

D'instant en instant

Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen

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At my age...

Some who have passed their *sixties* tell me that they are drawn to the Way paved by Graf Dürckheim. Numerous are those who regret not having heard earlier of this path, which awakens to the true self, and think that at their age it is probably too late. I do not think it is too late.

When we celebrate our 60th or 70th birthday, or as in my case, my 90th birthday, it is because we are still *breathing*. And I will ask you a question that could sound awkward: - *How old is your breathing-*?

During the day, whether you are lying down, sitting, standing or walking, you breathe! Day and night you *breathe*. This action is ageless. It organizes itself and comes into being from moment to moment according to rules that are beyond anything we are able to accomplish. Breathing is innate. Breathing is natural. Breathing is a matter of ontology. Breathing is *undoable*. I must breathe... even during the night. Breathing is not only existential but also essential. Breathing is ontological, from the verb *to be*, from the *action of being*.

What is important when we are on the path of Zen is the discovery of this *essential part of our selves which is made of the Undoable*. There is no age at which to begin the journey for this discovery.

Whatever the colour of my skin may be, whatever my age, whatever my profession, whether I am religious, agnostic or atheist, *now I am breathing in and the I is not responsible for it; now I am breathing out and the I is not responsible for it*.

It is, what is *undoable* that is the source of the qualities of being that we call: inner *calm*, self-*confidence* and the simple *joy* of being. There is no age that could prevent or favour the experience of our fundamental state of health.

No age but an essential duty: **to cease running away from what is essential**.

This duty implies taking an unusual path: the practice of an *exercise*. The Way is the technique; the technique is the Way.

Which exercise? The first consists in paying attention to the act of *breathing*.

The Westerner thinks breathing is something: a physiological function. In this case, there is I and something that is not I, the breathing. A dual point of view on reality.

The day I heard Graf Dürckheim say "*Breathing is the signature of Life*" I could no longer think of it as being "something". At that moment, and without premeditation, I suddenly felt swept up by this gesture of Life, always in the creation of living forms. I felt moved by this law which imposes what IS becomes, and what becomes IS. And furthermore, what is, is now,

during the time I breathe-in... and during the time I breathe-out! There was no difference between past, present and future. There was only the present.

When the attachment to the past (which existentially has been but will no longer be) and when the attachment to the future (which existentially may or may not be) give place to the present moment, we are freed from desires and fears that pollute our inner life.

“If you truly practice zazen the body takes the shape of calm”. I no longer tried to understand this indication repeated by the Zen master who visited the Centre for over ten years. I felt overwhelmed by this great calm which is not the opposite of agitation but the *absence of agitation*.

Despite these teachings, some think that *because of the difficulties of old age* they will not be able to benefit from certain exercises. To the person who wrote to me saying that it was impossible for her to sit in the lotus position, I answered that I forbade her to sit in such an uncomfortable position, and that she could practice zazen sitting on a chair. A Zen that is envisioned as a mortifying asceticism is not Zen. Zen is a vivifying asceticism accessible to all, at all ages.

To the members of the third and fourth age I will confide something. This is the very first time in my life that I experience being alive, just a few weeks from my 91st birthday. Yes, it is the very first time. And what I am living, and how , is quite...new. And far from being uninteresting.

To describe it I must leave the usual rules of grammar.

I can no longer write I-am or I-breathe. To express what I feel I must write **IAm** and **IBreathe**. Because there is no distance nor time lapse between the subject and the verb. No separation. No opposition. The experience of being ONE with oneself and the rest. The mind opposes and divides. Sensation unites, joins.

And, as the famous story reminds us, when the wave feels united with the ocean, she experiences her journey across the world with a feeling of security. It is true that when we truly practice zazen, the living body, the body we are, takes the shape of calm.

All the more so if old age takes you away who knows where and when, do not ask for explanations of Zen, nor why one should practice it to have good reasons to practice.

When I asked Graf Dürckheim if he could give me a good reason to practice zazen daily, he answered *“Yes, I can give a good reason...practice because it is the time to practice”*.

(It was on my 30th birthday!)

Jacques Castermane