

## *D'instants en instants*

*Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen*

Letter N°133 — April 2026

### **Master! Of whom or what are we talking about?**

This word usually designates a person who holds power, authority, mastery or talent.

When I was at primary school (from age 6 to 12), we usually addressed our teacher by calling him “master”. A bygone era. Nowadays, children call their *teacher* by his/her forename.

Certain solicitors like being called “master”.

In the art or craft world, we have maintained the denomination dance master, music master, master sculptor.

The Zen master!

In Japanese we distinguish two terms: Sensei and Rôshi.

*Sensei* is the “elder” who has practiced an art, a martial art or a craft for dozens of years, and who shares his knowledge and know-how with his students.

*Rôshi* is the person who, by constantly repeating the same exercise, *shares his experience* with his disciples.

### **When the master speaks...**

\* 1970. Rütte. “Graf Dürckheim what is the difference between the master and his disciple?”

Answer: “*The difference between the disciple and the one we call the master? There is none; both are on the Way*”.

But after a just a few seconds, enough time for me to free myself from a fear: subordination, dependence, influence, the old sage from the Black Forest smiles and says: “*Both are on the same Way. But I must say that for the one we call the master it is a little more visible*”.

\* 1980. Archery session led by master Satoshi Sagino.

During seven hours each day, we renew the few gestures that allow one to notch an arrow and then release it. When I shoot, it is a moment that I consider crucial. It is when the bow is at its maximum tension and during which it is important to let the hand holding the bowstring open like a blossoming flower (“*Do not shoot, let it shoot for you!*”).

And then comes master Sagino (whom I did not see approaching...) who takes advantage of the moment to slightly push me...and the arrow falls before me. A little later, he does it again... and this time the arrow flies straight into the sky.

In the evening, while having tea with master Sagino, I share my surprise. I have been practicing for four years and today you destabilize me at a crucial moment! Why? “*Because when you shoot you are animated by the desire to succeed, which necessarily awakens the fear of failure...!*”.

Thank you master Sagino! On that day I didn't understand, but I realized that the technique, *the external work*, had as its meaning the liberation of *an inner work*, which transforms the person who is practicing.

\* 2011. Mirmande. In my office a photo: the face a Khmer monk.

Hirano Rôshi who is conducting a sesshin at the centre asks me: “*Why this photo?*”

“Because when I stop and look at this face I feel he is saying: here is someone who needs to work much more on himself.”

Hirano Roshi looks at the picture and, after a moment says, “*That is curious because when I look at this face I feel he is saying: here is someone that is working well on himself..!*”

Thank you Hirano Roshi! The photo, from now on, encourages me to work WITHOUT a goal.

\* 2013. Mirmande. Sesshin conducted by Hirano Rôshi.

We are the same age, separated by only two years. I tell him that aging makes it difficult for me to maintain verticality during Zazen and Kin-hin.

He smiles and says “*Jack San, at our age, verticality is to accept being bent forward...!*”

I needed this answer to realize that I was still practicing, animated by the desire for a past that was no longer and that would never be again.

I needed this answer to realize that life is given to me here and now, and that aging is given to me here and now. And that my duty towards myself and the students that I accompany is to *sit in the best way possible*, bent forward and *to walk in the best way possible*, bent forward!

*Fall seven times, stand up eight!* Such is the Way.

### **The Way?**

For more or less a century, various ways of wisdom have reached Western shores. Among the most renowned are Yoga, Tai Chi, Aikido, Chado, Zado (Zazen)...

The particularity of these ways to wisdom is to combine a technical practice with the discovery of One's self. And this with only one goal: the realization of the true SELF.

Why practice Zazen? Hirano Rôshi answers: “*If you -truly- practice Zazen, the body takes the shape of calm!*”

*Truly!*

Christian Bobin in his preface of the work of Yoko Orimo (Comme la lune au milieu de l'eau – Art et spiritualité du Japon, Edition Sully) writes: “the West, drained, on the verge of consuming itself, has been steeling, for some years, what it thinks is oriental WISDOM. In doing so, it distorts it, changes it, limits it to what it UNDERSTANDS: that is, to techniques, recipes and know-hows.”

If you *truly* practice!

In the early 1970's, during a stay in Paris, Graf Dürckheim attends an Aikido demonstration for the first time, led by Master Masamichi Noro. I am taking part in this demonstration and do admit I feel a certain pride. My arrogance does not last very long. At the end of the training session Graf Dürckheim asks me: “*Jacques, are you sure that the way you practice Aikido is TRULY Aikido?*”

Certain comments are difficult to accept. But once digested, I must say: *Thank you Graf Dürckheim. Your question not only changed my way of teaching, but it also transformed and still does today, my way of being in the world.*

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Translation from French : *Céline Jouenne*