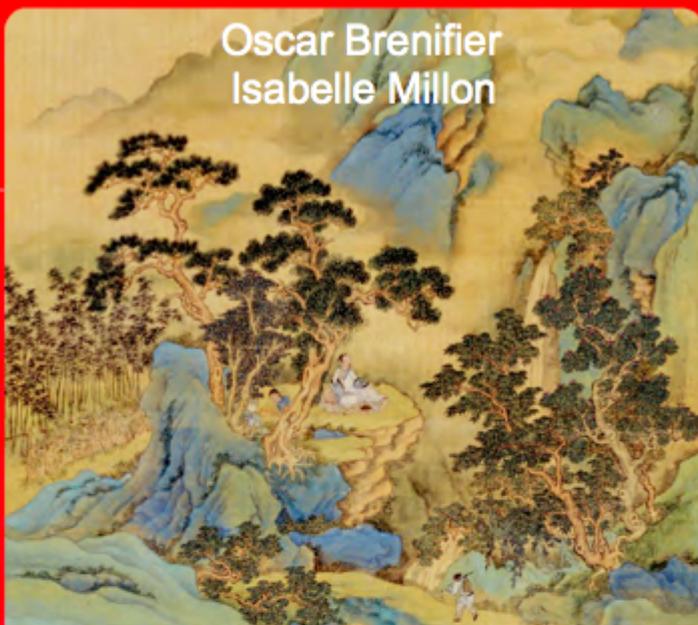


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WISDOM OF
ZEN TALES

Philosophical exercises

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Chapter 1 Breathing

Must we learn how to be bored?

A STUDENT WENT TO HIS MASTER TO COMPLAIN.

- MASTER, I AM GETTING TO BE REALLY FED UP WITH THIS WORK ON MY BREATHING. INHALE, EXHALE. INHALE, EXHALE. WITHOUT EVER STOPPING. IT IS GETTING TO BE REALLY BORING. ISN'T THERE ANYTHING MORE INTERESTING FOR ME TO WORK ON?

- I UNDERSTAND, SAID THE MASTER; COME WITH ME.

HE TOOK HIS STUDENT TO THE EDGE OF THE RIVER AND ASKED HIM TO BEND DOWN TOWARDS THE WATER. THEN HE GRABBED HIM BY THE NECK AND PLUNGED HIS HEAD INTO THE WATER.

AFTER A FEW SECONDS, THE STUDENT COULD NO LONGER TAKE IT AND STARTED TO RESIST BUT THE MASTER STRONGLY MAINTAINED HIS GRIP. THE POOR STUDENT WAS NOW STRUGGLING WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH. AT LAST THE MASTER LET HIM GO, LEAVING HIM COUGHING, WHEEZING AND PANTING.

The master-student dialogue (*dokusan*)

In the practice of Zen, the dialogue element of the relationship between master and student is crucial. The concept used to define this is *Dokusan*, which broken down is: *doku* “to go alone” *san* “towards a superior”; because the student has to find and approach a master in order to get initiation or further education. Thereby a permanent dialogue takes place between them through verbal exchanges and tasks designed to guide the student on the path (*oshie*) towards enlightenment (*satori*). Without the intervention and regular confrontation of a master, the learning can only remain formal and superficial. For the *Dokusan* to take place, the student and master must commit to a common path that will deepen over time. The master will only commit if he perceives in the student the appropriate attitude, which in the Buddhist tradition is called “Right/Just attitude”. It requires from the student openness and receptiveness on the one hand, drive and willingness to put in the effort on the other hand. This last problem is what

we see in this story: the student grows bored of putting in the effort, gives up and complains to his master who in turn must find a solution for his student to become aware of the problem and to boost him. In the Zen tradition, rather than explaining things, it is more about creating a striking educational experience designed to awaken the dormant mind. The dialogue is in fact a test for the student. Not to evaluate his academic skills so much as to work on the practice itself, to strengthen the mind and become conscious of the self. We could compare this to the master-student relationship in the teaching of martial arts, where the former has an advantage over the latter. In the practice of Zen, the master invites the student to step out of himself, which implies a certain degree of violence in the exchange. This requires a deep trust on behalf of the student without which he would act out or run away. The student's capacity to take on the challenge and go against himself is the condition needed to grow and become a master himself.

Benevolence

At first glance, benevolence designates a state of mind: favourable dispositions towards a person, a group, humanity or everything that exists. It is a feeling which drives us to want happiness for all. Kindness would be a synonym and generosity its expression. The kind person, generally in a strong position, would be considered forthcoming and generous as he desires good things and happiness for others, for the community or for an individual. Nevertheless, benevolence can easily slip into a particular sort of acceptance, like complacency, thoughtfulness or kindness. In opposition to this, let us take the example of the master in our story. He looks after the student with much care. This student could even be his only student. Whatever the scenario, the master takes the time to work with his student: since the student is bored with his work and does not understand the point of it all, the master takes him to the river. Of course, we can consider that his lesson is not "kind" as it is not graceful, nor charming, nor pleasant or thoughtful. It would be prohibited by ongoing educational precepts; from a legal standpoint as well: the master could be sued for violence or attempted murder. . . So is the master benevolent? It is clear that in the West, education

has changed much this past half-century. Less so in other parts of the world. Influenced particularly by psychology, it has lost a lot of its formal and strict aspects. The backlash of this is that certain educators today denounce the excess of “pedagogicalism”, which according to them is deprived of all standard and content. They see in it too much complacency and indulgence, or empty artificial kindness prohibiting any genuine apprenticeship and education.

Each will have a particular perception of the master’s actions. But beyond individual sensitivity, it is about understanding the master’s actions. He tries to teach his student the principle of reality in order to detach him from his subjectivity, to extract him from his mental sluggishness which, on the one hand, is the reason he is bored. On the other hand, he shamelessly uses his boredom as if it were a well-founded argument. In this experience, the act of breathing becomes strong and real again; the student finds himself. Can we not therefore consider that the master acted benevolently?

Boredom

Boredom is the absence of interest towards a teaching that seems useless and monotonous. It is also a state of mind that indicates a certain weariness or weakness, psychological or existential. Of course, a repeated boring activity may induce gloom or sadness of the mind. Likewise, a sad or grieving mind will find any activity boring. Being bored makes us feel tired or impatient. And by blocking our concentration and interest, fatigue and impatience in turn provoke boredom.

Boredom is often used as a sort of implacable and inescapable argument. As for all victims, the person who is bored is right *a priori*: his boredom is called upon as a justified critique in front of an object that as a consequence lacks appeal/interest. Thus, when someone claims to have been bored while reading a book, one would tend to come to the conclusion that there is a problem with this book. Following this logic, one should avoid all sources of boredom for its absence of pleasure and its dryness. The meaning of boredom and emotional load associated with it renders it a concern or a nuisance. This is how many adults think of children: One must do everything to make sure the child is not

bored, which means one must distract him, continually entertain him, and anything that would make him bored would be considered an objectionable activity to be ruled out. All education should be “amusing” without ever becoming “boring”.

This, nowadays, is a relevant problem, with all its accuracy and excess. This debate will eagerly oppose parents and teachers as proponents of modernism and tradition. This is how Kant defends the idea of discipline, submission to the tenets of reason, as a constitutive modality of education: boredom is none of his concern.

For the master in the story, his student’s boredom comes more from a certain sluggishness of the mind that prevents him from putting in the necessary efforts to accomplish his tasks. This is why he uses “shock”, a common educational technique of Zen, to get his student to experience and understand his own problem. Through this confrontation with reality, revived by this startling experience, the student will become conscious of himself and the world; he will emerge from the fantasies of his subjectivity which he came to believe in.

Yes, this practice of meditation on the breathing is boring. But it is no more entertaining than would be mathematics or artistic contemplation for many: lack of action, lack of entertainment, fueling impatience. It seems though that learning boredom is both unavoidable and useful. According to Kierkegaard, it is about transforming boredom, “mother of all pains”, into idleness, simply stopping all hectic and intoxicating activity to condition for thinking. One should make peace with boredom, with empty temporality, no longer looking for immediate satisfaction. It is a difficult enterprise, almost a luxury in these times of unintentional, untimely solicitation and immediate gratification.

Breathing

What could be more immediate and urgent than our breath? What perception or experience could be more intimate with being of life? Breathing is the only movement that is contiguous with existence, the only one which its prolonged absence we can never be conscious of, as consciousness would then no longer be. When the mind wants to empty itself of everything, when it wants to abstract itself even from time, it is

left with this unique clock, this pendulum that it cannot get rid of, that can only stop for a very short time through considerable effort. This slow, more or less regular but necessary and vital movement enables our surroundings to penetrate us in order to suck in its very substance, linking us inexorably with what we are not.

Breathing is a primitive feeling of life as well as an immediate consciousness of alterity, primary movement of osmosis between self and non-self, prerogative to animal nature. It is this instinctive movement which makes us open our mouths wide before even experiencing feeling hunger. There is nothing more distressing, more terrifying, than the horrible and sudden experience of suffocation—barely or not being able to breathe at all—the world denies itself to us; “Let me breathe” we say to the person who is pressing us and preventing us from living and thinking.

Our intimacy with breath is such that most of the time we do not even notice its activity. It is only when we are deprived from it that we notice it: for example after an unusual effort or in a confined space. Nevertheless, it is in our best interest to become conscious of it as it regulates our physical as much as our mental activity. It is our inner clock, but also the barometer of our mental state. The organs that are needed for our breathing, from the abdomen to the nose, represent a significant part of our body, central and dynamic. The diaphragm, the ultimate gravity center of us, easily indicates to us our emotional state.

For all these reasons, breathing is a recurrent topic of meditation or concentration. In the Buddhist tradition, one of the first steps in the practice of meditation is “attention to breathing”: the subject is sitting down and needs to fully focus on his normal breathing. This exercise is supposed to improve concentration and relaxation. The person who is meditating observes his inhaling and exhaling without forcing the breathing. He focuses on the rhythm of this breathing, on the air going in and out, letting the natural process take its course. He only needs to observe and be attentive to the process. This practice leads to inner calmness and serenity of the mind, thus to realization or enlightenment.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the student complain?
- What is the student's objective when he goes to see his master?
- What is the point of meditating on the breathing?
- Why does the master agree with his student?
- Why does the master himself plunge the student's head in the water?
- Is the master benevolent?
- Is the master hard on his student?
- Which educational principles does the master apply?
- Does this student need a master?
- Why does the student accept such treatment?

Reflection

- ★ Can we really learn by ourselves or do we always need a master?
- ★ Should we teach our children to be bored?
- ★ Are we responsible for our own boredom?
- ★ Is complaint a necessary evil?
- ★ Is meditation always a profitable exercise?
- ★ Is it the act of meditating in itself that is important or the object of the meditation?
- ★ Does learning necessarily imply going through a state of crisis?
- ★ Can violence be useful?
- ★ Does benevolence have limits?
- ★ Must a master explain his pedagogy to his students?

Chapter 2 The Tortoise and the Two Herons

Why are we sensitive to what others say?

TWO HERONS AND A TURTLE LIVED IN FRIENDSHIP BY A POND. ONE SUMMER, THERE WAS A TERRIBLE DROUGHT. THE POND WAS DRYING OUT AND FAMINE WAS IMPENDING. THE TWO HERONS DECIDED TO FLY AWAY TOWARDS MORE FAVORABLE HORIZONS. “WHAT ABOUT ME? WHAT ABOUT ME?” SCREAMED THE TORTOISE, “WHAT AM I TO DO?” AFTER A JOINT REFLECTION, IT WAS DECIDED THAT THE TWO BIRDS WOULD CARRY A STICK IN THE AIR WHICH THE TORTOISE WOULD CLASP WITH HIS JAW. “NEVERTHELESS, BEWARE!” SAID ONE OF THE TWO HERONS, “YOU KNOW HOW YOU LIKE TO TALK!”

THE TORTOISE ANSWERED WITH A NOD.

THE THREE FRIENDS TOOK OFF. SHEPHERDS NOTICED THIS STRANGE CREW. “HOW INTELLIGENT THIS TORTOISE IS!” THEY EXCLAIMED. “IT IS BEING CARRIED BY TWO HERONS!” THE TORTOISE WAS CAREFUL NOT TO LET GO OF ITS STICK BUT RELISHED SUCH WORDS WITH DELIGHT. A BIT LATER, PEASANTS WHO WERE WORKING IN A FIELD POINTED UP AT THEM. THE TORTOISE LISTENED ATTENTIVELY. “LOOK AT THOSE TWO HERONS” SAID ONE OF THEM, “HOW INTELLIGENT THEY ARE. WHAT A GOOD IDEA TO CARRY THE TORTOISE LIKE THIS FOR THEIR DINNER TONIGHT!”

”STUPID PEASANTS! IT WAS MY IDEA!” TRIED TO ANSWER THE TORTOISE. BUT IT DIDN’T HAVE ENOUGH TIME, AS IT CRASHED TO THE GROUND.

Speech

The tortoise speaks. It even seems it cannot stop itself from speaking as it dies, killed by its compulsive need to speak. But why do we speak? Deleuze invites us to think about the different possible types of relationships to speech. First, to designate things, to describe them, like when the tortoise says “this is mine”; or to prescribe them, like when the tortoise says “you must think about me”; or again to act upon others, the performative dimension of speech, like when the tortoise insults the

shepherds calling them “stupid”. Second, we speak to express ourselves, to manifest our being, to say what it is and what it is doing. This is of course the problem that the tortoise has, as it cannot stand to witness its own person be disparaged, to the point of forgetting the danger and dying. This is the almost desperate dimension of speech which provokes unrestrained, compulsive discourse. Very often we qualify this modality of speech as spontaneous; we evoke sincerity, endowed with an alleged gratuity. Yet, what could be more “calculated” than this instinctive self-defense? It continually attempts to promote an anxious subject which to its own eyes is threatened with annihilation. Nothing is less free than this type of speech, entirely reactive and defensive, and yet so common. Beyond apparent content, a majority of words that are pronounced daily are charged with this self-glorification. What I have done, what I have said, what was done to me, what I am, etc. This is what brings Deleuze to say that manifestation is first before designation. Finally, the third relationship is one of signification. We grasp speech in relation to general concepts; we evaluate syntactical connections which enable us to grasp the objective implications of this speech, what it signifies without explicitly formulating it: its own premises or even what it wants to demonstrate, its conclusion. It is within this framework that we can find the very message of the story: a criticism of this exacerbated egocentrism which pushes us to speak in spite of common sense. We must discover through the tortoise’s inconsiderate words, the absurdity of an existential model in which the subject is continually seeking proof and validation of its own existence in the eyes of others. Of course, here it is about interpreting, taking the risk of giving a shape and making sense of what is not said. A taboo gesture if you will, because if we entrust our understanding of a discourse to its author, even if this signification is screaming of truth, he will send us packing: “This is your opinion, your interpretation, because I never said that”. As if, strangely, it was forbidden to understand the speech of others.

Friendship

The three protagonists lived in friendship on the banks of a pond, says the story. Yet, according to Montaigne, true friendship is not a business run between separate protagonists; it is supposed to be based on a union of souls. However at several occasions in the story, this harmony does not seem to be very effective. But Plato warns us about friendship. On the one hand, opposing friendship and truth in general we tend to favor as friends those who manifest a certain complacency towards us. On the other hand, differentiating friendship based on pleasure, friendship based on usefulness and true friendship, very rare if not non-existent. Who has not been surprised by abandonment, changes of heart or betrayal from friends, apparently due to circumstances, particularly during difficult situations? When tensions rise or when the conditions of the friendship become difficult, are friends still friends? When one must choose between loss or deprivation and a friend, do friends stay friends?

Thus, when famine is looming, the two herons who are twin characters are ready to abandon their “friend” the tortoise. Not deliberately so, but simply by neglecting to think about it. The tortoise must then make itself known again. Even though it could have sacrificed its own interest to that of its friends as obviously it had become a burden for them. Despite that, probably to avoid a guilty conscience, they accept to take the tortoise along. But for the tortoise, when it comes to claiming the praise of others, vain as it may be, friendship no longer applies. The tortoise relishes receiving admiration but cannot stand admiration being attributed to its two “friends”. It shamelessly appropriates an idea that belongs to the community. This egocentrism or selfishness of the tortoise will incidentally provoke its own doom. The tortoise is willing to make the most of “friendship” when it suits itself, but there is no question of friendship when attempting to turn a situation to one’s own advantage. Like real love, real friendship is more about giving than expecting, which is probably why it is such a luxury for mere mortals.

Vanity

The word Vanity comes from latin *vanus*, which means empty, devoid of substance. Vanity is the characteristic of that which is vain, that is to say, of a factitious reality, of an illusory value, of what is useless and without effect. This refers to the inanity of the expectations, occupations and human concerns. By association, it also qualifies a person who is unduly satisfied with himself, complacently displaying his pleasure of appearance; it is about fatuity, pride, sufficiency. Something that is vain is something that is devoid of importance or interest. Thus we can perceive the pretentious dimension of vanity, which is empty but claims to have substance.

Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas (vanity of vanities, all is vanity), opens the book of Ecclesiastes of which the different chapters are variations on the theme. Because in this world, everything is illusion, everything is disappointment, tells us this passage of the book, a recurring theme of the Bible. And unfortunately, we grow attached to these vanities. Such a statement is common in most religious or philosophical messages, like Zen. Yet one of the most common vanities, object of many critics, is precisely the veneration of the “I” (the self). The main reason being that such a state of mind is primary and immature: it is that of a little child who thinks he is the center of the world, who has not yet learned how to decenter himself, to give, to love. The scope of his universe is still very restricted, and everything revolves around him.

So it is for the tortoise who cares about itself first, its image, its possessions: everything it says concerns the self. To the point where others do not really exist; or only for their usefulness or the pleasure they provide to the tortoise. Many social relations are of this nature but we do not notice it on a daily basis. It is only when context changes for the worse that we realize it. How many people, deceived by others, realize that all have turned their backs to them because their personal circumstances have become particularly difficult? The story is interesting because it shows how this tortoise is preoccupied by something so fragile and trivial as its image in front of others that it knows nothing about, to the point of dying. This fall and crash

to the ground is symbolic and reveals what happens to those who are brainwashed or confined to the reduced reality of his own little self.

Free from the self (jiyū)

Contrary to what one might think, the concept of freedom exists in Zen thought. The term that expresses it is jiyū. Literally, it means "outside oneself". Strangely, it has a connotation of spontaneity, not effort, which implies that being outside oneself is a somewhat natural state. Indeed, according to common sense, we are in ourselves, and freedom is precisely the fact that we can act without external hindrance, according to our own nature, probably in the interest of our own person. This is what the turtle in the story does, it behaves like each and everyone. Its "And me! And me!" shows its emotion as it fears being forgotten, not worrying in the slightest about the problem its requirement may cause to the two herons. Moreover, we learn that the tortoise enjoys talking; in general, those who like to talk want to show that they exist: we speak to boast, to justify ourselves, without really worrying about others if not for the image of ourselves which is sent back to us. We notice this when the tortoise struts at the compliments: "These people are right" it says to itself. But it could not stand any criticism or insult; it feels obliged to answer something, hence rushing to its doom. We can consider that through its selfishness, the tortoise is a prisoner to itself, to its image, to its own self-interest. The tortoise is in opposition with others, with the acceptance of reality, therefore it is not free according to the principles of jiyū. In fact, it dies because it acts according to its own impulse, blindly, by neglecting the principle of reality which could render it free.

Zen teaching strives to annihilate the individual and egocentric self. Because in Buddhism this "Self" is an obstacle to an adequate understanding of the true nature of things. It prevents sound judgment and legitimate action. But this "natural" freedom must be learned, because our "personal" being prompts us to act the opposite way. In Zen tradition, free action is not delimited or limited by anything, including oneself. The self is an unfounded foundation, a sort of nothingness, since it is without definition and without limits. It is precisely about

escaping the "limits", this pollution that threatens us. Here we find the idea of Plato who speaks of a purification of the soul, necessary to reach supreme "good". All that reduces reality, all that limits the absolute, is ignorance or vice, as well as a loss or an absence of freedom.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Are the three animals friends?
- Is the tortoise egocentric?
- Are the herons selfish?
- Were the two herons obliged to bring the tortoise along with them?
- Why did one of the herons warn the tortoise to be wary of itself?
- Why do those who see this group feel the need to comment out loud?
- Why do the peasants and the shepherds speak differently of what they see?
- Why does the tortoise only answer the peasants?
- Why does the tortoise listen to everything that is being said?
- Did the tortoise get what it deserved?

Reflection

- ★ Should we sacrifice ourselves for the wellbeing of our friends?
- ★ How do we recognize friends?
- ★ Is true friendship possible?
- ★ Why do we have friends?
- ★ Are human beings fundamentally egocentric?
- ★ Is it possible to not expect anything from others?
- ★ Why do we concern ourselves with what others say about us?

- ★ **What are the reasons that compel us to speak?**
- ★ **Do words have power over us?**
- ★ **Is spontaneity a good thing?**

Chapter 3 Hell and Paradise

Is reality created by our consciousness?

A SAMURAI APPEARED ONE DAY IN FRONT OF A ZEN MASTER AND ASKED HIM:

- MASTER, IS THERE REALLY SUCH A THING AS HELL AND PARADISE?

THE MONK OBSERVED HIS INTERLOCUTOR:

- WHO ARE YOU? HE ASKED.

- I AM A SAMURAI.

- YOU? A SAMURAI? WHAT LORD COULD POSSIBLY WANT YOU AT HIS SERVICE? YOU LOOK LIKE A BEGGAR!

ANGER TOOK HOLD OF THE WARRIOR. HE UNSHEATHED HIS SWORD.

THE MONK WENT ON:

- OH YOU EVEN HAVE A SWORD! BUT YOU MUST BE TOO CLUMSY OR INEXPERIENCED TO CUT MY HEAD OFF!

BESIDE HIMSELF WITH ANGER, THE SAMURAI YELLED AND BRANDISHED HIS SWORD, READY TO STRIKE. WHILE THE SAMURAI HESITATED FOR AN INSTANT, THE MONK ANNOUNCED CALMLY:

- HERE OPEN THE DOORS OF HELL!

THE WARRIOR, TAKEN ABACK, SHEATHED HIS SWORD AND BOWED.

THEN SAID THE MASTER:

- HERE OPEN THE DOORS OF PARADISE.

Hell and Paradise

Along with the hero of this story we can ask ourselves if “there is such a thing as hell and paradise”. But first must we most likely ask ourselves what hell and paradise are. This is what the monk tries to address, under the performative mode.

Myths, symbols, beliefs, archetypes or representations of hell and paradise are found in many cultures or religions around the world. Therefore, we can already conclude that these two twin concepts have a certain reality, if only psychological or ideal. No doubt this is because every human being has personally experienced heavenly moments and infernal moments. The mental intensity of such moments makes them

feel like an eternity of happiness or misfortune. From this it is possible to believe, to hope, to fear, or at least to consider that there is a place or a mode where these states of being could settle, stably or definitively. Nevertheless, the issue is whether it is a specific place, physical and temporal, or a state of mind, that is to say, a place or a physiological modality. It is easy to hypostatize an experience that impresses us or is important to us. It means taking an idea, an action or a state of being, and making it into a physical and substantial reality. This is how myths or tales are born, appearing as a tangible fact, a story, a psychological reality. If we can criticize such processes in terms of realism, we can understand the meaning or usefulness from an educational standpoint.

Generally, the representation of heaven and hell as a specific place refers to either a mythical past or a future promise. So it is with the Garden of Eden in the Bible, the privileged place where man lived in harmony with God, until, inspired by evil forces, carried away by pride and presumption, he rebels against his creator. Life on earth then becomes a painful moment during which everyone is put to the test: the good men will return to God, to paradise, while the others will suffer and burn in hell until the end of time.

For Muslims, paradise is a place of delight where, as a reward for their merits, the faithful will enjoy all the pleasures of the senses. In Buddhist culture, we find various paradises and hells with different levels of happiness and suffering. Though it seems that none of this comes from Buddha himself, but from a certain syncretism where the original and universal message, more psychological, mixes with other more indigenous traditions. The monk's response to the samurai corresponds fairly well to Zen teaching, which seeks to purify the psychological experience as much as possible by freeing it from any intellectual, mythological or dogmatic construction. Rather than engaging in idle and theoretical considerations, this practice considers that the essential thing is to seek wisdom and self-control through meditation, a simple and natural life, rigorous discipline and the practice of all kinds of physical work; these are the keys to "paradise".

Performative speech

Speech has mainly a descriptive or constative function, it states what is or is not, it asserts, but it also has a prescriptive function, when it says what to do or not, when it asks. There is a third function of speech, called performative, when it is an act in itself, which does not necessarily have a direct or explicit relation with its content, and which is sufficient to accomplish the act it enunciates, because it tries to provoke a change in others. John Austin addresses the act of speech: a word that tries to act on its environment through words. This act of speech is a means implemented by a speaker to affect his interlocutor or interlocutors in order to incite, provoke, convince, move, flatter or mock. In this case, "to say is to do," according to Austin. In ancient Greek culture, there are different figures who practice this form of discourse. Odysseus and his practice of the "mestizo", this cunning intelligence, operative wisdom that gets him to speak not in order to express himself or to give orders, but to produce an effect in others. This practice is an intrapersonal or interpersonal skill, useful in psychology, politics, communication and in the art of war. Then Socrates, with his questioning and his irony that provoke cognitive dissonances in others. The simplicity and rigor of his questions, the ambiguity and uncertainty of his irony, compel his interlocutor to think the unthinkable. Then the cynics, who practice excessive provocation, to make us aware of our presuppositions, our routines, our moral rigidities, our ridicule.

The same goes for the Zen master. Firstly, because for him it is about interrupting the processes of rationalization, considered rigid, idle and painful; such a disruption cannot be done without a certain violence. And just as he will not hesitate to strike his student who is captive of his own inertia, complacency or mental routine, the master will use words likely to cause a paradigm shift within the student. This is exactly what happens in this story. With no explanation, the teacher gives his pupil the opportunity to experience the answer to his own question.

Belief

Obviously, the samurai believes in the concepts of heaven and hell, at least enough to talk to the monk about them and ask for his opinion. Either he hopes for confirmation of these concepts, or he fears it, or he simply wants to avoid uncertainty. In any case, this is a problem for him and he finds himself with expectations.

Let us examine for a moment what belief is. It is a pretty paradoxical concept, because when you believe, you consider that something is possible, probable or likely, even true, but without being able to completely eliminate all doubt, otherwise you would use the verb "to know". There always resides in the concept of belief a part of subjectivity, a mental gesture which implies an absence of evidence that is compensated by an act of faith. Although sometimes, like love, it is exclusively an act of faith. In any case, one oscillates between an almost certainty and a forced acquiescence.

Why do we believe? For the good reason that certainty is often impossible, even when there is evidence, much to our discontent. This is already the case for practical reasons: from lack of indisputable evidence, for all intents and purposes, we believe. For example, we generally believe what our friends tell us because it would be exhausting to doubt everything they say, unless what they say defies common sense. But it is also for subjective reasons: for example, when we prefer to believe in God because it fills a metaphysical, moral or epistemological void.

Let us take the case of heaven and hell as an object of belief. The purpose or function of such an association is to articulate the possibility or necessity of a moral. Indeed, just as a law deprived of all idea of sanction is no longer a law but a simple recommendation, a moral without punishment or reward becomes ineffective, which will delight the one who chooses libertinism or immorality. Our samurai, for reasons we do not know, perhaps because of his acts of violence, cares about his eternal future: inhabited by guilt, he cannot be satisfied with doubt. Thus, he desperately needs to "know", that is, to be certain, or at least to be reassured. But the role of the monk in Zen philosophy is to bring the mind from a level of belief to that of thinking. His teaching

function is not to reassure a person or to confirm some belief, precisely what the samurai is asking for. In the present case, the master shows his surprised student that there are no mysterious places, based on faith or superstition: there are only ways of being, mental states, that one can choose deliberately.

Thinking without thinking (*mushin*) and martial art (*budo*)

The concept of *mushin* is important in Zen, especially in the *budo*: Japanese martial arts. Literally, it means "thinking without thinking". We find again the idea of absence or emptiness, crucial in Buddhist thinking, in Zen in particular. It is a state of mind in which thought is not fixed on anything; it is occupied neither by ideas nor by emotions. Thus it can be in direct connection with the cosmos, with the unconditioned. Of course, what applies to the martial arts applies to everyday life: we can consider martial arts as a training for life, or vice versa.

Therefore, the actions of the warrior must not be attached to any particular conscious thinking. Any specific determination of thought, any emotional attachment, can only lead to error. If one desires something too much, if one fears the consequences of his actions, the action will be distorted, truncated, hesitant or ineffective, because it will not be clear and precise, free and committed. Thus, during the fight, the man must subtract himself while handling the sword. When he strikes, it is not he who strikes but the sword itself. It is about trusting the technique, the gesture. This is what the master tries to teach the samurai who presents himself to him. On the one hand, the samurai is preoccupied with beliefs, which make him fear: hell, and desire: heaven. Then he is too worried about appearances, his reputation, the recognition of others. Because of this, he is immersed in the superficial and the illusory, and therefore does not know how to fight wisely: he gets carried away, he is easily manipulated and fragile. But through dialogue, he becomes aware of the problem that inhabits him. The master's speech here reflects the teachings of *budo*, literally "the way of war". On the one hand it is performative, it is action rather than description or injunction. On the other hand, it does not fear the samurai, even if the latter could kill under the influence of pride and anger. It should be

noted that budo refers not only to the arts of combat: wrestling, fencing, archery or military strategy, but also to artistic practices such as drama (*noh* or *kabuki*), floral arrangement (*ikebana*), or the tea ceremony (*cha do*).

The mind in the state of mushin is clear and pure, it is not inhibited by a reduction to a limited "self". This is how it is present, conscious and free. Whether in combat or in life, the mind is not distracted or preoccupied. It is "the spirit like water", say the Japanese, because the pond, when it is quiet, reflects all that surrounds it, the whole cosmos. The mushin is both being and acting; it is the ultimate experience of self-realization.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the samurai want to know if there is a heaven and a hell?
- What does the samurai expect from the monk?
- Why does the Zen master observe the samurai before answering him?
- Do heaven and hell exist for the monk?
- Why does the Zen master accuse the samurai of looking like a beggar?
- Does the samurai behave like a samurai?
- Does the master trust the samurai?
- Why does the samurai, as he is about to strike the monk, have a moment of hesitation?
- Did the samurai understand the monk's teaching?
- Does the monk answer the samurai's question?

Reflection

- ★ Why are we worried about life after death?
- ★ Can we afford not to have faith?
- ★ Are we afraid of being punished for our misdeeds?

- ★ Why do we need certainty?
- ★ Is provocation an effective tool?
- ★ Is honor a legitimate value?
- ★ Can one always be master of oneself?
- ★ Why do we question others?
- ★ Do Heaven and Hell exist?
- ★ Can we answer without answering?

Chapter 4 The Little Elephant

Can we learn how to be free?

A STUDENT COMPLAINED TO HIS MASTER ABOUT NOT BEING ABLE TO MEDITATE LONG ENOUGH AS HIS THOUGHTS WOULD BOUNCE ALL OVER THE PLACE. THE MASTER TOLD HIM A STORY.

IT WAS THE STORY OF A LITTLE ELEPHANT THAT WAS FOUND IN THE FOREST BY A HUNTER WHO THEN BROUGHT IT BACK TO THE VILLAGE. ONCE ITS INITIAL FEARS HAD PASSED, THE ELEPHANT BECAME USED TO RUNNING AROUND HERE AND THERE, DOING AS IT PLEASED AND GETTING UP TO ALL SORTS OF MISCHIEF. THE ELEPHANT WOULD KNOCK OVER, RUN INTO, BREAK, TUMBLE AND CRUSH THINGS WITHOUT EVEN NOTICING. WHEN CAUSING HAVOC, IT WOULD GET STARTLED, JUMP UP AND RUN AWAY, LOUDLY BLOWING ITS TRUNK. THE VILLAGERS BECAME ANNOYED; THEY COULD NO LONGER PUT UP WITH THE CUMBERSOME ANIMAL. THEY COMPLAINED TO ITS MASTER WHO DECIDED TO TAKE ACTION.

THE MASTER TIED THE YOUNG ANIMAL TO A BIG TREE, AT THE END OF A SOLID ROPE, AND LEFT IT THERE WITH FOOD AND WATER. NATURALLY, AFTER IT HAD PULLED AND TUGGED AT THE ROPE IN VAIN, UNABLE TO TEAR OR BREAK IT, THE BABY ELEPHANT FLEW INTO A FRIGHTFUL RAGE. WITH FURY, THE ANIMAL TRAMPLED THE EARTH, VIOLENTLY STRUCK THE TREE, PUSHED IT WITH ALL ITS MIGHT, GIVING GREAT BLOWS TO THE ROPE AND SCATTERING ALL THE FOOD AND WATER. SOMETIMES THE ELEPHANT WOULD LET OUT HEART-BREAKING TRUMPETS. BUT NOTHING CAME OF ITS ATTEMPTS TO FREE ITSELF FROM ITS TIES. THE ROPE DID NOT BREAK NOR DID THE TREE GIVE IN, AND THE YOUNG ELEPHANT GREW EXHAUSTED OF ITS USELESS EFFORTS.

THIS LASTED FOR SEVERAL DAYS. EXHAUSTION GRADUALLY TOOK OVER. THE ANIMAL SLOWLY CALMED DOWN, ACCEPTED ITS FATE AND STOPPED FIGHTING. WITNESSING THIS, THE MASTER LET THE ANIMAL LOOSE. THE BABY ELEPHANT THEN PLACIDLY CROSSED THE VILLAGE, ENJOYING ITS NEW FREEDOM. NOBODY EVER COMPLAINED ABOUT THE YOUNG ELEPHANT AGAIN.

Impulsiveness

Needless to say, the little elephant is impulsive. It does not think much about implications or consequences of its actions: it is eager in the present moment; the future does not exist. Past does not exist either for that matter. The elephant does not remember what it has done; it does not worry about it, nor does it draw any sort of lesson from its actions. How could it possibly learn how to persevere in anything?

Yet, as the student discovers, perseverance is one of the main characteristics of accomplishment and willpower. The elephant has a sense of urgency: urgency of desire and reaction. It does not master anything. It suffers the world and itself. It must be highly emotional as it has no sense of time or distance when facing events.

It is not surprising that once tied up, it becomes furious. It is incapable of dominating or transforming the impulses that guide it. It does not think, fights back, rears and cries its powerlessness to the world.

When confronted with the principle of reality, the impulsive being cannot know anything but suffering: he is unable to reason, therefore he is a victim. Hence, he is right against all and everything. He resents this unfair world that does not understand or accept him, the arbitrariness of an order that renders the conditions of his existence so unbearable.

The sense of urgency that dominates the impulsive person makes it impossible for him to inhibit any internal reaction to external stimuli. He suffers the world, others and himself, powerlessly. He does not know how to differ his actions before reacting. Obsessed by his dissatisfaction or his pain, he wanders without understanding what is happening: like a nutshell carried by a stream, colliding into anything in its path. He cannot even know regret as he does not connect events to any process of causality linked to himself. He remembers the past only through the chaotic form of an arbitrary series of incidents that make him feel sorry for himself, thus justifying his powerlessness.

The impulsive person is not able to concentrate on the slightest task: as soon as he starts, he gets distracted or disrupted by his thoughts and intrusive or even obsessive memories. A patchy flow of confused images, ideas, desires or emotions overwhelm him in uncontrolled ways.

This powerlessness creates an addiction to novelty as the impulsive person never finds satisfaction in his present situation. He is relentlessly seeking new experiences that would finally satisfy him in the long run; or he repeats for the umpteenth time a gesture that has yet never satisfied, relieved or fulfilled him. This is how some of us eat, drink, or gamble, without ever being satisfied. It is this hellish routine that the master invited his student to examine.

Freedom and necessity

The young elephant is free: it does what it wants and feels like. When it is tied up, it is no longer free: it can no longer do what it wants. But once it is set free, it again does what it wants, only this time, it does not do the same thing at all. Its behavior has changed. What happened?

Critics would say the animal has been tamed, broken or conditioned. Or, “it has made peace with necessity”, would argue those who, like the teacher who spoke of the little elephant as an example to his pupil, think that the animal has learned something.

Spinoza states: “something is free when it exists and acts by the necessity of its very nature, and is forced when determined by something else to exist and act according to precise and determined modality”. Does this mean that for Spinoza, the elephant is free in the first case scenario and is not free in the second? But the philosopher criticizes “this human freedom that all men boast about but that consists only in that men are aware of their own desires and ignorant of the causes that determine them”. And he concludes “There is nothing that men are less capable of than to moderate their passions, and often, under the influence of conflicting passions, they see the best but do the worst: they think they are free yet...”

The problem is then to know if one can be a slave to one’s self and be deprived of freedom when listening to one’s own desires and following one’s own impulses. This is the meditation the Zen master tries to teach when telling the story of the elephant. Is the elephant itself? Is it free when following every blip of its own mind? It would be mere alienation and manipulation unless the animal could consider that

its will, built on reason, recognizes the necessity to go against itself, to confront this “lack of being” that is the absence of concentration. A superior necessity that is different to need, that would in itself be the condition for all freedom.

But for this, the subject would have to position himself “outside” of himself. He would have to somewhat retract himself, deliberately determining what he should be by opposing it to what he is. He would go for Nietzsche’s “become who you are”, an ambiguous quote. “May you become who you are by learning it” wrote Pindare. Therefore there would be various degrees to being, different levels of existence. The point would be to access a “self” that is both present and absent, that too often we ignore, by indolence or futility, which we would need to elaborate or discover. But after all, why should we not listen to our desires? Indeed, why not knock over, run into, break, tumble and crush? What does necessity or a so distant “self” matter to us anyway...?

Thinking is like a wild elephant, explains the master to his student. It runs and bounces in every direction, it gets scared, and through speech, never stops making noise and chatter. One must then learn how to nail this thinking. The rope represents attentiveness, the tension of the mind that is working on itself, whereas the tree represents the object of this attention, that on which we meditate, or the center of our body or of our thought. It is through such constraint or exercise that we become aware of reality, of this necessity that we cannot escape without consequences for ourselves or for others. True freedom would then consist in quiet thinking, taming oneself or mastering oneself. And gradually, over time, this necessity will become integrated in our way of being. It will no longer be perceived as a constraint but as a source of calmness, a place of rest, like the anchorage of our singularity, like the power of being.

Xinyuan (the spirit of the ape)

Xinyuan is a Chinese Buddhist term that indicates the common state of mind which is often worried, agitated, erratic, pusillanimous, capricious, confused, indecisive, uncontrollable and uncontrolled, etc. This metaphor reminds us of the ape as represented in French (or English)

language. “To ape something” is to mimic or imitate in a grotesque way; to act like an ape is to act crazy, supposedly funny, which often implies a connotation of superficiality, absence of meaning. The reference to the ape is more present in cultures where monkeys live in a state of wilderness. They jump from branch to branch, fuss about and suddenly go still. They hang from branches, swing, jump up and down, run after each other, screech, muck about and play with each other, without any of this making sense to the observer. For these reasons, and because they look like us, we naturally perceive these animals as a human caricature with their excessive and arbitrary, yet fun and sympathetic characteristics.

In the context of Buddhism, where one learns how to control one’s emotions and thoughts, the analogy seems obvious. The chaotic, unpredictable and unreasonable aspects of our minds remind us of the behavior of monkeys in the forest.

Our ideas are rebellious, lost and stubborn. It is difficult to empty our minds or to keep our minds set on one fixed and determined idea. This is what Buddhism invites us to study through the practice of meditation while our minds resist. Our desires, our doubts and our fears raise many disorderly impulses that need to be eliminated, observed or channeled. Buddha himself describes the human mind as being filled with drunken apes that jump everywhere, chatter relentlessly, shouting in every direction, seeking attention. He adds that fear is a particularly noisy monkey that rings alarm bells all the time, pointing at all sorts of things that it thinks are dangerous or menacing, worried about everything that could go wrong—as well as what we desire, as we always want new things. As the ape that lets go of one branch to grab hold of another one, thinking jumps from idea to idea. Thus ideas come and go, day and night. The point is to tame this turbulent and agile animal that is everywhere except in the center, where it should be; in other words, to concentrate.

Thus the idea is to work on quieting the mind as suggested in different Buddhist traditions such as the practice of Zazen that consists generally in focusing on a single point, such as breathing, and being conscious of it. Nevertheless, the point of this exercise is not the ac-

tual success or achievement of calming the mind. The simple act of contemplating this chaotic mind is enough to do the work. In a way, tying up the little elephant, even though it is still fighting and resisting, is enough in itself to understand the mind of the ape, to perceive the chaos that inhabits us, were it only because of the pain that the effort causes.

But it seems that the controlled and mastered thinking could be the manifestation of another aspect of the monkey mind, an obstacle to enlightenment. As every time we instrumentalize thinking, it becomes ineffective, and as we need to think, we can never escape such mimics. It is only about feeling at every moment the world emerging from nothingness and diving back into it.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the master tell this story to his pupil?
- Is tying the baby elephant a punishment?
- Is the little elephant being harmed?
- Is the little elephant educated or trained?
- Is the master right to tie the little elephant?
- What has changed in the little elephant?
- Why did the little elephant calm down?
- Is the little elephant no longer himself?
- Did the master help his student by telling him this story?
- Does the young monk resemble the little elephant?

Reflection

- ★ Is it good to follow one's impulses?
- ★ Can one learn to calm one's mind?
- ★ Why is stress unbearable to us?
- ★ Are constraints a condition for freedom?
- ★ Can others stop us from living?

- ★ Do we have to comply with the demands of society?
- ★ Is it necessary to impose in order to teach?
- ★ Does teaching always imply going through states of crisis?
- ★ Is the man who does what he wants free?
- ★ Is freedom acquired through learning?

Chapter 5 The Cat

Is possession a source of violence?

THE MASTER WAS HAVING A WALK IN THE YARD WHEN HE MET TWO MONKS WHO WERE ARGUING FIERCELY ABOUT A LITTLE CAT THEY HAD FOUND, AND THAT THEY ALL WANTED TO KEEP FOR THEMSELVES. WHEN THEY SAW THE MASTER, THE PROTAGONISTS IMMEDIATELY ASKED HIM TO DECIDE WHO WOULD HAVE THE CAT. THE MASTER ASKED THEM TO HAND OVER THE ANIMAL.

- IS IT BECAUSE OF THIS CAT THAT YOU ARE ARGUING? HE ASKED. VERY ANGRY, THE TWO MONKS RESPONDED AT THE SAME TIME, IN A STREAM OF WORDS, EACH TRYING TO JUSTIFY HIS POSITION. WITNESSING THIS, THE MASTER BROKE THE CAT'S NECK, THREW IT TO THE GROUND AND LEFT.

THE TWO MONKS LOOKED AT EACH OTHER IN SHOCK. THEN ONE OF THEM RAN AFTER THE MASTER.

- MASTER! MASTER! HE SHOUTED. WHY DID YOU DO THAT? THE MASTER LOOKED AT HIM, RAISED HIS STICK, STRUCK THE MONK ON THE HEAD, AND CONTINUED ON HIS WAY.

Possession

The first man to build a fence around a field and who thought to say "This is mine," and even found people simple-minded enough to believe him, was really the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars, murders, misery, and horror would have spared the human race if only, while uprooting pillars or filling up trenches, someone had cried out to his fellow men: "Beware of this imposter; you are doomed if you forget that the fruits belong to all, and that the earth belongs to no one", writes Rousseau. To solve the problem of this "unnatural" possession, the philosopher suggests the concept of "social contract", a collective agreement by which property becomes "the most sacred of all the rights of citizens, and in some respects even more important than freedom itself".

This idea can also be found in Zen philosophy: possession is the

source of dissension, violence and misery. More radical than western philosophy, less cautious of establishing any convention, Zen philosophy cannot accept a society based on such an aberration. This instinct emanates directly from this "self" which opposes the "other". It is the direct expression and moreover the reinforcement of this reductive fixation of the mind which is the source of the problem. For possession extends the Self and its hold on the world, whether through identity, honor, property, social and family relations, etc. The illusion of the "self" grows stronger and solidifies. It is on such a pact, as Rousseau puts it, that society is built. But from the Zen perspective such an approach distorts reality since it is based on a claim for individuality: what is mine is mine, and therefore not yours! This absence of community is what inspired Proudhon to say that "property is theft". This can also be contrasted with the idea of Descartes, for whom true knowledge can "make us masters and possessors of nature". Here also, the human spirit shows its excessiveness and aggressivity. To possess is to control, so to cause conflict. Man comes into conflict with the whole world, according to Zen which defends humility and harmony with nature. We are far from "be fertile, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" from the book of Genesis.

On a psychological level, we can also say that the person who possesses is possessed; even if the demon is not a character in itself but the expression of an exacerbated subjectivity which conflicts with reason.

On the other hand, one can defend possession, since unlike property it has no right based on what it holds: it is only a state of affairs. It claims to benefit from the advantages of a situation without establishing any legitimacy. The monks of our story, ready to fight, seem to claim an attachment that strangely resembles the latter.

Confrontation (agôn)

Nietzsche declares: "No philosophy without agôn", a Greek term that is found in the words Agony or Antagonism. In his wake, Brecht defines philosophy as "the art of receiving and giving blows in a fight." It is this same idea that we find in Zen philosophy, as this story literally tells us.

In ancient Greece, where archetypes were personified, Agon was an

honoured spirit in Olympia, a city where all sorts of competitions were regularly held. There was an altar dedicated to him, and a statue of him bearing weights, thus confronting gravity and the order of the world.

Conceptually, the term finds its origin in tragedy, indicating the specific moment when two characters state opposing perspectives while the chorus represents the *vox populi*, the man of the street or the spectator who alternates between the two perspectives. In general, the term refers to any form of competition: sports, oratory or artistic.

This is what is similarly signified by the harsh actions of the master in this story. Violence, instead of being directed against "the other", becomes an opportunity to confront oneself in order to grow and overcome one's empirical and reductive being. It is about channelling the innate desire for combat that lies in the human soul into a fight with oneself. Thus, the two monks must, through the master's actions, seize the absurdity of their attitude. This includes understanding the fallacy of their "friendship" or "compassion" for the cat.

We find the same problem in the report of Socrates with the sophists, which was to later lead to his execution. Plato contrasted two concepts: the eristic and the dialectic. Both concepts have a connotation with "fight", where one can lose or win; only the goal is not the same. In the first case, as with the sophists, we fight against the other, in order to be right: the art of rhetoric. In the second, the fight is not focused on people but on truth. We win or lose not against the other, but thanks to him, or despite him if he defends himself or escapes and does not want to seek the truth. This is what Socrates did, constantly asking for this kind of dialogue, questioning all and everybody. Zen tradition seems to combine both verbal and bodily confrontation, which is also found in its practice of martial arts.

Violence

The present story will shock more than one reader because of its violence. Nowadays, where we praise care, gentleness and kindness, violence is a problematic concept: nonviolence is the ideal par excellence. Violence is negatively charged: it conveys the ideas of abuse, pain,

transgression, even inhumanity. But in order to make sense of this story, let us ask ourselves how it can be a positive concept. Firstly, as a primary reality, almost ontological:

Let us take as an example the principle of Heraclitus, according to whom "conflict is father of all things, king of all things". Violence means a force that is both destructive and productive; it generates the very process of life, which involves a degree of violence. Things and beings collide against each other, exclude, destroy and assimilate each other, transform themselves into their opposites. Identity is constantly threatened and can only be ephemeral. Violence can be assimilated to a force, to a power, the first form of being, as Plato says. Violent movements are against nature, yet they take part in it.

On the political front, Hannah Arendt regrets that the terms "power", "force", "strength" and "authority" are hardly distinguished from the term "violence": the border is hazy and slippery.

It seems that we are confronted with the same problem when distinguishing a "resistant" from a "terrorist": it is a simple question of perspective. The necessity and the legitimacy of an action would make the judgment pass from one extreme to the other; it would then be only a matter of political opinion or personal sensitivity. Even Gandhi, the greatest defender of non-violence, specifies that this does not mean abstaining from any real fight against wickedness: "Where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, it is necessary to go for the violent solution".

René Girard defends the idea of a violence as a creator of civilization, a principle found in all the great founding myths. He elaborates the concept of sacrifice, the necessary outlet through which violence must be able to express itself: it channels the violence that would otherwise be unleashed with terrifying brutality. This is what we find in the idea of dying for an ideal, a factor of humanization. "Through the idea of violence that terrifies them, it is non-violence that is always worshiped by the faithful," he writes. Is this not what we see in the "murder" of the cat, in the blow of a stick on the head of the pupil? By annihilating the causes of the violence, the latter is eliminated.

Compassion (Karuna)

One of Zen Buddhism's important values is compassion. Put simply, it is a strong feeling of sympathy towards people, especially towards those who suffer, along with a desire to help them. It enables us to psychologically share the misfortune of others by putting ourselves on the same level as them. For Buddhism, compassion is undoubtedly the main characteristic of the Bodhisattva, he who wants to follow the way of Buddha and follows the rules of Dharma. He could not possibly abandon other beings to their suffering: he invests himself wholly in the task of helping each and every one of us escape suffering. Awakening is the essential element, both for others and for himself. For the key to the abolition of suffering is the realization that things and beings do not exist in themselves. And "great compassion" operates when the bodhisattva no longer distinguishes himself from the one towards whom he feels compassion. Paradoxically, this compassion is no longer a feeling, it is strangely similar to indifference, because the subject no longer really has a status, neither his own nor that of other. There is a kind of radical detachment, contrary to the idea that one could have of compassion. It is about understanding that any attachment for a being, whatever its form and good intention, by granting an objective or legitimate status to the subject, would only nourish the suffering that it is set out to fight.

The point here is to be able to grasp the possibility of compassion without attachment. "From then on it is no longer an emotional reaction, but a reasoned commitment," explains the Dalai Lama. "It is not based on our expectations or projections, but on the needs of others". Of course, compassion implies skills such as empathy, listening, harmony with others, but moreover it must liberate us from suffering. Therefore compassion cannot be reduced to the sympathy of a friend, no matter how strong and attentive it may be. For this sympathy, this "suffering together", can strengthen or legitimize the very sources of suffering, rather than reveal the path to liberation. On this point, Zen takes a radical stance. It is not a question of accompanying the other person in his pain, nor comforting him, no matter how "therapeutic" such a position would be, it is a question of "breaking" the ties which

generate this suffering. From this perspective, one can understand the compassion that animates the master of this story, who wants his disciples to perceive the absurdity of their behavior and of the worldviews they maintain.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why do the two monks argue?
- Do the monks worry about the cat?
- Why doesn't the master separate the two students?
- Why doesn't the master explain the problem to his students?
- Why does the master kill the cat?
- Why does the master hit his pupil?
- Do the monks need their master?
- Is the master a good teacher?
- Are the two monks more violent than the master?
- Is the master fair?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we fight?
- ★ Is wanting to own something illegitimate?
- ★ Is possession a source of violence?
- ★ Can violence be used as an educational practice?
- ★ Can violence be beneficial?
- ★ Is violence necessary to put an end to violence?
- ★ What do we look for in our pets?
- ★ Can animals replace humans?
- ★ Do we have the right to kill animals?
- ★ Are the explanations always appropriate?

Chapter 6 The Challenge

Should we learn to die?

A YOUNG MONK WAS RETURNING FROM A JOURNEY, CARRYING AN IMPORTANT LETTER FOR HIS MASTER, WHEN HE BUMPED INTO AN AGGRESSIVE SAMURAI WHO CHALLENGED HIM TO A DUEL. THE MONK BEGGED THE SAMURAI TO LET HIM PASS, PROMISING TO RETURN ONCE HE HAD ACCOMPLISHED HIS MISSION. THE SAMURAI AGREED, AND THE MONK WENT AWAY. BUT BEFORE GOING BACK, HE ASKED HIS MASTER FOR ADVICE.

- WHAT IS TO BE DONE, I HAVE NEVER TOUCHED A WEAPON IN MY LIFE? I WILL GET KILLED!

- INDEED, YOU ARE GOING TO DIE, THERE IS FOR YOU NO CHANCE OF VICTORY. BUT I CAN TEACH YOU A GOOD WAY TO DIE. YOU WILL BRANDISH YOUR SWORD OVER YOUR HEAD, CLOSE YOUR EYES, AND WAIT UNTIL YOU FEEL A CHILL ON THE TOP OF YOUR SKULL: IT WILL BE DEATH.

THE MONK THANKED HIS MASTER AND WENT BACK TO THE SAMURAI. THE LATTER OFFERED HIM A SWORD AND THE DUEL BEGAN. FOR LACK OF ANYTHING BETTER, THE MONK FOLLOWED HIS MASTER'S RECOMMENDATIONS: HE RAISED HIS ARMS WITH HIS SWORD AND WAITED. HIS IMPASSIVE ATTITUDE SURPRISED THE SAMURAI. INDEED, THE MONK WAS COMPLETELY FOCUSED ON THE TOP OF HIS SKULL TO KNOW WHEN HE WOULD BE DEAD, PAYING NO ATTENTION TO HIS OPPONENT.

THE SAMURAI WAS WORRIED. "ONLY A GREAT SWORD MASTER WOULD TAKE UP SUCH A STRANGE POSITION. AND WITH HIS EYES CLOSED!" WHILE THE YOUNG MONK WAS STILL WAITING, WITHOUT MOVING, THE SAMURAI, DISTRAUGHT, DARED NOT ATTACK. FINALLY, HE BURST INTO TEARS, BEGGING:

-DO NOT KILL ME! HAVE MERCY! I THOUGHT I WAS THE BEST, BUT I HAVE NEVER MET A MASTER LIKE YOU. I BEG YOU, ACCEPT ME AS YOUR DISCIPLE AND TEACH ME THE TRUE PATH OF THE SWORD!

Attitude

The samurai is impressed by the attitude of the monk, so much so that he concedes victory without even a fight. This is a recurring theme in the Zen tales. Even more so than action, attitude is decisive in assessing the strength of an opponent, the skills of a person.

Attitude is a state of mind, determined by a way of being as well as various circumstances: event, idea, act, object, person, etc. Thus the attitude we will have towards someone will be formed by our personality and the experience we have of that person, which will bring us to act in a certain way. It is because of this coherence that the Zen practice gives important credit to attitude. We can note that the terms Action, Aptitude and Attitude can be easily linked conceptually. It is a way of holding/behaving ourselves that indicates a state of mind, an emotion, a personality, an existential or psychological posture. It is considered a priori natural and unfeigned; in this sense it informs us about the state of mind and the personality of someone, which allows us to predict his way of acting. Of course, it is a question of distinguishing it from posture or pose, which are more momentary, factitious, forced and theatrical, far from the usual composure. Attitude is therefore a non-voluntary behavior, although it may be the consequence of a habitual practice of the will. It is hard to imagine that the monk of the story would have acted the way he did had he not already trained to control his mental state and disregard his emotions, especially fear.

Attitude can be worked on with time. Under the action of constant will, the subject transforms himself. Here lies one of Zen's key teachings, which forms habit. It is about educating oneself, not just gathering information. The will is exercised regularly, continuously, thus distinguishing itself from velleity. Therefore, even though he is mistaken about the particular skills of the monk, the samurai understood that the monk's attitude was that of a master: there are gestures which do not lie. Fear or trust are pledges of failure or success. So the will of the monk forms his nature. The reason the samurai "is wrong" is simple: a master does not fear anything or anyone. Who would not have made the same mistake?

Fear

Human beings are fearful, they worry about many dangers. Like animals, humans experience fears that are of a biological nature such as fear of death, suffering, lack, losing loved ones, etc. But they also experience numerous fears that are of a moral and metaphysical nature: fear of being wrong, being flawed, not being recognized, being alone, not being loved, etc.

Along with desire, fear is undoubtedly our most predominant emotion. Moreover, we can consider that fear is just the dark side of desire, like darkness is absence of light. Indeed, if we did not have such a strong will to live, to be happy or satisfied, would we fear death, to be unhappy or to be dissatisfied? It is for this reason that the Buddhist tradition warns us against desire, the source of much suffering.

Another way of looking at fear is to think of it as an immediate response to anything that threatens our integrity. It would then no longer be a question of desire, but of instinct. There is a natural tendency for all living beings to protect themselves, linked to an intrinsic impulse to persevere in the act of existing. For the monk in the story, integrity is not about surviving, but about keeping his word. This cannot even be imagined by the samurai who fears death despite his apparent bravery.

Thus, with regards to fear, the psychological or cultural dimension changes the situation. If it amplifies the quantity of subjects of fear as we have seen, it can also replace them, sublimate them, or even make them disappear. It all depends on what we consider as our integrity. Are we primarily our bodies, like for animals, which seems a fairly common point of view? Or have we changed our fear by transcending our identity?

The placidity of the master regarding the issue of death, the unwavering will of the monk in the face of danger, lead us to reflect upon our behavior, motivations and anxieties. Do humans make themselves unhappy for nothing, fearing all these real or phantasmatic threats to their integrity? Maybe we need to learn to change our identity? Is it reasonable to be afraid of not being loved, be afraid of not being recognized or be afraid of our incompetence? In opposition to what Kant says, in order to master our fears and ourselves, ought we to accept

that we are not our own finality?

Risk

Who is this samurai who is so eager to fight? What drives him to expose his life as well as that of others? Why does he need to take risks and play with death? Obviously, he has something to learn from the monk since he is his interlocutor in the story.

If we are to believe Heidegger, for us it is simply about existing. According to this philosopher, human existence is defined precisely as one which puts its own being at risk.

It is not so much his life that the samurai is putting at risk, but what he is, in the most fundamental sense, which is not that of his presence or immediate function. Some might call this a quest for identity or meaning, or an experience of finitude, since it is a question of grazing death which, as an important part of life, seems to constitute the finality of our being. We may at first think that the samurai does not risk much in this fight against the monk, but on the one hand he does not know it, and on the other hand, nothing is less certain. Because eventually we discover that this fight which at first seems not to be notable, may well be the most important fight that the samurai has ever led. For if it is precisely a "quest for his being", he suddenly realizes that something escapes him. He recognizes a singularity in the monk, whom he calls "swordmaster", for lack of a better name, because he knows only the handling of the sword: there is his immediacy. As usual, technique and the material world conceal from the mind of man the fundamental question: that of being.

For Hobbes, the problem of risk is articulated more as a "natural right": that of each to exert its strength and power. We all want to extend our empire to live and destroy the other: an endless fight to the death, everyone wants to win at all costs. The game of life therefore consists in playing with death, which fascinates and frightens us. To live, we must graze it constantly. Paradoxically, the samurai seeks for himself the peace of the soul. By fighting everyone and continually risking his life, he becomes accustomed to risk in order to give meaning to his life. Here, he intuitively or naively perceives the monk as a "war-

rior" who, unlike him, seems to have found the peace he subconsciously desires.

The spirit of the gesture (zanshin)

One may be surprised at the reaction of the samurai, who recognizes the monk as a "master", since the monk has never fought and does not do anything. Now we sometimes find this pattern of combat without action in Zen tales. The key is in the zanshin ability of the monk, especially his absence of fear of death.

Literally, this Japanese term means "the spirit of the gesture," "The spirit that remains" or "the spirit of complete action". It is found in many Japanese practices, such as martial arts, tea ceremony, painting, floral art, etc. It describes a state of total vigilance where we are fully aware of what surrounds us and our own inner state, where the mind is attached to nothing, although completely present in the process, in the here and now, it is both alert and relaxed. Every action, every thought, must be precise and harmonious. Even the most banal things like eating, getting dressed, and of course interacting with others. This is a question of living fully each of these actions: when I eat, I eat, the mind and the body are fully engaged in the act of eating. The subject is completely immersed in his task, and he will accomplish it to the end. One can understand its importance in the martial arts (budo), where it is among other things to be attentive to the enemy as well as to the environment, being ready to act or react, without being affected by fear or pain. Such an attitude requires long training and will have repercussions in all aspects of our existence: it is a way of being. One of the consequences of this existential posture is that everything "counts": there is no "ordinary" moment, deprived of interest or possibility. Everything is opportunity, everything is trial, everything is Buddha, everything is Zen. There is no waiting, there is no need to be disappointed or frustrated. There is no difference of state of mind before, during, or after the action, whatever the result. For this, whether while doing a painting or during a fight, gestures are carried out in a continuous way along with controlled breathing. Nothing is left unresolved: everything is continuity, integrity and completeness.

True action leaves nothing to chance, hesitation, doubt, hope or fear, as long as we are ready for any eventuality, without trying to control everything. It is this attitude that the samurai perceives in the monk, only because he is ready to die, because he is deliberately waiting for death. Because in the zanshin, the main obstacle is fear, which generates weakness, error, useless gestures. There lies the "secret": not in the handling of the sword, but inside oneself.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the samurai want to fight?
- Why does the monk accept the fight?
- Why doesn't the master suggest the monk escape the combat?
- Is the monk naive?
- Why doesn't the samurai strike the monk?
- Why does the samurai burst into tears?
- Is the monk really a sword master?
- Do the monk and the samurai fear the same thing?
- What was the samurai looking for?
- What did the master teach the monk?

Reflection

- ★ Where does the desire to fight come from?
- ★ Why are we afraid to die?
- ★ Are there any "good" ways to die?
- ★ Should we learn to die?
- ★ Is cowardice reprehensible?
- ★ Can we dominate our fears?
- ★ Should we always keep our word?
- ★ Is the other a challenge for all of us?
- ★ Is naivety a recommendable posture?

★ Is attitude more important than action in itself?

Chapter 7 Because I Am Here

Is the present the primordial reality?

AN OLD MONK SWEEPED THE COURTYARD OF THE MONASTERY UNDER A BLAZING SUN. A YOUNG MONK WAS PASSING BY. CURIOUS, HE ASKED HIM:

- HOW OLD ARE YOU?
- EIGHTY-TWO YEARS OLD.
- YOU ARE REALLY VERY OLD! WHY DO YOU KEEP WORKING SO HARD?
- WELL, BECAUSE I'M HERE.
- BUT WHY ARE YOU WORKING UNDER THIS BLAZING SUN?
- WELL, BECAUSE IT'S HERE.

Curiosity

The young monk is curious. He sees this old monk sweeping the courtyard under a burning sun, he is surprised and questions him. But what is the nature or purpose of this curiosity? Science sees as necessary and productive this attitude which leads someone to wonder about the reality of the world. It encourages us to question, to try to analyze and understand the phenomena that surround us, or those who inhabit us, sometimes taking risks. Why? Who? What? How? When? So many questions that emanate from curiosity and lead to knowledge. Nevertheless, in order to problematize the concept—a specific form of curiosity—one wonders on the one hand whether there are several kinds of curiosity, on the other hand whether curiosity is always desirable, legitimate or laudable, or whether it is "an ugly flaw". Take for example the young monk of this story. Why is he questioning the old monk? It may be for various reasons that the narrative does not specify. He may be personally struck by this situation, imagining for example that this man suffers; he pities him, and it is because of an emotional reaction that he asks questions. It could also be morally or intellectually that he is struck because he wants to understand what is happening, since this

situation does not fit into the "natural order" of things: such labour should be taken on by a young monk, out of respect for seniority, or because working outdoors under such temperatures is beyond common sense.

He may also question the old monk for fun, as a game, because he finds such an absurd situation comical, and wants to interact with such a character. It may also be for the sake of conversation or to practice decency, like when someone asks "How are you?" without really worrying about the answer. It could finally be idleness, this indolence or inaction which generates "idle" curiosity, according to the expression of St. Augustine.

Depending on the different cases, curiosity can express concern, discomfort, a desire to understand, compassion, politeness, disagreement, a desire for change, and so on.

Of course, curiosity that is expressed by the child early on in life of all that surrounds him must be encouraged as it prompts him to discover and to think. But what are curiosity's limits or flaws? Thomas Aquinas criticizes curiosity because it ignores the virtue of temperance and can lead to excess. One might want to know things that are best not known, or that one cannot understand. In line with the Christian tradition, he suggests the idea of studiosity, which incorporates within the desire to know the role of moral judgment. Thus, one avoids compulsive, unconscious and dangerous curiosity, as in the stories of Bluebeard, Adam and Eve, and Pandora's Box; unhealthy voyeurism, such as featured in certain magazines; or intrusive and controlling curiosity that does not respect others.

Worry

We detect a certain uneasiness in the young monk's attitude, while the old monk seems completely at ease as he takes things as they come and accepts things as they are. In the pattern of Zen philosophy, the second character, more experienced and therefore wiser, is depicted as a mentor, in opposition to the first character who acts like a novice, poorly educated and naive. In this story we discern a critique of worry. But what can we think of this?

Leibniz praises worry, non-tranquility, which he links to desire: "The absence of something that would give pleasure if it were present". It is for him constitutive of human activity because it is "the main or only pointer". If this absence of good were not accompanied by displeasure or pain, no one would care, or barely; hence the benefit of worry. For him, worry is composed of a myriad of "imperceptible little solicitations that always hold us in suspense", somewhat confused and vague, but sometimes connected to certain passions or determined inclinations. Thus the fabric of the soul is a swarm of small itches, and it opposes a thought conceived as worry, to deadly indifference. Without this worry that is necessary for our true happiness, we would be "insensitive and stupid", incapable of progress and good. Zen precisely criticizes this posture by inviting us to go beyond worry, even if it be by cessation of thought.

Worry, for example, is concern for others, a source of morality and empathy. It leads us to fight injustice and to improve the order of the world. It encourages us to correct our mistakes and to perfect ourselves. But in an intellectual or practical engagement, it protects us from good consciousness. Certainly, worry can focus on more "unhealthy" objects, as is the case with envy or jealousy, where others become a threat. Especially when it breeds an obsession with what we are not or what we do not have.

But it is often of a paradoxical nature. In love, worry is both an erotic stimulation and a devouring monster, for fear of absence and betrayal. It is a frustrating obstacle for fun as well as an annoying spice. For reflection, it breeds doubt, which can stimulate thought as well as paralyze it for fear of error. Worry allows us to stay alive and still hope, but it can also plunge us into despair and anguish, as this generalized and total anxiety, intense and devoid of definite object. It brings us to the absolute or the unconditioned, source of metaphysical or existential inspiration but also the cause of despondency.

We can understand wisdoms such as epicureanism which proposes to live the pleasure of the present moment (*carpe diem*) or stoicism which recommends *ataraxia*, the absence of any worry, as a "recipe" of wellbeing. Everything is in the here and now, in the *hic et nunc*, past

and future are in vain, just as the suppositions of reason, the delusions of imagination or the illusions of desire, the fantasies of the hereafter. It is about limiting ourselves exclusively to the natural and necessary in order to avoid the precariousness of reflecting and existential positioning, and to be reassured.

There are other recipes besides wisdom with which we seek to alleviate or remove anxiety/worry. Knowledge, which through its scientific, psychological, mythical or metaphysical explanations, demonstrates worry and seeks to put it to sleep. We wish to know the invisible, the inaccessible, the mysterious, to predict the future, taking the risk of falling into fiction, because we want to reach the insurmountable depths of reality and to find its limits. But also doing good, accumulating wealth or power, seeking to be loved or recognized. To strike the world with our own singularity, by any means, in order to fight this death which marks our existence with the seal of derision. Finally, it seems that, above all, worry gives meaning to our existence.

Here and now

The old man explains things not by their causality, but by their presence, in a given place, at a given moment. It resembles the Latin concept of the *hic et nunc*, to live in the "here and now", without worrying about the past and the future, without worrying about other places or other possibilities.

We find in the cryptic responses of the monk, or one could say in his non-answers, a crucial principle of Zen thought. In the instantaneous, in the immediate, in the presence of the present, as reduced as its space-time, are the unconditioned, the absolute, the eternity, the emptiness. Any other consideration would fall into lack, incompleteness, partiality, with all the implications that this might have: setting in motion rationalization, worry, desire, fear, etc. If everything is in the moment, there is nothing more to wait for and to fear, all preoccupation disappears. Unlike epicureans, it is not so much a pleasure, but a tranquility of the soul, although we can still combine the two interpretations.

Nevertheless, in Zen, it is not a question of only a psychological

dimension, but also an epistemological dimension. In the experience of the moment is a kind of return to the origin. This is the experience before the split between subject and object. Moreover, the old monk speaks of himself in the same way that he speaks of the sun: the fact of "being here" explains his actions just as well as that of the star.

Through this explanation, they are no longer two, but one. The separation is no longer necessary, the separation of time and space disappears, the cause is no longer distinguished from the effect, the parts are no longer distinct at all. We find ourselves in a kind of "before" which is neither temporal nor causal. It is what it is, only what it is, and because of this "it is not" or "it is nothing". In this acosmism or atemporality, the non-dualism of Zen is articulated, in this bottomless foundation lies the ultimate reality of everything, identical to the Taoist principle of "the way".

Everything is here, why look elsewhere? We find this same coincidence in Nicolas de Cues, for whom the absolute is as much the absence of any reduction as the reduction of the reduction, it meets itself in the absence of any specificity as much as it would in the minutest specificity. He calls this "coincidence of opponents". But to consider such a perspective, one must step out of rationality in its usual sense in order to contemplate, even to engage the mind in pure intuition, be it that of the moment, of the 'unconditioned,' the 'here and now', emptiness. Moreover, for Zen, this primordial state is the most natural one since it is our most essential anchorage. Of course, one can also criticize this philosophy of the present moment as illusion, as anchoring in the ephemeral, as absence of thought, as negation of the process. One can see there a complacency, a withdrawal, a negation of others. For example, in the New Age cult of the "present moment", which is very popular today, we can observe an expression of consumerism and egocentrism, which disempowers the individual. Certainly, we can also find a psychotherapeutic dimension, insofar as such a vision of things frees us from our feelings of guilt and from the heaviness of tragedy. But let us not forget that immediateness is also a characteristic of infantile or pathological behavior. There is an aberration of the immediate, in that we confine ourselves exclusively to the present, just as there is one of

nostalgia, when we are haunted by the past, and another of the future, when we are too worried about what will happen and feel the need to control everything.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the young monk question the old monk?
- Is the young monk worried?
- Does the old monk really answer the young monk's questions?
- Does the young monk understand the old monk's answers?
- Does the old monk make sense?
- Is the old monk fatalist?
- Why does the old monk work so hard?
- Does the old monk ask himself questions?
- What characterizes the philosophy of the old monk?
- Can the young monk understand the old monk?

Reflection

- ★ Is curiosity a quality or a flaw?
- ★ Why are we worried for others?
- ★ Is worry a good thing?
- ★ Should we logically answer the questions we are asked?
- ★ Is it better to ignore suffering?
- ★ Should our actions always have a purpose?
- ★ Is the present the primordial reality?
- ★ Should we accept reality as it is?
- ★ Is it necessary to ask questions?
- ★ Can old age be an asset?

Chapter 8 The Way

Are we missing the essential?

A DISCIPLE ASKED THE MASTER:

- WHERE IS THE WAY?
- RIGHT BEFORE YOUR EYES.
- BUT WHY DO I NOT SEE IT?
- BECAUSE YOU KEEP WITHIN YOURSELF THE IDEA OF "SELF".
- OH SO BECAUSE I KEEP WITHIN MYSELF THE IDEA OF "SELF", I DO NOT SEE IT! AND YOU MASTER, DID YOU SEE IT?
- THE IDEA OF "YOU", IN ADDITION TO THE IDEA OF "SELF", STILL KEEPS YOU FROM SEEING IT.
- IF THE IDEA OF "YOU" AND THE IDEA OF "SELF" DISAPPEAR, THEN CAN WE SEE IT?
- IF THERE IS NO MORE "YOU" OR "SELF", THEN WHO WOULD WANT TO SEE IT?
- BUT ME, OF COURSE!

The essential

In a certain sense, the way is the essential. Yet we seek at the same time what is essential, and we ignore it inadvertently, out of forgetfulness, disinterest and ignorance. The disciple says he is looking for the way, but his behaviour indicates a lack of habit. He speaks of it with a lack of discernment, which indicates his mental state, his blindness and his inertia. Not only does he not know where to look for it, but he also thinks it should be looked for somewhere. Not only does he not see it, but he also asks if the master has seen it.

The Little Prince states, "the essential is invisible to the eyes". In practical terms, this means that the essential is not accessible to the senses, on the symbolic level; that it is not about the obvious. For, rightly or wrongly so, sensory perception represents the immediate given, which we cannot fail to grasp. But if this essential is not obvious to the senses, to what or to whom is it accessible? We have the choice between the mind and the heart, these two other organs or symbolic

places of perception. Plato and the idealist philosophical current share the first idea: the senses are coarse and deceptive, only the spirit by its activity can go beyond this illusion. Romantic philosophy, or various religions such as Christianity, would opt for the second hypothesis: one must love in order to know. Others, on a more mystical path, suggest a sort of union with transcendence or a path to the unconditioned: only the access to a primordial or substantive unity would be adequate. But such overtaking of immediate evidence generally implies a process, a work, an accomplishment, an inner transformation. Whether it is learning to think, open your heart or access the ultimate truth, it cannot be done without a minimum of commitment and effort. The essential is given, it is there, everywhere—"right in front of your eyes", says the master of the story—still it is necessary to want, to be able and to know how to welcome it. It is omnipresent and completely visible, but only for the one who knows how to see, or has learned to see. At the same time, essence, like any production of the human mind, can be a trap. Rabelaisian irony suggests that this is problematic when the author presents himself as "absentee of quintessence", this essence of essence.

The subject

Paradoxically, the person or the subject is an important obstacle to the perception of the way. How could we explain that? The most flagrant opposition is that the Way represents a kind of absolute or unconditioned. It is not the case of the subject who cannot be considered objectively as an absolute. The subject is always conditioned and reduced, whatever its nature. In grammar, the subject requires a sentence, it must be articulated at least in relation to a verb that determines its action, to a predicate that determines its nature, or to an object that determines its mode of relationship. In logic, the subject must always be attributed to a predicate, in order to build a reasoning. Of course, the subject in question can become an absolute, when it is the substance for example, as Spinoza puts it. The subject then deserves all the predicates and cannot be defined.

On the philosophical level, as an entity, the subject always falls

within the power of being specific, of a mode of action of which it is the cause, but "it" is generally a human. It is defined by specific and reduced attributes or functions: gender, culture, work, activities, relationships, character; these are what is called its identity, its singularity or its individuality: its condition of being. For example, Descartes bases the subject on his capacity to doubt or think, so much so that he suspects that the cessation of intellectual activity could lead to that of being or existence. Or it is considered to be the substratum of an affective or cognitive phenomenon: the fact of feeling or thinking something determines the existence of a subject. The latter can be defined in a relational mode: another, the one who is similar to me, or myself, the one who enters a relationship with me.

Another problem is whether the subject is in time or transcends it. To know myself, must I be and know myself in a kind of eternity, or in becoming? To define the subject, Hegel takes up the paradoxical model of the god of Aristotle: "the immobile who moves himself". He sees in it the intrinsic negativity of the subject separating from himself, which must be reconciled to himself by a negation of negation, the dynamic of a free and conscious being which at the same time is destitute and constitutes itself.

In spite of this deconstruction, the subject remains a crucial element of thought: it even seems to be its author, as a thinking subject, mediating between nothing and the phenomenon. But perhaps it is only the first illusion, the founder of intellectual and existential fantasy, both by its apparent stability and its claims of autonomy. What we take for a solid and unavoidable substance is in fact only an accident, an ephemeral quirk, a sort of shadow devoid of substance. Perhaps we erect a simple image into an idol, which would then obscure the substantial. For the sake of affirming ourselves, for the sake of certainty, for fear of being annihilated, like the monk of history, we want to place the subject at the heart of the real, in particular the "ours", to which we tightly hold. Should we then preach his death?

The *epoché*

Over the course of history, the pupil is seen to propose specific thinking patterns, each time defeated by the teacher. Even when asking questions or making inferences, one realizes that one's thinking is steeped in assumptions or preconceived opinions. This type of unconscious dogmatism is quite common, without anyone realizing it, especially in oneself, in one's thoughts and words. Many philosophers, like Descartes, propose a suspension of judgment as a condition of right thought or adequate understanding, a kind of active, temporary or permanent neutrality, which is called *epoché*. The latter is registered here in the Stoic tradition where it is mainly to avoid precipitation, in order to take the time to properly evaluate a proposal and not to fall into the trap of illusion.

This term means in ancient Greek "interruption or cessation". It is found in ancient thought, especially among skeptics. There, it is a question of affirming anything, in particular to confirm or to invalidate a given hypothesis, and to show a certain indifference. "Nothing is more than that," said Pyrrhon, the founder of this school. We cannot judge the value of things, nor their veracity: an absence of opinions which implies a certain detachment.

Another reason for practicing the *epoché* relies on the difficulty or the impossibility of grasping things in depth, the ultimate truth always remaining a mystery. Arcesilaus of Pitane, neo-Platonist, referring to Socrates who recommends the contemplation of one's own ignorance, advocates that since "nothing can be perceived or understood ... one must never assure anything, affirm anything, or approve anything". More recently, Husserl proposes in his phenomenology an epoch that means "to put in parentheses" our knowledge of the world, our beliefs, our postulates and presuppositions, in order to let the world "appear", giving way to the only relatively objective reality: the phenomenon. One can however wonder if "the way" will be able to appear.

The non-thinking (hishiryō)

Obviously, the disciple thinks too much. His teacher invites him to practice hishiryō. This term indicates a state of mind, an attitude, and a way of thinking. It can be translated as "thoughtless thoughts", "non-thinking" or "beyond thought". Widely used during zazen, it consists in allowing reflections to pass without paying attention or particular interest, which tends to widen the field of consciousness, because we observe thought processes that we would not see otherwise. This practice also promotes the harmony between the mind, the body and the cosmos, by exceeding distinctions and oppositions. It is no longer a question of thinking or not thinking: the hishiryō returns somehow in the depths of being, although such an expression is not very Buddhist. It is a question of living and acting from the space of consciousness, the one from which existence constantly arises.

Certainly, the prospect of a cessation of thought is a tempting ideal, to escape the storm of ideas and emotions devoid of meaning and coherence that inhabit us. But it would be falling from Charybdis into Scylla: the effort not to think is still a work of thought; we are actually looking for a way to escape from it. Thoughts are what they are, neither more nor less. It is simply a question of perceiving their inconsistency, their evanescence, their lack of anchorage, so as not to be attached to them, so as not to hypostatize them and believe in them. This is where the drama begins, by this anchoring, even though they are hidden in the folds of the soul. It is difficult to hold a neutral position in the face of thought. Already with our sensory perceptions we make choices, our subjectivity operates without even asking our opinion, we like or do not like, we are seduced or disgusted, we seek or flee. For example, listening to sounds without worrying about whether they please us or not is a difficult exercise: it seems that the taste is binding to us. This is even more the case with our ideas, which seem to us agreeable or not, true or false, good or bad. It is therefore a question of neutralizing them, of making them neutral, rather than wanting to make them disappear. Sometimes they make us ashamed, they seem to us unworthy of our being, of what we want to be. But they are there; accept them, see them, and let them pass. Reject them, and they would come back even

stronger. But thought is an integral part of our mind. It is natural for us to separate, to assemble, to judge and to invent.

Non-thinking is therefore a kind of return to the original, the primordial; it is necessary to hear the echo of a background of all thought, leaving the field free to consciousness, freeing it from the uncontrolled censors, rigidities and impulses that clog it up. This is done through a work of concentration and observation, which at once strengthens the thought and makes it present to itself. Non-thinking is in a way thought that thinks itself, clearly and freely. This is the way.

A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the disciple seek the way?
- Does the disciple know what he is looking for?
- What prevents the disciple from answering his own question?
- How can the way be right in front of our eyes?
- Why is the "self" an obstacle to see the way?
- Can we escape the concept of "self"?
- Should we want to see the way?
- What is the student's problem?
- Did the disciple understand the words of the master?
- What is the message of the master?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we want to give meaning to our existence?
- ★ Is thinking judging?
- ★ Can thought not be conditioned?
- ★ Is it possible to ignore oneself to think?
- ★ Does thinking too much prevent thinking?
- ★ Should we see to know?
- ★ Is reality in the world or in the mind?
- ★ Is it true that "the essential is invisible to the eyes"?

- ★ Is it difficult to distinguish the secondary and the essential?
- ★ Do we always know what we are looking for?

Chapter 9 The Young Woman

Does true morality mock morality?

TWO MONKS TRAVELLED TOGETHER TO JOIN THEIR MONASTERY. THEY APPROACHED A VILLAGE AND MET A YOUNG WOMAN WHO STOOD STILL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD. NICELY DRESSED, SHE WAS STANDING AT THE EDGE OF A BOG THAT SHE COULD NOT CROSS WITHOUT GETTING DIRTY. HAVING UNDERSTOOD THE PROBLEM, ONE OF THE TWO MONKS OFFERED TO TAKE HER ON HIS BACK TO CROSS OVER TO THE OTHER SIDE. AFTER A SLIGHT HESITATION, A QUICK GLANCE LEFT AND RIGHT, THE YOUNG WOMAN ACCEPTED THE OFFER. SO THEY PROCEEDED, AND THEN THE TWO MONKS CARRIED ON THEIR WAY. IN THE EVENING, WHEN HE ARRIVED AT THE TEMPLE, THE SECOND MONK COULD NOT HELP BUT MAKE A REMARK TO HIS COMRADE.

- YOU'RE A MONK, YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO MAKE CONTACT WITH WOMEN. ESPECIALLY WOMEN OF THIS KIND, YOUNG AND PRETTY. IT'S DANGEROUS!

THE FIRST MONK HESITATED, THEN ANSWERED.

- I LEFT THE GIRL BY THE ROADSIDE. YOU, IT SEEMS, ARE STILL CARRYING HER WITHIN YOU.

Obsession

Buddhism differentiates desire and greed: it is not so much the former that poses a problem but the latter because of its excessive pregnancy. This is what we could call obsession, and which seems to characterize the monk who criticizes his comrade. Because if any idea of concupiscence had crossed the first monk's mind, it has probably faded, while his comrade still seems to be tormented by it. On the psychological level, an obsession is a recurring mental phenomenon, idea, image or emotion, related to a situation, an object or a person, which manifests itself in a compulsive and inevitable way. Even if the subject finds it insane or painful, it seems to impose itself relentlessly. When he becomes aware of it and wishes to resist it, his immediate will is

defeated. With time and patience, reasoning and working on it, this uncontrollable and uncontrolled behavior will eventually change. Sometimes there is also an adverse effect, where the more the subject tries to fight these thoughts or this aberrant behavior, the more he reinforces their action, with the anxiety driven consequences on his own psyche. Sometimes this dynamic is so internalized that the problem is only visible to an observer. Either the subject remains completely blind to his own obsession, or he puts in place a more-or-less complicated system of justification, generally invoking a kind of necessity.

An obsession can be completely rationalized, it can even give meaning to life and become a reason to exist. For Wittgenstein, "to philosophize is primarily to fight the fascination that is exerted on us by certain forms of expression". That is to say, the freedom to be and to think comes with self-differentiation with oneself, which Hegel calls a work of negativity. The intervention of reason then leads us to reduce the emotional charge towards a mental object, without necessarily annihilating it. It is simply a matter of bringing it back into a more just or healthier proportion, of depriving it of its unconditional or absolute status, of withdrawing its ontological primacy. Thus, in this story, the first monk does not deny that contact with a young woman can provoke tempting desire, but he refuses the idea that such a pattern takes over such an important part of the mind. Paradoxically, the second monk, despite moral prohibition and good conscience, seems to have a much more congested mind. The seductive power of the young woman is an unwelcome or insidious idea which he cannot discard.

Morality

We all have principles that are conscious or not, clearly articulated or not, to guide our actions day by day. Thankfully so, because if we acted in a random way, it would be a problem for us and for those around us.

The key concepts that guide morality and therefore our behaviour are good and bad, good and evil, right and wrong. They can be more or less adamant, ranging from simple advice, "it would be better" or "it would be wiser", to the injunction or the obligation, "it is absolutely necessary" or "we must not ...". These are usually about duty or prohi-

bition, covering the content, the form and the manner of application of what must be done. Every society and individual is structured around an axiology, an organization that determines and classifies moral values, generally establishing a hierarchy. Some systems will favor relational values such as love or generosity; others, the relation to oneself such as caution, temperance or simplicity. Others still have minimum values, such as politeness, freedom or tolerance. On a philosophical level, we distinguish morals based on predetermined values, where intention primes regardless of result, from morals which are based on consequences, that is to say their utility, and the effects they produce.

Thus not only do morals come up against the actions they promote, but also the way in which they are determined. This is what we observe in the two monks. The first has a more utilitarian, even generous vision: he wants to serve others; while the latter prefers purity, without worrying about the consequences for others. In this story we understand that the same framework, whether it be ideological, philosophical, religious or other, and whatever its level of clarity or coherence, necessarily leads to contradictions, as values often conflict with each other when put into practice in concrete reality. This implies that the practical application, like the legal system, ultimately always relies on a judgment of the conscience, individual or collective, that is to say on an interpretation, on choices.

Modesty

The young woman, like the second monk, expresses a sense of modesty. The woman does in gesture: we can suppose that this is why she hesitates before accepting the monk's offer. The second monk, by word, when he accuses his comrade of a certain indecency. Modesty is the feeling of the soul provoked by the apprehension or perception of what is against morals. It is at the same time about delicacy, this embarrassment that prevents us from hearing, saying or doing certain things without a sense of embarrassment. It is also about humility, this restraint that forbids us from boasting or displaying ourselves in an ostentatious or shocking way. Finally, it is about propriety, this sense of decency, which impels us to act or speak, considering the person's

rightful due, according to their age, sex, condition, circumstances, and customary practices.

Thus, in the sociocultural context of the time, a young woman should not come into contact with a man who is not family, at least not in such a formal and public way. Furthermore, having made a vow of chastity, a monk should not touch a woman, both because of the pleasure he might find in it, as well as for the ulterior physical arousal this could provoke in him. Of course, for those who promote the alleviation of the burden of morality and guilt as a condition for psychological and existential liberation, such principles will appear a little obsolete. For them, modest is translated as prudish, a negative term that connotes both exaggeration and ridicule. This is what the first monk seems to express in response to his comrade's criticism when the latter tries to reduce the event to what he considers its fair proportion. The modern reader will be happy to laugh at the end of this story by agreeing with the "carrier" monk, who he considers more liberated than his comrade. But it would be unfit to take it so lightly.

Let us remember that the inaugural gesture of Adam and Eve, sent away from earthly paradise, finally becoming adults, sentenced to work, to give birth and to suffer, was to cover their genitals, modest gesture as such. Yet no one was there to witness, if not for each other, but precisely now that they are alienated from each other by simple gender difference. Modesty finds its place as the guarantor of a protected intimacy, which does not wish to expose itself to the gaze of others, a gesture that announces humanity as distinct from animality. Disguise, in its aesthetic and moral function, inaugurates culture as distinct from the natural state. In addition, this gesture expresses the desire for everyone not to be perceived as an object of desire or lust, but as a person in his own right, with a dimension of respect.

In this perspective, perhaps we will give new vigor to the first monk's gesture, which is not so much to reject morality as to give it meaning. True morality mocks morals, wrote Pascal. Let us not forget that this monk still accuses his colleague of a certain immorality by saying that he "still carries the young woman within him". It is the obsession with desire that is reprehensible since it monopolizes thought

and makes man unhappy, preventing him from having compassion for others, utmost immorality. Indeed, could the monk leave this woman on the side of the road?

Awakening(satori)

Zen Buddhism does not speak of morality, but of awakening. It is not so much about doing good or bad as to become aware of the reality of things, especially of their emptiness. To refuse or ignore these concepts can be explained not so much by not distinguishing the two, but by thinking that there are no external concepts that apply in a formal way. There is also the opposition between the two monks: the one who says "it's not good ..." and the one who teases the other. One wishes to apply an established rule forbidding contact with the woman, the second prefers to go beyond the problem of desire or thirst. In the Buddhist tradition, one encounters the idea of the "three poisons", the causes of all suffering, which are thirst, greed and excessive and insatiable desire. This thirst is described as a sort of fever, in opposition with peace of mind, whether to designate the desire of the flesh or the mental pruritus that generates ideas left and right. No matter the form or the object, there is attachment, complacency, compulsion, dissatisfaction, and so on.

The main difference with, for example, Christian or Kantian morality is that for Zen it is not so much the act that counts, it can even become irrelevant—it is then only what it is, like in this story—but the state of mind that animates the person. Thus, for the flesh, the sensory organs produce a contact between the senses and an object, which gives rise to a pleasant impression. Unfortunately, this sensation feeds and generates thirst, causing pain, and here lies the problem. Admittedly, Christian morality also criticizes the state of mind behind the bad action, because the intention comes first, it is condemnable, even if the bad action is not set out: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out and cast it away from thee", writes Matthew. But the act is still a fundamental criterion for judging our actions, while for Zen Buddhism, it is the state of mind that is decisive.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the young woman hesitate to accept the proposal of the monk?
- Why should the monk not help the young woman cross over?
- Why does the monk decide to help the young woman cross over?
- Why does the young woman finally accept?
- Why does the young woman throw "quick glances left and right"?
- Why does the second monk wait so long before making a comment to his comrade?
- How is carrying young and pretty women dangerous?
- Why does the first monk hesitate before answering?
- What is the criticism that the first monk makes to the second?
- What is the difference between the two monks?

Reflection

- ★ Why do some ideas obsess us?
- ★ Can we fight against the obsession?
- ★ Is modesty always a legitimate feeling?
- ★ Is morality always good advice?
- ★ Can moral principles contradict each other?
- ★ Should anyone be judged on his thoughts or actions?
- ★ Are good and evil necessary concepts?
- ★ Why does the adjective "moralizing" have a pejorative connotation?
- ★ Should we oppose the body and the mind?
- ★ Can we escape the feeling of guilt?

Chapter 10 The beautiful Nun

Must we get rid of our desires or satisfy them?

IN A MONASTERY WHERE MEN AND WOMEN LIVED TOGETHER WAS A NUN OF RARE BEAUTY. DESPITE HER SHAVED HEAD AND HER UNFLATTERING CLOTHES, SHE ATTRACTED ALL EYES. AS A RESULT, SEVERAL MONKS WERE SECRETLY IN LOVE WITH HER.

ONE DAY, ONE OF THEM, WHO COULD NO LONGER HOLD BACK, DISCREETLY SENT HER A LETTER SUGGESTING AN APPOINTMENT. SHE DID NOT ANSWER IMMEDIATELY. BUT THE NEXT DAY, AT MEALTIME, WHILE EVERYONE WAS THERE, SHE SAID LOUDLY, WAVING THE LETTER:

- LET HE WHO WROTE ME THIS LETTER STEP UP NOW AND EMBRACE ME IF HE REALLY LOVES ME, AND I WILL BE HIS.

BUT NO ONE CAME FORWARD TO MEET THE CHALLENGE.

Abstinence

The concept of abstinence is found in many moral codes, in particular those, more radical or demanding, based on a religious approach. It means the voluntary deprivation of bodily pleasures, especially those of food and pleasures of the flesh. In a spiritual or moral context, such an attitude presupposes a wish for self-improvement by not giving into the easy satisfaction of desire. The principle being that there is more to gain in deprivation than in indulgence. It is this strong problem that the "beautiful nun" incarnates, as she provokes desire by her beauty while demanding total abstention for herself and others.

Generally, in abstinence, prohibition or deprivation may be total or partial, in quantity or temporality. Nevertheless, it often has a therapeutic aim, whether for the body—for example a diet or fasting—or for the mind or the soul—for example to avoid negative ideas or emotions. The idea is that the frustrations or pains that accompany this deprivation give us greater goods: an improvement of our state, salvation, well-being, good conscience, etc.

To the extent that we give a positive connotation to the concept of

abstinence, it is opposed to desire and its satisfaction, thus constituting a rather unhealthy dynamic. It may be the desire in itself, which would be reprehensible, or its satisfaction, or the pleasure one draws from it, or the excess of satisfaction of desire. On the physiological level, excess is the most common problem: eating too much or drinking too much, for example. But it can also be the simple satisfaction of desire itself, obedience to its injunction: like scratching oneself when the skin is irritated. Sometimes it is not the pleasure obtained which is open to criticism, nor the desire in itself, but simple acting out, the act of satisfaction.

Morally, psychologically or spiritually, we will distinguish between the injunction of abstinence, which criticizes desire in itself, and that which blames only the acting out. Thus, the law or social conventions condemn those who satisfy forbidden desires, but do not care much about the interiority of the offender as long as it does not override the rules in force.

The Platonic pattern is an interesting example of this problem; it sheds light on the recurring dynamics of abstinence. It opposes earthly desires, linked to the flesh, to heavenly desires, connected with the spirit. The soul is heavenly, divine and immortal. For it to be itself and to be truly happy, it must escape the body as well as its demands, it must free itself from the physicality in order to fulfil its spiritual nature, what Plato calls the purification of the soul. Material abstinence is therefore the condition for fulfilment and happiness of man. This is how the "beautiful nun" challenges everyone, both as an object of desire and by the exemplarity of her behavior.

Interpretation and Ambiguity

There is a certain paradox in this story. When the nun challenges the person "who really loves me", what does she expect, what is she waiting for? The context of the monastery implies both that the monks have vowed chastity and that love between a man and a woman has no place in these premises, hence the expected social reproach of such a gesture. But one could also think, for the simple pleasure of thinking the unthinkable, that she is really waiting for such a gesture, consciously

or not. Certainly, if one sticks to the religious or ideological formalism, this second hypothesis would have little sense. But if one refers to the critical dimension of Zen, where the absurd and the pointlessness find their place and play a fundamental role, the impossible becomes possible again. "If you see the Buddha, kill him!" it is said. What could be more provocative than this simple evocation to kill the father, to ignore what embodies the absolute? Precisely because this absolute unfortunately becomes an idol instead of remaining an icon, because the incarnation of the absolute and fascination that it generates becomes an obstacle to enlightenment and awakening. It is therefore a question of diving into the absurd, into the forbidden, without any ulterior motive, abandoning all pre or post rationalization, in a sort of immediacy where everything is played out in the moment. After all, everyone, everything, every being, every phenomenon are the "nature of Buddha".

There are many ways to interpret this story. First: the classic form, where the protagonist maintains a noble and admirable posture in the face of an adverse destiny. She could have succumbed, because of the fragility of any being, to these "lecherous" monks who try to take advantage of her weakness as a woman who wants to be loved. But she stays put, and finds a plan to send these miserable beings back to their sordid and obscure designs, by revealing their true nature and bringing it to light. True love consists in allowing this nun to fulfil her vocation, a follower of agape, disembodied love. We are victorious with her; justice has been done. Perhaps these wretches, who resemble us, will learn a lesson from this. Second: the romantic, more psychological form, where the main protagonist is in search of the absolute. She wants to test her suitors, wishes to discover that love, the great love, the one that ignores all other considerations than its own, is real. But for lack of any lover worthy of the name, she remains faithful to her religious commitment: by way of absolute, only the inhuman, the unconditioned are possible. In one sense, the nun is sad and the outcome unhappy, but in another, the outcome confirms the legitimacy of the nun's initial commitment, even if it were only a second-best, revealed by the detour of an ephemeral temptation, a momentary fantasy. Lastly: the absurd form, where the characters are lost, oscillating on a ridge between

humanity and inhumanity, between transcendence and the world. Everyone is hoping for something, without really knowing what he or she is waiting for. Do the monks revere this woman worthy of love, or do they call her a prostitute? Does the nun hope for the love of these men, or does she want to reveal their impotence? The final victory is that of the impossible, the omnipotence of an elsewhere that always leaves us hungry, where the characters are nothing but dislocated puppets. No doubt, the Zen reading approaches this last interpretation, unless it resides in the clash of these different readings.

As Camus says, "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It is neither in one or the other of the elements compared. It arises from their confrontation".

Courage

The nun challenges the monk who wrote to her. Will he have the courage to own up to his love publicly? As one understands through an interest in the martial arts, courage is an important concept in Zen thought. On the one hand for practical reasons: it is a question of minimizing the delay between the attack and the defense, between the intention and the act, between the stimulus and the reaction. But fear is what makes us hesitate and doubt, it blurs the mind and inhibits action, it weighs on our actions and slows them down. In a fight, this split second can be fatal. And in Zen spirit, what is relevant in combat means just as much in everyday life, in every moment with oneself. The slightest weakness allows the insidious mental poisons to penetrate the mind.

On the other hand, it is a question of unifying thought and action: nothing must interfere in the relationship between them. A proximity, a transparency must occur between the two. "Not even the thickness of a hair between thought and action", said Mahatma Gandhi. But fear is just what leads us to speculate, to differ, to rationalize, to avoid, in short, to prevent ourselves from acting by various uncontrolled games of the mind. Fear paralyzes us, but we are so used to it that we do not even notice it. Or we call it caution, economy, reflection or rationality, and we betray ourselves, we no longer dare to exist. If we agree to

the exercise, let us ask how much time and energy we spend thinking about things that worry us or that we fear. And when it is not fear, it is the emotions of the same category: anger, shyness, resentment. For he who practices the Budo, there is no fear, because there is no future, no past, but only the immediacy of the "here and now", the tension between what will come and the present dissolves into nothingness.

Courage is also a discipline, both of strength of character and habit. Thus he who practices the technique of a martial art trains in the repetition of certain actions, which strengthens him: it is not that he became brave, but that the technique is strong within him, it is stronger than him. Thus courage in relation to a difficult or perilous situation is not an act of courage, but the result of a way of life. This is often what we hear from those who gained reputation as a hero because of a particular deed that impressed everyone: they are surprised by how they are described because they consider that what they did was quite normal. Thus he who gets used to daring to say what he thinks at the appropriate moment will do so without having to think about it for a long time, when the need arises. It is interesting to see that in children today, the two most common characteristics by which they define their existential problems are shyness and stress, probably because we protect them too much, or badly. In Zen thinking, the real opponent is inside, not outside. Responsibility for our difficulties does not rest with the "bad guys" who surround us, assail us or traumatize us. It is not so much a matter of courage or bravery, but of accepting to see the fear that operates within us, to become aware of its true nature, to realize that it is only a particular interpretation of reality; in short, to appeal to reason as the power of being, without letting ourselves be dominated by our emotions. In this we come very close to the recommendations of Spinoza or Nietzsche. There lies the terrible lesson of the beautiful nun, not morality but existence, or perhaps love, for amateurs.



A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- **Why is chastity a rule at the monastery?**
- **Why is the nun's appearance unattractive?**

- Is the nun loved?
- Does the nun want to be loved?
- Why does the nun choose to make a public statement?
- Why does no monk step up to declare his love?
- Does the monk harm the nun by writing to her?
- What does the nun hope by her declaration?
- Would the nun have loved the monk if he had declared himself?
- Is this nun provocative?

Reflection

- ★ Why is love often taboo?
- ★ Can love be platonic?
- ★ Does abstinence allow self-development?
- ★ Can abstinence be an escape?
- ★ Why are we afraid to expose ourselves to the eyes of others?
- ★ Must reason dominate emotions?
- ★ Is fear stronger than desire?
- ★ Why is it difficult not to listen to our desires?
- ★ Is man rather a being of reason or of passion?
- ★ Should we get rid of our desires or satisfy them?

Chapter 11 Oh?

Should we privilege tranquility of the soul?

A FAMOUS MONK LIVED IN A SMALL TOWN, WHERE HE TAUGHT THOSE WHO WOULD LISTEN TO HIM. ONE DAY, A GIRL FROM HIS NEIGHBOURHOOD BECAME PREGNANT. HER PARENTS, FURIOUS, HARASSED HER WITH QUESTIONS TO FIND OUT THE IDENTITY OF THE FATHER. CORNERED, THE GIRL DENOUNCED THE MONK AS THE CULPRIT. THE PARENTS RUSHED HOME AND HARASSED HIM WITH INSULTS FOR HIS INFAMOUS BEHAVIOUR. THE LATTER JUST REPLIED, "OH?"

OF COURSE, THE RUMOUR OF THE SCANDAL SPREAD RAPIDLY, AND ALMOST NO ONE WENT TO THE MONK. THEN, WHEN THE CHILD CAME TO BE BORN, THE PARENTS OF THE MOTHER BROUGHT IT TO HIM SAYING, "SINCE YOU ARE THE FATHER, TAKE CARE OF IT!" HE TOOK THE CHILD THAT WAS HANDED OVER TO HIM AND REPLIED, "OH?" THE MONK TOOK CARE OF THE CHILD AS BEST HE COULD. A FEW MONTHS LATER, THE GIRL FINALLY CONFESSED TO HER PARENTS THAT THE REAL FATHER WAS A YOUNG MAN WITHOUT A SITUATION WHO HAD NOW LEFT THE CITY. DEVASTATED, THE PARENTS RUSHED BACK TO THE MONK, CONFUSING THEMSELVES IN APOLOGIES. "WE COME TO BEG YOUR PARDON AND TAKE THE CHILD BACK," THEY SAID. THE MONK ANSWERED, "OH?" AND HANDED THEM THE BABY.

Nonchalance

The concept of nonchalance expresses a lack of courage in relation to effort, a lack of energy or willpower, in attitude or action. The nonchalant person is perceived as careless or indifferent to what is important, even indolent or parsimonious. It would be a question of correcting these faults, of becoming more enterprising, more zealous, livelier, firmer or more effective, no doubt by the exercise of the will. Parents who detect nonchalance in their children, especially teenagers, generally teach them a lesson: it is bad for moral reasons, since it is necessary to engage in effort and work rather than be idle and do nothing, but also for practical reasons, in order to obtain good results, a diploma, a ca-

reer, etc. Such presuppositions have such an obvious appearance in our society based on success and competition that it seems difficult to problematize such a posture. Any criticism of this scheme will be perceived as utopian. Yet, would we not sometimes want our children to be less affected by stress, this contemporary infirmity? Would we not want them to be able to sometimes read a book quietly or go for a walk, rather than be constantly after excitement on the Internet or in video games, be less subject to hyperactivity, another common illness of the time?

Nonchalance is also a tranquility of the soul, which leads us to contemplate the world with some distance, an attitude that represents a certain form of wisdom advocated by philosophy but also by religion. The poet Charles of Orleans made this his ideal of life, as a guarantee for peace of mind. He calls this "nonchalance" an absence of emotional outbursts, a sort of serenity mixed with melancholy, resting us from the tumults of existence. We find in nonchalance a rejection of anxiety, a certain trust in oneself and in the order of the world, a refusal to fight. Certainly one can fear the risk of complacency. But so are certain beings, little inclined to the exercise of voluntarism; they have their purpose. And perhaps each of us need these moments of nonchalance, where we take advantage of our right and pleasure of simply existing, without any other expectation.

The rumour

The Latin etymology of the word rumour has a double meaning, preserved in modern French: at the same time that of a composite noise, of vague nature, the noise of the street for example, and that of a hearsay, unfounded, close to gossip. In both cases, we find a sort of indeterminacy regarding the nature of the rumour, its origin, its foundation, its legitimacy, etc. And it is precisely in this indeterminacy that the rumour finds its strength. It is pressing, impossible to fight by uncertainty. Disinformation, propaganda and prejudices thrive on this; the rumour may even justify strange obligations and prohibitions. It changes uncertainty into certainty. This dynamic of the rumour explains why in the justice system, presumption of innocence is so difficult

to apply: very naturally, an accusation or even the mere suspicion is an irrevocable condemnation. Many are the people who are wrongly accused and formally rehabilitated, yet still carry the trace of their "infamy". Speech-word rumour is unverified "information" of unknown origin that spreads mainly by word of mouth, without excluding other means of amplification, such as the Internet. It is generally devoid of arguments or factuality, but its lack of foundation is counterbalanced by the fact that it flatters the voyeuristic instinct of our fellow-citizens, who thus grant it unconditional credit.

We like to learn horrible things about our people, especially those who are in the limelight. The rumour in the present story, to learn that a monk known for his wisdom indulges in lust, should be enjoyable for those who would like to justify their own insufficiencies. One can imagine the delectation mingled with horror or disgust, sufficiently powerful to make this man seem unsavoury, and the simple doubt of the reputation is enough to modify the judgment about him. And some will take pride in being the ones who spread this rumour, because by vilifying others, they indirectly and loudly say that "they are not like that". It is tempting to sacrifice the concern for justice and objectivity for some words that make us "interesting" by making others dirty. Thus the monk of history will never recover his flock. Oh?

Irony

"Oh?" is an expression that conveys both astonishment and interest, but also irony. One can imagine the monk of history who contemplates with a certain height the madness of his congeners, with whom it is impossible to discuss or reason: he can only be surprised, make a semblance of questioning, and try to provoke their curiosity or their stupefaction with its repetitive and incongruous distribution. The story does not say it, but we can imagine that at each meeting, the poor parents are so caught up in their own emotions that they probably do not notice anything. It is precisely this discrepancy that makes the story pleasant for the reader, although apparently quite banal, not to say absurd. Irony is a verbal form of a performative nature; that is, it does not have the function of describing or prescribing, but of acting directly on the

mind of the interlocutor in order to provoke it and to make him think. Unlike a warning or a request, the design of irony is rather ambiguous. Because, like many stylistic forms, this way of expressing something is different than what it means. The most classic scheme is to say the opposite of what one thinks, or to exaggerate the formulation to make it grotesque or absurd. So will we answer "It's amazing!" to a proposal that is downright boring, or moderately interesting. There is a caricature dimension that will cast doubt on the literality of the subject. It is about hinting rather than saying, and a mocking tone can also help to sense the hazy side of speech. In irony, the statement is logically inappropriate to the context, as it is perceived in the monk's reaction. But the interlocutor can nevertheless see it as a report, if it is mentally available, which is not the case for the parents of the story. The irony is employed to check whether the interlocutor is present, insofar as he perceives the non-literal "second degree", which creates a kind of intelligence or complicity. Or it can engender this "second degree" and make it operative in the interlocutor, through the unusual and weird side of the content. Nevertheless, if irony effectively provokes thought, one can also warn against its use. Used in a systematic way, erected in the end of non-acceptance towards otherness, it turns into a shell to protect itself from others and from oneself. From then on, it takes the form of a monologue, in which, by fatuity, one delights in not being understood, a proof of superiority towards the common man. Or, more aggressively, it turns into sarcasm, tinged with malice and contempt, a sign of helplessness and resentment.

Equanimity

Equanimity refers to the constancy of the state of mind, as can be seen in the monk of this story. Nothing seems to move him, no more thanks or shame than anger or insults. For Buddhists, this state of mind is on the path of nirvana. Of course, such behaviour seems to be a serious problem. For this appearance of indifference is somewhat shocking, if not pathological. One can see apathy, this sickly absence of feeling, emotion or interest for what or whoever it is. Such an individual is considered unfit for social life, if not for life in general. His existence

seems devoid of meaning and interest, since nothing moves him, nothing moves him. The tension necessary for daily activity is absent; the individual in question is unfit to deal with the problems everyone faces; lacking motivation, he becomes indolent. Either because he ignores reality or because he refuses to meet the challenges

it breeds. It is almost a form of dementia. One can think here of the characters of Oblomov or Bartleby, both unfit for the reality of the world, the first because of his visions of absolute and perfection, the second by his lack of desire or vitality.

Equanimity as an ideal of life is, on the contrary, of great importance. Already, contrary to the pathological "version", it is deliberate, it is the result of a work on oneself. Admittedly, it causes various problems for social life, where the criteria of success and relationship are linked to determined external objectives and to "effective" and "committed" behavior patterns. It is about expressing one's passions and emotions as a criterion of one's own humanity. What Nietzsche criticizes as "human, too human", an appreciation that some consider elsewhere as inhuman. It is very fashionable today to show fragility or vulnerability, while at another time it was rather frowned upon or prohibited.

In the story, the monk accepts without speaking to take care of the child who is confided to him wrongly. A more "passionate" person would have protested. He trusts the order of things, and he reacts equally to good and bad news. He is not a victim, he does not personalize events, things are what they are. Nevertheless, he is part of this world, he takes his share, since he accepts the responsibility incumbent on him, however arbitrary. Perhaps this equanimity is the closest thing to agape, that absolute love that gives and expects nothing.



A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the girl denounce the monk?
- Why do people choose to believe the rumour?
- Why does the monk agree to take care of the child?
- Why does the girl end up denouncing the real father?

- Why does the monk answer "Oh?" every time the parents talk to him?
- Why does the monk not try to dialogue with the parents?
- Why do the parents trust their daughter rather than the monk's reputation?
- Is the monk a helpless victim?
- Why doesn't the monk resent anyone?
- Is the monk's strategy effective?

Reflection

- ★ When a bad deed is committed, is it necessary to look for a culprit?
- ★ Should we seek, first and foremost, the tranquillity of the soul?
- ★ Does irony serve to protect oneself?
- ★ Is irony an adequate attitude?
- ★ Are emotions bad counsellors?
- ★ Can we educate our emotions?
- ★ Can we be deprived of emotions?
- ★ Is wisdom a form of madness?
- ★ Why do people easily believe rumours?
- ★ Does truth always prevail?

Chapter 12 Negation

Is knowledge an obstacle for thinking?

A SCHOLAR FROM THE SCHOOL OF "KNOWING EVERYTHING" VISITED A MASTER, AND AFTER INTRODUCING HIMSELF, ASKED HIM:

- DEAR COLLEAGUE, WITH WHAT SPIRIT DO YOU PRACTICE THE WAY?

- FOR ME, AN OLD MONK, THERE IS NO SPIRIT TO USE. AND THERE IS NO WAY TO PRACTICE.

- BUT THEN, IF THERE IS NO SPIRIT TO USE, AND IF THERE IS NO WAY TO PRACTICE, WHY DO YOU GATHER PEOPLE EVERY DAY AND WHY DO YOU ADVISE THEM TO STUDY THE ZEN AND PRACTICE THE WAY?

- WHERE COULD I GATHER PEOPLE? I DON'T HAVE ANY PIECE OF LAND. AND HOW COULD I ADVISE THEM? I DON'T HAVE ANY MOUTH TO SPEAK.

- NOW YOU'RE TELLING ME LIES.

- HOW CAN I TELL LIES? I DON'T EVEN HAVE ANY TONGUE TO SAY THEM.

- I DON'T UNDERSTAND YOUR WORDS.

- DON'T WORRY, I DON'T UNDERSTAND THEM EITHER.

Negation

The master refutes all that is submitted to him, to such an extent it may sound absurd. What meaning can it have? There is a Western philosophical tradition called apophatism (from the Greek *apophémi*: "to deny"), whose essential dynamic is negation. It is about approaching the truth through a principle of elimination, by affirming what things are not, rather than what they are. It has had its development particularly in theology, with "negative theology". The principle is that divine perfection is beyond every concept and affirmation; one can not state what God is, but only what he is not. Any affirmation would necessarily be reductive, for God transcends every thing, every identity, to such an extent that he himself cannot know what he is, wrote Scot Erigena. Meister Eckhart will say that if God is being, man is non-being, and if man is being, God is non-being. Of course, this is a

rather mystical path of theology.

The work of abstraction is another form of the negative way, since it is a matter of denying the concrete, the singular, in order to reach the universality of the concept, or to separate the contingent and the accidental from the necessary and the essential. One could call such an approach idealism, which attempts by subtraction or negation to move from a tangible reality to another that is invisible, from the immanent to the transcendent. In negation as well as in abstraction, one tries to define the absolute, the unconditioned, which is even beyond the concept, even beyond any approach, as a condition for adequate thinking and spiritual awakening, whose inevitable achievement could be utter silence. In this sense, the Zen Buddhist approach joins the Christian, Islamic, Jewish or other mysticism, because it is a question of going beyond Buddha.

We also encounter the path of negation in Hegel, for whom negativity is the internal source of any activity, of any spontaneous, living or spiritual movement. For him, it is not only a process of thinking, an approach based on the rule of reason, but the objective reality of things. For everything that exists—being, object or phenomenon—carries within itself a power of negation which pushes it to tear itself apart or to split up, thus forcing it to surpass itself. The "living" nature of everything that involves a contradictory dimension in the heart of every power or dynamics, a condition of its own manifestation. Thus change is not accidental, but substantial, as observed in the historical process, for example. Everything is doomed to go out of itself, the negation constituting the actualization of the infinite potential contained in the finite or surpassing oneself. It is also a negation of negation, since through this transformation, the subject ends up denying what denies him, rejecting the restrictive limits of finitude, surpassing himself. On the cognitive level, it is a matter of engaging oneself in a dialectical process, which thus corresponds to the nature of reality. Thus negation is a necessary asceticism for any thinking worthy of the name. This is what the monk of the story invites us to do, without fearing the inexplicable.

Lying

The scholar accuses the master of making up stories. We suspect the lie, on the one hand when we know the truth ourself or when we perceive some signs of verbal dishonesty in the other, and on the other hand, when we postulate a sort of obligation to tell the truth.

Lying consists of transforming the truth in a substantial way, asserting the opposite, a lie by commission or even of concealing the truth, a lie by omission. This verbal manipulation is the result or the expression of an intention: one seeks to obtain something from the other, to modify one's behavior or to prevent some untoward consequence, for instance to avoid a punishment or an act of retaliation. Of course, lying can be considered justified if this intention is laudable, for example when one wishes to please someone, or to spare him pain or sorrow. Although on this point the moral doctrines are opposed. Some philosophers, such as Kant or Saint Augustine, reject any moral justification of lying, even in cases of grave danger or torture, under the pretext that it diminishes or undermines any confidence in the individual or in society and perverts the natural speech's faculty to express a speaker's real thoughts. Utilitarian philosophers, in accordance with their doctrine, defend lying as long as its consequences are positive, for example if it increases the common welfare. For Nietzsche, the problem of truth and lying does not arise in itself, but in a relation to the will to power; thus, telling the truth out of fear or weakness would be reprehensible.

We find in Plato, always dialectical, the concept of the "noble lie", for example a founding myth. In itself, it does not correspond to any objectivity or factual reality, but it addresses a necessary truth for the good functioning of the city, to promote a message of a moral nature. Thus, a statement can be both true and false, on two different levels. The question remains of which of the two is given primacy. For this philosopher, in general the concern for good in itself as a criterion of truth transcends the concern for adequacy to empirical reality. For example, this justifies the "pedagogical" lie, as in Odysseus, who lies to provoke right actions. From this point of view, sincerity can be criticized as a form of complacency. It comes from feeling and belief rather than reason, from immediate perception rather than analysis. And one

can deduce the strong possibility of lying to oneself with the best consciousness of the world. In another register, this is what Sartre calls "bad faith". In the existentialist scheme, this consists of not applying one's own possibilities, but allowing oneself to be determined by circumstances, family, social, historical or other, and to not assume one's own freedom, out of complacency.

We will compare lying with joking, caricature, irony, or various literary forms and figures of speech such as understatement or euphemism, which consist in stating false things or half-truths in order to make the speaker reflect, to stimulate his conscience, to make him laugh, or to reinforce a statement by hinting at its meaning rather than making it explicit. The philosophical problem of stylistic playing is to know to what extent we believe what we affirm, to what extent we affirm what we think, to what extent we adhere to the form of our own words and of the other's words.

Thus, the scholar of this story accuses the master of lying because his speech is contradictory and senseless, but obviously he does not grasp the deeper truth behind these lies.

Beginner's mind (shoshin)

The scholar who comes to visit the master knows a lot, of which he is sure and proud. He introduces himself and behaves like an expert from the "knowing everything" school. When he questions the master, one suspects him of not really being interested in knowing what the latter thinks or knows, but of wanting to "verify" the veracity of what he thinks, to put him to the test or even to contradict him. As soon as the master utters surprising things, rather than listening to him, pondering his words or questioning himself, he begins to criticize him, referring to the logic of common sense. Moreover, he quickly moves from the interrogative form to the accusative form, revealing his true attitude, aggressive and competitive. Finally, by declaring the master's ignorance, he decrees that the master's thinking is incomprehensible, perhaps with a slight doubt in the end.

What this "knowledgeable" man is lacking is what Zen thinking calls shoshin, which can be translated as the "beginner's mind". Such

a state of mind involves staying open, thirsting for learning, not maintaining assumptions. It is just as useful for theoretical knowledge as for practice, in martial arts for example. For a child, for an apprentice, everything is still possible, contrary to the mind of an "expert", in which things are less open and more "determined". The accumulation of knowledge leads to a certain dogmatism, the mind acquires a certain rigid structure, because it saturates its own space, and because it acquires a strong certainty, leaving much less room for doubt. In addition, experience, knowledge or aging often lead to a loss of enthusiasm, creativity, zeal and optimism. The apprentice shows a certain authenticity, an absence of cynicism, indifference or lassitude that affect and overload the "established knowledge", as encountered in the drama of Professor Faust. In shoshin, the heart still has all its vigor, the gaze remains the one of a child, curious, who is astonished by everything he sees; the relation to the world is not yet flawed or blasé. This "original" spirit is ready for anything, nothing frightens him. Paradoxically, he has everything in him, precisely because nothing is played yet. He has not yet built an identity that requires recognition and respect, or that fears being neglected. He has nothing to lose, radicalism does not frighten him, and because of it he takes all the risks without blinking an eye. From then on, we better understand the final reply of the master, who confesses to not understanding himself, to the great displeasure of his interlocutor.

An echo of this concept is found in Western philosophy. The Socratic unlearning leads to the inevitable conclusion of "I know I do not know anything". Knowledge is an obstacle for thinking: since we already know, no need to think. It is therefore a matter of *mise-en-abyme* of what we know, but also what we are, thus desingularizing our being. Nicolas de Cusa takes up this idea, with the concept of "learned ignorance": acquired ignorance, in opposition to "natural" ignorance. It is about realizing that everything we know or think is all just conjectures, of which we see the emptiness, because ultimately all these distinctions are null and void, absorbed in the "coincidence of the opposites". The mystical tradition feeds many such conceptions.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- What does the school of “knowing everything” represent?
- Why does the scholar come to see the master?
- What is the Way?
- Does the master laugh at the scholar?
- Why does the scholar not understand the master?
- Is there a particular spirit required to practice the Way?
- Does the scholar seek to understand the words of the master?
- Does the master tell lies?
- Why does the old monk reject all the questions of the scholar?
- Is it true that the master does not understand his own words?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we like to say "no"?
- ★ What is the difference between a paradox and a contradiction?
- ★ Can absurdity make sense?
- ★ Why are we afraid of not understanding?
- ★ Is lying necessarily a negative concept?
- ★ Why do we accuse others of lying?
- ★ Can knowledge be an obstacle for thinking?
- ★ Is it possible to "unlearn"?
- ★ Is it true that every affirmation is a negation?
- ★ Can a proposition be both true and false?

Chapter 13 The cook monk

Is obligation a factor of emancipation?

A YOUNG MAN WAS WALKING THROUGH THE MARKET WHEN HE MET A MONK WHO WAS EXAMINING THE DISPLAY OF A MERCHANT. AS HE WAS INTERESTED IN ZEN, HE ASKED HIM TO STAY AND TALK. THE OTHER REPLIED THAT IT WAS NOT POSSIBLE BECAUSE HE WAS A COOK.

- I'M SORRY, BUT I HAVE TO GO BACK TO THE MONASTERY AS SOON AS I FINISH SHOPPING. OTHERWISE, THE MEALS WILL NOT BE READY ON TIME. AND ANYWAY, I HAVE NOT BEEN ALLOWED TO STAY.

THE YOUNG MAN TRIED TO DISSUADE HIM FROM LEAVING.

- WHAT'S THE POINT IN WORKING HARD AT COOKING? ISN'T IT BETTER TO MEDITATE AND STUDY KOANS AND DISCUSS THEM?

THE MONK LAUGHED.

- YOUNG MAN, YOU SEEM TO IGNORE THE TRUE MEANING OF ZEN.

- AH! AND WHAT IS THIS TRUE MEANING OF ZEN? THE YOUNG MAN ASKED NAIVELY.

- COOKING, REPLIED THE MONK. AND HE WENT AWAY.

Working

The monk cannot remain to discuss Zen, however interesting the discussion on the subject might be. He has to go to work, which is part of his monastic practice. This leads us to question the meaning of the concept of work, what makes it a priority.

Every animal "works" to support themselves by moving, hunting, picking, digging, building, etc. Man also works: he is obliged to do it, as the animal does for material reasons, but also, for humans specifically, for moral reasons. Indeed, many customs, wisdoms and religions condemn the idle person, for her inertia, her complacency or her irresponsibility. For Kant, it is through work that man learns self-esteem. And on an anthropological level, the human being is characterized by his capacity to transform the world he lives in, for better or for worse. This human specificity becomes visible especially with the development of science and technology.

Working is a mental and physical activity carried out in order to obtain a result. One could add the concept of suffering especially in the possible etymology, *tripalium*, a Latin term for an instrument of torture. This idea of work as painful is contained in the English word "travail", which is defined as : an unpleasant experience or situation that involves a lot of hard work, difficulties and/or suffering. Or when we talk about the Bible and the condemnation of Adam and Eve, driven out of the garden of Eden, forced to work "by the sweat of their brow". The pain in working comes from the effort that must be made, from the harshness of the task, and from the anxiety about the results.

Nevertheless, it has several important meanings or connotations that involve various issues. The first issue distinguishes work as a means of earning a living or as an activity designed to satisfy one's immediate needs. The person who picks potatoes for his family and the one who works in an office to buy some of them do not have the same relationship to work. One acts directly to satisfy his needs, the other through social mediation, with all the hierarchical and relational consequences that it implies. The second issue distinguishes work as a means of production and as creation. We will oppose for example the work on the assembly line, repetitive and mechanical, and the one of the engineer who invents these machines, more free and creative. The third problem distinguishes work as a means of survival and as accomplishment, the first being an obligation that includes alienation since one "sells his time" for money, the second being a source of satisfaction, since it gives meaning to existence. It will be noticed here that the same work may represent for one an obligation and for the other an accomplishment, depending on the spirit that animates them, even if one or the other earn their living. The motivation for which one works, and the way one does it, will also modify the object, its nature and its functioning. Thus, the person who runs a business for the sole purpose of earning profits will not do the same job as the one who runs the same business with human, social or environmental concerns.

Nevertheless, it is questionable whether work is really an anthropological invariant, if it legitimately constitutes an obligation, practical and moral. Should we, for example, educate our children with such

a vision of the world, or leave the choice to them? Should they be punished or moralized if they do not like to work, or should we accept their choice, their way of life?

Obligation

The monk cannot stay for the discussion with the young man, he is obliged to go about his business. According to its Latin etymology—obligare, meaning link to—obligation is what binds us, therefore what commits us towards something or someone. It is at the same time a duty, a necessity or a responsibility. We are forced to do something, which has a somewhat negative connotation. Yet, the obligation—or the obligations, because the term is often plural—referring to a system of duties is often used as a rather rewarding argument, and not as a grievance. One might be surprised by this state of things, given the loss of freedom represented by the concept of obligation. "I have obligations," one will say, precisely to assert oneself. Let us examine how this transvaluation takes place, from negative to positive.

In the first place, the person who respects her obligations is considered a responsible person. If it is about respect for the law, she is a good citizen; about respect for morality, a caring person; respect for one's commitments, a reliable person; etc. Moreover, because this person voluntarily agrees to give up some of her freedom, she can gain some satisfaction from herself in her own eyes, a certain glory in the eyes of others, even a certain pride. Secondly, having many obligations means being someone who is very busy, having a lot of responsibilities—so being an important, valuable person. It includes the multiplicity of links, the fact that people expect something from us, or because our actions have incalculable consequences, which gives us a certain power.

On another level, and paradoxically, the concept of obligation can convey a certain idea of humility, and therefore of moral value. The one who agrees to keep to his obligations agrees to bend the spine, to abandon his desires, his pretensions, which manifests a feeling of self-denial. Let us remember that the term "obliged" means "thank you", as formerly in French and nowadays in Portuguese. In other words, to express one's "obligation" reveals a feeling of gratitude—"I am your

obligee"—an important moral value, and the capacity to recognize what others do for us.

Last important point: the obligation in itself justifies our actions, and a certain action that would appear unfair in itself becomes fair, acceptable or tolerable by the fact that it results from an obligation; it is even a kind of excuse. Thereby obligation allows us to free ourselves from certain responsibilities, while showing ourselves responsible, courageous or innocent on another level. "I am obliged to do so," says the company manager to his employee when he dismisses him, expressing both sadness and strength. The question that remains is to what extent what we call obligation really is obligation, or is it a choice that suits us, disguised, a phenomenon that is quite common? For the monk of the story, he seems to identify himself entirely with his obligations, his practice being an integral part of himself. He draws no glory from it: his obligations are constitutive of his being.

Work (Samu)

Work is an important concept in the practice of Zen. Especially working for the good of the community, disinterested. Meditating only, like any work of thought, would risk going too far from the concrete reality and the relation to others. It is therefore the very balance of the practitioner not to fall into the mental illusion. Physical activity, responsibilities, tasks in common, are useful and put us to the test of ourselves. Because it is a question of being attentive, to both the reality of the world and one's own, since in physical work one must be aware of his own gestures, to be present to oneself. Every job, whatever its nature is, is therefore a real challenge to oneself.

On the other hand, within the monastery, we do not choose the task assigned to us. We do not really care about the monk's interest, vocation, or special talent, since it is about mourning oneself and awakening to the non-reality of beings and things. All tasks are worthwhile, both for their utility in the community and for what they imply for the person who is responsible for carrying them out. This is as well what the young man of the story does not understand, for whom there is a hierarchy of activities and probably statutes.

Even though Zen prescribes meditation, it establishes that one cannot abandon action. This is another form of meditation: "zazen in motion". Because, like sitting zazen, this action must not be mechanical or distracted: the practitioner must immerse himself completely in the whole action, he must be fully aware of the task being realized. Both in the action he poses and in the effects it produces. It is in this sense that the nature of the task does not matter. What matters is the relationship we have with the latter: the confrontation with reality. It is therefore a question of not worrying about the engendered pleasure and pain, but of being attentive to the pure phenomenon, by giving oneself completely. Body and mind are mobilized, the subject is carefully involved in the task, he fully concentrates his mind, fixes his attention, and in fact is interested in what he does. Whether cleaning, cooking, gardening or cutting wood, samu plays a practical and spiritual role: it is both a way to activate consciousness in everyday life and to accomplish what is necessary. By accepting reality as it is, work is a way to meet Buddha in everyday life. It is the concept of "primordial illumination", which is found in the practices of qi gong or tai chi, where the action of the gesture itself is awakened: there we find the original purity of reality.

The work is carried out in silence, without speaking or questioning in a superfluous way, giving oneself completely without leaving any useless place to doubt: it is a matter of trusting and solving the problems by oneself, asking for help only when it is really not possible to do otherwise. The samu is accomplished without expectation of recognition or reward, but in a spirit of giving, of compassion for all beings. We understand why the cook can not remain to discuss with the young man and why "cooking" is "the true meaning of Zen".



A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- **Why does the monk not want to stay for discussion?**
- **Does the monk hide behind authority?**
- **Why is the monk laughing?**

- What is the young man looking for?
- What is the point of "meditating and studying koans"?
- Why does the young man want to discuss?
- Does the monk "play" being a cook?
- How would cooking represent the "real meaning of Zen"?
- Can the young man understand the monk?
- Is the monk a free man?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we like to chat?
- ★ Is obedience a virtue?
- ★ Can we lose ourself by dedicating ourself to others?
- ★ Is there a hierarchy between theory and practice?
- ★ Is cooking an art or a craft?
- ★ Why do some people have a hard time with obeying?
- ★ Is it possible to fulfil oneself through work?
- ★ Do we all have a mission to accomplish?
- ★ Are we solely responsible for ourself?
- ★ Why do we give ourself obligations?

Chapter 14 Silence

Does silence generate dread?

FOUR MONKS WERE IN A LOST TEMPLE AT THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN. THEY DECIDED TO DO A RETREAT TOGETHER IN ABSOLUTE SILENCE DURING SEVERAL DAYS. THEY HAD TO STAY FROM MORNING UNTIL EVENING IN ZAZEN, THE POSITION OF MEDITATION.

THE FIRST EVENING, THE NIGHT FELL, THE COLD WAS SHARP.

- THE CANDLE WENT OUT, SAYS THE YOUNGEST MONK.

- YOU MUST NOT SPEAK. WE MUST OBSERVE A TOTAL SILENCE, STERNLY OBSERVED AN OLDER MONK.

- WHY DO YOU SPEAK INSTEAD OF KEEPING SILENT, AS WE HAD AGREED? SAID THE THIRD MONK WITH ACRIMONY.

- I AM THE ONLY ONE WHO DID NOT SPEAK! CONCLUDES WITH SATISFACTION THE FOURTH MONK.

Replying

For Plato, the art of thinking comes under knowing how to question and answer. The question poses a problem, the answer solves the problem by providing new elements. But often answers do not answer the questions, they avoid them, they are too allusive, equivocal or approximate. Knowing how to answer adequately implies awareness and rigor, not being afraid to think, nor contemplating the ideas which inhabit us, not fearing the other. Nevertheless, there is another form of response that concerns thinking when it comes to reacting not to a question but to an assertion. Therefore, it will be more a matter of adding precision, of illustrating, of supporting, of asking for a clarification, or of posing a problem, through another assertion, contradictory or critical, or by means of a question that attempts to clarify blind spots or uncover inconsistencies.

These different forms of answers come under the ability to think; they have overall a positive value. But there are other ways to reply that are much less appreciated. For example, we would say that a child responds when we make a comment on him to allow him to correct

himself, though he prefers to argue or justify himself, sometimes in a virulent way. This form of response is considered insolence, a lack of respect for authority. Then, we will tell someone that he answers too quickly, or too systematically, when indeed this type of answer comes under impulsivity, the desire to defend oneself, the need to praise or protect one's image, that is to say from fear and desire rather than reflection. It is about being right rather than thinking in the proper sense of the word. Precipitation will go hand in hand with the fragility or emptiness of the content, the discourse will take a rather rhetorical form, an eristic exchange in which will prevail trickery and sophistry, poverty or the lowness of the arguments. In general, when this type of discussion continues for a minimum of time, we witness a rise in power of negative emotions: irritation, anger, aggression, because there is too much to lose and gain.

It is this compulsive dimension of speech that stages this anecdote. Each monk, for various reasons, feels obliged to speak without even knowing it. The first, to express his anxiety and discomfort, because of cold, fatigue, darkness of the night, can not help but point out that the candle has gone out, while there is no doubt they all have already noticed. He answers to the reality of the moment. No doubt he does not know what to do, he does not dare to act, so he speaks, breaking the vow of silence first. The second reprimands him, lectures him. The third adds immediately. Neither of them, carried away by their good intention, their moralizing instinct, their desire to repress others or their conviction of being right, are aware of the performative contradiction they commit, since they speak while forbidding speaking, while the tone goes up. As for the fourth, he is animated by the consciousness of his superiority, which he can not refrain from expressing in the face of the world. He falls exactly into the trap he wants precisely to denounce.

Rules

The monks of the story establish or recall a code of conduct to carry out their retreat, such as the obligation of silence. Yet they break them "blithely", without even noticing. This is the paradoxical relationship we have with rules: at the same time we introduce and invoke them,

and we transgress them with the same candour.

The term "rule" comes from the Latin *regula*, which means a "straight stick", in the sense of what we use to draw rectilinear lines. If we take this case, the use of the rule serves to prevent the irregularities of the gesture, the lack of perfection of the hand, deficiencies of the gaze, etc. Thus, the very principle of the establishment of a rule comes from the consciousness of lack, fault and error, in order to prevent their influences, consequences and excesses. If we are aware of these imperfections and want to correct them, why are we making rules, rather than simply acting in an adequate way, by the simple exercise of the will? Especially if it is to then transgress them.

The primary function of a rule is certainly to establish a procedure of formalization which falls under awareness. So it is with the emergence of the rules of logic. Intuitively, we perceive its functioning, which for the most part comes from common sense; we distinguish more or less what is sensible or contradictory, case by case. The establishment of these rules allows us to go from the singular to the general, formalizing universal principles, on the one hand which allows us to deepen, clarify and strengthen our "logical sense" and on the other hand to understand some mistakes that we make without knowing it. The desire to universalize rules, by extending their scope, obliges us to examine their content and functioning more closely. This is what Kant proposes for the elaboration of the categorical imperative, the moral injunction *par excellence*: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". Thus, in order to better prevent breaches, we articulate rules whose scope is widened as much as possible.

Nevertheless, even when articulated, we transgress them, for several reasons. The first is that the rule is an ideal, which allows us to regulate, to draw limits, a horizon that we aim at, but which in general is in itself an impossibility, since we are imperfect beings. For example, it is impossible to always act morally or to tell the truth, even though we forbid lying: it is difficult to act for the better. The second is that we forget the rules, for a lack of memory and interest. The third is that the rules periodically contravene our immediate interest. Who among

us, for example, has not stolen an object—however insignificant it could be—without asking permission from its legitimate owner, aware of the transgression, while advocating for the prohibition of stealing ?

It is for these various reasons that the laws, these written rules of which any constituted society is endowed, are generally accompanied by measures of retribution, in order to reinforce by threat the prohibition of transgression. We can also say that it is a question of protecting oneself from others, because even if we make certain rules our own, we especially desire that others do the same, which is in our minds less than certain. Thus the history of these monks shows us the current paradox in which we intend to impose rules on others, which we do not respect ourselves, despite our good intentions. Or, the other being a kind of mirror, we can consider that he is a way of remembering them for oneself.

Zazen and silence

The monks had decided to make a retreat, where they could quietly, in common, practice the sitting meditation zazen. This practice is supposed to ensure the calm of the body and mind, focusing on the inner experience, thus leading to awakening, the satori. The bell rings, then the silence is made, the spirits are concentrated, at the same time present to the phenomena of the world but not distracted by them. One can meditate on one's own breath, on a koan, on any object, observing only one's own mental processes, or on nothing, on the ultimate reality of things. Certainly, the mind reacts to certain stimuli, visual, auditory or mental, but it must not be carried away, and it returns to the tranquility of its meditation, silencing all fears, distractions and desires. The subject becomes one with himself, body and mind, one with the universe, because in working on himself, he forgets himself.

These retreats, called sesshin, a kind of meditation marathon, may seem long: they require endurance. We pass through moments of joy, agitation, annoyance, irritation, fatigue, impotence, or sublime happiness. This is an opportunity to challenge one's mind and see how it works. It is therefore not surprising to see the monks suddenly give

way to a noisy worry and break the silence.

In all traditions, the concept of wisdom is linked to silence, as if the ability or the will to be silent was intimately linked to self-realization, to intelligence. With some reflection, one can establish a similar correspondence between foolishness or madness and gossip. In general, wisdom echoes calm, reflection, tranquility, rather than noise and precipitation. In the Indian Buddhist tradition, the term *mauna*, which means wisdom, is rooted in silence, in the sense of a joyous tranquility. Yet the monks of this story, despite their good intentions, seem unable to escape a compulsive, reactionary and unthinking speech: in the end, they are worried.

Various meanings or functions can be found in this silence. On the one hand, as we have seen, it allows us to concentrate because the noise distracts us. On the other hand, silence puts us to the test, because everything that emanates from us, every word will be all the more audible, more vigorous, more striking. Silence must be possible for speech to really make sense. By saturating the space, speech destroys itself. Then, silence allows us to consider the hypothesis of the sacred, a kind of beyond the word, which makes us aware of the restricted and reductive dimension of words. The truth that is said is never anything but a substitute for truth, teaching us all great wisdoms. And then, on a purely psychological level, we all know the drunkenness engendered by the words: by dint of repeating them, we end up believing them, we forget ourselves, we ignore reality. But through silence, we reestablish the possibility of facing oneself, of working on oneself, of facing reality.

In the Zen tradition, silence is already truth, because it is its condition of possibility. Moreover, we have all, at one time, experienced the effect of silence, very troubling, when suddenly the speech is interrupted and nothing is said. "An angel passes", as the saying goes. Then everything is good to interrupt it; emptiness frightens us: it allows us to think.



A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why did the monks decide to practice absolute si-

lence?

- Why have a common retreat, if speech is forbidden?
- What is the interest of meditation?
- Why does the first monk speak?
- Why does the second monk speak?
- Why does the third monk speak?
- Why does the fourth monk speak?
- Why can the monks not keep silent?
- Do the monks understand what is going on?
- Could the monks not speak at all?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we feel obliged to respond to others?
- ★ Why are the questions of others troubling?
- ★ Do we always know why we talk?
- ★ Can one be a prisoner of one's own word?
- ★ Do we invent rules for ourself or for others?
- ★ Why do we transgress the rules we invent?
- ★ Why are we looking for calm?
- ★ Why do silence and calm bother us?
- ★ Is it possible to silence the hubbub that is in ourself?
- ★ How can silence be the truth?

Chapter 15 The wisdom

Do we thirst for infinity?

A MAN ASKED THE MASTER:

- IS WISDOM GREAT?
- IT IS GREAT.
- HOW IS IT GREAT?
- WITHOUT ANY LIMIT.
- IS WISDOM SMALL?
- IT IS SMALL.
- HOW IS IT SMALL?
- EVEN IF WE WANT TO LOOK AT IT, WE CANNOT SEE IT.
- WHERE IS THE TRUTH?
- WHERE IS NOT THE TRUTH?

Infinity

The master plays here with infinity and tries to communicate to his interlocutor this immeasurable scope of being. If man is a being aware of his own finitude, by the very fact of his biological and mortal dimension and of his imperfection, it is because he bears in himself the trace of infinity, he relates to infinity in a certain way, otherwise he could not realize and articulate this finitude. Without this perspective, the latter is hardly conceivable as such: it would be the whole, the finite would be the totality, the limit, the only conceivable reality; it could not be considered as a specific entity. For, to think of reality in itself, it is necessary to be able to think of this thing from its exteriority, from what it is not, from its difference, in its relation to what exceeds it. Thus the reality of time is conceivable in itself only in the perspective of a concept of eternity, that is, of a timeless dimension. The passage through infinity is therefore necessary to apprehend the finite.

There are some modes by which the human being naturally experiences infinity:—time, space, fields like arithmetic or metaphysics—which envisage perfect entities out of this world. But there are two forms of

infinity that must be distinguished here: the potential and the actual. The immediate reality presents itself rather as finite, something determined in number or size. The environment is restricted, what is offered to us is easily representable. Then, through the exercise of thought, we can try to go beyond. So, when we count, we add and we realize that we could always add without reaching any limit. Infinity, a simple negation of the finite, shows that something is always missing. This infinity is potential, always failing, as far as we know. Moreover, because of its permanent failure, because it escapes us, it is in fact indeterminate: the infinite is presented as an indefinite.

This is how a whole philosophical tradition, in the wake of Aristotle, envisages infinity. This one exists in power, for example in the form of infinity by division and by addition, but does not exist in act, that is, as actuality. To go to infinity in action, it is no longer a question of "leaving something behind", but of exceeding the finite in any determined or determinable proportion. This is what Duns Scotus will attempt to do among other things—in mathematics and concept—opening the way for more complex later work, such as the work of the mathematician Cantor. To do this, we must go from quantitative infinity to a qualitative one, and this is, among other things, what metaphysics allows, especially the concept of God, which is absolute. Such a rupture makes it possible to account for the discontinuous nature of physical processes, such as the seed, potentiality that becomes tree, actual infinity. It then takes a concrete form, determined, graspable. For Cantor, God is the only "true" infinite, the others being in fact "transfinites", that is, there are ascending sets or orders of infinities, which he demonstrates mathematically, as with sets of natural, rational and real numbers. This is what we intuitively perceive in the dialogue on wisdom. This principle qualitatively exceeds the concepts of quantity, "larger" and "smaller", with which one might want to compare it. Grasping this requires from the mind a qualitative leap that involves for the student a break, a paradigm shift, which defies the usual logic of the finite.

Transcendence

Wisdom is at once great, so great that it is limitless; small, so small that one can not see it; and omnipresent, there is no place where it is not. This is a concept of transcendence, which implies going beyond, surpassing oneself, crossing a higher threshold. On the level of thinking, this implies going beyond logic or switching from one logic to another. In general, this is the case for religious messages, which require the believer to change his mentality, a paradigm shift accompanied by a certain psychological and existential asceticism, as a condition of accession to a transcendent order. This is the case of Zen, which makes the breaking of the usual mental processes an essential element of its practice.

What is interesting in the principle of transcendence? When we examine the world around us, when we interact with our peers, in our daily activities, there is a kind of sense of obviousness about reality. Certainly, we perceive changes, differences, even the unknown; but sometimes we also suspect that we operate in a very specific context, determined by certain principles: we are prisoners of a certain logic, of a certain mental routine. We realize it especially when for accidental reasons events are imposed on us which force us to think differently. We then have the intuition or the presentiment of something else, somewhat indeterminate. Strong experiences, such as love, suffering or death, are good examples. Moreover, religions refer to these experiences when they want to produce a conversion of the mind in us.

In this story, it is our way of perceiving the world that is questioned, especially through the spatial axis. We classically use "the most and the least" to compare when we measure, in order to "find our way around". But there is also the immeasurable, of a completely different order. Thus wisdom in itself, a power, infinite, is not measured: it is the metric itself.

Anything big or small can be perceived, to the extent that we know its limit, while the infinite escapes us. Similarly, in transcendence, the opposites lose their meaning: they coincide more than they oppose. Thus wisdom in itself escapes this concept of limit, and can not be grasped: small and great coincide in it, it generates them as tools of

comparison. It can not be localized either, and is consequently excluded from no place: one can not postulate a place where it would not be. It becomes strange then not to see it if it is everywhere. Here lies the paradox of every transcendent entity: we do not see it precisely because it is never absent, so we can easily ignore it or forget it. Only absence shows or recalls presence. Wisdom is the power that allows us to compare, judge, think. As it gives rise to measurement, it can not be measured. But if the measure is obvious, if the big and the small impose themselves on us, we shamelessly forget that it is possible only because wisdom is granted to us. But as it escapes measure and obviousness, it is difficult for us to think of it as an object of reflection or meditation. We prefer to take it for granted, or ignore it.

Non-duality

One of the most fundamental philosophical experiences, both cognitively and psychologically or existentially, is the split between the subject and the object: on the one hand the self perceiving, feeling, thinking, and on the other hand the external world, which can only be apprehended as exteriority. The subject knows, the thing is known, it is an object of knowledge. Both phenomena oppose and are not reducible to each other. On this subject, however, one could sometimes oppose an Eastern and a Western vision. For one finds in Indian or Chinese thought a strong tradition which opposes this split subject-object, which may be called the thinking of non-duality. It is a schema of Hindu origin found in Buddhism in general, including Zen.

This conceptual tension is not secondary, it has important consequences. First, it relates to the identity of the individual: if there is a split, the one who thinks is clearly different from what he thinks, from what he is not, his ego is a separate entity; while non-duality presupposes an integration of subject into the totality of the real, an indistinction in its nature or its absence of nature. If there is duality, what is different is foreign to us, otherness is alienating, conflict permanently threatens. At the same time, this scheme allows the subject's autonomy, a founding distinction, a principle of identity. In addition, it allows a concept of free will that the non-dualist scheme does not

allow. Because the coincidence of the subject and the object does not oblige to choose. Even in relation to oneself, on the psychological level, the stakes are high, since the subject here becomes one with himself.

Non-duality also applies to all sorts of schema, to many other antinomies. For example, we no longer distinguish ideality and reality, since they also coincide. For it is only the mind that makes this distinction, which does not exist in itself. Although this can be compared to various Western principles such as Hegel's, for whom the "rational" and the "real" coincide. On the epistemological level, this means that analysis, mental decomposition, is not the privileged way, but rather meditation, contemplation, what can be called non-thought. It is also an experience, involving the totality of being, rather than a purely mental activity. This is why many Zen practices involve the body and not just the mind, again denying the classical opposition between body and mind, material and spiritual. One of the main reasons for non-duality is interdependence: I can not exist without humanity, just as humanity can not exist without singular human beings. This echoes the Buddhist concept of conditioned co-production of phenomena, or the law of conditionality, which establishes that nothing exists in itself, that every entity exists only in relation to what it is not.

The dialogue of this story provides a simple example of non-duality. There is no question of opposing the big and the small, because these distinctions have little sense for wisdom, a fundamental principle, constitutive of our thought and therefore of reality, since these last two concepts do not oppose each other. So it goes for limited and unlimited, for presence and absence, for the whole and the part. To follow this dialogue, the reader must abandon the common sense that animates our daily thinking, where one thing is one thing, its opposite another, this common sense that nobody ever complains to miss, according to the words of Descartes. Otherwise, everything would seem to melt into a great confusion, which is the risk of a principle of non-duality applied in an indiscriminate or coarse manner, as happens sometimes with certain "experts". Thus Pascal laughs at the semi-savants, who are quite right, but without knowing why.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the man ask the master for his opinion?
- Why does the man use size to identify wisdom?
- Can wisdom be both great and small?
- Why does man seek to apprehend wisdom?
- Is the truth somewhere?
- Why does the master answer the last question with another question?
- Does the master answer the questions asked?
- Could the master simply define wisdom?
- Does the man understand the answers of the master?
- Is truth always paradoxical?

Reflection

- ★ Is wisdom universal?
- ★ Is knowing wisdom more problematic, or practicing it?
- ★ Why do we want to measure things?
- ★ How can a thing be both big and small?
- ★ Does infinity fascinate us?
- ★ Can we know infinity?
- ★ Is the principle of non-contradiction still valid?
- ★ Should we be able to overcome the oppositions?
- ★ Is reality rational?
- ★ Is transcendence a reality or an intellectual construction?

Chapter 16 Nothing at all

Should we give up on ourself to be free?

A MONK WENT TO MEET THE EMPEROR, REPUTED TO BE PIOUS, IN THE CAPITAL, IN HIS PALACE. THE LATTER TOLD HIM:

- I BUILT MANY TEMPLES, MADE AND RECOPIED SUTRAS, AND HELPED COUNTLESS MONKS. WHAT MERITS CAN I HOPE FOR?

- NO MERIT, REPLIED THE MONK. THE EMPEROR, SHAKEN, THEN ASKED:

- WHAT IS THE SACRED PRINCIPLE OF SUCH A TRUTH?

- AN UNFATHOMABLE VOID AND NOTHING SACRED, REPLIED THE MONK. THE EMPEROR BEGAN TO GET IRRITATED A LITTLE.

- BUT WHO ARE YOU THEN, TO PRESENT YOURSELF LIKE THIS TO US?

- I DO NOT KNOW.

AND THE MONK WENT TO MEDITATE IN FRONT OF A WALL.

Reward

The emperor hopes for some reward for his many good deeds. So much so that one wonders whether the hope of any retribution was the main motivation for the "good" he did, whatever he was aware of it or not. Disappointed, the emperor even questions the principles of a truth that deprives him of a just gratification, obviously eagerly awaited.

We want, wait, hope for something, without always knowing the nature of the coveted object. Indetermination is, moreover, often the manifestation of infinity: we want so many things that we can not specify the reality of our expectations. Indecision then refers to a form of greed, excess, or chronic dissatisfaction.

In general, what do we want in such an insistent, even desperate way? First, the material things that correspond to our primary needs: food, clothes, a roof. Then comes what is relational: love, friendship, family. Then come the rewards that correspond to our existential patterns, our life choices, our personal ambitions: a social place, wealth, power, recognition of others, celebrity. Finally, we find the realization of personal or collective ideals: justice, peace, truth, immortality, sanc-

tification, that is to say, one form or another of the absolute, spiritual, material or other. And when we expect something, either we want more than we already have, or we want precisely what we do not have or very little, or what we are not sure to have. And through all of this, we can claim that everyone seeks to calm their anxieties or to be happy.

We are pursuing these different goals, and we are acting consequently. Obtaining one or more of these "retributions" will reward our efforts. In many cases, if the reward could be obtained without any effort, we would be satisfied. This is how many people work only to make a living, which is for Nietzsche the height of horror.

Spending so much time accomplishing something that displeases us or makes us suffer exclusively to survive does not seem to him to justify an existence worthy of the name. Another criticism of this philosopher, taken from Pascal, is to assert that we are active in order to avoid confronting ourself, or we give ourself specific and reduced tasks as a means of escaping from activities more meaningful and legitimate. Thus one might suspect the emperor of this story of acting for the sake of being recognized as a very pious man or to obtain a form of eternal bliss, but unfortunately for him, or fortunately, the monk puts him in his place: he makes him face the futility of his concern and the vanity of his being.

Foundation

The foundation is what a building or ideology stands on. This concept refers at the same time to the principles that are at the origin of an idea, its cause or its motive, at the origin of a system of thinking, or that system of thinking itself, to the extent that it is the basis of a religion or a philosophy for example. It can be both the instituent and the instituted. The foundation implies an anchorage, it indicates what offers a guarantee of stability; it is also the trench, the ditch that one digs to begin to build, or the soil or the rock which are below the base and support it. So, when one wishes to "found" something, one wants to go beyond layers of loose earth, in order to reach the solid rock. When we seek the foundations, we want to go beyond what emerges, to dig deeper, to find, join or catch up with the ultimate solidity on

which everything is based, if it exists.

The emperor expects rewards for his good deeds, as we have seen. But as soon as his expectations are frustrated, he questions the foundations of such a judgment, because he can only doubt a system that deprives him of what he believes to deserve. But he gets answers to his questions that are more than strange.

This raises the intrinsic problem involved in the quest for the foundation: the more we dig, the more we touch the foundation, the closer we get to the unspeakable. So, in a religious scheme, when one goes back to God himself, to ultimate certainty, one can only be blinded by his presence, and recognize one's own radical ignorance. The same goes for the scientific process, when it comes to accounting for the first principles and when we encounter arbitrariness. Hence the Socratic principle of "I know that I do not know anything".

When he obtains the "confirmation" of the absurdity and illegitimacy of the system of the monk's thinking, then the emperor questions not only the principles invoked, but also the authority of the person who is the spokesperson. For it cannot be forgotten that behind the principles are hidden authors, an authority. Even if a word is sacred, it is articulated or conveyed by a specific person, who is involved in its foundation. He is at the origin of it, he is at the beginning of it, one could say he is the occasion or the cause. The legitimacy of the idea is therefore linked to the person. But this monk denies himself, ignoring his own identity. What remains then for this poor emperor, deprived of "foundations", who would like to be rewarded and reassured so much?

Sacred

According to the emperor, the essential characteristic of the foundation is to be true, and especially "sacred". This last concept is used to separate the secular things, ordinary and banal, pertaining to the useful or the pleasant, from more important and respectable things, which transcend the human or the daily, exceed the common sense and fall under the divine. In the hierarchy of values, the postulate of a sacred dimension implies a hiatus, a discontinuity, where the above and the beyond are incomparable, where what applies to one does not apply

to the other. This particular aura may concern persons (for example a king), functions (priestly), places (a temple), objects (a flag), acts (marriage), relationships (maternity), values (heroism), etc. The usual ways of acting, reacting and thinking are changed, even at the level of the law. Thus one cannot behave toward the national flag like they would toward any piece of printed fabric. In the same way one is supposed to behave differently from the common mortal when one is the representative of a religion or the State. Of course, an appreciation of the sacred depends on a cultural, social and personal context, while sometimes incorporating itself into the written law. Every incorporated society necessarily has legal and moral requirements in this field.

The origin or nature of the sacred can be religious, mythological or mythical, patriotic, ideological, historical, familial, etc. The object of reverence can engender admiration, devotion, fear, a feeling of inaccessibility, even a form of disgust. For if the Muslims make ablutions before entering the mosque, in order to purify themselves, in some Polynesian cultures—at the origin of the term "taboo"—we wash our hands as we leave the sacred place. Thus, in the same way, we maintain in our Western cultures a paradoxical relationship, both sacred and impure, to money. We perceive it as the symbol par excellence of venality and corruption, yet we are constantly looking for it, and coins are always printed with the most valued national symbols.

Through the verticality of the sacred, we express adherence to a superior principle, a vertigo in the face of an unintelligible transcendence, a hope of an ideal, or an authentic realization of the human. It is for this reason that sacrilege is an unacceptable and unforgivable crime. The paradox of the dialogue of this story is that the emperor does not appreciate the *mise en abyme* of the sacred: he aspires to a sacred that can be grasped and named, while the monk can only send it back to the void, which makes yet a better account of the unheard-of, unspeakable and out of the world of this sacred.

Not wanting anything (*mushotoku*)

The emperor, in all piety, wants something, or several things: he acted rightly, so he is waiting for his just retribution; he has sought, so he

wants to know the truth. His concerns seem pure, noble and even worthy of praise! Yet, as soon as he is frustrated by his "deserved" rewards, he becomes irritated, angry and aggressive. This pattern can not be more common. We want something, and the more we consider this expectation legitimate, the less we bear to be frustrated. So Zen proposes as the path of wisdom, the mushotoku: the state of mind which wants nothing, expects nothing, desires nothing, does not seek to obtain something, no matter how legitimate one might consider this expectation. Whether it is wanting the truth or a chocolate éclair, it does not change the problem.

Obviously, this requires to be attached to no object, material or spiritual, or to seek neither profit nor result of what happens, of what could happen, of what is. As strange as it may seem, the highest wisdom is defined here as being empty of any object. It has no finality, the consciousness is purely phenomenal: it contemplates the immediate, as it is; the being of things comes down to its appearance. Waiting, wanting is to be closed to the reality of the world, it is to take options that obstruct the infinity of perspectives. The mind that gives itself a goal attaches itself to it, so it closes itself within itself, into its own desires, into its own concepts, a form of egocentrism if there is one. Such a perspective opens the door to fear and suffering: the fear of losing inhabits us, frustration lurks about us, and as a result we have already lost.

The state of mushotoku gives us immediate access to the infinite of the whole; it transcends the separations and boundaries generated by the limitations of our self and its expectations. Even if we lose everything, we have everything, we are free and happy. But it is difficult not to calculate, not to think of keeping what we have, not to hope for better when we give up a good. Even the self, in its most essential sense, does not deserve our attachment to it: it is the instrument of our loss. But visibly, the emperor finds it difficult to detach himself from himself, especially when he is interested in what seems the most essential to him. To perceive the inanity of his quest is unthinkable.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why does the emperor do "good"?
- Why can the emperor not "hope for merit or reward"?
- Why is the emperor surprised?
- Why is the emperor irritated with the monk?
- Why would a truth be unfathomable and devoid of sacredness?
- Why does the emperor doubt the monk?
- Why does the monk declare that he does not know anything?
- Why is the monk abrupt with the emperor?
- What prevents the emperor from understanding the monk?
- Why does the monk choose to meditate in front of a wall?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we do good?
- ★ Should a "good action" be selfless to be good?
- ★ Is it legitimate to want to be rewarded for our actions?
- ★ Why do we want to be recognized?
- ★ Is it true that "hope makes us live"?
- ★ Do we need a foundation to justify our actions?
- ★ Can we have nothing sacred in our existence?
- ★ Is it possible to reconcile with uncertainty?
- ★ Is desire an obstacle to happiness?
- ★ Should we give up on being ourselves in order to be free?

Chapter 17 The wrapping

Is reality a mere appearance?

FOR SEVERAL YEARS, A COUPLE HAS BEEN RUNNING A SHOP OF SMALL ITEMS: THE WOMAN WOULD WELCOME THE CUSTOMERS, THE MAN WOULD DO THE PACKAGING. HE HAD BECOME AN EXPERT IN THIS EPHEMERAL ART, AND FOR THIS REASON, CUSTOMERS CAME FROM FAR AND WIDE TO GET A GIFT WRAPPED IN THE BEAUTIFUL FABRIC PACKAGING, MADE IN A JIFFY. THE WIFE WAS PROUD OF HER HUSBAND. AS SHE WANTED HIM TO BE RECOGNIZED UNANIMOUSLY BY ALL, SHE PROPOSED HE GO TO THE TEMPLE TO SEE A GREAT MASTER WHO WOULD MAKE HIM PASS THE ULTIMATE TEST. VERY MUCH IN LOVE WITH HIS WIFE AND EAGER TO PLEASE HER, THE HUSBAND AGREED, AND HE WENT AWAY.

-THE FATE OF A WRAPPING IS TO DISAPPEAR BY RELEASING ITS CONTENT, EXPLAINED THE MASTER.

-YES, MASTER, REPLIED THE MERCHANT.

-WOULD YOU KNOW HOW TO OVERCOME FATE AND CREATE THE WRAPPING THAT NO HAND COULD VIOLATE? ASKED THE MASTER.

THE MAN COULD NOT HELP HIMSELF FROM THINKING OF HIS WIFE'S MAGNIFICENT BODY, AND HE DECIDED TO DESIGN THE WRAPPING NOT AS A GARMENT, BUT AS A SKIN.

-WELL DONE, SAID THE VENERABLE MAN, YOU HAVE SUCCEEDED IN CREATING A LIVING WRAPPING, WHICH NO ONE CAN UNDO. YOU ARE A TRUE MASTER. KNOW, HOWEVER, HE ADDED, THAT THIS SECRET IS CURSED. EVERY DAY, SOMEONE WILL HATE YOU WITH ALL HIS SOUL AND CURSE YOUR NAME. THIS IS THE PRICE TO PAY FOR YOUR ART.

Wrapping

To wrap means to cover, that is to say to surround on all sides something with a protective material, paper, cloth or other. In ancient Greek, we find both *ballizein*: to dance, from which ballet comes for example—the aesthetic aspect and *ballein*: to throw, from which comes the balloon, and the ball, a package of goods wrapped in cloth and bound with ropes, for transport, or film which envelops the grain in

the ear—the practical aspect. In its utilitarian version, the package is rough, serving only as a protection, but we also find the aesthetic dimension of the wrapping, which veils or disguises. Therefore, a coarse wrapping may hold valuable content, and vice versa. In everyday language, to thrill means, among other things, to please, to enthuse or to seduce. When we receive a package, more than the wrapping, it is the content that interests us: it is the "reality" of the package.

In Japan, we find the art of wrapping, which is called *furoshiki*. This technique was initially used to go to public baths, packaging the necessary clothes or objects, and then was developed as a gift packaging technique, both for the sake of protection and decoration. Of course, one could argue that there is at any time and in any place the principle of a container that is beautiful in itself, in the form of a bag, a setting, a purse or even a furniture like a cabinet, which, even if they have an aesthetic value, serve as well as a container primarily. But the wrapping stands out from these objects by its ephemeral nature: it is used often only once.

In this relationship to the ephemeral, there is undoubtedly the essence of the "master wrapper" of this story, in reference to the Zen tradition. Because we can get excited about the beauty of the gesture, but we must know that it does not last, can not last: neither the joy that the object arouses, nor the object itself, could persist. The wrapping symbolizes the reality that is only appearance, the one we see, and which must disappear to give way to another underlying one. Everything is therefore destined to disappear, even though we are attracted and seduced by this appearance, attached to the wrapping. Perhaps this is the essence of the relationship between husband and wife, or for every couple, whatever it is.

Skin

The absolute wrapping would therefore be like a skin, according to the "Master wrapper". As we do not always realize, the skin is one of the most important organs of the body, considering its surface, its mass and the importance of its physiological role. For many animals, it is on the one hand the first protective barrier—mechanical or ther-

mal, against microbes, bacteria or parasites, etc.—either in itself, as epidermis, firm but supple flesh, or by the fact that it can give rise to various solid substances: hairs, feathers, scales, hooves, etc. On the other hand, thanks to its many sensitive nerve endings, it provides crucial information about the environment: temperature, contact with objects, nature of the ambient milieu, etc. Then, it pertains to internal temperature regulation or humidity, respiration—almost completely in some amphibians—, absorption or secretion of liquids or soluble elements. More specifically, it can produce venom, perceive light, adapt to the colour of the medium, or other crucial functions. Thus the skin is very plastic, moldable, in the plurality of its form and its function.

By its sensitivity, especially at the fingertips, it allows one to explore his environment by touch, sending information that is interpretable by the brain, which allows him to perceive for example the pressure, the temperature, and to feel pain or pleasure. Here lies the specificity of the skin compared to other sense organs, the touch acts: the touch is active as much as passive. This is the only sense that acts on the outside world. The sensory perception related to the mobility and motor skills of the skin, extremities in particular (hands, feet, paws, fins, snout ...), makes it a powerful agent, feeling and acting, allowing many types of actions: moving of oneself or objects, palpation, interaction with other beings, etc.

This reflexivity of touch will make Maine de Biran say that there are "two kinds of observations," one external: on the foreign thing that resists, the other internal: on the limits of the ego. This quality is taken to the extreme when touch becomes a means of research and communication. Haptic perception is precisely the activity of the skin, supported by muscular activities, which deliberately comes into contact with external entities. It is a kind of substitute for vision, as the blind know it, nevertheless operative only in a relation of proximity. For example, one will perceive spatial properties: distance, shape, size, orientation, or textures: roughness, hardness, elasticity. At the level of intersubjectivity, it will be used to establish certain types of relationships, such as politeness (to shake hands), friendship (embrace) or love (caress).

Wrapping is the interface between the object and the world, which makes the object both visible and invisible, a paradoxical object of desire, expectation, surprise and disappointment. The skin seduces us, but like an idol, it can make us forget the emptiness of being. Unless we attribute the totality of being to the skin, the wrapping, henceforth considered as a pure surface effect. So he who is "uncomfortable in his skin" feels prisoner of himself. For example, the teenager covered with acne or the serious burn victim who knows the suffering of a miserable and invasive skin, from which one cannot escape.

The skin sometimes seems to be a barrier, making it impossible to access or be accessible to others. It can be a decoy and illusions generator. The quest for unconditional love may seek to overcome a curse: the one of being locked in a skin. The merchant is in love. To create an impregnable wrapping, he thinks of his wife's body and conceives this wrapping as a skin. Does this mean that his wife's skin would make her inaccessible or untouchable? Inaccessibility would be a condition of true love. That is what drives us crazy!

Reality (shihokkai)

The hero of the story is an artist: he knows how to pack things, that is to say to present them well. Whatever the object in the package, even if there is almost nothing, the gift will please. Therefore, he is an initiate, he knows the mysteries of human consciousness, the game of reality and appearance, and the human being's preference for the shimmer of external impressions. But to go beyond his art and himself, he must become able to overcome this distinction, to transcend this duality, this fracture between the noumenon and the phenomenon, as Kant calls them. In other words, he must no longer seek to please, to deceive the customer about the merchandise, and every day he will be cursed for it. There, however, he will become a true master.

In the Zen tradition, reality has four degrees: the shihokkai. First, the level of the phenomenon, the worldly reality, the one around which daily life is articulated. Things differ from each other, they exist in a more or less temporary way. The second can be called the level of the real, because one realizes that all things are identical, they form

only one thing, or no-thing, since emptiness characterizes them. The third level is the one of coincidence between phenomenon and reality. We realize that these two concepts are not opposed, because within any phenomenon, we can perceive the ultimate reality of all things, vacuity. The fourth and last level is the one of coincidence between phenomena and phenomenon, where there is perceived the multiplicity of connections between all things, their interdependence. At this level, we realize that any particular phenomenon affects all the others: each singularity affects the totality.

It is not only a matter of de-realizing the phenomena and their principles—this derealization is just a simple step—it is a matter of grasping the fluidity of things, their insubstantiality, certainly on a background of emptiness, but without denying the principles such as causality. Thus the ultimate reality of emptiness coincides with the relative and habitual one of phenomena. If those ones are devoid of their own nature, they nevertheless exist in a worldly perspective, so they cannot be ignored. Thus they are simultaneously given a lack of value and content, and a value of truth and provisional content.

To work with this modality of thinking, Zen masters use the analogies of "turtle hair" or "rabbit horns". They are intended to criticize or ridicule the belief that things do not exist at all or that they have a substantial and eternal reality: two complacent positions which for them come back to the same. The challenge, difficult and even painful, is to contemplate the phenomenon both as it is and not to attribute to it any other reality than what it shows, that is to accept its uncertain dimension, fragile and ephemeral, without ontological background. For the Buddhist tradition this is what is called in English "thusness", "suchness" or "quiddity": what the thing is. It is not a monistic, or dualist, or pluralist view, because unity does not obliterate multiplicity, nor does difference obliterate identity.

But such a perspective is somewhat unbearable for our mind, which seeks rather the comfort of the pleasant and certainty. Thus, when the appearance no longer differs from the real, while not being the real, the mind gets irritated because reality escapes it while imposing itself on it. This is what the "living wrapping that no one can undo" is about:

everything is there, and nothing else, wrapping wraps itself only and all at once. Henceforth, we understand why such a master will be hated and cursed.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why is wrapping an important element of the gift?
- Why do customers care so much about wrapping?
- Why will the man go through the ultimate test?
- Why should man overcome fate?
- How is the skin a wrapping?
- Why is the skin an unusual wrapping?
- Why would the invention of the skin as a wrapping be "cursed"?
- Why does the master ask his pupil to do such a terrible accomplishment?
- What does the woman represent in this story?
- Is the man in this story a sorcerer's apprentice?

Reflection

- ★ Is wrapping a part of deception?
- ★ Is reality effectively a mere wrapping?
- ★ Does skin serve to hide or to make visible?
- ★ Is the body the wrapping of the soul?
- ★ Do we love someone, or his appearance?
- ★ Are there certain skills that it is better not to acquire?
- ★ Is the inner reality of things inaccessible to us?
- ★ Do things have their own and inalienable nature?
- ★ What is more important: appearance or reality?
- ★ Does the appearance reveal or hide the reality?

Chapter 18 The stick

Is a thing something else than what it is?

THE STUDENT ARRIVED AT THE MONASTERY, PROUD OF HIS NEW STICK.

- WHAT IS IT? ASKED THE MASTER, POINTING TOWARDS THE OBJECT.

- I DO NOT KNOW, ANSWERED THE DISCIPLE, STUNNED AND SUSPICIOUS. HIS MASTER THEN ADVISED HIM TO GO FOR A WALK AND MEDITATE, IN ORDER TO ANSWER THE QUESTION. ON HIS WAY, THE DISCIPLE MET A PEASANT AND ASKED HIM THE QUESTION.

- COME ON, IT'S A STICK! REPLIED THE ROUGH MAN, ASTONISHED. A LITTLE LATER, HE MET A WELL-DRESSED MAN, OBVIOUSLY A MAN OF LETTERS. HE ASKED HIS QUESTION AGAIN.

- IT IS A CUT AND POLISHED BRANCH OF A TREE, WHICH IS USED TO LEAN ON DURING THE MARCH OR TO DEFEND ONESELF; IT IS CALLED A STICK, REPLIED THE SCHOLAR. THEN HE MET A MONK, WEARING A ROBE AND CARRYING HIS BOWL. HE ASKED HIM HIS QUESTION AS WELL.

- IT IS ONLY A SIGN OF THE IMPERMANENCE OF THINGS, A MANIFESTATION OF UNIVERSAL EMPTINESS, SAID THE RELIGIOUS MAN. THE DISCIPLE RETURNED TO HIS MASTER, AND WHEN HE ASKED HIM ABOUT THE RESULT OF HIS MEDITATION, HE VIEWED IT MORE PRUDENT TO ANSWER:

- IT'S A STICK, MASTER. THE MASTER GOT ANGRY.

- AH! YOU GIVE ME THE OFFICIAL ANSWER! YOU WANT TO SHOW THAT YOU ARE A GOOD STUDENT OF ZEN! IN THAT CASE, WHAT IS MEDITATION FOR? WITH THAT HE SNATCHED THE STICK FROM HIS PUPIL'S HANDS AND STRIKED HIS SHOULDER WITH IT, SAYING:

- THIS IS WHAT THIS OBJECT IS.

Certainty and the obvious

We like to know and we want our knowledge to be certain. When we are in doubt and uncertainty, we even prefer to say that we do not know, rather than take the risk of error. This is what happens to the student of this story, surprised by the master's question, so he prefers to plead

ignorance. At the end of the story, frustrated by an expected certainty, he chooses to give the obvious and low-risk answer so as not to incur bad judgment or blame. Certainty always refers to a kind of evidence. The first is the one of common sense, the obvious that imposes itself on everyone. It can be of an empirical nature, what is perceived by the senses, or appeal to common sense, to a sort of primary or intuitive logic, which is non-formalized, generally acceptable. This is the answer provided by the peasant in the story.

The word evidence comes from the Latin term *videre*: to see. In general, we do not doubt what we see clearly: the objectivity of the thing is clear to us, we consider it factual and indisputable. Evidence leads to total adherence of the mind, its truth or reality hardly needs proof or justification. This applies to empirical truths as well as those of thinking. Of this evidence Descartes will make the criterion of the true *par excellence*, the goal of the scientific process that seeks to overcome speculative differences in order to come to an agreement based on reason. For this philosopher, it is a question of coming to clear and distinct ideas to overcome doubt. Then we go from "immediate" evidence, the one of the senses or intuition, which we do not doubt by ignorance or complacency, to a "terminal" evidence, which we can no longer doubt, thanks to a critical analysis using doubt, or as the product of a constructed and demonstrative reasoning.

Many philosophers criticized this conception of the obvious, for example Leibniz who showed certain "memorable errors" deriving from these Cartesian evidences, by excess of simplification or approximation. According to Karl Popper, one can denounce the fact that this criterion of evidence has a subjective nature because it is a quest for certainty, which is contrary to scientific knowledge, rather of a conjectural nature. Moreover, this desire for certainty often deploys "immunization stratagems" to preserve oneself by escaping all criticism, thus hindering any thinking process.

Dogma

Thus, in his quest for certainties, the student will meet several types of evidences, which could be considered dogmas. A dogma is what consti-

tutes the foundation of a considered indisputable doctrine. As a result, the principles that constitute this foundation are clearly indubitable and unquestionable. We forget that the origin of the term dogma in ancient Greek is the verb *dokein*: to think, and *dogma*: opinion or belief, which refers to a subjective process, even an absence of reflection. Thus, the dogmatic person will speak in a peremptory and categorical manner, attempting to impose their "opinion" on others. Nevertheless, any constituted society, however open it wants to be or pretends to be, will necessarily admit a set of beliefs or established principles, which will be accepted without argument. These dogmas may have a moral, cognitive, ideological or psychological nature, sometimes supported by legal rules and sanctions, in a more or less legitimate or abusive way. Regardless of the reference group, ostracism always threatens those who do not accept the established dogmas, although these can vary dramatically according to the time and place.

The first form of dogma encountered by the student is the one of common sense. This is what everyone knows, therefore what cannot be wrong. This common sense is composed of a relatively unshakable trust in sensory perception, in current social codes and in banal knowledge. It is sometimes called "horse sense", for its rough and coarse side. It is surprising to those who complicate their life, like this student who asks what a stick is.

The second form of encountered dogma is the one of the scholar. Above all, it is based on formal knowledge, on erudition. The scholar knows many things that ordinary people do not know. As a result, his word is supposed to be authoritative, just as he himself refers to the author's authorities. Very often, the scholar pontificates; in general, when he opens his mouth, it is to give lessons. Even if he criticizes himself easily, he can not bear being criticized because he knows best. He has worked hard, he now gives himself the rightful reward for his personal encyclopedic work: he is right, the others are ignorant or idiots. He likes to define and name, as the man of letters in this story.

The third form of dogma encountered is the one of belief. It generally comes from revelation, either from the words of any prophet whom we adhere to by individual or collective choice, or from personal en-

lightenment. Unlike the scholar, the believer does not speak under the authority of reason, but of the miraculous and the mysterious, even though he tries to justify his visions sometimes by constructing an explanation. This dogma in general detonates with all other types of discourse and even with other dogmas of the same type, because the dogma of belief is terribly specific: it wants to be exclusive and extraordinary. It is a question of accepting his word as authoritative, as incongruous as it may seem, rejecting all other forms of knowledge. The fourth form of dogma encountered is the one of the good student. It is based on an unshakeable trust in the teacher, whose words are repeated without necessarily understanding. This is basically what everyone does when they are on school benches, but also by reading a book or listening to information. At the same time, because our critical sense is not always active or developed, but also because we do not always have the means to verify or fully understand what is being said to us, we therefore trust the established authority, we take note and we repeat what he says. It also lets us avoid, like the student of the story, taking the risk of making mistakes, in an illusory way as the master points out.

Absurdity

The master's behaviour may seem strange and absurd, both because he seems to harass his pupil and because he does not teach him anything: either he sends him to ask for everyone's opinion, or he hits him with the stick. To understand, we must know first that these "exchanges" take place in a context where they are coded and have a specific meaning: the master who would hit his student in an "unexpected" manner could in fact obtain an effect contrary to the planned intention! Although we can support the idea that reason can operate in any case, to the extent that the student simply trusts the master. Nevertheless, a Zen specificity remains the art of non-response, of non-explanation.

In pedagogical interactions, the Zen master uses sounds, gestures, body movements, strange words, jokes. These "tools" have a performative function, and not descriptive or assertive: their function is to perform an intellectual and spiritual transformation in the interlocutor.

The uninitiated who asks questions to the master will get "answers" that will not suit him; he will probably produce other questions or affirmations, confirming his incomprehension and his frustration. Henceforth, he will have the choice: to abandon his assumptions and his habits in order to understand, because he decides to trust the master, or to maintain his position and to run into him. In any case, the master will seldom give in to the pressure from the interlocutor, because the latter must do a work on himself in order to become aware of the reality, starting by seeing himself.

These non-responses are of various natures. Some responses are in an indirect but nevertheless understandable way, by an analogy, by an injunction, which the uninitiated reader himself will be able to understand. For example, in the present story, we might think that the master wants the disciple to think about what this new stick, which he is so proud to bring with him, means, perhaps as well as about the pride or possession. He must discover that the stick is nothing in itself, since the definitions of it from the ones and the others will differ a lot. But also that "good" answers are always "bad" answers. One can also think that being struck by the stick constitutes a "phenomenological reduction" of this object: to reach its most objective and incontestable reality.

Thus this "innocent" stick becomes the object of a whole adventure, of a series of experiments which makes the pupil progress in his relation to the real. But the answers of the Zen masters are sometimes much more abstruse or senseless, as we see in other stories where the relevance seems absent, even completely impertinent, putting the subject and his thinking into the abyss. There it is about understanding the absence of the reality of things in themselves, to learn to accept the absence of meaning, of satisfaction and certainty, and to work on letting go. Therefore, it is not about providing the student with a pleasant and comfortable answer, reproducible as he wishes, which will provide a complacent impression of knowledge. For it is above all a question of producing epistemological ruptures in the student, an indispensable condition of possibility of a real understanding of oneself and of external phenomena. The paradoxical aspect of words is in fact only an

appearance, a staging, a challenge for the interlocutor, who must know how to untie the knots of his own thought in order to think.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why is the student proud of his stick?
- Why does the master ask him what this object is?
- Why is the student suspicious about the master's question?
- Why does the master send the student to walk?
- Why is the rough man amazed?
- What distinguishes the rough man from the scholar?
- What distinguishes the answer of the religious man from the two others?
- Why does everyone have their own definition of the stick?
- Why does the master speak about an "official answer"?
- Did the student understand why the master hit him?

Reflection

- ★ Why do we attach ourselves to objects?
- ★ Is it possible to be devoid of certainties?
- ★ Is the human being conformist in general?
- ★ Should we be wary of the obvious or trust it?
- ★ What are the obstacles that prevent us from seeing the reality of things?
- ★ Should we always think before answering?
- ★ Is a thing only what it is?
- ★ Should we find the answers in ourselves or in others?
- ★ What distinguishes a good answer from a bad one?
- ★ What is the role of a "good" master?

Chapter 19 The boat

Does fear prevent us from living?

A YOUNG NOVICE AND HIS OLD MASTER WERE CROSSING A RIVER ON A SMALL BOAT. IT WAS WINTER, THE WIND WAS STRONG, THE SURFACE OF THE WATER AGITATED. THE NOVICE WAS WORRIED BECAUSE THEIR BOAT SEEMED QUITE PRECARIOUS TO HIM UNDER THE GUSTS OF WIND. A FINE RAIN BEGAN TO FALL, IT WAS THE END OF THE DAY, THE VISIBILITY WAS NOT GOOD, AND THE YOUNG MAN FELT FEAR OVERCOME HIM.

THE TWO MEN WERE ROWING IN SILENCE, WHEN ANOTHER BOAT LOOMED IN THE SHADOWS. THE NOVICE THEN DROPPED HIS OARS, POINTED THE BOAT OUT AND SAID TO HIS MASTER:

- LOOK MASTER, THIS BOAT IS COMING STRAIGHT IN OUR DIRECTION. WITH THIS WIND BLOWING, IT IS DIFFICULT TO MANEUVER, IT WILL HIT US!

AS THE MASTER DID NOT ANSWER, THE NOVICE STOOD UP AND BEGAN TO SHOUT.

- HEY BOAT! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU ARE COMING STRAIGHT AT US!

ALAS, NO ONE ANSWERED.

- COME ON, IT'S INSANE! WHO IS THE MADMAN DRIVING THIS BOAT?

AS THE BOAT APPROACHED, ONE COULD DISTINGUISH A VAGUE SHAPE, MOTIONLESS, NEAR THE RUDDER. THE NOVICE TRIED TO SHOUT AT HIM.

- HEY PILOT! WAKE UP! YOU ARE GOING TO MAKE US CAPSIZE! WHEN HE RECEIVED NO ANSWER, HE BECAME ANGRY AND SHOUTED HIMSELF HOARSE WITH INSULTS, IMPRECATIONS AND THREATS.

- FOOL! DUMBASS! IF YOU OVERTURN US, YOU'LL HAVE A PRETTY GRIM TIME! THE BOAT CONTINUED TO COME CLOSER INEXORABLY. FORTUNATELY, AT THE LAST MOMENT, BY A SWIRL OF THE CURRENT OR A SKILLFUL GESTURE OF THE MASTER, THE COLLISION WAS NARROWLY AVOIDED. BUT AS THEY PASSED THE OTHER BOAT, THE TWO MONKS REALIZED THAT THERE WAS NO ONE ON BOARD. THE FORM THE NOVICE HAD TAKEN FOR A SLEEPING MAN WAS ONLY A BIG BLOATED BAG. THE MASTER THEN TURNED TOWARD HIS NOVICE AND

ASKED HIM: TELL ME, WITH WHOM DID YOU GET ANGRY?

Fear

Fear is a painful emotion engendered by the presence of a danger, its possibility or its mere evocation. Like joy and sadness, it is part of the fundamental emotions. A priori, fear is rather useful as a survival mechanism: it is a physical and psychic reaction that manifests our consciousness of danger, pushing us to flee or fight in a relatively immediate manner. But fear inhibits the exercise of thinking. Thus extreme fear, terror, can engender a third form of reaction: paralysis. By extension, the use of the term may include the reaction to unpleasant situations, such as the fear of error, loneliness or heights, or the fear of beings we find disgusting, for example the sight of some animals, approaching old or sick people, or even the mere idea of ghosts. Fear generally concerns the threat of a loss in connection with life, health, loved ones, security, wealth or anything that is considered valuable. It generally has a clearly perceived object, face with which we can react.

On a moral, religious, psychological, ideological or philosophical level, fear is the object of much criticism, because it would be a matter of overcoming it or ignoring it, rather than letting oneself be dominated by it. On a psychological level, the maturation of the mind and the individual will imply learning how to overcome certain fears as we get older, such as the fear of the dark or loneliness. On a moral level, the virtue of courage is classically convoked as a valuable criterion of a person. Warlike cultures, such as Ancient Rome, erect courage as virtue par excellence, fear becoming an object of reprobation. In some traditional societies, we encounter initiatory rites where it is necessary to face a dangerous situation to belong to the community by right. And most cultures celebrate one form or another of heroism, which means praising the fact of not giving in to fear.

Another way to fight fear is to de-realize or devalue anything that could be an object of fear, especially suffering and death. This is accomplished by replacing or sublimating that fear with values deemed to be safer or more essential, such as eternal life, sacrifice for others or

an ideal, control of oneself and one's emotions, power of reason, etc.

The present story depicts a young man who is subjected to anxiety and fear, who gesticulates in vain, and an impassive and confident master, who acts in an adequate manner. Therefore, it is about overcoming fear, on the one hand because it is painful and prevents the tranquility of the soul, provoking anger and other erratic behaviors; on the other hand because it gives rise to fantasies: we take our fears for realities and we envisage the worst, which seems "natural" to us even though it makes us uncomfortable. Thus, fear easily leads to paranoia, a disturbing vision of reality. So, according to Zen, we must learn to become master of oneself and practice equanimity, as many wisdoms advocate, depriving any external event of the power of scaring us.

Anger

In the narration, the novice goes from worry to fear, then to anger. In Buddhism, as in Christianity or many other wisdoms, anger is considered harmful. In the first case, it is considered that, with greed and ignorance, it is one of the three poisons of the mind, the sources of all our acts, thoughts and negative emotions that cause suffering, of which we should free oneself by the awakening. In the second case, anger is part of the sinful passions with lust, greed, pride, gluttony, etc. For Catholicism, it is one of the seven deadly sins, that is to say those from which all the others result. For example, anger can engender hatred, violence, even murder, all acts contrary to Christ's message of love. Stoic tradition or rationalist philosophers like Spinoza will also condemn anger, for the excesses in words or deeds that it engenders. Reason must take over emotions or passions, violent and uncontrolled. Anger is a kind of temporary madness that on the one hand opposes the tranquility of the soul, and on the other hand can push us to evil and injustice by its blindness.

Nevertheless, there is also an apology of anger in the tradition. Here we speak in the Bible of the wrath of God, in the face of injustices committed by men. For if according to the prophet Joel "the eternal is compassionate and merciful, slow to anger and rich in goodness, and repents of the evils he sends", he can still lose his temper face to the

iniquities of men, as with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by sulfur and fire, victims of divine wrath because of the decadence that reigned there. So it is possible to have healthy or fair angers, as well as unhealthy and unfair ones. In the Greek tradition, anger is reserved for some people and forbidden to some others. Warriors are entitled to exercise it, for it increases their fervour in battle, while slaves, domestics or children, forbidden to revolt, are dispossessed of it.

Anger, such as sadness, despair or resentment, comes from a lack, a frustration, a feeling of helplessness compared to an unbearable reality. But unlike the latter, anger pushes us more significantly into action. Thus facing evil, injustice, arbitrariness, anger attempts to gather all the available energy—physical and mental—to express refusal, by words or actions.

One has to wonder whether the nature of an anger, its origin and motivation are legitimate. The problem is that the angry person is not able to ask these kinds of questions because he is caught in his own spiral. Of course, the expression of anger can be a release, but anger can also trigger some involuntary actions that he will bitterly regret. Thus, the novice gets angry with someone who does not exist, realizing the absurdity of his behavior later. This is what we often discover when we get carried away because afterwards the object of our anger was not what we thought: either it did not exist or it did not deserve such excess of us. When we are angry, we necessarily think we are right. It is hard to get angry in an appropriate way; it is probably something you can learn, but maybe the anger is never appropriate, which would rather be the Zen reading of the problem.

The four traps (shikai)

In kendo, the way of the sword, we consider that there are four evils that lead irreparably to defeat, because our opponent will use them, and because they will prevent us from acting properly. These are doubt, confusion, surprise and fear. Other emotions could certainly be a problem, but these are the main ones, and their combination engenders many others. This is precisely what happens to the young novice of this story, who manifests these different states in turns, which prevents

him from facing reality and acting appropriately, unlike his master.

Confronting one's emotions helps to develop strength of character and determination. Certainly, the challenge is to not be affected by them, but we must not pretend to become perfect or totally impermeable: in the absolute, these emotions are not much a problem in themselves, if we know how to recognize and identify them, or even admit how they can sometimes be useful to us. It is all about being aware of what is happening to us, in order to not let oneself be invaded and overwhelmed, which is called emotional intelligence.

The surprise is that we are not ready for everything: we expect some things and not others. So, when the unexpected shows up, caught off-guard, we are somewhat disconcerted and paralyzed. We leave the field open to our adversary if he manages to surprise us. If we fear something, apprehension invades our mind, our decisions and actions are no longer free, we especially want to protect ourselves, without daring to act, and we have lost in advance. Moreover, our judgment is biased because we overestimate our opponent or dramatize the situation. When we are in doubt, we look at all kinds of possibilities, sensible and senseless, and, as a result, we lose confidence in ourselves. We weaken our ability to perceive and evaluate reality. We withdraw into ourselves; our mental processes are weighed down, our actions are slowed down. Unfortunately, doubt often tends to justify itself as being reasonable and necessary. In confusion, the mind is greedy, it wants everything, it confuses everything: it thinks too much, it embraces too many ideas at once, it rushes, it mixes up separate ideas and even their opposites. It is an excessive form of indecision; though, to think and act is precisely to get involved, to make a choice and stick to it, without being sure of anything.

These four "poisons" are the product of the "false mind," the restricted self. Only the consciousness can deliver us from it, that is to say, to make us realize that the cause is not external, but internal: the enemy or the danger is in us. That being said, convincing oneself of being the best is exactly the same problem with reality.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- Why is the novice worried from the beginning of the story?
- Why does the novice drop the oars instead of rowing?
- Why does the master not answer the novice's calls?
- Why does the master not try to calm the novice?
- Why does the novice get angry?
- How is the collision avoided?
- With whom did the novice get angry?
- What does this unmanned boat symbolize?
- What mistakes does the novice make?
- What distinguishes the teacher from the student?

Reflection

- ★ Are we the victims of circumstances?
- ★ Is anger necessarily a bad counsellor?
- ★ Is life worrisome?
- ★ Are we capable of not listening to our worries?
- ★ Is fear a necessary reaction?
- ★ Do our fears come mainly from ourself?
- ★ Should we overcome our own fear?
- ★ Why do we feel the need to insult others?
- ★ Is it possible and desirable to always remain calm?
- ★ Does relying on providence make sense?

Chapter 20 Polishing the tile

Should we seek perfection?

- WHAT ARE YOU DOING? THE MASTER ASKED HIS DISCIPLE SITTING ON THE FLOOR. - I'M DOING ZAZEN, ANSWERED THE LATTER.

- AH! AND WHY ARE YOU DOING ZAZEN?

- I WANT TO BECOME BUDDHA.

THEREUPON, THE MASTER SAT BESIDE HIS DISCIPLE AFTER PICKING UP A TILE, WHICH HE BEGAN TO RUB CAREFULLY. THE DISCIPLE, INTRIGUED, THEN ASKED:

- MASTER, WHY ARE YOU POLISHING THIS TILE?

- I WANT TO MAKE IT A MIRROR, QUITE SIMPLY.

- WELL, EXCLAIMED THE STUDENT, PERPLEXED, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

- AND IS BECOMING BUDDHA BY DOING ZAZEN POSSIBLE? REPLIED THE MASTER.

Perfection

The disciple wants to become Buddha, so he wants to be perfect, which is a common aspiration in the human being. It is found at the heart of the religious process, including in Zen Buddhism. Of course, the absolute is not incarnated by a god, but represented by the figure of Buddha, or by vacuity.

The desire for perfection echoes the taste of man for the infinite. As we are imperfect by nature, we daily experience finitude, through mortality, fragility, error and powerlessness, but despite all this, there lies in us a kind of ghost of perfection, more or less significant in one or the other, according to cultures and temperaments. "Should we accept ourself or try to be the best as much as possible?" is a nagging question, even if it is not always conscious, poorly formulated or not formulated at all. No doubt, it is absurd. But the dissatisfaction with oneself or the world, the two feelings responding to each other, inhabits us and resurfaces periodically. We have lived in paradise, we have been exiled from it, or we will go to paradise one day, at the end of time; these are motifs that are found in many cultures, in many myths

or archetypes. Sometimes we experience certain moments that seem perfect to us, for example in love, success or recognition. The same goes when meeting the perfect being or the perfect object. Thus, the natives of the Trobriand Islands described by Malinowski, when they were making a boat, had one so perfect in mind that it could fly. The absolute boat served as a model, it exemplifies the regulating ideal of every fisherman. Every society, every person, carries a kind of axiology at the forefront of which there is a kind of perfection, whether it is possible or not. Poets and philosophers are particularly fond of it in their writings.

The idea of perfection offers us a direction towards which our actions point: a regulating ideal. It is a powerful motive for our actions, it gives strength to our projects, even if, very often, we prefer not to call it so, because it would seem absurd, pretentious or ridiculous. We aspire to be perfect, a common temptation, we claim it by our behavior—for example when we refute any criticism, when at the moment we refuse the idea that we may have been mistaken—but we do not openly admit such an ambition, for we would therefore be imperfect. We prefer to say that we do our best, that we try to be better or improve ourself.

Many are the paths offered to us in order to surpass ourself: moral, religious, philosophical, professional, etc. The new religion of personal development is somewhat related to this inspiration, as are the so-called extreme sports. But one could criticize the illusion conveyed by this temptation: not loving oneself, being intolerant towards one's own imperfection, not assuming one's own existence, not accepting the finitude of one's own being. It is in this sense that the teacher ridicules the disciple by parodying his zazen posture. In any case, for Zen philosophy, perfection can only be imperfect.

Derision

Thus the master ridicules his pupil in his effort to become Buddha: he makes fun of him. This is above all an act of mockery, where one makes fun of a situation, something or someone. One does not ridicule him only to arouse gratuitous laughter, but as well to show the inanity of the object in question, its derisory dimension, its shabby, mediocre or

insignificant side. It can also be seen as a kind of contempt. The term derives from the Latin *ridere*: to laugh at something, to make fun of it. We generally consider that derision is devoid of compassion, that it is not generous, little affable and hardly kind, but is it necessarily the case?

To problematize this common vision, let us examine for a moment the concept of self-derision. It is practiced to facilitate social relations or as a rhetorical maneuver, it is very common among humorists. Its function is ambiguous, it can also be considered a form of duplicity. It consists of making critical, humiliating or disapproving remarks about oneself, in a playful or ironic tone. Should we take this as a form of confidence, where we appeal to a third party to confess our own weaknesses, our own insufficiencies to him? Or is it a trick, either to prove that one is clever or mischievous, or to show one's lack of pretension and his humility, or is it simply a strategy to establish a kind of complicity with others?

On the other hand, is self-derision really the expression of a critical vision of oneself, does it reveal a lack of self-esteem, or on the contrary does it express a strong self-confidence, even a form of arrogance, obvious when one grasps the ironic content of the utilized words? Humility is a volatile concept; it is so easy to boast by evoking it: "No one is more humble than I am." Let us think of the vanity of an intellectual who would discourse on his own idiocy or of a person known for her beauty who would speak of her repellent features. This could be a rhetorical strategy to obtain an immediate denial of the criticism in question from the interlocutor.

The interpretation of the gesture of self-derision relies heavily on the trust, benevolence or value we attach to the author of the words in question. The same goes for derision. The crucial question is to know or to guess what the formulated word or the laid gesture means, and especially to induce the intention or state of mind of the author. Does he want to hurt us? Does he want to make us understand something? Should we take this criticism personally, if there is a criticism, or is it a more general problem that he wants to make us understand? Can we trust him?

So what should we think of the master who polishes his tile? Is he sarcastic or mean? Is he a good teacher, effective, who knows how to teach through action and not only through words? Does he want to raise a general problem about the human being: this desire for the impossible, of which the absurdity is symbolized by the desire to make a mirror of the tile? Does he wish to experience this extreme attempt at absurdity himself, in all humility? Is he trying to prove that only the gesture counts in itself, and that in this sense the disciple who is doing zazen is already Buddha? This last hypothesis may seem incongruous to us, but it is only the mirror image of the previous one. Besides, Zen thinking addresses the problems in a paradoxical way. And after all, this tile is indeed already a mirror: it allows us to observe ourself, as the story shows. We will see what we want to see, what we can see. Perhaps, the art of derision consists of this. Seeing the true meaning of things precisely because one is able to grasp their insignificance.

Expedient and humour

The concept of expedient is ambiguous: it is both a convenient way to perform a task, and an easy solution or even a way out. But in the Buddhist tradition, we encounter the Sanskrit concept of upaya, which means the "right means": the practice, gesture or method that helps the other to attain enlightenment, according to the context and the person, which presupposes the knowledge of a plurality of means and the absence of dogmatism. This action is precisely opposed to the prajña, the perfect wisdom, emptiness, since it is absolute, whereas this one is relative, linked to circumstances, nevertheless a very important virtue, a "masculine" dimension of the bodhisattva. But if the upaya is effective, because it is not absolute, it can state inadequate or even false assertions or motivate strange or even aberrant behaviors. Error, lack, imperfection are an integral part of effective practice: in any case, everything ends up transcending into vacuity. We can also conceive of these "errors" as provisional truths, stages in spiritual progression, a little like thinking that scientific progress is articulated through a series of errors. In addition, not everyone suffers from the same evils and these differences must be taken into account, for practical and psychological

reasons. Thus we come across the ambiguity of the concept of expedient again.

It is in this "relative" and "effective" perspective that we will understand the importance of humor in Zen Buddhism. In most religions, there is no place for lightness: it is vain and superficial, but this is not the case for Zen. For example, in Rinzai School, Japan's oldest Zen tradition, it is taught that enlightenment can not be attained formally and analytically, but only in a sudden way, precisely such as the lighting that occurs in understanding a joke. And as well as a joke is no longer one if we have to explain it, the satori loses its power if we have to analyze it. This illumination is done only by oneself.

Thus the Zen master acts in a bizarre way, provokes the student, tells crazy stories, states koans, these short sentences with a paradoxical sense or brief enigmatic or absurd anecdotes. Nevertheless, some Zen schools, such as Soto, criticize koans as merely useless spirit. Through the practice of humor and absurdity, the experience of lightness and detachment is carried out, a source of awakening, the content of the teaching becoming secondary or insignificant. Besides, the most vulgar degrees of humor are not to be despised, as the famous koan shows: "What is Buddha? A shit stick!" This is also what Milefo embodied, the laughing Buddha, the popular paunchy and weird figure that we encounter in the windows of Chinese restaurants.

In this technique very similar to Socratic maieutics, it is above all a matter of provoking the mind, of upsetting its usual and routine processes, of letting go. It is a matter of experiencing the "sudden realization", of practicing the sudden modification of consciousness and, by laughter, provoking the relaxation of the tensions engendered and nourished by the "self" through desire, fear, ignorance, etc. Then we become aware of the inanity of our own suffering, thus experiencing freedom and truth. This is exactly what the master does by sitting next to the disciple with his tile. His gesture, funny and paradoxical, offers the opportunity to the student to laugh and understand the problem or to be dumbstruck: it is up to him to see.

 A FEW QUESTIONS TO DEEPEN AND BROADEN

Comprehension

- What is the purpose of the *zazen* practice?
- Why does the disciple want to become Buddha?
- Can the disciple become Buddha?
- Does the master really think that the tile can become a mirror?
- How does the master's analogy work?
- Why is the student perplexed?
- Why does the master choose this way of conveying his message?
- What does the metaphor of polishing represent?
- Is the master sarcastic towards his student?
- Does the master think that one can become Buddha by doing *zazen*?

Reflection

- ★ What is the interest of the meditation exercise?
- ★ What is the difference between meditating and thinking?
- ★ Why do we want to be perfect?
- ★ Can we achieve a kind of perfection?
- ★ Is it good to look for perfection?
- ★ Is it desirable to no longer experience perplexity?
- ★ Must we always glimpse the derisory of things?
- ★ Is it absurd to desire the impossible?
- ★ Is irony an appropriate means of teaching?
- ★ Can we cause enlightenment in others?

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