
Zen and Professional life

Workshop led by Roland Yuno Rech, Nice, February 2017

«The theme “Zen and professional life” is important, but I did not find a Shobogenzo chapter that I could take as structure to develop it. On the other hand, I have my own professional experience and each of us has one as well: so we should be able to be much more interactive. You all have an experience and you all thought about the link between Zen and the professional life. I am going to underline at first some points which seem to me interesting and about which I thought a lot, then later on, I shall let you express yourselves and I will ask your ideas to feed the common reflection.

We say "Zen and professional life ", but what are we going to call "Zen" within the framework of this workshop? Usually, Zen is zazen: we will therefore examine the various aspects of zazen which can be transposed in daily life.

With this in mind, we have to insist a lot on the consciousness of the body, to be present in one's body. This seems very important to me in the professional life, because wherever we are, we are always in our body. Professional life is most of the time bureaucratic, it is a life in which we sit behind a desk, and the result is that the way we sit is important: we should be always correctly sitting. There are even people who adopt ergonomic seat with a support for the knees. Otherwise, with an ordinary chair, it is necessary to find the way of sitting correctly: it is better to avoid curved office chairs (because sitting on them we have necessarily the pelvis tipped over in the wrong direction), to try to put a pillow that maintain the pelvis tilted as in zazen. This is important: as we spend 8 hours in a row sitting at our desk, it is necessary to have as good a seat as in zazen. Try to find the right way to sit.

After that, whatever our activity is, we should make a break every hour, from 1 till 3 minutes maximum, during which we are going to concentrate on our breathing. We will breathe calmly and stop working. In my opinion it changes everything: it allows the mind to find peace again and allows us to go back to work with another frame of mind, with a clearer mind. This will makes us more efficient, because we are less under stress. There is a cumulative effect of stress, and when we begin to be stressed, we become less efficient and this ineffectiveness increases the stress: we tell ourselves that we are not going to be capable of finish our task and it increases again our stress. Thus try to find to preserve good work conditions for your body and your mind, to allow your mind to be fully performant and with its full capacities. This implies to have a good posture and breathing. It is generally possible to go back to an awareness of our breathing during the various phases of our professional life.

The problem is that all this is easy to say, but much more difficult to put in practice... We have nowadays many tools to manage our daily life better, but which finally we seldom use, as for example the exercises preparing to take the posture. I believe simply that we have difficulty in taking care of ourselves because we are so often in a hurry, while it is nevertheless fundamental.

Question: "How do you see the importance to calm down and have a break but remaining still, compared to going to the photocopier for example? Movement is something I miss in Zen compared with the yoga. In Zen, we do not move ..."

Roland: "Yes, but in Zen we can get up and do kin in, and it is far more practical during the day to do Zen than to do yoga. But it is necessary to move, it is a good thing for the blood circulation and the functioning of the heart and we should not remain without moving too long. For example, we can systematically take the staircase instead of the elevator ... In any case, do something to move.

But the most important thing here is the meaning of the work. In sesshin, we do samu. The word "samu" has the same etymology as the word "samurai" which means: "to be at the service of, to serve ..." This means we are at the service of the community. As a result, the work takes all its value as fuse, as a gift one does of his energy, of his attention and of his capacities for the good of the community.

Obviously the problem in nowadays social life, or economic life, is that very often we do not really choose neither the product which we are going to produce, nor the service which we are going to give. Furthermore, we are not in an independent structure, but most of the time employed in companies with a commercial purpose. From then on, it is clear that - for the managers - the goal is to maximize the profits to pay the shareholders as well as possible, and this has inevitably consequences on the life of the company. Often, the shareholders press the direction to increase their profits, with as a consequence the reduction of the production costs (for example the number of workers). Those who stay undergo then an increase of their workload and it creates more and more stress, because the workload becomes abnormal and then they sometimes think: "What's the point to spend so much time and so much energy, just to pay the shareholders well!" Generally the employees think that they deserve more respect than that. This is a big problem in today's world and it is harder and harder "to remain Zen" in these conditions.

Beyond that, there are activities which take place in other contexts such as associations, public services etc. ... but the model which tends to dominate even in these structures today is also the entrepreneurial model. They apply the same principles as in the private sector, for reasons of budgetary restrictions. This is the result of political options, of debts and of the necessity for the budget to take all that into account: the necessity to reduce expenses affects jobs, even in philanthropic societal services, (as in the health department for example), and the result is that people work in dreadful conditions. The quality of the service to the user degrades, one does not have time anymore to smile to people, to say thank you, to humanize the relations between the user and the worker. And as a Zen practitioner, we are more and more in conflict with this situation".

Question: "I imagine easily what you just described and I recognize myself in it. I am employed in a company which supplies Gas and electricity. In this professional context, I have more and more difficulties to live as a Bodhisattva, because I am confronted with colleagues who live with a deep anxiety about a reorganization which takes a pyramidal form and which is felt by them as totally incoherent. I feel distraught, not knowing what to tell them ... It is difficult to me to speak to them about the non-ego, about the Three Seals. I try at least to stay calm and it sometimes surprise them. For example, at the end of a meeting, my colleagues told me: "How

on earth can you remain so "Zen"? (They mean of course here "Zen" taken in its most publically accepted meaning) ".

Roland: "In such a case, are you not in a position to tell them: «Don't you see what happens between us? Do you believe that we can keep working validly like that? Isn't it possible to adopt another method? ". It would have the effect of helping them "to do a step backwards", as Dogen who also invites us "to do a step backwards" when we sit in zazen. To put an end in a way to this state of intern excitation and cause a kind of shock, would make them aware of the fact that they are poisoning their life themselves and would make them understand that they could act differently.

It is not here a question of being aggressive or of criticizing, but I believe a lot in the interest of bringing people to question themselves. And to do this, it is necessary to choose the right moment to invite the group to be clever and wise. Nowadays, one of the big problems is that we tend to consider stress as part of the normality. Little by little, we became used to it, until it causes cancers or stomach ulcers. Anyway, it is not the normality, but on the other hand it becomes a very usual, but bad habit! And that's what is dangerous, because we do not realize it is so anymore. As in zazen, we can sit in a bad posture without being aware of the fact and it has insidious and very negative effects on the body".

Comment: "Yes, and it is true for all professions, which are more and more affected by the phenomenon of competition, which generates more and more conflicts. I would like to insist here on the notion of solidarity and the importance to federate the workers, to counterbalance the power of the employers. I believe that it is necessary to favour and maintain a kind of "cocooning" aspect, to create a better environment for the workers".

Roland: "What I understand here, is the interest for you to create alliances, to move closer to people of the same sensibility as yourself, to create "groups" to defend your propositions better and adopt a different way of functioning. So you will not be alone anymore in your corner, a little bit as in the labour-union system, you have to federate your energies and become allied to be more efficient. This is something we must think about".

Comment: "I don't suffer from stress anymore, because I stopped working to be more in coherence with the practice of Zen. I try to find people with whom I share the same global approach, for example about economy and fuse, and approaches favouring mutual help ".

Roland: "You make a reference to practices which develop a lot at the moment, which are no more and no less than exchanges of services".

Question: "Would it not be useful to develop this system for the Zen disciples?"

Roland: "The problem is that we are not enough. Churches, which have several centuries of existence and thousands of members, are solid enough to set up this system, but in a dojo it is more difficult. Having said that, if we can help ourselves mutually, it is a good thing ".

Comment: "Since I started practising, I am less attached to the results and more concentrated on what I am doing".

Roland: "Thank you for this comment... First of all, it is what you live as beginner; secondly the Zen practice teaches us to be more and more concentrated on what we are doing, to be "here and now" and not attached to results or profit, in other words, not to be obsessed by results as so often in our professional life".

Here I can tell you about my experience with young entrepreneurs: I had been invited as Zen monk to give a conference on the theme "The Spirituality in the Company" by the Centre of the Young Company Directors. While waiting for the beginning of the conference, I sat in zazen on the table. Then at the beginning of the conference, I told them straightaway, a little bit as a provocation: "I wonder what I am doing here!" Obviously they were all a little bit shocked. I told them then that they were all CEO of large companies, aiming to maximize the profits, but that the practice of the Zen was just the very opposite: absolutely without pursuit of any profit. Then I said to them: "I think I have nothing to do here, so I will leave". They reacted by saying: "No, no, please stay, on the contrary it interests us" and we spent all day discussing about profit and it was very interesting.

However, Zen does not condemn profit, provided that it is the result of an honest activity and which represents a value. But profit should not be the main purpose, simply the result which comes on top of it. The error that companies make, from my point of view, is that they look for a maximal and short term profit: they want results at the end of the year, because of the pressure from outside and in particular from the shareholders, eager for quick cash. Often this attitude is dangerous for the companies themselves, because it is to the detriment of the long-term investments, such as research, and it prevents the creation of new services. This idea was a cause of concern for them during our exchange.

The question which is behind all this is to know how to be profitable for a maximum of persons, within the company and for those who revolve around it (the customers, the suppliers ...). In summary, it is necessary to think how the company can provide benefits for all the people concerned, and this must take the impermanence into account. The young entrepreneurs were interested by the discussion, but we quickly came to the conclusion that we could not integrate the practice of Zen in the life of the company, because the risk there is that the practice will be seen as a way to increase the performances of the employees, which corrupts the message of Zen.

But you should not condemn profit systematically, but rather change the idea of the profit. It is just as the practice of zazen: it must be done with a mushotoku spirit, but this does not necessarily mean that the practice is without profit for the practitioners. Indeed, these profits are deeper if we let greediness go. As Master Deshimaru said, we should not be concentrated on obtaining something. For him, it was exactly at that moment we let go that the maximal profit arises and he meant here the awakening, the liberation, stemming from a real letting go. Master Deshimaru said also: "If you want to catch a cat, he will run away, but if on the contrary you stay calm, he will come on your knees". If we want to obtain benefits, they escape, but if we practise calmly, we receive them.

Question: "In Japan, there are universities which have dojos and they pretend that the practice of zazen decreased there the number of conflicts for 30 %. What do you think about this?"

Roland: "There was in Italy a certain Guida who worked a lot with children in schools and taught them the practice of silence. She did not call it "practice of zazen" not to shock the parents and the school directors. It had a lot of success, everybody wanted to do it and it spread. But this experience stopped because of budgetary restrictions, because she had to ask for a payment. This shows the importance also to teach the practice voluntarily and not to be dependent, but this also means having other sources of income".

Comment: "For music, I developed in my pedagogy the dimension of the concentration. It is certain that in concert it is necessary to be free and a little bit detached. The stress, I have it naturally, but as I play a wind instrument, breathing and posture are important".

Roland: "This is a fascinating and vast subject, but we are not going to be able to talk about it here. So I invite you to produce short papers, of one page, synthesizing your experience, so that you can communicate what you realized from your practice of Zen in your professional life, and this could lead to exchanges afterward".

Question: "To come back to companies, would it not be interesting to give the managers an idea of the approach proposed by the Zen?"

Roland: "The problem is to know how to contact the managers, it should come from a spontaneous request from them. One idea would be to propose, to associations of entrepreneurs and managers, themes for reflection around the interest of the zazen practice within the framework of seminaries and conferences".

Comment: "I worked in a dental private clinic where the problem came from the direction and where the only solution was to go on strike. But I do not see well what how Zen could help the company?"

Roland: "Yes, but we can at least let them know that it could be beneficial for them and insist more at certain occasions".

Comment: "For me, the frame of mind of the leader is important: if he is under stress, it has inevitably an impact on the people, if he is feeling well, it spreads among the employees".

Comment: "It is where the physical and mental postures are important. For me, the practice was a resource in my professional life, in the situations of conflicts in particular, where it allowed me to operate a change of point of view on the people with whom I was in conflict, for example by making the effort not to see them only under the angle of their demands, aggressive posture, even violence, and to allow the famous "step backwards" which is not always simple to do. It allowed me to understand better what could underlie their attitudes and to identify, to recognize their suffering. This way of behaving surprised my interlocutor. The tone became then different and this contributed to transform the conflict into a confrontation of points of view and then into exchanges".

Roland: "What you say is important and I believe that what is best is to lead people to become aware of certain mechanisms: "What is taking place, here at this moment, in me and in my relationship with the other one?" Because generally people act with their feelings, their stress, their ambitions, without any backward movement and it produces rather disastrous effects, in them, around them and on their environment. I believe that as Zen practitioner, we can help

people to stand back and become aware, as Socrates, and bring them to ask themselves the good questions, to make them "deliver" the wisdom which is in them. I believe that it is an interesting track, with regard to our role and this even if we do not have power of decision".

Comment: "I do not work anymore ... (Laughters)"

Roland: "Yes, but as volunteer in the dojo you work a lot and you have worked in the past".

Comment: "Yes and the practice of Zen helped a lot me, because at the end there was an inspector who was not giving me any work anymore ... I had let go in a way and I considered that it was more its problem than mine. Furthermore, during that period, I typed kusens... (Laughters) But I was in a particular situation: I worked alone in my office and I was member of a team of 7 people ".

Comment: "I work in a hospital which does research and diagnosis, and it becomes worse and worse. We could approach the problem under the angle of the Three Poisons:

- Greediness: profit, again and again
- Ignorance: to be in the denial of the problems and their consequences at every level (staff, patients)
- Hatred: as a result from attacks, from fears. "

Roland: "Thank you to remind me of the Three Poisons, which we find a lot in social situations today. Our society poisons others and poisons itself. You tell us also to what extent the practice is precious in these difficult times ".

Comment: "Yes, and it allows me to have a certain detachment, in particular when I think about my career. I concentrate especially on the moment which is the most important for the patient: the diagnosis, and this to the detriment of the research, because my workload becomes heavier and heavier because of a lack of financial and human means and because I cannot make everything ".

Roland: "It is like that everywhere".

Comment: "I have a manager who is in fact a kind man, but who is under the pressure of the hierarchy and the budgets. I don't know, but sometimes I would like to take him on the side and tell him: "Open your eyes... "Because he is surrounded by a circle of people incompetent and sometimes manipulating the situation and he has difficulty to take decisions. It is a system which favours the rewards (money, promotion, etc.) "

Roland: "Sometimes, to concentrate on our day-to-day work is what we have to do to do best. For example, I worked for Rhône-Poulenc where many of my colleagues tried to make a career. For me, it was the opposite, my goal was limited to do my work as best as possible, without ambition. I was therefore not a problem for my colleagues. Finally, it is me who got the most interesting proposition from the direction and I answered them: "No thank you". I eventually resigned, to dedicate myself completely to the teaching of the practice of Zen.

When we evoke Zen and especially to be mushotoku, people take us for dreamers, but is it not right to fight the competition system, the system of " always more " and to have an attitude

which favours concentration on here and now? It creates a kind of aura around ourselves of sympathy, of collaboration and it makes us more efficient.

It is my experience and maybe was I in fact lucky, thus I will avoid carefully to make generalities, but this is directly connected to my practice of Zen ".

Question: "There is an element which is also important, it is the fear, and what we make of it? The fear we have, when we go to the work for example, because we do not have other choice, because we need our salary. This question stays in my mind: how to manage fear? As far as I am concerned, if I had not had the Sangha, I would not be here today".

Roland: "One of the remedies to fear, it is to stop avoiding the problem. But the fundamental question is to ask oneself: "Of what am I afraid?" In other words, de-dramatize the object of our fear".

Comment: "All right, but there also the humiliation, the pressure in certain professional circles, as for the teachers, who are exposed to the violence of the pupils".

Roland: "All right, and this time the expression "to remain Zen" takes all its sense. Of course, we cannot limit ourselves to this incantation: what can we do, for example, when we are confronted to a class of children where we anticipate aggressiveness, or even sometimes violence? I think that the attitude which we have to adopt in these circumstances, is not to consider the other as a potential enemy. This attitude, which conveys a negative image of the other one, has the effect of leading to violence in his mind. It's as if we immediately lent him negative intentions. This leads me to say "Trust the other one!" This means that in the other one who frightens you, there is not only bad feelings. Thus try to de-dramatize just a little bit ".

Comment: "It is easy to say, but when this happens every day, with humiliations and harassment, and the situation tends to become chronic ..."

Roland: "Master Deshimaru named The Gendronnière "the Castle of the Non-fear ". It means for us that zazen has to help us to overcome our fears, to allow not to be terrorized. For him and according to his teaching, fear comes from the attachment ... Thus realize the non-fear, is to realize a mushotoku mind, the mind without attachment. Then the effect on us of humiliation is less deep, because we are less attached to our ego, to a certain image of ourselves. In other words, "it glides on the rails of our indifference ".

The question which I invite you to think about is: "Which is the attachment my ego has, which provokes my fear?" Somebody who is not attached, even to his own life, (to take an extreme example), has no fear if he is ready to die at once, which the case in zazen. Because Master Deshimaru said: "You should practice zazen as if you were going to enter your coffin ". And thus accept the fact that you can die now. Symbolically, this means abandoning the attachment to the ego".

Comment: "I have on this question an example: at my hospital, for lack of personal, the workload becomes heavier and heavier for the nursing staff. It engenders fears at their level and especially the fear to make errors and I noticed it. Once a night nurse was called at the same time by several people at the same time, and when she made a task, she was trembling with fear, because she did not know which way to turn anymore. I calmed her, out of

compassion. But there are also positive and useful fears and they have as function to stimulate us ".

Comment: "Often the people feeling fear feel also very lonely, and for me, sharing this with others is important because when we do it, we realize suddenly that we are not alone to feel this fear and this can result in alliances. The context can be also a resource, because it offers us a frame which can be protective and reassuring ".

Roland: "Yes, when we have between our hands the life of people, this fear increases. What can save us at that moment, it is the breathing and more particularly the expiration. This is easy for people who are used to do zazen, but explaining that to people who are not used to it is not a solution. But on the other hand, it is maybe the opportunity to tell them, that in the moments of peace, they can learn to breathe. Instead of having an outside structure, give yourselves an internal structure to be able to relax and to overcome your fear ".

Comment: "Nowadays, we hear rather negative testimonies about work. I tell myself: "What is the point of working, of earning money and to be in a system in which we do not blossom". From my point of view, we should content ourselves with few, and try to live in autarchy... "

Roland: "I think that we should not reject work for all that. On the other hand, if this alternative solution (which consists in abandoning the ordinary daily life) can show that the model is viable, if we can be content with very little, we become freer and we can live fully as a monk. In the 1970s, René Dumont said: "Think globally and act locally ". But most of the time, people have desires and thus want urgently to satisfy them. And for this, one needs a regular income, and a career, which implies being in harmony with the existing system ".

Question: "We aspire all to happiness. Is the dominant ideology, which is capitalism, in capacity to give us this happiness? "

Roland: "No, certainly not ".

Comment: "Zen is not compatible with the capitalist ideology, it does not have the vocation to take the power and it is not revolutionary ".

Roland: "Yes, and the only thing which we can do is to think about the way we can invest the existing structure and think about the way we can stimulate an evolution, without making the revolution. I believe a lot in local and individual actions based on the Bodhisattva attitude, and in the capacity to influence things".

Comment: "My experience in Zen, is that I feel normal, I am myself. The Zen community helped me a lot and it is thanks to the Sangha that I composed songs, they were born this way ..."

Roland: "Before leaving, you will sing us a song ".

Comment: "I work in a high school, for the insertion of young people in difficulties and my experience makes me think that one should not give too much to be efficient, otherwise there is a risk of substituting oneself to the person we teach. The practice of Zen allows me to keep that necessary distance".

Roland: "All right, and I would like you to remind us this tomorrow, when we shall broach the subjects of compassion and empathy ".

Comment: "I do not work anymore, but I was coach in an institute that gave formations for jobs in the special educative system. I trained a lot of students to the control of feelings and Zen helped me not to identify myself to the other person".

Roland: "We need to end this workshop, but tomorrow we shall speak about compassion. And the next workshop will be about "Zen and family life ".