

CENTRE DURCKHEIM
A Path step by step
Encouragement for daily practice

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Zazen, a natural gesture

A nod!

In his February letter, Jacques Castermane recalls he began practicing zazen in 1967. 1967 is the year I was born; a few months later I was myself practicing sitting, carried by the laws of the living body; sitting in a gesture that was perfectly right, right because natural. Who hasn't been surprised by the vitality of a baby sitting!

Settled in his bottom, stable, vertical and open... as well as flexible from head to toe, naturally (no cushion, no muscle strength, no willpower, no intention). During the years 1967 and 1968... I was naturally sitting in zazen, as do all babies in the world when they sit for the first time, answering the intentions of life itself.

So, when discovering zazen in 1967, Jacques admits that, like anyone making his first steps on the Path of Zen, he was trying to build a posture named zazen.

Posture! A term which prevents us from realizing that before having a cult and cultural dimension, zazen is a natural gesture, a natural action.

As I write these words, I remember a popular French saying, "Banish the natural, and it comes galloping back." How these few words can keep us trapped in the vicious cycle of mental awareness and distort our relationship to our true nature! In this expression, "the natural" refers to our automatisms, the mechanical nature of our reactions, and our ingrained ways of understanding the world. It also represents our family and social determinism that shape our way of being. "Natural" brings us back to our beliefs, our fears, and the difficulty of breaking free from our egocentric view of the world. *"I have always acted this way, been afraid of this, always thought this or that..."*

Thus, we are defined by this "natural", which reduces us to an inner non-freedom, restricting us to a way of being based on assumptions, constraints, fears, and reflexes of protection or aggression... that are deeply embedded within us, and have been for a long time. Nothing changes, and that feeling is reassuring: I can recognize myself, and I am recognized. *"Ah yes, that way of doing things, that's so me, that's so him (or her)!"* In this sense, what is natural is what is habitual, mechanical, and controlled; what is natural is what keeps us anchored in our mundane I, instead of opening us to the renewal that is the act of being.

"The experience of awakening, Satori, is the liberation of man's essential nature from the chains of an I that is chained to our world. In the conditions of the world as it is, we can rediscover our fundamental state of health: inner peace. It is the awakening from the madness of materialistic, dualistic consciousness, which determines our vision of the world; a vision that recognizes as real only what conforms to the order of concepts." K.G. Dürckheim

If we refer to the etymology of the word "nature" – meaning: *what is in the process of being born* - it would be far more accurate to put aside this popular saying and replace it with another formula: "Open yourself to what is natural, and the mechanical and trivial aspects will disappear."

Thus, the relationship to our true nature is approached in an entirely different way, and we can speak of "the liberation of man's essential nature," of our natural being. "Natural" is no longer a restrictive or confining term, but can be lived as an opening to what is being born, emerging, truly happening in the present moment. That which is natural is what opens us to the possibility of change and evolution. It is therefore natural to feel what is being created at every instant, what is renewed with each breath, each gesture, each sensation...

The essence of Zen is to pay attention and to offer oneself to this life that animates and continuously transforms us, by seriously considering our body's sensitive conscience, our full attention to the living body, the body sensation, the body gesture, that I am. To be profoundly reborn with every breath and supported by this life that animates me. To be reborn in a form, a stance, a gesture of the entire self, to break free from a mechanical and static world and open oneself to the flow of the world as it is, moment after moment.

Jacques often tells us the story of the battle with the bear, to help us differentiate the importance between a consciousness of the I dependent on the mental world, and our vital, sensorial consciousness, which escapes the order of concepts.

A renowned swordsman fights against a bear, which is tied by one hind leg to a stake, and yet, the swordsman cannot win! The bear relies on the sole reality of the present moment. It does not react to the swordsman's feints, because a feint is not a real threat. It does not move aimlessly; it sees, faces, and acts in response to what is really happening. The bear perceives what truly is, with an open and free consciousness: that is, his sensorial consciousness, the essence of Zen. On the other hand, the swordsman is trapped in his knowledge and past experiences, inventing strategies and feints; he anticipates, calculates his attacks. He is confronted by his emotional world: the desire for success and the fear of failure...

The swordsman thinks about what he is doing, hoping for a favorable outcome. He remains confined in mental consciousness and can only respond partially to the situation.

"If we recognize the dead-end into which our rational consciousness has led us, it would be futile to hope to escape it using the very means that created it," says Dürckheim. This awakening can only occur if we relinquish the omnipotence of our ordinary consciousness and reopen ourselves to pre-mental, vital, and natural consciousness. Thus, Zen remains above all a *"universally human"* path, one that transcends eras, borders, dogmas, religions... and rigid postures. A path that does not seek to accumulate knowledge, performance, or experiences, but instead creates the conditions for the emergence of our true nature, our true being, by unsettling a self that is too neatly arranged. The greatest danger for Zen would be to turn it into a "useful" path, one that merely enhances our mental abilities and knowledge, causing us to forget our true nature: inner peace, the vital resource of the living body, which is already here, waiting for us... provided that during the practice of the exercise, we learn to make ourselves physically available to what will always elude us mentally.

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Translation from French : *Céline Jouenne*