

## CENTRE DURCKHEIM

*The way of action ... for wisdom in practice*

### *D'instant en instant*

*(Letter of encouragement to the practice of zazen)*

Letter N° 84 – July 2020

### *The Way of action*

In various zen monasteries in Japan, zen monks will be able to read this warning at the zendo's entrance, place where zazen is practiced:

*“Birth and death are important moments.  
How life is ephemeral!  
Every minute is precious.  
Time awaits no one”.*

### **Every minute is precious! Time awaits no one!**

This injunctive expression should satisfy most managers at the head of companies listed on CAC 40. The teaching of Hui-Neng (Chan master from the 7<sup>th</sup> century) could well be an invitation to work *faster* without a salary raise. Some 20 years ago managers were fascinated by Eugen Herrigel's book “*Zen in the Art of Archery*”, in which they perceived the possibility to increase their staff's capacity of efficiency and performance.

Instead of being tempted to explain the meaning of this Haiku, and in order to allow you to integrate it in your intellect, I will invite you to read the testimony of a person's experience during and after a silent meditation retreat at Dürckheim Centre.

More and better than a discourse on zen, her testimony is the proof that the practice of the exercise named zazen, as well as the whole of oriental exercises, pursue a unique goal: the *transformation* of the person who practices these exercises. The word transformation is a synonym of a maturing process. What can be surprising is the immediacy of the change which is revealed in what we call *the inner experience*.

The sudden interest of Westerners in the word meditation is unexpected. This new attraction shows that man feels that deep down he *is* what he aspires to be. What we call *meditation* could be the exercise that prepares to the right conditions that will allow and enable the accomplishment of our true human nature. Could be? Yes, because today if the word meditation is trendy, it is often used incorrectly in methods that are tagged under personal development, but will develop the *ego*, the *personality*, the *social person*. What the zen master designates as being our *true human nature*, is our reality as a person; the “I am” that was originally, well before the “I am I”.

I suggest you read this chronicle in which *Anne Laure Gannac* simply and explicitly describes this path which gives the direction to the clarifying perception of the true self: the way of action.

Jacques Castermane

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## **The day I slowed down** by *Anne Laure Gannac\**

At work my boss calls me Lucky Luke, and it has nothing to do with my boots or my belt. I've always tried to draw faster than my shadow, I can't help it, I'm born in a hurry. As a kid, I wanted to be grown-up. As all kids of course. But a little faster perhaps. At the age of 2, I would wake up early to make breakfast alone, they say in my family: "Always did everything faster and earlier than everyone else". Who would want to hear that they did things slower and later than others?

Speed is about precocity, autonomy, profitability... It relieves parents, satisfies employers, suits friends who don't have to wait at rendezvous. Thus, it's not without a sense of pride that I admit being of the efficient type. For me, being early is being on time, and being on time is already being late.

"Have you any idea of the time you are trying to catch up with?" a psychoanalyst asked me one day. The word "late" does not awaken anything but *Alice in Wonderland's* rabbit. Always in a hurry. Obviously, it has an appointment with the Queen: that would stress more than one rabbit. And the word "catch-up" ... There's barely one gap that could be impossible for me to fill: the eight years between my elder and admired sister and I. One of these moments in analysis when the ceiling cracks and reveals an evidence. Then comes the time to worry about "missing something", the unbearable feeling of resting on my assets, of seeing the world go forward while I would vegetate, of "rooting" myself, conscious that there are many fears to alleviate.

### ***I will not give up anything***

But I have other things to deal with. Lying there for forty-five minutes, in the middle of the day, is not my preferred position. As a child, I always saw my parents standing or seated at a table. Themselves never saw their own parents live otherwise other than in full action. "There's always something to do" my grand-mother used to say, and "only the good-for-nothing wander around". Endowed with this heritage, I am in effervescence in Paris, this "refuge for the disabled of the present time" and in this era which has elevated urgency as a way of life.

In a society which confuses speed and precipitation, the slowest and less reactive are suspected of slowing down the march of progress. "Behind the myth of urgency, there's a guarantee of exceeding, of extreme limits, of excellence, of performance, in other words, of heroism", comments sociologist and psychologist Nicole Aubert. So, I joyfully accelerate. A sense of power takes hold of me: I hold time by the reins, I can tame it, master it. Perhaps I could even compress it, squeeze it... kill it.

Pierre Niox, "The man in a hurry" by writer Paul Morand, complained of being able to accomplish only one thing at a time, "which slows us down so much". That was in the 1940's. I have a cell phone, a computer, email and voicemail boxes..., technology at the service of my phantasy of multiplication. Here I am in the skin of a sort of spatio-temporal Vishnou, capable of accomplishing the multiple tasks of my desires instantly, or almost. Be able to do anything, renounce to nothing, enjoy the maximum: I do not doubt that phantasy of total power underlies my acceleration peeks. "I'm going fast, very fast/ I am a universal human comet/I am travelling through time", singing, 15 years ago with Noir Desir, a generation (Mine!) with insolent aspirations. This "*Man in a hurry*" has become a hymn of the modern individual in all of its pretention to profit from existence at the power of one thousand. However, how can I enjoy anything at that speed?

### ***I experience peace***

"If you do not find peace here and now, where will you find it and when will you find it?" This phrase is like an electroshock. Sitting there on my zafu, the meditation cushion, facing the white wall, alike the twenty other participants who have come to this sesshin, it's like I was just punched in the stomach. I know this saying from Master Dôgen, Japanese Buddhist monk. But here, in the silence of the dojo, pronounced as soft evidence by Jacques Castermane, zen master, it brings tears to my eyes. This notion of calm, so sudden... Yes, it is precisely that, that I am looking for in urgency. Calm. This much hoped-

for state, awaited, constantly rescheduled to “later”: “once the work is done”, “after the kids are in bed”, “when the week-end comes”... Dôgen’s phrase moves me because of the brutality with which it reveals to me that I am on the wrong track : There’s nothing in particular to do to find calm. Nothing. “Life, does not start after you wash the dishes or after sweeping says Jacques Castermane: savour each moment of your life.”

This savour inevitably requires slowness. To slow down is to feel. To live the present time in its capacity to satisfy with calm. “Zazen, is a rupture. Rupture with our daily life, our habits. It is in fact, the opportunity to see our self be. And to realize that most of the time, we do not act, we react: mental reaction, emotional, physical... *Zazen*, is the way of action” Action: this word that I usually associate with precipitation, multiplication of experiences is brought down to what my body is experiencing through complete immobility. It would seem completely crazy if I weren’t feeling through breathing and a slight swaying provoked naturally. Thoughts are attacking my mind, the need to move, legs becoming restless... “The ego does not appreciate a rupture with its usual functioning. So, it intervenes: thoughts, again, inhabit us, useless. To stop the flow, we have to bring our attention back to our breathing.” And ceaselessly, “start from scratch”. The expression is reassuring: it reminds me it is always possible to come back to calm.

Between two 25 min sessions of zazen, five min of kin-hin: the experience is the same, but upwards, walking slowly. Very slowly. A slowness I no longer evaluate, I let myself be carried by the swing from one foot to another, slowly, I feel each leg working intensely, the hip, the thigh... As a long-distance runner, I’m learning to walk.

“Zazen is over, the exercise continues”, says Jacques Castermane. Outside the dojo, while preparing the meal, while setting the tables, while sweeping the garden, I try to remain in this full attention, a precise attentiveness to each action- which is, in fact, slowness. Bizarrely, it doesn’t require a particular effort: I don’t have the feeling of “having” to slow down, but rather, of following an inner rhythm that seems right. My rhythm. I feel good.

After four days at Dürckheim Centre I am not myself anymore. Or, rather, I feel like myself like never. Feeling like being together, really walking, really breathing. Something like coming back to the essential which makes unthinkable another forward leap. I exist, I am conscious of that, this action alone is enough to feel the uselessness of adding another ten at a time. But what I can here, in this peaceful and kind atmosphere of the Centre, will I be able when I’m back at home, in Paris, in my life punctuated by imperatives, delays and by the agitations of a stressed crowd? I doubt it.

### ***I go back to reality***

And I am right. Back in my daily routine, I feel like a turtle surrounded by hares. Not too slow but too peaceful. However, as the turtle in the tale, I continue at my rhythm, with quietude. And I realize I’m able to arrive on time, I finish my work within the delays, I do what needs to be done: Lafontaine had seen right. Although it’s not enough to leave on time to keep up with the rhythm of an accelerated world: one has to make choices. Renounce. At work, learn to delegate and procrastinate: it’s not because work is not done right at this minute that it is bound to failure... In my private life, go out less and sit more. A revision of priorities is necessary, a selection of desires becomes indispensable. Time is at a necessary renouncement. I knew this of course; I was aware of its necessity. But thanks to the “way of action” I now feel it. It is no longer understood through the mind but through the body, and the difference is extreme. By a response that is felt, and through breathing, all of these choices to my surprise, are done by themselves.

Often the temptation for “always more” is revived. My pace speeds up to settle into the rhythm of others, and soon the desire to overtake them arises. Now the difference is that I see it. And I know I’m the only one that can find the right pace. Slow down. Take the right step. And the next. Start from

scratch. Don't be in a hurry cooking, to quickly start eating, to be able to slip into bed early... No: enjoy cooking, each action, savour it. Slowness is sensual Milan Kundera reminds us. On the way to school, I stop telling my daughter "Hurry up, we're going to be late." No, live the moment with her. And eventually, leave earlier in order to be able to forget about the time.

Re read Montaigne: "When I dance, I dance, when I sleep, I sleep; when I am wandering alone in a beautiful orchard, if my thoughts are occupied by outside occurrences some of the time, the rest of the time I bring them back to the stroll, the orchard, the soft solitude, and I." And us. To what is there. The sense of urgency naturally cedes place to pleasure.

But this voluptuousness is often replaced by the pleasure of urgency. I begin to think there is so much to read, to see, to hear, and to learn to give way to slowness. And again, doubt arises: Slow down? But why? "Ask yourself, suggests Jacques Castermane: Am I born to rush? Get up quickly, quickly shower, have breakfast quickly and quickly go to work? What for? To quickly go to the cemetery?" It's up to you."

\* Anne Laure Gannac is a journalist, head of department for *Psychologies* magazine; columnist for *PLAY RTS* (Swiss Radio Television), author of *Mère-fils, l'impossible separation & Divorce, les enfants parlent aux parents* (Ed. Anne Carrière).

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