
Clarifying the understanding of our practice

By Claude Émon Cannizzo

For some time now, several dojos have been facing a kind of “desertification”: beginners who don't stay, but also elders who no longer come to do zazen. It would be interesting to try to understand the reason for this phenomenon. Apart from the ego conflicts (which are part of human nature), it would be interesting to know - and to clarify - what idea people and even some practitioners have of Zen, and of zazen.

Defection in the dojos is not only due to Covid-19, and the pandemic is possibly only a trigger or a catalyst, as far as our practice is concerned.

Perhaps Zen, as it was taught to me for forty years, is coming to the end of a cycle? Could the reason be partly due to all these new trendy meditation techniques that are coming "on the market"?

In any case, the two confinements and other restrictions have raised doubts in the minds of some practitioners, who had to say to themselves, among other things: "What's the point of going to the dojo to practice if I can do it at home? And practice my "little zazen" in my "little home"!"

However, it must be noted that abandonment of the practice already happened during the recent years. And that it was already the case long before the pandemic ...

During a meeting in our dojo, the question was asked. Some members put forward a point which could be partly the reason for the lack of popularity and the abandonment of Zen and its practice. They said:

"The rigour and austerity of Zen could be the reason why people do not stay! »

I therefore feel it is important to clarify this point:

I can well hear these words and I can even give them some credit : Zen> is indeed a difficult practice which is not meant for everyone ... It has never been said that Zen was an easy Path. The fact is that Zen is a direct and straightforward Way. It therefore requires an effort, patience and a perseverance (*Paramita*) that few are willing to give.

Zazen is a practice of the body, through which we can touch the highest dimension in each of us. It is a “religion through the body”. The values of Zen are out of time and still relevant today. It is indeed possible to adapt the practice with "more softness", and in some dojos this is already done : the *kyosaku* is not given, fewer ceremonies ... Nevertheless, I remain convinced that a threshold must not be crossed. If we understood the teachings deeply, we would know where that threshold is...

Nowadays, human beings always want to achieve more, and - if possible - without making any effort. Society has become much weaker; some people only think about achieving a state of well-being or of “feeling better” and do not ask for more. But if this is their only objective, Dogen's Zen is not the Way they should follow.

The idea of acting without expecting results is certainly the most difficult thing to understand in our society. We usually function in terms of profit: "I give, I receive, I pay, I consume". However, this attitude of the mind which concentrates solely on profit must be abandoned during the

practice of Zazen.

If we see the practice of Zen as, for example, a therapy to increase our well-being or our health (and if possible, without making too much effort), we are totally mistaken. If we practice in the hope of obtaining some personal profit, we are not practicing "true Zen".

In Zen, *mushotoku* means getting rid of our attachments, but also of our illusions, especially those concerning the practice itself. Letting go of this ordinary mind of profit actually means letting go of one's own ego.

Mushotoku is the state of mind with which we act without wanting to achieve a result or a profit, accepting all the necessary efforts for this. It is the fundamental attitude defining the Way of Buddha, the Way of Zen. It is important to be clear with this, when we talk about Zen or claim to follow the Way of Zen. If it isn't, we must ask ourselves the real questions:

"Why do I practice zazen? Is it really the Way of Buddha that I have chosen to follow? »

Although we are no longer in Dogen's time, and neither in China nor in Japan, we must ask ourselves and reflect on how to envisage the future: how not to get lost? For us, it is a question of returning to a clear vision, especially if we have the responsibility of transmitting the Way of Zen. We must reflect on the necessary bases, so that the place where we practice can truly be called a *zendo*, that is to say a place in which a dynamic based on the Three Pillars of Buddhism is practiced: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha!

We can very well take into account the "evolution" of mentalities, but without losing the direction transmitted for centuries. The world may have changed, but the ordinary mind has remained the same. This means that, more than ever, we must remain vigilant, to avoid falling into the traps set by our confused and easy-going society.

The practice of zazen is by no means "old-fashioned" and is still the ideal Way for those who have chosen to follow it and who have the desire to sincerely practice the Three Treasures. We must understand that the practice of zazen is totally rooted in *mushotoku*, it is beyond the dualities and limitations generated by our ego. In the practice of zazen, *mushotoku* is the aspect that makes all the difference with another practice. It's a practice in which we don't try to obtain or even achieve anything. It is a state of mind which does not attach itself to any result, which does not seek any personal profit, any goal.

This is the fundamental difference which characterizes the practice of zazen, compared to any other meditation practice.

Even if this may displease some people, any kind of meditation (Mindfulness or other Full Conscience meditations) which does not integrate the Three Treasures into its practice is not a spiritual Path, and even less so a religious one. Without a religious state of mind, in the sense of "relating to one's own Buddha nature", in other words without *Bodaishin* (the mind of enlightenment), zazen is not authentic and cannot honestly be called Zen.

The dojo is a place of practice where we get to know each other, with the help of the Sangha. On what basis could we base ourselves to pretend to help others, if we don't know who we are ourselves?

The Three Treasures: sharing (the sangha), teaching (the Dharma) and zazen (Buddha), give us the bases, the tools, to give substance to our Vows. From then on, in everyday life, everyone will express them in the way that suits him or her, or it will be done by following the Eightfold Path and in the respect of the Precepts. Everyone will be able to find the appropriate way by which to express his practice, and there is not only one! The path of Zen is unique, but its expression is multiple.

Values such as wisdom, compassion etc. should not be conditioned by the "I want, I desire," but be the consequence of a strong and regular practice, *Bodaishin!* When we enter the Way of Zen, we must reflect if we truly want to practice Dogen's Zen.

Let us be sincere with ourselves, for it would seem to me to be totally futile to spend energy to follow a Way, if we do not fully embrace its values.

For my part, this is the Way I have chosen to practice and teach.