

CENTRE DURCKHEIM

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

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Every living form is a mystery



Every living form is a mystery. When you look at a flower you do not see a fixed *form* but a growing form. This rose which emerges from an underground bulb, will go through three essential phases: the bud stage, that of a blooming flower and then become a fading flower.

In Japanese, *Ikebana* means *living flower*, but also designates the exercise of floral composition, the art of making a bouquet. In this field, the culture of chrysanthemums is considered as a traditional art.

Unlike the gloomy symbolism attributed to this flower possesses in European countries, the culture of chrysanthemums in Japan is historically considered as a *true philosophy of life*.

When Graf Dürckheim was in Japan (1937-1947), he visited an exhibition on this specific flower, which is also the imperial family's emblem.

During this visit, he asked the master gardener: "*Could you please tell me if during the growth of this flower there is a particular moment which is more important than another?*"

The master gardener seemed very embarrassed by this question and answered that he did not understand it. Graf Dürckheim asserted that he saw the moment during which the flower blooms as the most important one. Finally understanding the question, the master gardener answered: "*For the Japanese there is no moment during the growth of a flower which could be considered more important than another, because the life of this flower is a path of transformation which starts at birth right through to its death.*"

The error made by most Westerners who say they are interested in Zen is to imagine that, by accumulating exercises one can accomplish, attain and maintain a state of being that could be

equivalent to the level of beauty of a blooming flower! In other words, be infinitely good, infinitely just, infinitely perfect! Or remain in a state of being that is at all times serene, confident, and pleasant.

The goal of Zen is to redirect us toward our true self, which Graf Dürckheim names our essential Being: “*To be in harmony with the Being does not mean to be in a state of perfection. To want to attain perfection is an error that the person on the Way must not make. The truth of our reality is often quite miserable compared to the ideal we imagine. To be in relation with our true nature does not mean that “what man should be” is a perfect realization, but rather to be able to see ourselves in the truth of the moment. The awakening to our true self does not manifest itself when we surpass our human condition, but precisely when we recognize ourselves in this human condition, when we acknowledge our weakness.*”¹

The last stage... growing old!

The fading flower. It is often removed from the bouquet that we were offered or torn from our garden. Probably because it confronts us with the unacceptable: death.

The rose button, the blooming rose, the fading rose are physical impregnations (corporal) of what makes what is alive...live (the essence)!

On the way of Zen, the person on the way, as he/she grows old, learns to -part- from any *realized form*, which allows him/her to learn to -accept- a *new form*. That is why growing old should be understood as being a chance for us to *mature*. Always wanting to stabilize what has been acquired is one of the causes of anxiety in elderly people.

Growing old (maturing) is accepting the weakening of the forces, which are part of *doing* and are developed by the I. The body, possibly assisted by a cane, now moves slowly and becomes a field of experience for the *undoable*.

Experience of a force which cannot be *quantified* by a dynamometer; a force that is felt as a *quality* of being. Corporal impregnation of inner plenitude, of inner order, of inner peace, the power of not wanting.

I could not imagine in 1967, having practiced zazen for the first time, that this exercise would bring me to no longer consider agitation as being the opposite of calm, and to experience that agitation excludes calm, the great calm present in the depth of every human being.

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Translation from French: *Céline Jouenne*

¹ Le Centre de l’Etre - éd. Albin Michel (p. 45)