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# Clarifying the mind

**Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech, December 2008**

When we practice zazen we constantly return to the concentration on the posture of the body, like a leitmotif of practice. Whatever happens during zazen, we return to the following points: tilting the pelvis forward, stretching the spine and neck, pushing the sky with the crown of the head, the earth with the knees; this relaxes the shoulders, the abdomen and one inspires and exhales quietly through the nose and lets thoughts drift away.

These two or three sentences sum up the practice completely. At least the first aspect of the practice, that is to say, the practice of concentration. The merit of the positive result of this practice is that it helps clarify the mind quickly, enabling one to calm all mental agitation, to wake up eventually if one dozes, to find a peaceful and clear mind. This mind is both available, open, and which grasps at nothing, rejects nothing, and as a consequence is free from the poisons of greed and hatred which make us reject what bothers us.

Yet, on the other hand, this practice is not enough, in itself, to dispel the third poison that is the cause of all the others, that is to say, ignorance: the lack of understanding of the fundamental essence of existence. The practice of concentration is a necessary condition as the saying goes, but it is not enough. Without concentration, without having a clear mind, we cannot let the intuition of what is the essence of our existence develop; but conversely, only concentrating is not enough. As we stay focused, we can of course have the right attitude. But the cause of the trouble we may experience in concentrating remains, that is to say the erroneous belief in an ego, a "me" which is separated, from objects and strives to strengthen itself, enhance its sense of existence by identifying with all sorts of things and by opposing other objects.

As a consequence this "me" fundamentally functions through discrimination and is helped in so doing by concepts, notions, which it manufactures and which help it to divide reality into entities that it can hope either to grasp or to reject. We can grasp at what seems good for us or reject what seems bad for us. One is separated from the world and the world itself is divided into two, depending on the wishes of our ego: the good world, that is favorable to us, and the bad world, that is not. And it is the same when we consider others: there are those that bother us, there are those that we love, there are enemies, and there are friends. With enemies we go to war, with friends we have fun, we have a good time. If we look at what is happening in the world, everything is driven by this attachment to the ego and its consequences.

So it is not enough to concentrate or to adopt the right behavior to sever the root of this ignorance and its consequences. That is why the Fifth Patriarch, Konin, made his disciples take a test, asking them to write a poem expressing the essence of their understanding of Zen and his teaching.

While Jinshu, who was the star pupil among the disciples, wrote:

*"The body is the tree of enlightenment,  
The mind is a bright mirror  
Which we must constantly wipe  
Not letting the dust deposit itself there. "*

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The young Eno, to whom he had read this poem, reacted by saying: "This is not the essence of the teaching of our master. " And he wrote a poem in turn, in which he said:

*"In emptiness there is neither tree nor mirror.  
Where can the dust settle? "*

And although Master Konin praised Jinshu's poem, in the end, he awarded to Eno the transmission of the Dharma.

Jinshu's poem expresses the practice of concentration that is absolutely necessary but not sufficient.

Eno's poem, which will come to symbolize the sudden awakening in Zen, calls for the immediate intuition of emptiness, which is supposed to sweep, in a single stroke, all obstacles. Except that if this intuition is not accompanied by the constant practice of concentration, it can just remain a flash of light in the darkness, which quickly engulfs us once more.

When we hear a lot teachings we are generally quite convinced, that everything is without substance, the ego has no absolute reality, is not permanent. In a nutshell, we have some understanding of emptiness. But it has often been difficult to make this understanding real for us. As children who are told when they are hurt, "it's nothing" and yet they still redouble their cries and groans: it may be nothing, but I am still in pain. Therefore I exist. I protest.

Rinzai Zen opted mainly for the abrupt approach of Master Eno. Soto Zen has opted for the two complementary practices of concentration and observation. It is appropriate not only to practice successively but together, harmoniously.

The practice of concentration in zazen, but also in daily life, is the practice that helps us to not betray our understanding of emptiness, not to leave that understanding at an intellectual level but to make it real in our life, returning constantly to the *hishiryo* consciousness, which dissolves all mental coagulations, all attachments and naturally causes harmony with the Dharma, emptiness, and even fully expresses this harmony.

This means that in everyday life when we encounter an obstacle, a painful attachment, we should adopt simultaneously the concentration practice, which helps soothe the mind, calm the emotions and see clearly. This seeing clearly means that we perceive that the self, which is struggling with the obstacle and the obstacle itself are without substance. And we must be convinced deeply of this. Then, the practice becomes easy, there is no need to invest so much energy, nor so much effort, to harmonize ourselves with the Dharma. This becomes much more natural and spontaneous.

And this natural, this spontaneous gifts, are not given beforehand: they are the fruit of a long practice and, as for many other things, a long and patient approach. As in the art of calligraphy, as in the martial arts, the right gesture, the right spirit, which seem so easy, so natural and spontaneous, are the fruit of a long concentration. And if one is not ready to make this effort then one is not ready to enter the Way of Zen.

And if one has entered it, then one should be eager to go to the end, that is, until the true realization of enlightenment.