

CENTRE DURCKHEIM  
*A Path step by step*  
*Encouragement for daily practice*

Letter N°13 - May 2025

**The exercise on the Way: constraint or space for Freedom?**

Both! It all depends on how we practice.

“Is the Zen I practice really Zen?” This is a recurring question Jacques Castermane asks during retreats at the Durckheim Centre. A question that can both annoy and stimulate, and an invitation to remain awake and alert!

The regular and specific practice of an exercise is unquestionably part of Zen. Day after day, month after month, year after year, we renew the same exercise, the same technique, to verify this saying:

“An exercise done 10 times is interesting; if it is done 100 times it is boring, irritating; if it is done 1000 times it can transform us.”

If we add to that, this insight from K.G. Durckheim: “A continuously renewed exercise is no longer an exercise, it becomes another way of being.”

We therefore transform a specific exercise into “daily life as an exercise”; two pillars on the Way of Zen.

After such a presentation, one must admit that the world of Zen remains obscure and mysterious, for: “As all Zen masters remind us, there is no reality in Zen except for the person who embraces the practice of a technique”.

The specific exercise is all the more disconcerting, for it is often quite simple.

At the Durckheim Centre, two exercises are fundamental and practiced daily: zazen (sitting in silence completely immobile) and kinhin (slow walking).

For someone discovering these practices, they can seem odd, even unsettling:

First day, sitting in silence and walking slowly following strict rules. Second day, same program. Third day, sitting in silence and slowly walking. First retreat, second retreat, third retreat... again and again, zazen and kinhin.

This repetition of always the same exercise, the same technique, may be met with boredom, weariness, or even anger. The range of troubles encountered is vast, and at first deeply frustrating for someone seeking inner calm.

The manifestation of our EGO reveals itself in full force, wanting to move on from these simplistic exercises, considered as prerequisites on the path of Zen, while waiting for a more spiritual teaching to come.

To quickly move on, to be able to think about something else, to escape the discomfort and irritation of this repetitive and monotonous practice!

Practiced this way, the exercise is experienced as a constraint, a lack of freedom to do what I want, to do what I like, or wish to gain, protect, or reject.

Year after year, sitting in a perfect stillness, in the right stance, form, and breathing, "right because natural", that is zazen.

Year after year, taking one small step, being the full weight and height of Oneself with each step, releasing the right sway and balance of the lower abdomen. To fully master that one step, “meaning to allow what is right to emerge”, that is the practice of kinhin.

These two examples of exercises are experienced as constraints for the EGO that wants to preserve its own pace, way of walking, control over the situation, understanding and habits. Any serious practitioner who knows these stirrings and resistances, knows well the boredom, irritation, and discouragement being described.

So then, why always repeat the same exercise? Why do many of those who've experienced these difficulties come back to the centre, or decide to engage in a daily practice?

A technique practiced every day, without compromise, increasingly precise and perfectly embodied, prevents the EGO from doing everything it wants. This precise aspect of the practice is what opens us to an experience, to another inner reality that is beyond mentalization.

Jacques Castermane once said during zazen:

“Stillness prevents me from becoming rigid, from remaining in physical, emotional, or mental reactions; these habits start to fade away from the EGO.”

I am doing nothing and this attitude could help me escape from my difficulties? Stillness could make a more natural way of being arise? One must practice it, pass through it, live it, to believe it!

He also said: “You felt physical resistance, saw your emotional and mental patterns: that is a good reason to renew the exercise.

You felt and tasted an unusual moment of inner calm, of order, of openness: that too is a good reason to renew the exercise.”

The exercise opens us to self-awareness, and also to the awareness of our true self, our true nature. Every time, we gain... in maturity, in “being”.

If the technique that is continuously renewed remains the same, the way we see ourselves changes, the one who practices continuously changes. Little by little, or all of a sudden, we can step out of the repetitive mindset of the ego and discover what is called the spirit of renewal, and undeniably, everything is transformed.

From a repetitive “neurosis” of perfection, we rediscover principles and actions we had cut ourselves off from by giving too much space to our mind: sensuality, difference, impermanence, interdependence... so many vital laws we have forgotten!

The exercise is the passage from a constrained posture controlled by the EGO, to the liberation of a renewed gesture, subject to the natural, transformative laws of the living body.

Thus, universal, immutable, and “undoable” actions can suddenly surprise us again.

How strange.. it feels like I'm doing nothing, and yet “I feel nourished and more alive than ever.”

Zazen, perfectly immobile: the coming and going of breath moves me; form breathes, stance is renewed in every instant, and I am carried by the undoable: “it breathes, it happens.”

From a mastered and constantly renewed technique, emerges full participation in a perpetually unfolding event; and finally, I am not doing anything: what pure freedom, what pure peace!

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