

## THERE IS NOTHING TO LIMIT OUR FREEDOM

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*An interview given to Pavol Remiáš and Daniel Cvečko by Sandó Kaisen*

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Zen is a Japanese expression for object-free meditation. In China it is *Chan*, in India *dhyāna*, in Korea *Seon*. This originally eastern philosophy, or a way of recognition of the self and the laws of the universe, came to existence through a fusion of traditional Taoism and Buddhism, which was brought to China from India by a legendary first ever Zen patriarch Bodhidharma in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Then, from China, Zen came to Japan, where it took roots and very intensely soaked into the local culture. Within the past 50 years, Zen, like other branches of Buddhism, penetrated into Europe and the USA. Today, you can find numerous books on Zen in bookshops – from catalogues of Zen gardens with typical economising aesthetics to sageness of the Zen masters.

As for meditation, which is to bring insight into reality, in almost every book the cognizants emphasise that Zen is not about knowledge, but practice. Despite hundreds of sympathisers, there are only a few dozens of people who practice Zen in Slovakia, and even less of those who do it regularly.

What is practice? For example, in Zen, an important part of the practice is to sit with one's legs crossed for approximately half an hour several times per week, sitting on a cushion opposite a white wall, so that the person is not distracted by anything. Sitting in this position is called Zazen.

Hundreds, maybe thousands of hours spent in such meditation one of the few European carriers of the highest knowledge, Master Sandó Kaisen, née Alain Krystaszek. He was born in 1952 in Noyon, France. He spent eight years living in a communist Poland, raised by his strict grandmother. For several years he assisted in a church. Later he moved to France. At the age of 20 he set off on an adventurous and dangerous journey to the communist China, where he trained the martial arts Wu Shu with a local master. After returning to France he came across Zen. In 1979, he was ordained a Zen monk. At present, he leads Zen adepts Europe-wide.

We met on the occasion of his visit of Bratislava. A modestly looking, pleasant older man with spontaneous and natural demeanor welcomed us. During the interview he switched between French and Polish and his behaviour was rich in kind-hearted laughter, although the topics were not cheerful only.

**Q How do you explain that the intellectual, reading interest in Zen prevails over willingness to truly practice it?**

**A** K: It has always been like that. Zen is not a religion, nor a philosophy or ethics. It is practice, as you said. One has to first experience many things in life, only then can he/she get to Zazen. Not everybody can practice it. But, if someone wants to be responsible for oneself and see what is like, and not to deal with what others say about him or her, he or she will then dedicate himself or herself to Zazen. Or, they will join another order, e.g. a Christian one, and devote themselves to contemplations. But, contemplation and meditation is not for all.

**Q Why is it important to sit and meditate in Zazen?**

**A** K: It is important that a person, their body and spirit, forget themselves in their nature. That means we concentrate on breathing, totally and fully, until we stop to notice there is any observer and the observed. We do not realise that somebody would be judging us. Once an odour of a person vanishes, what remains is only brightness, light.

**Q What practical gain does this have to a person from the Western civilisation?**

**A** K: They begin to live their life naturally. Practising Zazen leaves an imprint of naturalness on our entire behaviour.

**Q That means that the person can better cope with problematic situations which life brings? For example with partner separations, death of the close ones, and so on?**

K: We learn to relativize life. We discover the non-permanent character of the world. That is because we also have a spirit that changes constantly. And, moreover, there appears silence, peace that transcends emotions and feelings. But, if somebody close dies, we have the right to be sad; we have the right to cry. For, in this divine there is also part of a human, therefore we must live a life of a human, too. Fully.

**Q Exactly. For the Western lifestyle it is typical to try to see position, power, and relationships as if they were changeless and stable. This brings along lots of psychological problems, from which we try to set free in some way. What would you recommend to people who are trying to search for their self?**

**A** K: We carry many illusions, numerous traps in our minds, and therefore I would recommend them to come back to reality. Sitting in Zazen helps in this, too. Then we are seated in the presence. We always have to take care to be in the presence and not to wander somewhere else. For example, when we walk, we should do only that. It is necessary to be firmly rooted in the presence, which means, for example, in our work at the computer, too.

**Q We can suppose that it is the people who want to come to terms with their own personal problems who are interested in various spiritual movements. They want to get rid of them. But, when they start to practice Zen, it can happen that their problems, anxieties and depressions, nervousness, weakness, cowardness, sexual deviations, aggression, desires, which**

**they wish to get rid of reveal to them in their full power, in their real form. But most of the people obviously do not want to confront their dark sides. How to deal with it?**

**A** K: In Zen it is good to meet and practice together with others, on so-called sesshins [Ed. note: longer, usually several-day meditation sessions]. On these meetings, which generally last three days, we don't speak about ourselves, we do not talk about our problems. We concentrate only on Zazen, work, meals, on the way we sleep, and on how we relax. We do not think about other things. So, slowly we get to the presence. But, on the other hand, it is important that people live through their problems and their suffering. Each existence is unique. Every person has to walk his or her way till the end. One cannot fear suffering, nor illnesses, or complications in life. We need to live them through without fear and unnecessary concerns. Zen is not a recipe on how to put an end to suffering, nor is it a recipe on how to live a better life. Because there is no better life than the one we are living "now". But we always want something else. We always try to search for other realities, and then we cannot find them. This results in our suffering, hardship. However, it is not necessary to come up with some new reality.

**Q** **You say that sesshin is a several-day practice. After that, one returns to an ordinary life and is buried in advertisements, stress, and is exposed to various pressures. He or she finds himself in a world of marketing based on the fact that everybody wants to get money from**

**him or her. Does the performed practice not get lost in the everyday reality?**

**A** K: The fruit is eternal, because you are eternal already. You are already enlightened [Ed. note: ridden of clinging to anything]. The entire universe is actually enlightenment. You yourself are that enlightenment. If we are truly present also in such complications, somewhere deep inside we are motionless. I know it is not easy. Mind cannot understand this.

**Q** **Where is then the motivation in people to sit in Zazen? For the most part, we are not able to do things for the things themselves, without reaching goals. This is perhaps an ability of some artists, but how can be motivated to Zazen, for example, a finance person, who needs to give and get back? For such people Zazen has probably no sense.**

**A** K: One must have a goal in their life. We have to try to achieve something in life, but when we accompany it with Zazen, we are more concentrated, more attentive. Also emotions are calmed at practising Zazen. We do not experience anger, jealousy, or similar feelings. Everything is more real. But we mustn't lie or steal at doing it.

**Q** **How do you evaluate situation with Zen in Japan? A traditional country turned into a modern one in the second half of the last century. The young generation of Japanese is already detached from the tradition, which has always been represented by Zen as well.**

**A** K: I have recently been to Japan. That tradition of Zen is deeply rooted there, even if people do not practice Zazen. But it shows in

their gestures, behaviour, in their everyday life. This is true for the young generation, too, although on the outside it shows signs of Americanism and globalisation. On the inside they are all very Japanese.

**Q Does it mean natural, Zen?**

**A** K: Yes. Profound reverence and respect to others. Consideration of the others. A lot of goodness. Numerous natural characteristics. To be in Japan was a great pleasure for me.

**Q We have had also different experience. It is said that the Japanese divide people into the Japanese and the Gaijins, that means the White. According to this, a Gaijin is a person of lower value. There is allegedly a certain form of such xenophobia up to date.**

**A** K: With travelling they now know Europe much better and the division into the Gaijins and the Japanese has been put an end to. However, it was still so 20 years ago.

**Q People who travelled to Japan had an experience that abbots of Zen monasteries, who are often holders of high degrees of martial arts, remain in this style of thinking.**

**A** K: Then it's mostly those who haven't travelled much (laughing). Part of such an old Japan still exists. But, it is the part of Japan that suffers from the wounds and conflicts of the past.

**Q In Europe, but also in Slovakia, Zen is quite young, practiced by few people, and so it is live. In Japan, it is strongly institutionalised, which is given historically. Similar to how is institutionalised Chris-**

**tianity in our country. The Japanese Zen temples are said to collect huge amounts of money as gifts in the first two days of a new year. Does this not block the very Zen way that you are talking about?**

**A** K: Yes, this was a bit of a problem at my last journey to Japan. I had to separate myself from this. But, there are still old masters in the mountains, who teach Zen in small temples and they are basically those who transmit the true teaching. Now, Zen in Japan is very politicized. The Japanese try to control the European Zen, too. They want all the Europeans who would want to be ordained and teach others to have to come to Japan and pay for the ordination there. I belong to the branch Soto [Ed. note: the second main branch of Zen Buddhism is the branch Rinzai]. There, one has to pay to Eihei-ji, the main temple of the Soto branch. But, we want to practice our own ordinary European Zen. There are some problems with it. In Zen, there shouldn't be any organisation. Zen is free.

**Q The Soto sect is said to be organised as strictly as the Japanese imperial court.**

**A** K: Yes, but on the other hand, thanks to that Zen has survived for more than seven centuries. The question of organising will, however, always be a problem. The question is how to find balance between organising and freedom. That is a problem we cannot solve on the Earth. I want to pass down my knowledge to my disciples, and then they can do whatever they want with it. I will die. Then it will not be my business; it will be up to them.

**Q The penetration of eastern philosophies into Europe has been going on for several**

**years already. Why is it exactly the eastern philosophies that are popular when we have our own tradition, the Christianity here.**

**A** K: Zen is not a religion. We can have our own religion and dedicate ourselves to Zazen, too. In Zen we have no specific ideas of religious character. We do not believe for example in Buddha. Zen is mainly about forgetting ourselves in order to really live. But this doesn't prevent from studying Christianity, reading the gospels. Everyone should be given chance to gain knowledge. Religion is for all laymen. People should stay in their religion because it is a protection for them. The very fact that they believe in God. It is important that all believe in the same god. I am not saying that God does not exist. We only teach people a different way of how to perceive God.

**Q** **How do you see ability of Christianity to tolerate other religions? The church has quite a strong background in Slovakia. For example, with yoga, which was to be an optional subject at grammar schools, there were objections that it could bring a certain undesirable psychological influence. It is as if there were concerns that when any system brings along a different philosophical viewpoint it could happen that those children stopped going to Christian temples and started working on their development in another way. There are many diverse ways, equally good as Christianity. Somebody can mind that.**

**A** K: People should be left to decide about their own lives, nothing should be banned. Religion should never forbid. Religion is

not here to shut someone up but to help the person to open up. Religion should develop the concept of universal freedom. But, they fear that their religion would decline and that is why various restrictions arise. It is exactly the same in Japan in Zen.

**Q** **How do you get along with churches and authorities in France? The French are more liberal, it is a social country. What is the co-existence like?**

**A** K: There are no pressures. The government respects Zen. It considers it a true practice which is useful to people. But the French are not so focused on the heart, but rather on the intellect. Then they have a problem with Zen. They always want to talk about Buddhism, but those who would practice it are a few. There are more Slovaks, and Czechs, Russians, Ukrainians.

**Q** **Is it really given by the Slavonic character, which is more intuitive, emotional?**

**A** K: Yes, the Slavs are closer to Zen by their naturalness. They are more authentic.

**Q** **Is there then good ground for Zen to settle in Slovakia?**

**A** K: Certainly, absolutely. Not so much in France.

**Q** **But we have a less liberal cultural background.**

**A** K: That will change for sure (laughing).

**Q** **How can a Zen monastery be started up for example in Slovakia? It is certainly not easy. How is Zen financed in Europe?**

**A** K: I don't know about the others. I have my own small temple in France. Each temple has its disciples who secure its operation. There

is a particular self-steering. As for the Slovak disciples, you have to ask them, I never ask how they finance the monastery.

**Q Your temple lies in France in a municipality Cubjac. What do you live on?**

**A** K: We all work and then give part of the money for the operation of the temple.

**Q It would probably be difficult to find sponsors for a Zen temple since it is not a profitable business.**

**A** K: My master [Ed. note: Taisen Deshimaru] had a sponsor. It was a big Italian financier. He gave him donations every year. But he was not a practising person, but a sympathizer. He once met my master and told him he would help him.

**Q Do you also have your sponsors, sympathizers?**

**A** K: I do, but they are poor (laughing).

**Q Is the combination of Zen and martial arts a suitable one, as it used to be in Japan? You yourself devoted yourself to various martial styles.**

**A** K: Let each person do what he or she wants. Music, calligraphy, karate. From Zazen, from ourselves, from that depth we can then do anything. Everyone is his or her own creation.

**Q However, the system we live in – marketing, advertising, globalisation, church – all of that is focused to suppress the individuality of people.**

**A** K: Yes.

**Q What then constrains an ordinary person of the western civilisation from true re-**

**alisation of the freedom you are speaking about?**

**A** K: Nothing (laughing).

## About the author

**Sandó Kaisen** (1952) is one of the main representatives of the Soto Zen Buddhist schools in Europe. This school was founded in 13<sup>th</sup> century in Japan by Master Eihei Dogen. It was spread through Europe in the 1960s thanks to the efforts of Master Deshimaru. The main practice of this school is the sitting meditation – Zazen, during which the position of the body, the respiration and attention are important.

Master Sandó Kaisen introduced himself to the East of Europe (also to Slovakia) in 1990. Since then, his books have been published here and people could have come to see him on several lectures and introductions to Zazen he has given here, and learn about him from various press articles and programs on the radio and TV.

Master Sandó Kaisen transmits only one thing “from my soul to yours”: to break through the shell of habits and securities that imprisoned the being, to touch the Way and make it real in pure consciousness of the body, so that we can understand the Spirit of Unity.