
Zen and the environment

Lecture by Roland Yuno Rech

Our western civilisation, whose way of thinking extends to the whole world, is a technological civilisation, oriented towards the control over and exploitation of nature. The current crisis in man's relation with his environment is not a chance accident in a process of infinite progress. It's the expression of man's unbalanced attitude in his relation to nature, the origin of which goes back to the sources of our culture.

The Myth of Prometheus symbolizes the attitude of Western man who set out to develop an intellectual mind as a means to satisfy his material desires. And yet no object can totally satisfy the fundamental desire of man, which is the pursuit of unity with nature. The more this spiritual aspiration is neglected, the more we are witness to an incessant multiplication of desires. This has even become the main motor of the economy of Western countries, and it has resulted in a constant deterioration of the natural environment and the wasting of non renewable resources of the planet, without counting the numerous forms of pollution. The development of artificial desires is nothing more than an attachment to the limited ego which only engenders dissatisfaction, fear and aggressiveness. Individual competition results, at an international level, in competition between nations in both the economic and military domains. This competition leads to the impoverishment of the poorest people, as much in the so called developed countries, as in the third world.

Spiritual Revolution

A true spiritual revolution is therefore the only solution to the problems of the environment. Zen can contribute to this because it's a way which harmonizes humans with the cosmic order, through daily practice of sitting meditation. Sitting facing the wall means to stop pursuing exterior objects and to learn to know oneself intimately.

With the left brain, man developed abstract thought which allowed him to have a certain control over nature, but which cut him off from an intimate relation with the environment. Thought based on verbal language is dualistic in its essence and creates a gap between man and the world. This gap engenders solitude and frustrations, which man tries to compensate for by further strengthening his hold over nature through the use of technology. Practising zazen enables us to rediscover an immediate, intimate relation with nature, a poetic vision of the world, a participation in life which is the only profound way to counteract man's desire for power - man who has become exclusively « homo economicus ».

Non – technique

The dualistic attitude of our civilisation turns everything into « techniques », and this technical attitude is what creates the crisis between oneself and the environment. This attitude consists in always doing something with a view to future profit. The simplest and most natural things like loving, expressing yourself, even meditating, become techniques, means to obtain something. Doing zazen is to let go of this attitude and to “make a U-turn”. We don't practise zazen to obtain satori. But when we practise without a goal and without the mind of profit, zazen itself is satori. When we realize this, everything in our lives becomes the practice of

awakening. When a monk asked Master Joshu : « What is the essence of Buddhism? » Joshu replied simply : « Have you had your breakfast? » - Yes, Master, replied the disciple – So, go and wash your bowl. »

The simple actions of our daily lives done with total attention to the here and now are the practise of the Buddha Way. This total attention involves respecting and protecting all things as if they were our most precious belonging. This led monks to create art forms like floral art, the purpose of which was to prolong the life of flowers offered to Buddha or those broken in storms. The art of gardens is also the expression of unity with nature and with the whole universe.

But the root of these practices is the realization of our deepest nature in zazen. It is realized when we stop wanting to grab or to reject. At this moment our unity with great nature, with God or Buddha, with the highest dimension of our human existence is realized naturally, as a flower becomes a flower when its petals open.

The ecology of oneself

Even though we're talking about ecology, there is a gap between what we know about the dangers that modern technology puts the natural environment in, and what we really do to remedy the situation, as if we believed it were impossible to stop the pollution and deterioration of the environment.

The conquest of nature happened through the development of the dualistic and abstract mind, through the mathematical mind which puts forth the approach of quantity over quality, of having over being. Technology reduces essence to phenomena, seeing appearance in a form, like a separate object or a thing. It's not surprising that God has died within such a vision. The problem is that man has also lost his true roots, his true divine nature or Buddha nature. Efficiency in the control over nature has resulted in the decrease of our powers of intuition and creativity. After making nature conform to their techniques, man has become a cog in the machine who must comply with the technocratic model he has created.

Ecology reminds us of the fundamental principles of the laws of natural balance, of interaction between living beings and their milieu ; but without a radical change in mentality, ecological ideas will not be very influential.

Practising zazen means changing attitude here and now, beginning with our immediate environment. Pollution is in our minds before it can be seen in the atmosphere, the water, the earth.

Practising zazen means abandoning our ego and realizing our interdependence and our solidarity with the whole universe.

Energy and impermanence

The relation with the environment is also a question of energy. We are made up of the same elements and the same energy as the whole universe. Using too much energy creates an imbalance not only in the environment but in ourselves. Too much food or a diet which is too rich ruins your health. During sesshins we eat a lighter and more natural diet. Without dogmatism, zazen re- educates our instinct for food. Too much comfort weakens our resistance. Zen life consists of living a simple way of life without seeking too much comfort or luxury. The ideal of a zen monk consists of living with his bowl and his kesa. Too much

information makes our relation with the world abstract. Zen means rediscovering our direct experience of life.

Zen monks often set up their dojos in nature, in the mountains, near rivers. But this wasn't a romantic attachment to nature. Like zazen, natural phenomena express the teaching of Buddha beyond language and mental constructions.

Monks have awakened on hearing a stone fall, on seeing a peach blossom or even hearing the sound of a torrent in the valley. These natural phenomena were occasions to realize their unity with the whole universe.

Finally, our environment is a changing, impermanent world. Our ego, which looks for stable happiness, comes up against this impermanence of phenomena. Consequently, most religions looked for happiness in the hereafter ; in some schools of Buddhism, they seek nirvana beyond the world of phenomena. But zazen is beyond the dualism between the environment of phenomena (samsara) and nirvana. Because this dualism is still an attachment to our ego.

When this ego is abandoned, we no longer need to flee from samsara or to seek nirvana. The bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism lives and practises in the world of phenomena to help all beings resolve their suffering and realize awakening.

Such is the life ideal that the practice of zazen proposes to each of us.