
The ego, according to Zen Buddhism

By Roland Yuno Rech, publication in the AZI Zen magazine, 2020

"Abandoning the ego does not mean losing it, but overcoming it".

The history of Zen is full of teachings about the nature of the ego. Of course, the ego exists, but not in a substantial, permanent, separate way. To identify oneself with this mental construction causes human suffering. But the Way of Awakening consists in freeing oneself from this egocentric confinement, to live in interdependence with all existences.

The ego is what I refer to when I say: "I, myself ...". Its existence has the character of an immediate evidence. It is my personality, the sum of my experiences, what I identified myself with, the values I adhere to.

It is therefore a mental construction that gives me the sense of a personal identity and serves as my reference point in my relations with others. I can put everything in doubt, except the fact that there is someone who doubts and that it is I. "Ego cogito, ergo sum": "I think, therefore I am" is the expression of this immediate evidence that allowed Descartes to cure his systematic doubt.

In Zen Buddhism, it is the nature of this evidence that is questioned. When the Chinese monk Nangaku came to see Master Eno (Houei-Neng), he asked him: "What is it that thus comes?"

Nangaku could not answer. He meditated for a long time on this question and it became his *koan*. After seven years, he ended up saying: "It's not something". In other words, it's nothing that can be grasped, nothing limited, nothing separated from the whole universe.

When the monk Eka came to see Patriarch Bodhidharma who was doing zazen in his cave in Shaolin, he asked him: "Master, I am suffering, my mind is not at peace. Can you pacify it?" Bodhidharma replied: "Show me your mind and I will set it at rest". Eka replied: "I have searched for my mind, but it is unattainable". And Bodhidharma replied: "In this case, it is already pacified".

In other words, if you truly realize that your mind is elusive, without substance, is emptiness, the root of your suffering is severed, as well as all your attachments that are the cause of your suffering, just like Nangaku when he realized that his ego was not something that could be grasped. This shows that the ego does not exist on its own. It is a mental construction, the result of interdependent causes to which we wrongly identify ourselves. This an illusion like the mirages, the result of a desire to exist, desire that causes our existence in this world.

As deep down we feel the fragility of this identification with our history and personality, we always tend to reinforce our ego. And this becomes the cause of our many desires, especially the desire for recognition, for success... These desires increase our ambitions, our impatience and our hostility against everything that disturbs the realization of our aspirations. So, greed and hate are the two great Poisons caused by our egocentrism, and they are the result of our ignorance of the reality of our life.

To free oneself from them implies a profound awakening, which is the meaning of the practice of Zen meditation, zazen. So Master Dogen writes in the Shobogenzo Genjokoan: "Buddha's Dharma consists in getting to know oneself. To get to know oneself is to forget oneself, and to forget oneself is to be awakened with all existences".

The Buddha did not deny the existence of the ego, but he denied that it has a substantial, permanent existence, independent of the causes and conditions that make it exist impermanently. Not to understand this and not to accept this is the cause of *dukkha*, the fundamental suffering of human beings which Shakyamuni resolved by his awakening. It was from his awakening to the existence in total interdependence with all other existences that he taught the Way of Liberation in the form of the Eightfold Path. This Path consists of life ethics, the practice of attention and of concentration that generate wisdom (which is nothing other than to understand oneself deeply and to harmonize oneself with this understanding). It consists in being liberated from the attachment to our small ego and therefore from the causes of our suffering. Liberated from this self-centred confinement, one can open oneself better to others, put oneself in their place and therefore experience compassion and benevolence towards them.

Actualizing this realization becomes the meaning of the life of those who follow the Way transmitted from Buddha. Inner freedom and generous love of all living beings make it possible to rediscover the foundation of life ethics that are often lacking nowadays, where human beings can no longer be satisfied to submit themselves to rules and precepts because they need to experience the truth for themselves, as the Buddha recommended.

If our ego can put us on the right track when it discerns the causes of its suffering, it remains however the main obstacle to liberation. It is not "I" who realizes awakening, it is the practice that realizes it, by drawing us beyond ourselves and therefore allowing the nature of Buddha to be realized, unconsciously and naturally. But this implies to be able of letting go of the attachment to our ego. To do this, we must not be afraid to sink into nothingness, because letting go of our ego does not mean to lose it, but rather to overcome it and reach a more authentic life in harmony with our true nature, which is not substantial, but a way of being that actualizes our interdependence with all beings.

At that moment, all the encounters and situations we experience in daily life are an opportunity to actualize this awakening, in shared joy and happiness.