

Zoom Zazen Saturday 1 May 2021

After recommendations on how to eat, sit and practice zazen, on *Kontin* and *Sanran* - the two extreme states of mind during meditation - Master Keizan enumerates the errors that can mislead us during zazen:

'Sometimes you can see outside the room, or inside the body, or you have visions of the forms of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. You may also believe that you have attained wisdom and that you understand the sutras and their commentaries perfectly. All these extraordinary situations are diseases that arise when there is disharmony between the mind and the breath.'

During zazen, states of mind that make concentration difficult, or distract the mind from its meditation are called '**makyō**' in Japanese. Literally this word means 'the realm of demons or monsters'. These are all the forms adopted by *Mara*, the prince of demons, who holds the Wheel of our life in his clutches. *Māra* symbolises the unbalanced aspects of the mind, the neurotic mental reappearances of our past conditioning, all that pushes us to follow the most basic, crude instincts of our humanity.

'Makyō' are sensory hallucinations, ephemeral sensations, bizarre thought sequences, fanciful associations of ideas, imaginary life scenes, moving images, prophetic visions, involuntary movements.

There is nothing true or real about all this, but the attractive power of the '**makyō**' seduces us, hypnotizes us or frightens us, to the point that we lose contact with the reality of things.

It's like a film, that of our inner imaginary cinema in which the 'I, me' is the hero or the victim. In our mind and body, we can have a virtual experience which has no relationship to, or connection with the, reality of things - like actually feeling fear from mistaking a piece of rope for a snake in the dark.

'Makyō' are hallucinations of perception and distortions of thought that arise in the minds of meditators. Some may even be mistaken for enlightenment or realisation! Beliefs, expectations, fears and all fantasies take on an astonishing profile during zazen, sometimes marvellous, sometimes upsetting or disturbing. Like clouds whose shapes change constantly, drawing in the mind a fantastic world that overlays reality and hides it from our eyes. So the sun and the blue sky are hidden by clouds and we feel frustration and even pain. We do not realise that the clouds make the sky beautiful.

'Makyō' and illusions are the clouds of the mind. There is no point in trying to stop them or thinking that we can transform them. We must simply recognise them for what they are, unreal. **'Makyō'**, in fact, are not in themselves evil as long as we give them no more attention than we would give to shadows, and keep our vigilant attention focused on our own presence, posture and breathing.

Zen also speaks of '**bonnô**' which are passions, anxieties, pains and sufferings. Like '**makyô**', '**bonnô**' appear in the mind and are often transformed into karma.

It is important to understand that illusions are also emptiness, manifesting as illusion. It is therefore neither in our power nor in our ability to control or erase them. This is why it is said in Zen: '**Bonno soku bodai**': illusions are Awakening! The only true attitude towards '**makyô**' and '**bonnô**' is the unconditional acceptance of their empty, appearance-disappearance nature. Seeing this is Awakening.

To experience or undergo a '**makyô**' during zazen has an influence on the attitude of the body, the emotional state, the vital energy. The whole posture becomes destabilized, loses its centre of gravity. We experience states of confusion and agitation, and this can produce great frustration. What to do? This is what Master Keizan says:

*'If such '**makyô**' occur during zazen, you should put your mind in the lower abdomen. If you fall into torpor, place your attention between the eyebrows. If you find that you are scattered, place it at the tip of your nose or in the lower abdomen. During zazen, learn to put your mind in your left hand. And if you practice for a long time, don't fight to calm the mind and it will naturally free itself from distractions and obstructions.'*

Bringing the mind back into the body and uniting them both in recollected attention is the only practice we perform. '**Shin jin ichinyo**', a maxim dear to Master Dōgen, means '*body and mind unified.*' When we abandon all attachment to the fragile and ephemeral productions that wander in the mind, we find once more the unified space of Presence that is completely without limit.
