthquakes, to which should be added the anxiety linked to armed conflict in various parts of the world.

Chimerical? Could it not be the perfect opportunity, before being swallowed by the world of business (busy to do things), of taking the time to discover this part of our selves, essential, which is in the **undoable**?

It is true that Zen remains a mystery to a purely theoretical curiosity.

One should, to be able to live peacefully in the world as it is today and without expecting for it to change, practice the exercise commonly known as **meditation**?

Here is what Zen master *Jinen San*⁴ answers to this question: *“It is the reason for mediation. But when we say “meditation” it would be fairer to say ZAZEN. When we says-meditation-, it is a practice within the concept. Zazen is out-of concept. We use the same position (Za = sitting) to practice zazen and meditation, **but the way of practicing is very different if we meditate or if we practice zazen”.***

Hirano Katsufumi Rôshi, whom animated sesshins at Dürckheim Centre for many years, drew our attention to the dangers of amalgamation between meditation and zazen: *“There are thousands of ways to meditate but there is only one way to practice zazen”.* And he adds *“When you practice zazen **the body takes the shape of calm”.***

Another enigma to which the Westerner interested in Zen is confronted: the exercise named zazen is undoubtedly **corporal** and **spiritual**!

A gift brought by Graf Dürckheim to the westerner upon his return from Japan: a set of exercises allowing the passing from a conceptual truth *“I have a body”* to the experience of the real truth *“Body I am”*.

Inescapable when one wishes to truly practice zazen, these exercises also concern those who practice and teach artistic, hand-crafted, martial disciplines rooted in Japanese tradition, like Yoga or Tai-Chi-Chuan teachers do.

³ HuiNeng (638-713) 6th patriarch of the Dhyana Buddhist school and founder of the Chan movement in China.

⁴ Jinen San Rôshi : *D’Instant en Instant* Letter n°113 – April 2023

Graf Dürckheim offers “a path of **experience** and exercise” not to be confused with the multitude of “paths made of **exercises** and experiences” which have flooded the well-being market.

“For the person on the Way, all begins with an experience”.

What is this experience? During my sojourn in the Black Forest, I was soon to be confronted with concepts, enigmatic, esoteric, abstruse expressions: our own essence... our true nature... the natural mystical experience... our essential being!

During the first conferences Graf Dürckheim invited me to present in his name (because he was unable to attend), I felt uncomfortable when the time came to speak about the *experience of being*⁵. Clearly, I had at my disposal numerous formulas, slogans, discourses about the natural mystical experience Jinen San Rôshi qualifies as being “*truths within the concept*”. An unexpected and unforgettable experience was necessary for this conceptual truth to become “*a real truth*”.

Hospitalized for surgical intervention, upon my return from surgery, I am awakened by what could be considered as a face-to-face with death. Feeling of suffocation, asphyxia. My breathing is blocked until I am liberated from this feeling of choking, immediately followed by another suffocation. Nothing matters other than breathing.

Paradoxically, in the background, the experience of ... “I breathe, therefore I live; I live therefore I breathe!”. Experience which is disconnected with the scientific theories on breathing which I was taught during my university studies; and which have nothing to do with the breathing exercises I proposed during the physical therapy sessions I gave.

What a miracle, what a mystery, I breathe. No, *IBreathe!* *IBreatheIn* and I am not responsible of ANYTHING; *IBreatheOut* and I am not responsible of ANYTHING. That is the ESSENTIAL! Experienced with a feeling of plenitude, order and unity.

Having lived this simple experience of being, it is in the scheme of things to ask myself one question: “What can I do to remain in contact with this part of myself so often ignored? Answer... an exercise!

What is Zen? Henceforth, I do not try and understand the answers given by the zen master when he is at the dinner table and says: “*Zen? When I eat, I eat*”. When he walks, answers: “*Zen? When I walk, I walk*”. Or: “*Zen? When it rains I open my umbrella; when the rain stops, I close my umbrella*”. Or still: “*When I sleep, I sleep*”.

Jacques Castermane

⁵ In his mother tongue, K.G. Dürckheim uses the expression "Wesen Erfahrung" which he translates as "**the experience of being**". In the French translations of his texts, the publisher uses the expression: "**the experience OF THE being**" which distorts the comprehension.

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