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# Practice of Zen: A Quest for a Meaning of Life

**Conference by Roland Yuno Rech - published by the AZI in the revue Zen n° 93**

What is the meaning of our meeting? It depends on the expectations of each person. There is not a single meaning.

The search for the meaning of life is a deep yearning for an absolute, which would be the foundation of our existence so that without it one would feel frustration and that something is missing. But searching for a meaning supposes that a phenomenon, our life for instance, would stand for something else, an idea that would be its significance, the *raison d'être* that would be used to justify it by giving it its own value. Such a thought process sets us immediately in duality from which profound meditation - once it has become without object or subject, i.e. meaningless - can take us out. That is the meaning of liberation. For *who* is searching for a meaning of life?

This question about the quest for a meaning of life was at the center of my life between the ages of 14 and 28. This question made me abandon the start of a professional career and take a journey around the world in search of a meaning of life. For me it was utterly vital and I would not have been able to go on living had this search not succeeded. Finally, I found myself sitting on a zafu in zazen in the temple of Antaiji in July 1972 and during this zazen, the question of the meaning of life left my mind completely.

I felt in a great state of peace, a great sense of inner freedom and I realized that all my doubts, all my questionings had vanished. Did it mean then that zazen had answered all my questions? I do not think so but it had simply made disappear the mental way of functioning of the mind, which makes one ask oneself that kind of question.

This does not mean of course that there is no realization of a meaning of life and this is what I want to try to set out during this lecture. First by reminding ourselves, what are the main principles of meditation, and then, how a meaning appears from this meditation as a bonus or an extra gift. The meaning is no longer what is sought in the practice but comes from the practice ... later.

After returning to France, the practice with Master Deshimaru made me understand what happened during this zazen in Japan and I became aware of all the implications this experience of zazen had on life. And particularly, let's get straight to the point: to find again, I believe, the sense of unity of this life.

Indeed, it seems that the quest for a meaning of life imposes itself once the sense of the One withdraws, when the dualistic mental working, which rules our current world, intensifies individualism and causes conflicts, somehow contaminates the mind. Meditation enables us to find again unity within ourselves and with the world: "our original face from before the birth of our parents".

It often starts when, caught in our daily routine, we are struck by the absurdity of a mechanical life with its depressing symptom of the "metro, work, sleep" routine.

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With the loss of faith in God and the failure of so-called liberating ideologies, there is a tension between the desire for a meaning, which would give some direction to our life, and a lack of concern for the universe, leading to a feeling of the absurdity of everyday life.

Albert Camus wrote, "It is about knowing whether life should have a meaning in order to be lived". Most people avoid this question or answer it by going round in circles fulfilling their desires up to the point of having breakdowns and becoming exhausted. The inconvenience of such escapism is addictions, from bulimia to the compulsive "falling in love" syndrome. They have a meaning: the expectation being finally fulfilled, the quest stops. Nirvana would be then the deep meaning behind all our desires: the search for their abolition. Furthermore, if God does not exist, it seems that everything is allowed, which contributes to the crisis of moral values that is not solved by conformism.

However, nihilism would be to abolish a possibility of a meaning beyond the five senses, organs and mentality. This meaning is given by the sense of transcendence constituent in the human being cramped within his ego. It is an intuitive sense of another dimension of life sometimes called original awakening. This sense manifests itself in all religions and spiritualities as well as in the practice of meditation. In the Buddha Way, it is the *bodhicitta* or *bodaishin* in Zen, the longing for an awakening to the deep reality of existence that enables an end to be put to the sufferings of all human beings.

## From the origin to the abolition of the question.

What is Zen? A way of life rooted in the practice of zazen. In this world of sufferings, sitting in zazen is engaging on the same path as Buddha Shakyamuni. Zazen is the meditation in which he awakened. He wondered about the meaning of life, being struck by the suffering related to impermanence. Illness, aging and death cannot be avoided and seem to make all human actions pointless.

Shakyamuni's quest was the meaning of suffering. It led to a practice aimed at liberation from delusions and harmony with reality, which became the meaning of existence that his disciples vowed to share with all beings. The awakening mind is the mind that longs for liberation from suffering, not by running away from the reality of the impermanence of life and death, but by confronting oneself with it in meditation.

The practice of zazen is concentration and observation beyond any duality between subject and object. The upright body is a hyphen between sky and earth. Concentration on the body and breathing smoothens the mentality and clarifies the mind since one does not follow one's thoughts or emotions. One does not get attached to any state in particular. It enables one to be present at the ceaseless appearance and disappearance of all phenomena forming our existence and the world's existence. This impermanence reveals the absence of substance in our mental formations. Realizing it enables us to let go and bring us back to the oneness of life by abolishing the mind, which creates separations and attachments. Simply sitting when sitting is all that we need. Presence at each moment beyond the before and the after turn them into moments of eternity.

There is no need to add something to that experience. No need for prayers or ceremonies. Then we can freely make some as ways of expressing this liberation and our gratitude towards Buddha and his successors who made it possible through their transmission. The very question

about meaning vanishes, for it is only sought when unity is lost. When we are one with the every-moment-life, nothing is missing and we are not separated from anything. Observing delusions and karma enables to see our mistakes and thus to transform them. But this is a merit derived from zazen, a meaning that comes about without being sought.

In the *Genjokoan* Dogen wrote, "Learning to know yourself is forgetting about yourself", through concentration beyond mental formations and the right vision of the vacuity of that which constitutes the ego. Not by forgetting about oneself as a form of self-sacrifice or rejection which would be a mortification, or self-denying, but this kind of self-effacement, letting go of anything that creates separation within oneself or that is attachment to a false ego, to a mental formation. We get over the delusion of this "I" that says "myself" and takes itself seriously, that opposes oneself with others and creates numerous conflicts and separations. Thus, the "non-self" is the true self, i.e. a separation less existence, an existence that includes others.

Zazen frees us from our attachments, which jeopardize our peace of mind: the every-day life concerns, greed, hatred, restlessness, drowsiness, doubts and all mental formations such as the idea of a separate self. What is left is only an alert and equanimous consciousness that does not dwell on anything, not even on the ecstatic states that some people may mistake for satori.

True liberation consists in perceiving intuitively the absence of all phenomena since they are conditioned by their interdependence. Thus, we can wake up from our delusions and brighten our darkneses. It keeps us from projecting them onto others and onto the world around us. It enables us to greet others as they are, without judging them through our mental categories. Then the values, which unconsciously drive our lives, are a benevolent love and a sense of sympathy for all beings. We find again our original unity with the whole universe. Any feeling of lack disappears and the need for meaning is abolished. The true nature of our existence is realized in this life without separation.

"Roses do not have a why," said Angelus Silesius. The question of the meaning of life comes from not being in unity with the everymoment-life, which seeks compensation in having wealth, knowledge, power or meaning. Zazen casts us *off* from the question and what provokes it. In *ku*, the ultimate vacuity, there is no suffering, no origin, nor cessation of suffering. There is no separation between subject and object, the significant and the signified, action and aim to reach. We concur with Wittgenstein when he wrote, "The solution to the problem of life is in its dissipation." The life, which emanates from it is the manifestation of a harmony with the dharma, the cosmic order. A deep meaning arises when we do not expect it any more. We do not search for it, but it is offered to us on top, as a bonus. It is the present of zazen!

## A meaning of life beyond all the whys?

"Why" puts causality into question: we are born in this condition because of our past karma. This is what Shakyamuni understood in his meditation and that turned him into an awakened being. The twelve links of dependent origination keep us in the *samsara* cycle. Their functioning implies that our existence is made only of interdependence. Thus, it has no substance of its own. Then we can abandon selfishness and a sense of deep solidarity with all beings arises. It becomes the answer to the question of "what for?"

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Then the meaning of life for the one who awakens to this, and who is then a bodhisattva, is the fulfillment of his or her altruistic vows founded upon compassion. For it is living in harmony with one's true nature to realize the non-self and to be without greed. We cannot achieve the bodhisattva's vows through our personal will since the ego cannot save anyone, and anyone who believes that there are egos to save is no longer an awakened being. It is the mind without object, *mushotoku*, which realizes the vows since it leaves it up to Buddha nature. A sense of awakening intuitively animates our life.

The realization of the ultimate vacuity makes us renounce any absolute foundation of good and bad, preventing any form of dogmatism and fanaticism. The *paramita* or liberating practices are not only skilful means to improve the Way, but they are expressions of wisdom and of the compassion of awakening. They are the orienting values of the practitioners' lives, making them live in harmony with the awakening realized in meditation. This is the source of meaning and value for our lives. This harmony is the criterion of realization. Here are a few illustrations:

Giving is possible since we do not possess anything of our own. Even our body does not belong to us. We live from borrowings: to give away is giving back what we were given. It confirms the detachment prompted by *shin jin datsu raku*, the letting go brought about by concentration without object in zazen. The gift frees us from the poison of greed. It blesses the one who receives and the one who gives. It connects us with all sentient beings.

The Zen precepts are the realization of the dharma. They are not do's and do not's but values expressing Buddha nature in everyday life. During ordination, they are transmitted as life rules such as the recommendation not to do evil but to do good and to do it for others.

Within the practice of meditation, we discover the vacuity of all mental discriminations and Master Dogen advises us not to think about either good or bad. Such a process, though, does not lead to a moral nihilism since simultaneously giving up the ego attachment, which is the cause of the three poisons, and then of evil, does not let us act badly any more. It is not that we must not act badly, nor that in vacuity good and bad do not exist anymore, but within *hishiryo* consciousness, no evil can be committed anymore.

Thus in non-separation, it is impossible to kill or even to attack. Stealing implies an attachment to an object that does not exist in reality.

Lying is impossible when we look at ourselves in the mirror of zazen and when it is zazen, which leads our life. Sexual misconduct comes from lack of love, from being locked in self-centeredness and the absence of empathy. Zazen develops empathy without which there would not be true love. Intoxicating the body and mind makes the practice of zazen impossible, as the disturbing effects are very noticeable. Taking care of oneself, keeping a healthy mind in a healthy body, makes one receptive to Buddha nature. Then all frustrations, which lead to addictions, disappear.

The rules and precepts of Zen are first of all like relative norms that one must comply with, without getting attached to. Then, they become the expression of transmitted awakening. Patience is training in letting go. However, when there is no one who actually lets go and there is nothing to be loosened, true liberation takes place. Then we naturally can use the whole

energy to realize the Way with others who actually are not separate from us, though apparently different from us. This is the manifestation of compassion and the expression of wisdom.

The criteria of a true life are inward and manifest themselves in the practice. They become unnecessary when we continuously return to the practice of zazen. At that point, it is no longer our ego that lives but Buddha that lives within us. This means that we are both: awakened from our delusions and awakened to reality. Everything becomes an opportunity to practice the Way. Each day is a good day and every place is a good place to actualize it.

What gives ground to these Zen values is the realization of a life without separation or Buddha nature. It implies not doing to others what we would not want them to do to us and acting in harmony, not with God's will but rather with this Buddha nature that is present everywhere and in all existences. Zen rituals are nothing but the expression of our gratitude towards the Buddha, the bodhisattva and the teachings, which brought us into contact with the Path. Daily life and particularly work, far from being a torture, are celebrations of Buddha nature.

*Samu* is a practice of mindfulness and of awakening and a service given to the community. The mind becomes as happy as that of the *tenzo*, the Zen cook, happy to be able to provide for the Three Treasures: Buddha, dharma and sangha.

The meaning of suffering is that it is the symptom of non-awakening to the ultimate reality. It does not resolve itself by accumulating good merits and by eliminating substanceless delusions. We do not look for nirvana beyond *samsara*. We realize it within *samsara*, by being freed from the three poisons and living in harmony with what we are: Buddhas. The meaning of our life is not to expiate an original sin or a bad former karma but to live in harmony with our true original nature. Zen is a direct Way that immediately realizes reality without substance. Within vacuity there is no need to discriminate any more, no more values are consciously created, but values arise as expressions of awakening to Buddha nature, i.e. existence without separation.

There is no meaning to pursue, but a meaning is realized when the mind opens to the dharma. This is why the dharma has been transmitted from Shakyamuni to us, along with the precepts and the kesa. It is called "*Shoden no buppo*". Then one can realize that all things preach the dharma: this is what "*mujo seppo*" means, the teaching of the dharma by non-sentient beings. Buddha mind manifests itself during zazen but also in nature, in all beings displaying to us *immo*, reality as it is beyond mental stains. Being aware of that enables us to realize a sense of oneness with nature. Then we are naturally compelled to do all we can to preserve the healthiest life conditions on earth. The answer to the question of why, is found in the "how": how can we live in harmony with the real?

There is no ultimate answer to "why" or "what for", for interdependence is without beginning or end. There is always a before and an after but they are elusive. For a Zen practitioner, the meaning of life is not dictated by the will of another: it arises from realized intimacy with our essential nature that we share with all beings.

"An infinite emptiness and nothing sacred," said Bodhidharma, making from this vacuity the essence of a disinterested life truly in harmony with the dharma.

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The practice of meditation gives us access to a meaning for our life. But nothing requires us to believe that it is the only true meaning of life for all of us. This single way or meaning is what some believers try to impose on others. Even if God does not exist, it does not mean that all is permitted, for our Buddha nature has its demands. The direction to be taken is shown to us by all the Buddhas and the patriarchs' lives dedicated to the practice. When we practice in our turn, we harmonize with them and this stimulates and feeds our faith. However, what makes it profound is not practicing the Way in order to free ourselves from a life in *samsara*, but rather to free the life of *samsara* by realizing the no-birth and no-death beyond identification with our ego.

Finally, I believe that if the theme of the quest for a meaning of life indeed arouses your interest, it shows that this issue is becoming urgent and that there is an opportunity not to miss of testifying that there are possibilities of awakening and of transforming our way of being. In addition, they are simple: it only requires sitting down, looking inward, learning to know yourself, forgetting about yourself, and opening up to a dimension of communion with all beings; and from that point on, meaning manifests itself in our lives.