

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

Letter N°120 — February 2024

What the body can!

During the 17th century, a few years following Descartes' death, Spinoza writes: " *The body can do, merely by the laws of its own nature, a lot of things that will surprise its soul*".

For a long time, the importance given to the mind was disproportionate, regarding our human being's existence. Today, it is the body which, surprisingly, occupies the first place in numerous sectors of our human life. Apart from scientific discoveries concerning the organisation and functions of the body, numerous people will give time to their body. In addition to sports practices, are practices concerned with our well-being.

But let us come back to this fundamental indication: **what the body can!**

In order to understand it, it is important to differentiate what – *the I can do with the body* – and what – *the body would like to do with the I* - ?

What the *I* can *do* with the body is spectacular.

From this viewpoint, the body is considered as a tool, an instrument, a means to attain a goal. Thus, the opposition between *I* and something else: my body. A dualistic point of view which considers the body as an object (a throw-out).

This objectified body Dürckheim designates as "the body man HAS" (*Körper* in German).

I am impressed by the incredible capacities of the contortionist. Also, the dancer who can "do" the lateral and the antero-posterior splits. The trapeze artist who can "do" front or back flips. The pole-vaulter who can jump over a 6-meter obstacle. Or young acrobatic hip-hop dancers.

When it comes to *what the body can*, it is simply *what the I cannot do*. For example: "Breathe"!

The *vital* action, the most intimate and sensitive, the act of breathing, is *undoable*. It is undoubtedly the reason why different spiritual traditions present for the past 25 centuries in the East and Far East are centred on the attention given to the act of breathing. It is not a question of *doing* a respiratory exercise invented by man, but rather of *welcoming* the vital breath initiated by life itself and which make us live.

That being so, is it possible to expose what exercises are proposed during a retreat at Dürckheim Centre?

Graf Dürckheim defines the Way he traced upon his return from Japan (1947) as being: "*Zen in what it conceals of universally human.*"

Each day at the Centre begins with the practice named zazen.

Zazen? It is - *doing nothing* – but profoundly!

A few hours of practice are sufficient to realize that *doing nothing* opens on the UNDOABLE, on this part of ourselves from which emerges actions that transcend the capacities of what we call our will. The first, being inevitably the act of breathing.

Sensitive experience of *what the body can*, naturally. Appears to my memory this moment during which it is clear that I am *compelled* to breathe in, and I am *compelled* to breathe out. And that the I, which is capable of doing thousands of things, is not responsible of anything. I have rarely experienced what we call inner freedom as I did at that moment. And this transcendent force, this absolutely undoable vital rhythm, opened on a great inner calm.

The undoable weaves *our true nature* as a human being. What Graf Dürckheim designates as our *essential being*.

The person which trusts and confides in the undoable.... In everything that is done... frees the fundamental state of health, primarily expressed by a symptom of CALM, great inner calm.

I do not practice zazen (Kyudo, Shodo, Aikido, Yoga or Tai-ji) to win a gold or silver medal, which would imply passing from an XXL ego to a XXXL ego.

Then why practice? Because “*When you practice zazen, the body takes the shape of calm*” (Hirano Katsufumi Rôshi)

Jacques Castermane

Translation from french: *Céline Jouenne*