

CENTRE DURCKHEIM
A Path step by step
Encouragement for daily practice

Letter N°20 – July 2026

Za-zen !

I recall an experience during one of my very first sittings at a retreat; moment of absolute immobility.

Twenty to thirty minutes of sitting in absolute stillness can seem very long... so long that everything in me resisted and tensed up.

Physically I was a block of granite, hard, tense and in pain.

Emotionally, I swayed between boredom and anger.

Mentally, it was a battle of negative thoughts: “What is the point of this... It is ridiculous to hurt oneself so much... This is not for me, it is useless...”

And then, this fleeting and subtle feeling: “I Breathe!”

A surprise: “Hey! I am still able to breathe in the midst of all this!”

The sensation of the breath finds its way through this harshness, flowing like an inner caress: “I breathe! How good that feels, how gentle!”

And suddenly, the experience of coming into contact with this action that I am not doing, but that is doing itself - breathing in/breathing out, becomes self-evident.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I am deeply moved by the gentleness, the natural rhythm the strength of what we call the breath... Everything calms down, everything flows.

The focal point of the sitting is no longer trying to do something, of trying to be “more this or less of that”. Simply sitting, I feel more intensely this undoable action, dictated by life itself: it breathes!

“The exercise, says Dürckheim, does not make us a better person, but puts us in contact with that part of ourselves that is not affected by the hazards of our existence”.

It is exactly what I am experiencing!

The external situation has not changed but my attention has shifted.

The sitting, previously inhabited by the thought of “doing a good za-zen” and everything that it implies in terms of physical and mental constructions – desires, refusals, goals and ideals to attain – suddenly gives way to simplicity: simply sitting, carried by the vital breath, fully alive.

The “hazards” of the sitting which until then had overwhelmed me, suddenly disappeared.

For a moment I could feel and taste what welcoming truly meant.

“Face what you are facing”, “Embrace reality”, “Welcome what is, through sensation”, instructions heard many times, and sooner or later... the posture made up of struggles and expectations suddenly transforms into a vast and sensitive gesture of surrender to what appears and disappears, transforming itself moment after moment.

Za-zen!

I do not mentally oppose myself to what is given to me to experience this very moment.

I do not construct other possibilities, other scenarios.

What I want, what I wait for, what I idealise – if possible, a meditation under my control and of course, luminous – gradually fades, losing all interest: all these unreal thoughts are pierced by the profoundly real gesture of sitting, alive, carried by the breath.

For a moment I live in contact with “being essentially there”, touch of the being as K.G. Dürckheim describes: “Satori? It is the scaffold on which the ego stands, which suddenly collapses, and the transforming of life’s vitality which seizes us”.

Za-zen!

“To sit in the right stance, form and rhythm.”

To sit on a cushion, on a chair, back straight, perfectly still.

To truly sit, established in our vital centre, the pelvis and lower abdomen, and at the same time surrendered to a natural verticality. In this subtle balance between earth and sky, the right stance can be found: a natural gesture that is not constructed, undoable, free from the effort of trying to sit up straight.

To truly sit, and relax the shoulders, the back... relax the jaw, the neck and the gaze, eyes open... relax the belly, the pelvis, the thighs... hands cupped below the navel.

Thus flourishes the gesture of the Self, supple, breathing, free from contractions born from an excessively determined attitude.

What we call a right form is a sitting that is never fixed, but constantly evolving, following the rhythm of the living body: breathing in/breathing out, tension/relaxation.

To truly sit, immobile, without interfering with the “transforming vitality of Life”, our undoable depth.

An absolute stillness that “stop preventing what must happen” and naturally transforms us.

This part of ourselves “not affected by the hazards of existence”, exercised, experienced and renewed by the regular practice of za-zen, never truly leaves us: it is the heart of our Being. The mystery of our suffering and of our essential being are intimately intertwined, this depth lies at the heart of our existence, in the world as it is.

Still, we need to learn to listen and hear this inner call, to practice.

It is the meaning of the path of experience and exercise in Zen.

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