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# The opening of the heart

## **Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech- Moissac - November 2018**

The pelvis is slightly tilted forward, the knees rest firmly on the floor. From the waist on, stretch the spine and neck by tucking the chin in and relaxing the shoulders. Be constantly attentive to the right tonus of your body, neither too taut nor too slack. This involves an intimate observation of your body.

This regular return to the body during the practice of zazen prevents us from being carried away by our thoughts. The body brings us back "here", the breathing brings us back "now". The leitmotiv of our practice is to come back to the "here and now". But this must be realized concretely, that is to say instant after instant. Without being distracted by our mental fabrications. We sit facing the wall, which prevents us from being distracted by objects from the outside world.

Concentrating on the breathing and the body does not mean becoming self-absorbed. On the contrary, concentrating on the body allows us to detach ourselves from the ordinary mind, which is constantly fabricating opposite notions, such as "practice and awakening" (which I hope to achieve later), such as "me and others", or "me and Buddha".

Abandoning this attachment to the mental fabrication that is our ego is what allows the opening of the heart and the mind, which, no longer cluttered with our personal concerns, allows us to become receptive to others and to nature. It is what allows empathy, the natural ability to put oneself in the place of the other. This capacity is often obstructed by the egocentricity that we have developed since childhood, through excessive attachment to our ego. The ego is necessary, but it cannot become overdeveloped.

Many things in life are necessary: it is necessary to eat, but it is not necessary to become bulimic. It is necessary to have sex, but it is not necessary to become sexually obsessed. It is necessary to earn a living, but it is not necessary to become overly ambitious and seek highly paid jobs, at the expense of the rest of one's life and often at the expense of others.

The Buddha's teaching, the Eightfold Path, the practice of the Way, is the practice of the Middle Way which embraces the poles of all our dualities, especially oneself and others. Being able to put oneself in the place of the other implies a flexible mind, a mind sufficiently detached from ourselves to be able to step out of ourselves and put ourselves in the place of the other. It is a movement that is natural. And this natural movement must be rediscovered by removing obstacles to empathy, especially the fear of damaging ourselves if we give attention and time to others. By practicing zazen, we heal from this fear, because we no longer make any difference between ourselves and others. Taking care of others is taking care of ourselves. This is what we realize in a life where the mind which constantly separates, which discriminates, is put aside.

As soon as one is able to put oneself in the place of the other, the spirit of compassion naturally appears. This has nothing to do with a commandment such as "Love thy neighbour as thyself". Love cannot be commanded, neither can compassion. Compassion comes from the ability to become the other, not only to feel what the other needs, but to really help him or her. And the

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best help, as the sixth Patriarch Master Eno said, “is to help the other person to awaken to his true Buddha nature”, because deep down, it is our Buddha nature that awakens us, that liberates us.

We cannot liberate the others. Sometimes, the first Vow of the Bodhisattvas is translated as "I vow to liberate all beings". This is not possible. We cannot liberate others, but we can help them to liberate themselves, to be liberated by their Buddha Nature, with which we can help them to come into contact, mainly thanks to the right practice of zazen.

The ability to experience active compassion is the best criterion to measure our evolution on the Way. Even if we practice assiduously, even if we are very concentrated, if we finally remain egocentric, if we don't care about others, if we don't have the deep desire to help them, it's because something is not realized, is not resolved in itself. So, there is no need to feel guilty, but it is right to feel what is happening, what is hindering the opening of our heart.

Initially, it can be useful to consciously put oneself in the place of the other, as a kind of exercise, for example by developing the ability to listen. Whereas people who talk to each other often have only one desire: to speak up and speak about themselves. It is difficult to really listen to others. So, in the first instance, practicing empathy can be a good thing.

For example, the *samu* is an excellent ground for practicing empathy. In a kitchen, people working together can constantly be attentive to doing the right thing to help the other persons in what they are doing. Empathy is what makes it possible for human beings to cooperate. On a building site, everyone must be focused on what one has to do, but at the same time, open to what the others are doing, to cooperate.

This openness of heart, this attention to the other also extends to our entire environment. To defile the environment is to defile ourselves. To pollute the environment is to pollute ourselves. In interdependence, everything we do ends up coming back to us.

Also, to have compassion for beings and to help them is also to have compassion for ourselves and to help ourselves. Because deep down there is no real separation between the two. Doing this removes the fear of damaging ourselves by being too compassionate and not self-centred enough.

Being able to put oneself in the place of the other is the key to harmonious relationships, especially in couples. Partners often blame each other for their selfishness. The life as a couple is an excellent place to practice the Way. In intimacy with someone, it is important to feel the other person's needs, to “put ourselves in their shoes” and to provide for these needs. When both partners do the same thing, are in a reciprocal caring relationship with each other, the couple functions harmoniously.

This opening of the heart in a loving relationship with someone should not be limited to the love relationship. Buddha taught us to practice the Four Unlimited Practices, of which compassion is an aspect. First with people we love (which is the easiest thing), then with people who are indifferent, neighbours, people we meet in the street, at work, and finally, also with people with whom we have difficulties, who may have hurt us, whom we are not inclined to love at all.

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This is the practice of the Bodhisattva: to practice compassion, empathy, put ourselves in the others' place, feeling their needs, not judging them, but on the contrary, finding a way to help them, and - above all - enabling them to help themselves. This is what makes that our practice is not limited to sitting facing a wall and turning one's gaze inwards. On the contrary, we open ourselves to all our relationships with our environment, with a spirit of compassion and benevolence.

The dojos, the sangha are privileged places to do this, because we all are in the same state of mind, we all practice in the same direction. So, let's start with the sangha itself, so that it really becomes the Treasure, the third Treasure, which is at the same time - as Master Dogen said - the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha here and now. The Dharma, the teachings can still remain relatively abstract, but the sangha is composed by living beings who embody the Buddha's Dharma when they actualize his presence among us. In a way, we are each the representatives of Shakyamuni Buddha.

If we behave like this, if we take this into account, then the sangha becomes a real Treasure and coming to practice with the sangha becomes a real happiness.