

## Meditation and meaning

*La Gendronnière 1-3 ottobre 2010*

### The meaning of zazen

One of the main question proposed by this seminar is about the therapeutic function of meditation, and, from what I understand, the illness of today's man that needs curing is the loss of meaning in his existence. Properly speaking, the religious practice I am going to speak about, zazen, is neither a meditation technique nor a therapy of sort. So, I should perhaps start explaining what it is, even if an exhaustive definition is neither useful nor, I believe, possible.

Zazen is a posture of the body – the body sitting straight and still – and of the mind –the mind in a condition of lively concentrated inactivity --. These are the prerequisites of zazen that permit us to call this form “meditation”, even if a meditation *sui generis*. Zazen is a religious practice cultivated and transmitted down the generations up to today within the Buddhist tradition. According to those who devote themselves to it, zazen is the concrete and immediate manifestation of the essence of Buddha's testimony. The professed purpose of Buddhism is to announce and to point to the way that leads to the extinction of suffering, where suffering is uneasiness in living, not a psychological condition but a malaise no man is immune of. From this point of view, it is fair to say that zazen is a cure to the radical illness of Man.

Having clarified the connections between the theme of this seminar and the arguments of this speech, we can get to the heart of matter.

### ***Loss of horizon and fragmentation of meaning***

The very fact that we reflect on the search for meaning implies that what we call “meaning” is something we won't find unless we search for it. The two concepts, search and meaning, are therefore in a relation of reciprocity: the meaning is the aim of the search (if we don't believe that meanings exist, or, at least, could exist, we don't go about looking for them), and the searching is indispensable to the meaning (the meaning does not appear without searching, otherwise there would be no need to look for it).

What is then this “meaning” we are speaking about? How can we search for it?

The “search for meaning” has busied men for very long. It emerged in an explicit way at a certain point in the evolution of man's consciousness, if not at the very birth of what we now usually call human consciousness.

Perhaps there were times when what we now call “meaning” was not a matter to be questioned but was, as dawn and sunrise, a self-evident object of direct experience. At a certain moment (the visions here are different), some say with the expulsion from Eden, others in the transition from myth to philosophy, or even at the moment when man began listening the voice of God and to question him, man also started to ask himself what is the “meaning” of birth, death and existence. At the beginning, this question was expressed in poetry and tragedy, and later on in different, more and more articulated and complex forms.

Traditional cultures usually cont on a founding myth that holds the total meaning of reality for each person on matters of crucial importance for all, like birth, life and death, for society as a whole, and in relation to the fundamental issues of destiny, freedom, and moral choice. For them, the field within which meaning is sought lies inside the horizon of the meaning of reality: it is not a matter of searching for meaning because meaning does not exist or because it is in doubt, but of looking for its fullness and of trying to realize it in one’s own experience.

Modern culture does away with myths, breaking down the horizon of the total meaning of reality. That unique and unifying horizon is fragmented into different fields, which are often neither convergent nor consistent with each other.

Nowadays we can speak about scientific meaning (explanation of physical phenomena), philosophical meaning (form and foundation of reality), moral and ethical meaning (justice, responsibility, retribution), psychological meaning (identity, identification, relations), esthetical meaning (beauty, harmony, order), religious meaning (transcendence, mystical, ritual) and so on.

For instance, the meaning of time in physics is not the same as in psychology, which, in turn, is not the same as in philosophy.

Today it seems impossible to build a unifying vision of reality without forfeiting one or more of its aspects, and yet we feel that it is this very impossibility that causes the malaise so widespread today both within each individual and in society. We are living the following paradox: the more the way we look at the world becomes globalized and the evidence of the oneness of humanity becomes glaring - through the expansion of media technologies, the integration of national economies into the world market, the intensification of intercontinental migration (to quote just few glaring factors), the more dramatically evident becomes the lack of a universally shared myth that could contain, give sense and direct the individual and social life in this globalized world. The “local” myths are breaking down

and no global myth is born yet can furnish a unifying framework to all the different spaces which the human spirit has been occupying in its recent history.

In this wasteland, searching for meaning is almost a form of nostalgia, it is like looking for something we once had and have lost along the way. It looks as if we are trying to build a new meaning by sticking together the fragments of meanings into which the mirror where we observed reality has shuttered, with nostalgia for paradise, innocence and the lost meaning as the glue. But this mirror fancifully reassembled from broken chips, reflects a broken image, which is the representation of our own broken identity.

The perception of a lack of identity in which to recognize ourselves pushes us to search for a meaning, and many people nowadays are convinced that meditation is an effective guide in this search.

### **Zazen, reversal and surrender**

I have touched on the fact that zazen is not a meditation technique. To support this statement, let me quote from the reference text on the practice of zazen, *Fukanzazengi*, written by Dōgen in 1227. Explaining in details “*the essential art of zazen*”<sup>1</sup> Dōgen says “*zazen is not the practice (the apprenticeship, the use, the learning) of dhyāna*”<sup>2</sup>, a Sanskrit term meaning “meditation”, and go on as follows: “*It is just the dharma gate of beatitude. It is the verification in practice that brings realization to its final limit. The unconceivable evidence of reality, where there is neither basket nor cage*”<sup>3</sup>.

The expression “*dharma gate of beatitude*” should not be understood as if there were two consecutive realities, divided by a gate: up to here everyday’s reality, and beatitude beyond the threshold. It means that zazen is the door to dharma that opens onto the vision of reality as beatitude. What lies beyond that door is not a blissful world, different from this we live in, it is this very world seen as beatitude.

The Sino Japanese word translated as “beatitude” sounds *anraku* in Japanese and comprises the two ideograms used in Chinese to translate the Sanskrit word *sukha*, that is the opposite both linguistically and conceptually of *dukkha*, the Sanskrit term that means the radical malaise

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<sup>1</sup>此れ乃ち坐禅の要術なり *kore sunawachi zazen no yōjutsu nari*

<sup>2</sup>いわゆる坐禅は、習禅にはあらず *iwayuru zazen wa, shūzen ni wa arazu*

<sup>3</sup>ただこれ安樂の法門なり。菩提を究尽する修証なり。公案現成、羅籠いま到あらず *tada kore anraku no hōmon nari. Bodai no kūjin suru shushō nari. Kōangenjō, rarō ima itarazu.*

we spoke about. To Dōgen then zazen is the dharma gate to the opposite of *dukkha*, the door of the dharma of the extinction of suffering.

When we adopt a therapy to heal a sickness, once recovery is on the way, the therapy stops. If there is no recovery, the therapy must be changed. But here, to keep with the medical metaphor, sickness is not an alteration of the natural condition of health: it is the the natural condition itself. Buddhism teaches that “everything is suffering (*sarvam dukkham*)”. This illness is not related to specific existential, geographical, temporal or genetic conditions: it is congenital to the human condition. The cure of such illness can be neither temporary nor localized: it should be continuous and radical, like the sickness it tries to eliminate. If everything is suffering, healing should be nothing less than the reversal of that condition.

The description Dōgen does about “what to do” in zazen is impossible to misunderstand. *“Therefore stop the intellectual practice of looking for words and interpreting utterances and sayings. It is indispensable that you learn to take the step backwards that turns the light on yourself. Body and spirit naturally abandoned, the original aspect emerges. If you want to obtain the thing as it is, apply immediately yourself to the thing as it is”<sup>4</sup>*.

It is the description of a turnaround: surrender instead of searching; introspection instead of inspection; backward instead of forward. Not increase but decrease, not attainment or gain but loss and withdrawal: *“Set yourself apart and give up all relationship, let every activity stop, don’t think either about good or evil, do not busy yourself with the true or the false (pro and con). Bring spirit, mind and conscience to a halt. Shut off analysis and evaluation of thoughts, ideas, visions. Do not plan to build Buddha. Do not concern yourself with the motionless sitting position”<sup>5</sup>*.

This description is very clear, and it points to an impossible task. If one abandons everything to the sitting position, even the perception of it, if all the very human faculties and functions are given up, what remains, who is it that remains? From a point of view based on human experience, zazen is

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<sup>4</sup>ゆえに、須く言を尋ね、語を逐うの解行を休すべし。須く、回光返照の退歩を学すべし。身心自然に脱落して、本来の面目現前せん。恁麼の事を得んと欲せば、急に恁麼の事を務めよ。Yue ni, subekaraku koto wo tazune, go wo ou no gegyō wo kyū subeshi. Subekaraku, ekō henshō no taiho wo gaku subeshi. Shinjin jinenn ni daturaku shite, honrai no memmoku genzen sen. Inmo no ji wo en to hosseba, kyūni inmo no ji wo tsutomeyo.

<sup>5</sup>諸縁を放捨し、万事を休息して、善悪を思わず、是非を管することなかれ。心意識の運轉を停め、念想観の測量を止めて、作仏を図ることなかれ。あに坐臥に拘わらんや。Shoen wo hōsha shi, banji wo kyūsoku shite, zenaku wo omowazu, zehi wo kan suru koto nakare. Shi i shiki no unden wo yame, nen sō kan no shikiryō wo yamete, sabutto hakaru koto nakare. Ani zaga ni kakaranya.

an impossible thing to do. Total surrender is impossible but, if everything is suffering, what other possible salvation is there?

With a very different language, the Gospel describes the same stalemate, and the same door. <sup>17</sup>As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup>“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” <sup>20</sup>“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” <sup>21</sup>Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup>At this, the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. <sup>23</sup>Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup>The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup>The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God!” (Marc 10, 17-27)

The Gospel talks about a door as narrow as the eye of a needle, Zen about a gateless door<sup>6</sup>: in both cases the only gate there is that leads to salvation is impossible to cross, in our present conditions. We have to leave out everything, all our human wealth and misery, we have to go through it: we cannot do more, and anything less is useless. What saves you is not what you attain, but the act of crossing the threshold through surrender.

Zazen – which is to sit in the posture that brings about salvation - is impossible to man: from the point of view of our human experience, it is an act of faith. Indeed, being the intentional and conscious renunciation to all faculties of intellect, thought, evaluation, and conscience, there is no other way to verify its effectiveness, than the practice itself: the verification of the efficacy of surrender is surrender itself. In keeping with the medical metaphor we have used so far, the cure is the recovery: there is no temporal gap, no causal relation between practice (treatment) and verification of the effectiveness (recovery). Zazen is the verification of the practice through the practice of the verification. *If you want to obtain the things as it is, apply immediately yourself to the thing as it is.*

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<sup>6</sup>無門関 mumonkan

In the world of which zazen is the door, the search for meaning is the way we live, the “how” each one of us lives the circumstances that constitute our own lives. This “how” doesn’t depend on the application of a style or a method, on the adaptation to rules, on the obedience to a system, on the celebration of a cult, nor on the rejection of all these things: it is much easier, the yoke, at the end, is much lighter. That “how” doesn’t depend on anything (and this is why it makes one free to do everything) other than the continuous impossible act of abandonment that turns this conditioned world into the inconceivable unconditioned world.

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*N.B. The translations from Japanese are mine.  
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