
Understanding conditioning

Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech – Sesshin of the Pyrenees, November 2015

During zazen, if one is not always perfectly concentrated, one realizes that when one lets himself be taken away by thoughts or emotions, our mind changes and one literally transmigrates from one mental world to another, according to the attachments of the moment. Sometimes one is assaulted by negative thoughts of moral sufferings and literally feels to be in hell, at an impasse and desperate, but curiously this passes. Other thoughts come, other emotions, perhaps dominated by our appetites for food and sex, perhaps fantasies emerge. Then at another moment our worries about work and about family come to mind. And thus throughout a zazen one can go through the six roads of transmigrations. To go from the hellish state to the heavenly state, through the animal state, the human, the aggressive sometimes, when one is angry.

But at that very moment, one can realize an aspect of the Buddha's awakening which he expressed shortly after his Enlightenment, that is that human beings are constantly reborn according to their karma, that is to say according to the actions which were determined by their *bonno*, their illusions, their attachments. When he expressed this, the Buddha did not ask his disciples to believe him, he expressed his experience, what he had lived. For him this was very true, and for many of his disciples too.

For us, this is less obvious because we do not think in terms of rebirths, it is not in our culture, in our archetypes. In any case, the essential point of the Buddha's awakening is to understand conditioning. That is to say that we do not exist in a permanent way, that the state of our body and of our consciousness is a conditioned state, that it therefore depends on our mental images, on our thoughts, on our attachments, and that without even thinking of what is before birth or after death, when we look at the film of our life, we easily see how we go through very different states.

With regard to this unending transmigration in this life, which makes of it a *samsara* even though it could be a *nirvana*, the sole concentration of zazen is not enough. The Buddha's Enlightenment has a very important component which is the deep understanding of causality which results from the careful observation of how things appear and disappear. We can become conscious of this during zazen but also by always being fully conscious in daily life of what is happening and how it happens, especially within our body and our mind, in our interdependence with others and with the environment.

The fact that our mental states, and therefore the mental universe in which we live, are conditioned does not mean that we have no freedom, on the contrary. The more that we understand how we are conditioned by our own attitudes, our own thoughts, the more we can act to liberate ourselves by letting go in every moment . . . Because otherwise, the practice of zazen would merely be a parenthesis, a happy and tranquil interlude, in an agitated and painful life.

Zazen is not a rest station on the motorway. Zazen must really be a practice of awakening and realization. For this there therefore needs to be an element of profound understanding: *Prajna*.

Our different states of mind are conditioned by attachment to this mental construct that we call the ego. It is not a question of fighting it but of understanding it. By what blunder do we come to consider as permanent and substantial something which is not? If we tend to adopt this belief in a permanent and substantial ego it is because we fear the void, to be nothing, so we build an identity, we identify with all sorts of things, experiences, we tell ourselves, that is me. Me, I am somebody like this, like that, with this or that characteristic. We tend to freeze ourselves like this, as though transformed into a statue, and this would be at most a statue of salt which would melt with the first rains.

The practice of awakened zazen like that of the Buddha Shakyamuni consists in radically changing one's point of view: To accept the reality of the absence of a fixed and permanent ego. Instead of seeing in this something negative and regrettable, to understand that accepting this is the doorway to liberation, as it is what allows us to harmonize ourselves with reality, with what is sometimes call the cosmic order or the Dharma. And instead of being trapped in something artificial and confining, to be able to breathe and live the genuine life, which is to be in harmony with the entire universe. This greatly facilitates letting go, not only during the interlude which lasts for a zazen, but constantly in all moments and circumstances of daily life. This letting go is all the easier insofar as we realize that at bottom there is nothing to let go, all that which we cling to is nothing substantial, that's all.

Nothing is not a void but on the contrary is life whole, life in the total relation of interdependence with all beings, which make us radically leave our enclosure, our solitude. We lose certain false protections but we gain a great liberation. No more need to waste energy in defense systems. Our mind finds again its genuine natural fluidity, its ability to literally surf on waves and especially to not stagnate in a given position. To be able to easily and quickly place oneself in someone else's shoes, or even those of an animal, a tree, a mountain, to really live this unity of all beings. At this moment, there is no more opposition between what we call *samsara*, that is to say this life of transmigration across conditioned and often painful states, and what we call *nirvana*. For *nirvana* is not a distant place, a beyond, but is only another state of consciousness in which the poisons of greed, hatred, and ignorance have been dissolved.

What poisons everything is ignorance, that is the say non-awakening. Let yourself then be enlightened, illuminated by zazen and let this sometimes voluntary ignorance dissipate. Have complete confidence. It is the message of the Buddha that this is possible for absolutely everyone. There is no need to be an exceptional being. One simply needs to have the courage and the patience to look within oneself, and to let oneself be enlightened by the truth.