

CENTRE DURCKHEIM

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

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Do not shoot... Let it shoot!



Graf Dürckheim evoking his experience of archery during his stay in Japan, under Kenran Umeji Roshi's watchful eye.

The central idea a person is confronted with on the Way of archery (Kyudo), is: *“How can the shot go off, if it is not me who shoots?”*

Graf Dürckheim indicates very precisely: *“By endlessly renewing the sequence of gestures required to notch the arrow and then release it, the archer ceases to be conscious of himself as -I-, whose goal is to reach the centre of the target. The shot is then done without aim, and in so doing, without the desire to succeed at all costs, always accompanied by the fear of failing.”*

Let it shoot! Liberate the action by entrusting it to the undoable. Free the shot of any intervention of the thinking I. Such a liberation can only be immediate, but we can only achieve this way of being completely empty and free of the - I - in a progressive way.

Do you practice the exercise called zazen? Then you are confronted with the same requirements indicated by the archery master: *Do not breathe... Let it breathe!*

The exercise described by Siddhartha Gautama as “āna-apāna-sati” (full attention to the coming and going of the breath) is probably the closest and most intimate manifestation of the *undoable*, which is nothing else than the vital process which makes everything that is... is.

In the 1970's, during a sesshin Yuho Seki Roshi¹ during an individual meeting (Dokusan) asks me “*Jack San when you breathe... who breathes?*”? The question seemed to me so foolish that I immediately answered: “*Well when I breathe, it is -I- that breathes!*”!

My answer caused a sudden burst of laughter, which quickly turned into a severe look followed by these words “*If it is your -I- that breathes, then only BREATHE IN!*”

In the evening, recording this exchange that had shaken me, I write without noticing it, -I Breathe In- in one word: *IBreatheIn*. This grammatical error appears to me curiously as deciphering the true (real) truth: -IBreatheIn – should be written in one word, for there is no distance nor time lapse between the subject and the verb. And while renewing the practice of zazen, here I am grasped by an unexpected and obvious experience: “*IBreatheIn and -I- have nothing to do with it!*” And now this undoable vital action floods me and generates an unexpected inner *calm*.

Let... it become!

The condition? Learn by and through the body while avoiding taking the path of erudition, which cuts us off from reality by locking us into representations of reality.

Make yourself a gift! Watch the movie “Every day a Good Day”². This is the journey of a young woman who practices the Way of Tea (Chado).

Her Master, whose teaching goes beyond the simple apprenticeship of an ancestral Japanese ritual, observes, as she has done for several years, her student's way of practicing. Attentive to her pupil's way of being, of moving as well as to the different gestures that compose this constantly renewed ceremony.

And suddenly her young student exclaims: “*This time my hands were moving on their own...!*”

Imperturbable (but touched) her Master says: “*Yes. This time you stopped thinking with your head about what you have to do*”.

Technique is the Way. The gestures come first. It is only after that the true meaning of things appears. Do not think about what you are doing. Trust yourself by always practicing the same gestures again.

In the preface to the book “Zen in the Art of Archery” the wise scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki writes: “*Man is indeed a thinking reed, but his greatest works are done when he neither thinks nor calculates.*”

Close to Centre Dürckheim, the village of Cliousclat is home to a pottery dating back to the very beginning of the XXth Century: la Fabrique de poteries. On one wall, this inscription by Japanese poet Sôetsu Yanagi: “*It is not the artisan who makes his pot, but Nature who speaks through the hands of the potter*”.

Zazen? Let nature, our true nature, the undoable, speak through the body we are. And, as Hirano Roshi liked to repeat: ‘*When you practice zazen the body (**Leib**) takes the form of calm*’.

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Translation from French: *Céline Jouenne*

¹ Rinzai Zen Monastery Abbot in Eigen-ji (Kobe), directed sesshins in Rütte (Centre founded by K. G. Dürckheim) between 1973 and 1982

² “Every day a Good Day” movie by Omori Tatsushi, 2018.