
Zen and the business world

By Jean-François Viaud

When we read the key figures of the INRS (National Institute of Research and Safety) concerning the psychosocial risks, we become aware of the threats which weigh on the employees' health. An investigation done in 2013 on the working conditions tells us: "In France, 47 % of the working population declare having to work in a hurry, (always, often), 31 % declare to have to hide their feelings, to pretend always to be in a good mood (always, often), 27 % tell not to be able to settle problems themselves, 36 % tell that they have undergone at least one hostile behaviour at work during the last 12 months, 33% declare not to feel the pride of a work well done anymore (always, often), and 4 % are afraid of losing their job ".

But what do we hear by psychosocial risks? Always according to the INRS, they correspond to working situations where the stress, the internal violence (moral or sexual harassment, aggravated conflicts between people or between teams) or external violence (insults, threats, attacks ...) are present in an isolated or combined way. These risks can arise from the activity or be created by the organization or the working relationships. The consequences of these risks can damage the health of the employees and be translated in cardiovascular diseases, muscular or skeletal disorders, anxio-depressive disorders, professional exhaustion, or even suicide.

Beyond these studies, we hear more and more people in our environment speak about these problems: simple comments, complaints or testimonies of bad experiences about these risks at work. A few years ago, we usually called "narcissistic perverts" the people who used moral harassment on their colleagues or collaborators. Within the framework of our Zen practice, we hear regularly during mondos questions about these subjects. The question is then asked to try to get a solution and to be able to react to this situation.

What can Zen and meditation bring us in these situations? I would like to share with you some situations I experienced personally, at various moments in my career and at various moments in my Zen practice. These experiences and the practice also led me to perceive and feel with more clarity the situation of the other people or colleagues, especially because I have been close to several people who suffered from burn-out these last years. What is disturbing in these situations, it is that we see that something is going wrong, but when we realize the problem, the burn-out has settled down and it is too late ... The most difficult thing for burn out is to prevent it.

I had a few years ago the experience of a conflict at work with a senior executive, and I think I managed it well. We were in the office and one early morning, even before saying hello to me, my boss addressed me on an aggressive way and blamed me for not having shared an information. However, he did not explain clearly his reproach and I thought that he was just in a bad mood. This type of situation is disturbing, I felt some guilt and I did not understand the heart of the matter. I could have chosen to answer on an aggressive way and to start a conflict with him, or a "yes man" and servile attitude. But strangely, I reacted differently. Having an experience of the sale interviews, I practiced first the "active listening" and I let him show his anger. I also tried to understand him by asking questions and by reformulating his answers, but without aggressiveness not to make him angrier and not to give him the impression of being

attacked. I believe that I kept an attitude of equanimity, while being friendly towards him. I think it allowed me to show some assertiveness and to win his respect. I was also not afraid of the situation of conflict. Of course, I showed him that I understood why he was blaming me when he eventually explained the reason of his criticism: another subsidiary firm of the group was realizing an action similar to the one I was supposed to do. Much to my surprise, at the end of our conversation, he apologized and I was very surprised of his reaction.

Did the practice of Zazen help me react to this situation? I think so, but I am not sure of anything and nothing proves it. I suppose that the Zen practice helped me not fall in one of the traps on our Way: the trap of opposition, of discrimination and after that, of confrontation. And maybe it helped me to perceive that my interlocutor, even if he is my enemy at this moment of the relationship, is not my enemy all the time, that if he aggresses me, it is because he feels attacked and that he is hiding some doubt or a kind of fragility behind this aggressiveness. The practice of Zen doubtless allowed me to go beyond my ego and not to go in frontal conflict ego against ego. The wars of ego are frequent in the professional circles! I think that a regular Zazen practice can bring us the possibility of extending in our daily life the constant practice, or Gyoji. It is this behavior which we can develop as much as possible in our daily life and which, because of the interdependence, will then influence our entourage and will make our interlocutors change as well.

I have not a too bad memory of this event, but in other periods of my professional life I did not always react so well. Sometimes I did not succeed to be assertive in my relationship with a superior, while I should have been able to do it. I sometimes let a situation degrade. It is never easy to estimate and to measure in which situations it is necessary to react and those where it is better necessary "not to make waves"!

Management functions are not easy, and I know it because I was a commercial manager. I was maybe not always up to it, even if I always tried to be listen to others. Some collaborators are often very demanding and it is not simple to manage this, even if as a manager we take in account the other' point of view. Once again, it is never easy to be constantly friendly and équanime. It seems to me that the main point is to try to be équanime as often as possible. It is the meaning of our zazen practice and beyond that, of Gyoji in our daily life. It is moreover curious to use the term "benevolent" in the business world and the world of management: it is rather considered as a synonym for "weakness". When I was commercial manager I remember that my boss blamed me for being too friendly with my subordinates. This reproach made me think about the true meaning of benevolence and to ask myself which attitude was better at work. For me, benevolence is also synonym of listening to others, what seems to me to be one of the first missions of a manager. Listen to others, but without accepting everything either.

Which are the current evolutions and the actions which can improve this situation? It is paradoxical to speak about meditation in the business world where we speak more often of performance at every level. We also speak about competition with the competitors, about gaining market shares and about economic war. As far as I am concerned, I do not talk about my Zen practice with my colleagues or my superiors. I do not feel ready to do so. However, things evolve very fast and it is possible that we will talk more and more about meditative practices in the context of companies and management. This breakthrough of the laic meditation at work seems to me similar to the breakthrough of the action of Jon Kabat Zinn, of Christophe André in the medical world and of Fabrice Midal in the business world. Even if they

made the meditative practice laic, and thus approachable by the largest number, they admit that its origin comes from Buddhism.

We see nowadays several experiments which take place directly in some firm and in the field of the sciences of management. At the moment, these experiments are practiced in the field of laic meditation and one speak about the practice of meditation of full consciousness, or Mindfulness. The current development of the meditative practice of full consciousness is particularly guaranteed by the recent scientific researches in neurosciences. Zen is not evoked, but the Buddhist origin is sometimes mentioned in several conferences, as the one of the Dalai Lama at the University of Strasbourg, and these of Mathieu Ricard in Grenoble at the School of Management (GEM), or at the economic forum of Davos.

But it is still surprising that a Business school such as the GEM of Grenoble (GEM) has even a chair: "Mindfulness, Well-being at work and Economic peace". [2] Dominique Steiler, holder of this chair, teaches to the students who start their training as well as to professionals already in function, techniques of meditation of full consciousness. Companies of the region participate by financing this chair and to the development of the research by publications and the development of the meditative practices in their companies. His book: "Let us dare the economic peace: from full consciousness to the search of common good" [3] will be published at the end of September, 2017.

There is also an initiative of Sébastien Henry which is a former manager, a creator and a company director, but also acquainted to the monastic world. In the West, then in Asia, he became close to Benedictine monks and to Zen Rinzai monks. His practice of meditation brought him to propose an accompaniment for business managers and leaders. His first book on the subject, "When the decision-makers are inspired by monks, or 9 principles to give meaning to your action" [4] is very surprising, because he compares the monastic rules of Saint Benoît and the life in a firm. His second book: "Decision-makers who meditate and commit themselves: a bridge between wisdom and business " [5], concerns particularly the experiences of meditation practitioners in a company. He is writing a new book, organizes retreats and has for ambition to create places for meditation close to the business centers in big cities, to allow the managers to meditate as often as possible.

Next to these interesting and structured initiatives, numerous former managers and leaders have created their own structure of accompaniment towards meditation. We see that they have generally a diploma of coach, of meditation of full consciousness or positive psychology. They do Buddhist and laic retreats and sometimes organize them. According to the prices which they propose, we perceive that they are creating a business around this practice. Even if I do not want to be proselyte about my own Zen practice, it makes me stand back and think. I have an image of this meditation marketing in a company as too superficial and bringing only a short-lived well-being. Certain people disagree by arguing that the managers learn a new technique to make then their employees more successful in their professional activity.

Fortunately, numerous exchanges about this take place on the social websites at the moment. They react to this commercial trade around meditation and quote in particular many newspaper articles, as the article David Loy and Ron Purser " The marketing of the full consciousness " [6], or Internet blogs, as the blog of the Anne - Valérie Rocourt : "Meditation at work, what are the possible leeways ? " [7]. They wonder about the real intentions behind these

initiatives of meditation in the firm. While keeping a laic approach, they return to the essence by warning not to expect anything from the meditation practice, and especially not well-being or any gain. Even if we quickly can see some leeways, we notice that this trend to develop meditation in a company goes in the right direction. In any case, I want to believe it and to remain positive, without discriminating and without opposing managers and employees. There are certainly not only bad intentions in the development of the meditation at work.

If all these initiatives allow to avoid burn-out, it will already be a good thing. Nowadays a University diploma of "Management of the quality of life at work and Health" [8] already exists at the IAE of Lyon 3. There is also another diploma: " Medicine, Meditation and Neurosciences " [9] at the University of Strasbourg, but the latter is only for doctors and psychologists. A University diploma of meditation at work for managers and leaders does not exist yet. Let us hope that it will be soon created, as it is better to prevent than cure as far as psychosocial risks are concerned!

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