

CENTRE DURCKHEIM

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

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When doing becomes being



Kyoto, 1941. A Japanese friend had organized a meeting with Master Hayashi, an abbot of the renowned Zen monastery Myoshinji.

Japan observes the beautiful custom of gift-giving: when one visits someone for the first time, he offers a gift, and the guest is also offered a gift. The most valued gift is the one that has been made by hand.

When the time came to part, Hayashi Rōshi said to me:

"I would like to offer you something. A painting."

Two young monks brought him the necessary brushes and Chinese ink. But the ink, in a solid form, was not yet ready to use. The ink stick had yet to be rubbed, for a long time, in a hollowed stone with a small amount of water until it became liquid.

With great serenity and prodigality in his movements, as if he had an infinite amount of time — a master always possesses infinite inner time — the abbot began to grind the ink himself. His hand moved steadily back and forth until the water finally turned into a deep black ink.

I was somewhat surprised that the master undertook this task himself and asked why he didn't delegate it to his collaborators. His answer was enlightening:

"Through the quiet back-and-forth movement of the hand, one becomes completely calm. Everything becomes silence. One needs a heart (what we might call a mind) that is impassive and silent, so that what blossoms within oneself, is entirely pure."

Sitting back on his heels, his brow serene, shoulders relaxed, torso upright and at ease, embodying the quiet vitality of someone trained in postures grounded in the body's centre of gravity, the master picked up the brush in a gesture that was calm, fluid, and unique. It was as though the master had entirely freed his inner self, allowing the image he saw inside to emerge spontaneously, unrestrained, neither by fear of failure, nor by the desire to succeed.

And so the image of the goddess Kannon appeared.

Then came the moment for which I share this story: the painting of the halo around Kannon's head, the gesture of painting the perfect circle.

All of us who were present held our breath. On such fine paper, the slightest pause in the movement, the tiniest hesitation of the brush, leaves a blot and ruins everything.

Without a moment's hesitation, the master dipped the brush in the ink, lightly blotted it and calmly assumed his starting position, and, as if it were the simplest thing in the world, drew a perfect circle around Kannon's head, radiating with purity.

It was an unforgettable moment. A sublime silence filled the room.

Before our eyes, even the completed circle seemed to reflect the silence emanating from the master himself.

When Master Hayashi handed me the painting, I thanked him with a question:

"How does one become a master?"

He replied with a mischievous smile: "Simply let the master that lies within, surface. Yes - Simply let it surface" if only it were that simple...

To reach such simplicity, the path is long.

It means that on the path of transformation, a person must learn to let what lies within come forth. Whether it be in the practice of breathing in accordance with the laws of life, or in performing a technically challenging action or work, what matters in the end is that the result does not emerge from the ego, but from a connexion to our deeper self, so that its expression be the manifestation of a master's action.

K. Graf Dürckheim

This story may speak to every practitioner, and especially people who teach disciplines such as Yoga, Tai Chi Chuan, or any artistic, hand-crafted, or martial art discipline rooted in the world of Zen.

The technique is the Path. Whatever the technique may be, its meaning must be, to bring about inner harmony and peace. Every action, every gesture of the present moment can capture the very essence of this.

The path each of us must draw (for it is not one that can simply be followed) is the reason for the existence of Dürckheim Centre.

Even a practice as simple as slow walking (Kin-Hin) can become an exercise that connects the practitioner to his own inner essence, the source of inner calm, of inner peace in this world just as it is, without expecting for it to change.

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¹ K.G. Dürckheim — Merveilleux chat et autres récits zen – éd. Le Courrier du Livre (p.12)