
Zenkonyama

The small « temple of the mountain » of the Basel dojo

By Volker Gyoriki Herskamp

Practicing zazen and samu in communion with nature with sometimes, as a special, a view of the Alps is a possibility we have at the Basel dojo for almost a decade. An ecological exploitation of the vegetable garden and a special attention to biodiversity throughout the land of the temple are our priorities.

Why practising in nature as Buddha Shakyamuni ? It is a question that any city dweller asks to himself, but also any one who has practised zazen in nature. A dojo is indeed, as a general rule, quieter and calmer (unless someone has a coughing fit!); shrews running stealthily through the grass or dead leaves, birds singing, a dragonfly suddenly stops up eyes and with a slight helicopter whirring checks whether your eyes are well cast on the ground !

Not to mention the many insects that walk on the ground or in the air and of course the species homo sapiens who is around with advanced technology as tractors and electric saws making a significant contribution to the sound track of nature.

Then why practicing in such uncomfortable location? Because nature is our « refuge » before we will part helped by « modernisation ». Because in fact, nothing bothers when we practise zazen. It's always the mind that creates the disturbances and begins to develop fears or nervousness when beings as small as mosquitos or ants come near us. Have we forgotten that Buddha Shakyamuni awoke under a tree in the jungle in India (Terai) ?

The ones who know India know that we find there other sources of noise and disturbances as snakes, monkeys and precisely in such environment the awakening of Buddha occurred. Because with the passage of time, the outside becomes calm and the mind becomes as vast as the horizon. Because the view far away of the Rhine valley and of the Jura up the Bernese plateau is gorgeous (of course not during zazen;-)).

Because when at peace and one with nature we can feel our true "home". And not just us, animals too. At every other minute of zazen they lose their shyness. Sometimes a shrew jumps on one leg, a lizard is lost on the kimono (so far fortunately not below ;-)) and that birds come and have a look. At that moment the separation between man and nature temporarily vanishes , the separation we created ourselves. It is precisely for these reasons that we should practice outside like Buddha once. Unfortunately the outside dojo of the Gendro no longer exists. Up to 400 people used to practice under the old oaks, those imposing sacred trees of the Celts.

It is for these reasons that we decided to make from this beautiful place, officially named "View of the Alps", a mountain dojo located in the Markgräflerland at an altitude of 500 meters in a limestone fault in the South of Black Forest.

In 2000 got the opportunity to acquire this one hectare plot nearly at the top of the hill exposed to the South, it was not used for 30 years and consequently lay fallow especially under blackberries.

Because of these difficult conditions none of the neighbours who had in fact a pre-emptive purchase right was interested in the plot. It took several years for what had been once a meadow to turn back to its original condition. Not to mention a set of trees rarely found today.

After building a terrace in 2002 the first afternoon zazen took place under an old oak. In 2008 I donated the parcel to the dojo and the temple Zenkonyama "Mountain of good roots" (not just because of the many roots of mulberry) was founded.

We try our best to respect nature when we are working on the land. Of course we had to start by destroying much to exploit the land. And in extracting the roots of cut trees I could set up two wetlands where mountains newts live, many rare species of dragonflies, like Adonis or the Virgin dragonfly and also many other insects.

Even a grass snake came about in the spring and many amphibians. The land is on a huge orchard and nowhere in Europe such biodiversity in a single orchard can be found.

Countless of animals and plants species live here in a unique symbiosis. So I planted different species of fruit trees on which many birds such as woodpeckers, orioles and cuckoos for our ears and eyes delight.

At the top of the temple there are the old trees, mostly oaks, beeches and ashes. There is also a rare species of bird the black woodpecker and the biggest beetle in Europe, « the kite ».

It is the only parcel within a large radius with such old trees, since elsewhere modern methods of logging prevail not leaving the trees aging beyond 50 to 80 years.

Even at the Gendronnière those exploitation methods are applied, to my great regret, because precisely in a Zen temple economics issues should not be at the forefront, but it's too late now, the old trees can only be found in the park of the Gendronnière.

Even when an old beech falls, as it happened this summer, or that a large branch falls near a (female) visitor, we stick to our concept of protecting the habitat for old trees and animals.

The southern slope built on an ancient coral reef provides plant under extreme conditions. Intensive exploitation of the soil can cause the formation of a semi-dry grassland. The orchids are the queens of the meadows, so we were able to see in 2008 the extremely rare species of orchid named in German « Bienenragwurz » or « Bee Orchid », that we can see in the picture below.

Thanks to seeds of native plants we can see many species appearing whose pollen attracts butterflies and other insects. And butterflies swarm in spring, like the tails of swallows, chess, etc.. I also built nesting places for wild bees.

Both the soil and the southern exposure are well suited for growing Mediterranean plants such as thyme, rosemary, verbena, lavender, marjoram, sage and mint that we use in the dojo. Many

herbs such as St. John's wort and yarrow grow there too and we also try to highlight them in the dojo.

Growing vegetables is more difficult due to the extreme conditions already mentioned. The soil is clayey. When wet, heavy and sticky, the water remains on the surface, when dry, as it was the case this spring, hand-wide cracks are formed and the soil becomes as hard as concrete.

Many of the plants that were sown did not survive these conditions, since we have no water at all times. Potatoes, pumpkins, beans and courgettes were found to be quite resistant to these conditions when the seedlings are well chosen. Similarly, blackberries, raspberries and currants grow well. For the first time this year we were able to harvest cherries and apples.

Of course from time to time we must wipe setbacks, for example in 2006 when a small tornado caused havoc in the region, the year before it was hail. There were of course no more cultivated crops to be harvested, while other plants survive rather well against such setbacks, they just bloom a month later. Another year it was the sheep who ate most of the plants and hedges we planted in the fall to make a fence to protect from the sheep !

Now it is precisely this fence and a small cabin that should disappear. Someone complained. This little oasis of nature is not to everyone's taste. Some lay on our altar outside next to the statue of Buddha, flowers, snail shells, money, to others this place with Buddha and a stupa looks suspicious in the midst of this center of « free » churches in southern Germany.

This is how, the hut was destroyed by fire in 2007 for unknown reasons. Now the administration of the region wants us to destroy the cabin according to a new law banning huts built after 2006. Attorneys' fees of 1800 euros left a large hole in the accounts of the dojo and many practitioners who are not passionate about zazen outdoor wonder if the expense is really useful. Despite this, and maybe precisely because of these setbacks, the project will continue, because it is only afterwards that people will notice how important is this Buddhist paradise.

Those who are interested in a retreat are welcome. One can find everything that is necessary, a cabin, the kitchen utensils, stove, room for zazen. Only drinkable water should be brought from a distant source with a car. Once in a while some of us spend a night there . I myself once did a sesshin on the site, a unique experience.

I could write much more on the unique fauna and flora of this beautiful place, not to mention art and creativity of the place. Whoever wants to see the place virtually can do it on facebook <http://www.facebook.com/pages/ZENKONYAMA/151195918283684>.