
Thinking of not thinking

Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech - Nice, March 2012

During zazen, do not follow your thoughts. The conclusion of Master Dogen's *Shobogenzo Zazengi* takes up, nearly word for word, his teaching in the *Fukanzazengi* about how to think in zazen. He tells us:

"Sitting in zazen, in silence and without moving, think of not thinking. What is thinking of not thinking? Non-thinking. This in itself is the essential art of Zen. Zazen is not the learning of Zen, it is the door to Dharma, to great rest and bliss. It is the practice of realization without defilement".

As these two or three sentences really sum up the essence of the practice, they deserve to be deeply contemplated upon. But at the same time, they should be understood simply, without confusing our mind about them, without having too much to think about it.

"*Sitting in zazen silently*": it's obvious that in zazen one does not talk, except sometimes the teacher. But "silently" also means "stopping all the inner noises, all the discussions that we often pursue with ourselves".

"*Motionless*": of course, the body does not move, although, imperceptibly, one rectifies one's posture, at first voluntarily and consciously, and then, with the practice, unconsciously and naturally. But "motionless" also means that "we stop pursuing anything". It is not only the posture of the body that is vertical and immobile: the attitude of the mind is also vertical. That is to say, it is totally concentrated here and now. Nothing sticks to this verticality of the mind; everything slides on it as on a perfectly smooth wall. Nothing drags us backwards or forwards, to the past, to the future, to "elsewhere".

We are perfectly here and now, thanks to the fact of "thinking of not thinking", that is, remembering not to follow our thoughts. Thoughts appear, have a natural tendency to develop, to associate with each other, in an infinite sequence of associations. In zazen we can let these associations unfold. It is the natural functioning of the mind, which reflects the natural functioning of the brain: as soon as we wake up - and even at night - as long as we are alive, maintains its neuronal connections by constantly updating its circuits. So, a living brain is not a flat electroencephalogram, total inactivity, but permanent exchanges and interactions. But these exchanges, these interactions take place independently of our will, our consciousness, our will to think, to solve problems, etc...

In zazen, we can let these natural connections go on, because wanting to stop them is extremely difficult and counter-productive: we would go against the natural current of life. Even if we could reach at certain moments total cerebral inactivity and total non-thinking, it would be a quite extraordinary experience, ephemeral, and the normal activity of the brain and thus the mind would resume soon after anyway.

How to "*think of not thinking*"? Simply without thinking about it, without using any voluntary or conscious thinking, and remembering not to follow thoughts ... therefore practicing letting go

from moment to moment, by returning to the verticality of the spine and the attention to our breathing.

So, zazen is not the learning of zen as a philosophy, as a religion. It is simply, and much more essentially, the immediate experience of "the practice-realization without defilement". That is to say without the defilements of the dualistic mind, which discriminates and attaches itself to the objects of thought, which creates the dualities of I, the others, my practice, my future awakening, etc.

Experiencing this practice-realization supposes a great faith, a great trust in the fact that there is no need to add anything to our existence as it is, that everything is already there, that we just have to let go of what obstructs our clear vision of reality.

Then "*the door of Dharma, of great rest and bliss*" opens wide, that is to say the door of *nirvana*, of the extinction of all causes of turbulence and suffering. It is not only an extinction, a "*great rest*", which - after all - would seem to be equivalent to death, a *nirvana* as extinction. But Dogen speaks also of "*bliss*": there is a great joy, a great happiness in this realization. A true love of life, of the awakened life, of the Buddha's life, of a life in relation to all beings, which is a source of joy and not just an extinction in emptiness.

It is a joy that leads to activity that leads to sharing with others, which in itself is a source of joy and in turn can help them to remedy what causes suffering.

Such is the meaning of the practice transmitted since Buddha, clarified again by Master Dogen and then by Master Deshimaru, and actualized by each of us each time we realize this practice-realization.