

CENTRE DURCKHEIM
A Path step by step
Encouragement for daily practice

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Zen, Calm, Friction, and Relationships

The most recent letter from the Centre (June 2025 podcast) spoke of “our responsibility to offer inner calm and inner silence” in all the existential situations we are faced with, and also in the relationships we have to others. But linking calm with human relationships is no simple matter. On this topic, Jacques Castermane reminds us:

“Calm is not the result of my daily practice of zazen, but rather, the practice of zazen is a daily opportunity to exercise inner calm.”

Welcoming and embracing what arises, and tasting the calm that appears, does not end when solitary sitting in zazen is over. Calm is not an inner reward to be attained, kept, and protected in rare moments, but is a way of being that is constantly questioned, challenged, and shaken by the events of our life. Exercising calm is a gesture that brings us face-to-face with our way of relating to our environment throughout the day. It forces us to question ourselves, to step outside of our comfort zone, our prejudices and our habits. In this sense, calm is not apathy, detachment, or passivity, but rather an awakened stance, one that sharpens our adaptability and openness, helping us to perceive and feel a situation in its entirety, and to act in a way that “sticks to reality.” And sometimes, anger, firmness, or a strong gesture is exactly what is called for.

K.G. Dürckheim speaks of Zen as a path to human maturity, through the rediscovery of the essential Being lying within each one of us; source of wholeness, peace, and trust.

This intimate contact is meant to be cultivated in every part of our life, including the domain of relationships (cf. *La Percée de l’Etre* in French or *Durchbruch zum Wesen* in German).

A mature human being is the opposite of an infantile adult who is driven by shifting moods and endlessly reacting to whatever displeases them, internally and externally, forcing their instability and agitation upon others.

Even if this inner maturity is slowly nurtured through fleeting and inspiring experiences during privileged moments, it must also accompany us in the rawness of everyday life. As Dürckheim puts it:

“I must recognize that if I myself am this depth, this potential vastness, so too is the other, no matter how they may appear on the surface.”

Does the Zen path, even before speaking of “unwavering compassion,” open us to a certain warmth in our relationships?

Are we capable, when confronted or upset, of:

“Gathering ourselves with a smile and speaking soothing rather than hurtful words?”

“Developing a capacity to love that is not dependent on being liked or recognized by others?”

“Realizing that Zen is love and compassion expressing the unity that links all beings, and that Zen demands absolute dedication to this unity, in the very place each of us is assigned by destiny?” K.G. Dürckheim

To rediscover this bond of humanity, this unity, is to learn how to rely on our inner depth—to see the universally human in every human being, to recognize the universally alive in every living being, and even to treat every everyday objects with respect, always, everywhere.

A Zen master once said to Jacques Castermane, after he slammed a door during a sesshin: “What did that door ever do to you to deserve such treatment?”

And Dürckheim once told some visiting clergy: “You must lose all interest in your ideas about a Creator, and instead become interested in what is right before your eyes: creation itself.”

A monumental order indeed! Before becoming the heart of a sacred practice uniting essence and existence, such words invite us to leave behind our habitual worldview and way of thinking, to no longer stay at the surface of mechanical reactions and judgments produced by the mind.

If Zen is reduced to the space of the dojo, where, sitting in zazen, we try to live intense spiritual experiences (and undergo equally intense inner struggles), it can create a kind of heroic image of the Way and lead us to forget how to live an ordinary, simple, and peaceful life. By developing what might be called a “spiritual ego,” we risk fleeing the world.

Even if, through the calming of the emotional and mental worlds and the rediscovery of a surprising life force in the “hara”, Zen fosters a stronger and more balanced ego, the rewarding effects of the practice carry a different danger: that of stopping at mastery, efficiency, and worldly performance. The Way is then hijacked to serve the ego.

The process of transformation awakened by serious, regular practice can trap us in the comfort of partial progress, to the risk of: *“Stopping at a particular form and betraying the essential Being.”*

We must therefore ask ourselves whether the Zen we practice daily has become a comfortable routine that keeps us distant from the truth of the world? Or merely a useful obligation that serves only our mundane life? To find out, nothing works better than allowing ourselves to be shaken.

“It is not avoidance, but it is the obstacle itself that gives us the chance to mature.” (Jacques Castermane)

Shaken by the master of the exercise who questions our spiritual ideal, or shaken by the very challenges we’ve carefully avoided, which life then places on our path, exposing our illusion of mastery over the world.

Just like zazen, our relationship with the “Other” is a vast field of learning non-resistance, a field where expressions like “gathering oneself,” “full attention,” “sticking to reality,” “being one with” are endlessly renewed.

The Way unfolds both on the *zafu* **and** in our ability of opening and meeting every situation and relationship fully, this is the balance on the path towards Great Calm.

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