
The Four Seals of the Dharma

Kusen by Roland Yuno Rech - Sesshin des Pyrénées, novembre 2013

During zazen, do not waste your valuable time following your thoughts. You should rather concentrate on the breathing. Thoughts drift us away from the present reality, focusing on the breathing brings us back to reality. Thus, just observe your breathing. When you breathe in, be fully aware of the inhalation, that's to say body and mind in total unity with the movement of inhalation. When you exhale, expel all the air, body and mind in unity with the exhalation. If while exhaling, a thought, an emotion, a desire, a mental phenomenon arises, just acknowledge it for a moment and let it go throughout the exhalation. Exhaling helps letting go.

We got air to breathe, to oxygenate and what we receive, we give back, we don't cling to it, we exhale and expel all the air, we empty totally ourselves without storing anything. Often, we don't dare to exhale completely, like someone who can't swim and keeps the air in his lungs, like a buoy. By doing so, when we are stressed (since fear is rising up), we hold our breath and we are not confident we can overcome challenges. If we can't let go of the air we have breathed in, we don't expel it, then we can't fully replenish the body's oxygen through the next breathing in, and we end up by poisoning ourselves. If we are attentive to that point while breathing, we take an active part in what is there: to give and to receive.

We exist only through what we received: the body we received from our parents and the life which developed thanks to their love and also through all that which we received from our environment and, ultimately, from the whole universe. So we realize that our life is interdependent with this universe, like a wave on the surface of the ocean, which at no time can separate from it. Our life is completely interdependent with our near and distant environment.

Observing that through the breathing of the body and the whole mind, is realizing the awakening like Buddha Shakyamuni, who exclaimed the morning of his satori: "I realized awakening with all beings of the universe." He realized life beyond his little ego, in oneness with all the universe's beings. But, this awakening, the Dharma, the teaching he had received from the whole universe, he decided to give it back, and made the vow to transmit it in turn.

That experience of living only on an interdependent-based relationship with the whole universe, makes us understand why our ego is merely a mental construction that doesn't actually exist: it is an idea we make up, according to a number of characteristics we identify with, which have no real or independent substance. Both our body and our mind are constantly changing: they have no permanent set substance.

Those two characteristics are the two Seals of the Dharma: impermanence and the emptiness of any fixed substance. They are the two fundamental aspects of reality, not only the reality we live in, but the reality that constitutes us.

If you don't realize that, your life becomes *dukkha*, suffering, the third Seal of the Dharma. If you realize it and live in harmony with this reality, your life is endowed with the peace and joy of the nirvana, the fourth Seal of the Dharma.

But generally, we identify with our little ego, which is a delusion we made up. If we fail to see that we are not the centre of the world, we can't see the reality. We remain deluded and the Dharma remains unknown to us. But it is not a question of not being able to realize it, since it pertains to our most intimate reality. This awakening nature (*bodhicitta*) is Buddha nature. If we don't want to see it - there is no one as blind as he who does not wish to see- it's because we are afraid, we can't figure it out, because it disturbs our self-centred prejudices.

To be in zazen enables to tame this reality, to become intimate with it, to be able to see that it is not only real but also liberating: the reality as it is. Taming it consists in harmonizing with the impermanence. How? By realizing the mind that doesn't stagnate on anything and yet fully aware of the phenomena, which keep appearing and disappearing from moment to moment, and (realizing the mind) that is totally intimate with the Seals of the Dharma. And this is what enables to let go of our illusions and to harmonize with the reality of our interdependence with all the universe's beings. To do a sesshin means to be in intimate contact with the mind, *shin*, with the Seals of the Dharma, with our body and with all beings. And finally, instead of fearing it, we must comply with this awareness and free ourselves from our illusions - not by understanding it intellectually, for example by agreeing with my kusen- but by integrating, embodying it deeply and acting it in our life.

That is why the sesshin is also an ideal training ground. By following the *gyoji* to the pace of the collective practice, we are forced to abandon our personal preferences in order to be led by the Dharma and not by our ego, even if the latter sometimes grumbles and resists. When it finally gives in, it is a great release. If we actually experience that, we want to prolong it throughout our life and it becomes the foundation of our lifestyle. Since it is very liberating, once we have realized it, we also want to share it with others. Being no longer egocentric, the mind of compassion can appear and grow. Then the meaning of our life is to share the Way, the Dharma, with all beings, and this is what prompts us to take the great vow of compassion: *to help all beings to awaken*. And all other practices are there to support us in achieving that. This is the great hope of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, i.e. of all the beings who have realized the awakening.