

---

# Who is the observer during zazen?

**Mondo with Roland Yuno Rech – Sesshin of the Arche, September 2009**

**Question:** *It is a question about the mental (thinking mind). When the mind is too restless, you advise us to observe how it functions. What is observed is clear to me but I wonder if it is not the mind that is observing itself. Who is this observer?*

**Roland Yuno Rech:** Yes... If you really ask yourself who is the observer, deep inside, you will see that you can't grasp who is the observer. That is really the fundamental thing. The one who observes is ungraspable. This is the great koan.

**Question:** *But (is there a way) I could know that it exists... and be sure that it is not the mind that is observing itself?*

**R.Y.R.:** But from the moment you want to know whether it exists, you are already set on finding a substance somewhere. And that's the problem. Mental (thinking mind) doesn't exist. There is nothing that exists as an entity. That is the basic point we need to understand. There is no ego entity, no entity of me, no entity of a mental mind. All of that is mental production, that is to say phenomena. And this is the reason why the mental mind can't be grasped, the mind can't be grasped. What we have are processes, working processes and relationships. What you have there are relationships. But relationships between non-entities! Relationships only! Even in physics, we know that very well by now. In physics, it was believed that there were atoms interacting with one another, etc. But now it has been observed that is not the case. There are no entities. Nothing at all! No substance.

**Question:** *But is there an interaction between things that don't exist?*

**R.Y.R.:** There are interactions only. But there is nothing that interacts. That's right, absolutely. But here I am speaking from an ultimate perspective. Ultimately, there is nothing. That is to say, the observer, if you want ..., if you cling to that view... don't even consider my answer, make your experience yourself. But try to grasp the observer. And observe well. Take all the time you need, hours, months, years if necessary. Seek the observer. I am convinced that you will come to the same conclusion as when Eka went to see Bodhidharma and said that he was suffering, Bodhidharma asked him to show that mind that was suffering. Fuka toku. Ungraspable. Of course we don't have to believe Eka. Each of us must experience it. That is zen. It is not about suddenly working out a new concept and saying to yourself: « Well, yes, I understand zen: everything is ungraspable. So my mind is ungraspable, I have understood zen ». It is again a concept !

**Question:** *But to me, my experience is rather what I said, that is to say the mind that controls the observation process. It observes itself and makes me believe that there is something to be observed. At least it provides me with the outcome of that observation but, at the end of the day, it feeds the (mental) mind.*

-----

**R.Y.R.:** I agree, but what you call the « (mental) mind» are thinking processes. Don't believe that there is an entity, that can be named the « (mental) mind » and that can be grasped as such, as the « thinking mind».

**Question:** *But you say that these processes have a reality?*

**R.Y.R.:** Of course.

**Question:** *They are not produced by anything?*

**R.Y.R.:** Yes! Everything is produced by something! Everything is the product of relationships, of interdependence.

**Question:** *And in a relationship of cause and effect as well? Because if that's the effect, what is the cause?*

**R.Y.R.:** Yes but in the end the cause... We can't grasp the cause. The cause itself is the result of a range of relationships. In other words, we live in a strange world where there are no entities, but where there are phenomena. And what is strange is that zen meditation has made that clear to monks two thousand, two thousand and five hundred years ago. This is what scientific evolution and the most modern sciences see and confirm. In pure physics, in atomic physics, it is only that: relationships, no entities.

But it is true that we have a deep-rooted attitude... But I believe it is related to the language, it is not an evil demon deceiving us, it is because we are beings of language. And Buddha understood that very well. We are creatures of language, spoken language. And words imply sounds, signifiers that are mistaken for reality.

It means that we give them a substance, because obviously for a signifier to have a meaning, for a word to be meaningful, it must be different from the rest of the vocabulary. Thus the (mental) mind works with a lexicon, with a certain number of words, which only have a value in order not to be confused with other words. Otherwise it wouldn't longer work. So there must be differences.

And the functioning attitude based on thinking with the language naturally tends to "substantialize" words. And mainly, the most blatant case, we start talking and after some time of small talk, we end up by saying « me, myself, I ». And these "me, myself, I" we end up believing they are substantial. That is the basis of all illusions, the starting point. It is a phenomenon, it is not even related to a bad karma, a demon, an original sin or whatever ... It is simply our functioning structure itself based on articulated language that creates words, and these words eventually deceive us.

But that - I believe linguists or analysts could confirm with their own experience- but that's exactly the experience of Buddha that he taught at the beginning of his awakening and his practice. It is the first sutra I often refer to, translated as: « The sutra of the Original Cause ». It is the first sutra from the collection of middle sutras, the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

If you are a little bit interested in sutras, read it. The translation is called the « the Original Cause ». There are ten pages to read. It is perfect. It fully explains Buddha's vision on the origin of all human illusions, that comes from the fact that we designate some objects of reality and turn them into concepts, and once we have created these concepts, we position ourselves in

-----

relation to them, and so we create an ego, a “myself”, a “I” who is the master of the language somehow, and who becomes attached to these objects, and eventually takes a stand: « I like, I don't like », « It is good for me, it is not good for me »... And then afterwards the whole process of the ordinary (mental) mind that functions with its illusions, its attachments, sets off.

And Buddha analyses how it works for all existences. As Indians like to do, he lists thirty or fifty different existing forms through the world. He starts talking about earth, water, fire, air, and so on... the different elements, the different categories of beings, and then at the end, he comes to nirvana. He says the exact same thing about nirvana.

We listen to Buddha's teaching and we imagine nirvana, making a concept of it, we declare that this concept is good, we want to get it, we endeavour, we try hard, it becomes an object that we can't realize because we fell in the trap. It is not only zen masters who say that we shouldn't become attached to satori or nirvana, Buddha said it from the outset. This is again an indication; it is just a direction that is shown. But that's all.

It is a very relative designation. If we become attached to it, we are done. That's why he said: « Ordinary beings cling to their illusions, people who engage the Way try to eliminate their illusions, and the Buddhas, or the arhats, the realized beings, do not longer create illusions. » These are the three levels.

And not creating illusions means even not creating attachments to satori, awakening, nirvana etc. It is to be there, truly inwardly liberated, since precisely the (mental) mind, this famous mind, even though it continues to produce concepts, we are enlightened enough not to be attached to them anymore. They are just concepts, empty words, somehow. Thus we shouldn't be attached to them!

On the other hand, how we function, how we live, how we practise, in concrete terms, that is very important.