

Communication

Karlfried Graf Dürckheim: The Initiatory Therapy from the Experience Lived to Theorisation

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Abstract

The article that is proposed to you retraces some elements of Karlfried Graf Dürckheim's career, from his lived experience to a theorization that he developed as soon as he returned to Europe in 1947. It was on the basis of experience that he built the milestones of the initiatory therapy that he theorized as soon as he returned to Germany at the end of the Second World War. A professor of psychology and philosophy, he knew how to combine his academic knowledge with spirituality oriented by Rhenish mysticism. Similarly, he was inspired by the practice of Zen that he discovered during his years spent in Japan. His attention to sensoriality and his striking memories would guide his therapeutic work, his theorization and the support of the many people who came to work with him and his collaborators throughout his life. It is a journey in the footsteps of the "Sage of the Black Forest" that we are invited here, an initiatory journey as close as possible to what constituted the foundations of his thought and practice. Today, many disciples continue his work of transmission and accompany people on the way, in Rütte in Germany or in other countries in Europe, and especially one of his closest disciples, Jacques Castermane, in France in the Drôme.

Keywords

Experience, Theorisation, Initiatory Therapy, Body, Zen

1. Introduction

Karlfried Graf Dürckheim (1896-1988), “the old sage from the Black Forest”, as Marc de Smedt¹ likes to call him, lived through the 20th century leaving a teaching of great depth and international significance. He is the author of over fifteen books that have sought to bear witness to man's quest to rediscover the true path of his being through practices of wisdom.

Born in October 1896 in Munich, Germany, in a family of noble descent whose genealogy dates from the 12th

century, he enjoys a peaceful childhood that he himself describes as “golden”. His father Friedrich, who ran a farm and an industrial business, ensured the family's comfortable lifestyle (summer estate, fishing, hunting...); his mother Charlotte, open to culture and charitable causes, allowed the home of the Dürckheim's to host cultural gatherings and exchanges, open to artists, musicians, poets, philosophers and psychologists.

Gerhard Wehr, in his biography devoted to Karl Friedrich von Dürckheim-Montmartin; testified of his journey in a work entitled *A life under the sign of transformation* [11]. However, for our purpose it seems important to identify and recognize

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what in his journey, was underlying and allowed to lay the foundations of what he will later call “the initiatory therapy”.

2. The Beginnings of His Thought

From an early age, Karlfried Graf Dürckheim is sensitive to different atmospheres and his environment. As he will reveal in his work, he assimilated the world around him, all senses alert, and was marked by certain events, places and people. From this carefree childhood which took place in a secure environment, he will retain memories and a certain quality of experience that will guide him in his counselling practice. In his books, he was able to describe moments that left a more profound and lasting impression on him - that everyone has lived at one point, without necessarily giving them greater importance -. He will remind us regularly that the recognition of these moments is a step on the path of becoming oneself.

At the age of eighteen, when World War I brakes out, it seems normal for the son of Count von Dürckheim, educated in the values of his homeland, to interrupt his studies and enlist as an officer in the Bavarian Infantry Regiment. There, he will have to face the horrors of death and war. Like many others plunged in these horrible circumstances, the young man emerges from this experience transformed, discovering another value for life, another “flavour” we might say. The young officer opens to a new awareness of life, which, with the acceptance of death, becomes more vast.

The anguish of death, the distress we experience on an existential level does not seem to be reduced to an impasse to which we can only resign ourselves. Karlfried Graf Dürckheim will slowly shape this approach of the initiatory therapy. *“Certain moments offer the experience of another awareness of our relation to dying and living; moments when, as a soldier among other soldiers, we imperatively need to dive in the arena of probable death, while admitting the possibility of an end for ourselves. There is a certain enjoyment to consciously throw oneself out of oneself into the peril of death. I experienced this during a night assault on a forest ridge, crossing a barrier during the battle of Flanders, while jumping in a ravine under a volley of gunfire. It was as if, at the precise moment of a possible annihilation, and in the anticipated acceptance of nothingness, we were suddenly aware of what was undestroyable. During these experiences, in going beyond the limits of our usual lives, another dimension emerged, that is neither related to a belief or faith but is a truly liberating experience”* [4].

Back from the war front, the events of “death and rebirth” experienced by lieutenant Dürckheim will mark the process of maturation of the individual, which he will later recognize and theorize in his approach to counselling.

A period of study will then begin, consequently pursuing an openness to culture and sciences which had nourished his childhood. He will become professor in psychology at Kiel university in Germany, and Breslau in Poland; as assistant at first and then fully appointed, and professor in philosophy.

Studies and encounters will favour the stimulation of both cultural and philosophical exchanges. The long-lasting friendship with Enja von Hattingberg, who will later become his wife, also participates to the period’s intellectual dynamic of openness. Dürckheim recounts that during one of these traditional gatherings among friends, his wife read an excerpt from Lao-Tse’s *Tao Te Ching*, and listening to the words, and especially chapter 11 (or verse 11), he is so profoundly moved that his path will forever and permanently be marked by it:

“We join wheel spokes to form a wheel, / but it is the emptiness of the hub / which allows the chariot to move forward.

We model clay to make a vase / but it is the emptiness inside / which contains what is poured into it.

We nail wood to make a house, / but it is the space inside / which makes it liveable.

We work with the being, / but it is the non-being / which is essential” [7].

Adolphe Hitler’s rise to power and the emergence of national socialism mark a change, and although from a noble descent, Dürckheim’s Jewish origins make him politically undesirable. The regime sends him out on a diplomatic mission in England, and farther still to Japan. This ten years period spent in Japan (1937-1947) will mark a bend in the forthcoming author of *Hara, Vital Centre of Man* (Dürckheim, 1972). There he will encounter “zen masters” and most of all “exercises on the Way”. During his encounter with Daisetz T. Suzuki, - considered as one of the introducers of Zen Buddhism in the West – Suzuki will suggest to Dürckheim that if he wishes to discover the fundamentals of Zen, it must be done through the practice of an exercise. Consequently, Dürckheim will start practicing archery, zazen, calligraphy...

During his exchanges with Daisetz T. Suzuki and other masters, he will make the link between what was transmitted by the Rhenish mystic, Master Eckhart, to whom he was very close to, and Zen masters.

When he met Daisetz T. Suzuki, one of his answers resonated deeply when he asked him what he thought was the difference between western wisdom and oriental wisdom. Suzuki’s answered: *“Western wisdom looks outwards while oriental wisdom looks inwards, [...] but if you look inward as one looks outwards, you turn the inside [...] into an outside”* [1]. These words will have a lasting influence on Karlfried Graf Dürckheim and he will regularly quote them during his teachings.

The study and deepening of this path, lead him to the experience of what lies beneath the cultural and cult aspects, which seems to be universal to mankind. *“I am interested in what is universally human”* he would often say. This experience of oneself will guide his therapeutical and theoretical work. In this sense, the practice and exercises he proposes will favor *“the passage from the body I have to the body I am”* ([3], [4]). Dürckheim will pursue his Japanese experience in the work of opening and deepening, which seems for him to be an obvious path. His attention to sensoriality enables him to step aside from a purely academic knowledge and im-

merge himself body and soul in the exercise and experience. Although he is schooled in psychology and phenomenology, he is able to keep his knowledge in the background, to allow the emergence of what he will later transmit throughout his entire life.

An event is worth noting: In 1945, while the American army invades the very first Japanese islands – which end with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki islands -, the diplomat's nationality will lead him to prison. During his 16 months detention in Sugamo's prison, while the other German prisoners had long since been released, Karlfried Graf Dürckheim will experience the absurdness of the situation. False testimonies against him, groundless accusations, ill-treatment, the impossibility to defend himself (he was refused legal representation), no acknowledgement of his testimony ... a "twist of fate", as he calls it; events that will deeply affect him and force him to turn inwards. "It was a very fruitful period for me [...], with the various contours of my future work taking shape from day to day. In my cell, a great silence enveloped me. This period of captivity was very rich as I was given the possibility to simply practice the exercise named zazen: I sat in silence for hours on end" [11] he will say years after. In 1947 he is released and repatriated after his incarceration, for which the only reason given was that it was a "mistake". All he receives is a modest apology from the only officer present the day of discharge.

3. The Emergence of the Personale Leibtherapy

His return to Germany leads him to redirect his work. It seems obvious he must start afresh, both financially and professionally. Thus, the interrogation of how to pass on his experience to his contemporaries emerges. After a period of incubating his experiences and trials, he shares his observations, knowledge and hypotheses with different professionals of the psychotherapy sphere. An interesting encounter with a former student, Maria Hippus-Winterer will lead him to formalize, clarify and refine the "Initiatory Therapy" or *Personale Leibtherapy*. Dürckheim becomes increasingly aware of the central role played by the body in the experience of life and in the process of transformation. It should be noted that the term "body" in English can be transcribed by two words in German, namely *Körper*, rather indicating "the body I have", and *Leib*, referring to the dimension of "the body I am" which is more "spiritual", and in its etymologic sense, meaning "life or soul principle" or "wind, breath, air".

Karlfried Graf Dürckheim speaks of the "Being", of the path that each one of us draws towards the Being, towards the self, distinguishing the "existential I", what he names "the little I" and the "essential Being". Let us remember that Dürckheim's notion of "Being" is borrowed from Master Eckhart and the Rhenish mystic. The path he proposes, and the path he invites us to follow through the practice of an

exercise, he will develop in what he will later call the "Initiatory Therapy". For Dürckheim, "meditation and the initiatory life revolve around two poles: the essential being's experience, redeeming and liberating, and the creative transformation into an individual form based on the essential Being" [5]. As was seen earlier on, the term "experience" takes on its full meaning in the lived experience, and so he will speak of three distresses lying within every human being, the three fears we encounter, which call for their own clarification and surpassing through what Dürckheim offers in the Initiatory Therapy or *Personale Leibtherapy*.

The three distresses encountered by man are the fear of death, the destruction or annihilation which imply the quest for security; and despair tied to isolation which implies the quest for love. The fears and distress that we hear in all of the demands for counseling and therapy expressed by the people who come in for consultations. Yet, death is inevitable, the world is meaningless and nothing can protect us. In this perspective, man in contact with this distress or anguish feels trapped in a nostalgia that dwells and feeds on passed events. With regards to the moments of life he himself had to cross, we can see the extent to which he had to come to terms with these distresses, and how they were able to make sense, paradoxically, in the construction of a therapy. However, for Dürckheim, the therapy is an in-depth process, a path of individuation in reference to Carl G. Jung, a process that involves the whole person, leading him to say that traditional therapies are often only one half of the therapy addressing the I. The Initiatory therapy on the other hand, was revealed to be the other half of the commonly accepted forms of therapy, in which the aim is not to heal "THE I" from suffering of human condition, but rather of healing "FROM the I" that produces the suffering. This distinction, which he emphasized at a conference in Lindau in 1972, still seems relevant today when we look at the multiplicity of specific technics that are being developed.

In this sense, Jacques Castermane, after fifty years of practice as an extension of the teachings of his master Karlfried Graf Dürckheim's teachings, whom he worked with from 1967 to 1988, writes: "Zen is neither an ancient nor a recent therapy. Zen invites us to take a fresh look at mankind, and ourselves. Like Graf Dürckheim, I am convinced that what we've heard about therapy up until now, is in fact only half of it! It is fortunate that amongst the pragmatic therapies that we know of, some help man to better evolve in his relationship with the world and with others. However, there exists a therapy that strives to awaken man to an ignored area of himself: his essential nature" [2].

Also, to the question asked: "Is the way paved by Dürckheim a spiritual one or a therapy?" Jacques Castermane answers: "Both in one!", interesting proposition in the light of contemporary therapeutic approaches which are sometimes exclusive, even divisive, if not integrative, but all tend to the realization of this unity of the being.

4. From Theory to Practice

The work or path, journeys through the body, through a renewed contact with the body that “I am” and not a body “that I have”, that we mobilize in an ever-increasing need to have, to do or know, insidiously distancing us from our essential dimension. This body refers to the *Körper*, but also the *Leib*, to the “body-being” that we are.

With Maria Hippus-Winterer, Dürckheim will establish a Centre for training and meetings in existential psychology and the Initiatory therapy (nowadays recognized as a foundation of public interest) in Todtmoos-Rütte in Germany (Black Forest). The Centre will offer work based on the exploration of the body, using “zen style” exercises and will consider phenomenology, existential philosophy and depth psychology.

The exercises tend to awaken the “sensitive conscience” evoked by Dürckheim, similar to the “taste for Being” known by the Mystics, which is a founding perception on the initiatory path, being both the path itself and the direction. In this sense, it concerns the why and the how of meditation, on the one hand through the development of this awareness, this attention or this taste in the practice of meditation, revealing that this conscience or the organ is none other than the man in his entirety having become transparent to Being. The therapeutic work leads to refining this sensitive conscience and this opening to oneself, slowly transforming the person engaged in the process.

Different degrees or different “steps” indicate the deepening, and maturing on this path that Karlfried Graf Dürckheim and his collaborators will call “vigilance”, “abandonment”, “becoming one”. It is about recognizing and consenting to what is happening and letting this dimension of the self be and manifest itself.

The vigilance, the presence to the body that we are in a slightly more continuous contact, marks a change for the person who opens to it regularly in daily life.

Thus, the exercises proposed are designed to awaken this dimension of our relationship with ourselves.

We often hear of letting go, of detachment, of the grieving process, of abandonment... terms, and words that can be heard on everyone’s lips and in numerous books on psychology, meditation or wellbeing. A concept which, when it is purely in our mind does not produce much change. It is a question here of exercising and feeling as a body; but of what exactly should I let go of?

The “I” is organized around the “I want, I can, I know”, this “I” which, from the outset, seeks to fix our identity as different from the other, a clear identity that would be reassuring, this “I” which separates and objectifies (etymologically signifies “to throw out”). This differentiation acts as an obstacle, a veil to that prevents us from accessing what we are trying to achieve within ourselves, from liberating the gestures; for example, in the same way that a tension blocks the amplitude of a gesture. Clearing the obstacle, dissolving it, is the path to

becoming oneself and presents itself as a path of detachment. The work consists in paying attention to breathing, to the corporal tension and relaxation of the body, in a slow anchoring in what is called the “centre of Being”, “Hara” [3].

“Become who you are” Nietzsche wrote after Pindar. Becoming one with oneself is a process that deepens as the “zen style” exercises progress, and one that Dürckheim never fail to emphasize and take up again in his talks with those engaged in a work process in Rütte. The interviews provide an opportunity for guidance and discussions in this therapeutical process engaging the entirety of the person as he or she is. These conversations are an opportunity to point out and underline the experimented dimensions during the exercises, or at the turn of an associated memory, encouraging the recognition of these deeper experiences and echoing the Being that we too often put aside, often forgotten or considered of minor importance. Acknowledging this sensation or dimension of the self which, at times, opens when one or another obstacle clears, reveals to be a step on the way of the initiatory therapy. Opening and consenting to what is happening, both in the practice of an exercise and through the technique in everyday life, contribute to the transformation of the person. Thus, Karlfried Graf Dürckheim speaks of “transformative exercises” leading to a “metamorphosis”. For him, it is a question of letting our Being manifest itself, of manifesting this dimension of the self in gestures we make in our everyday life, not seeking anything special, but coinciding with the moment that presents itself, participating fully in it. To achieve this, the exercises are based on a specific technique: “*This technic, writes Dürckheim, born from both freeing and uniting, must be repeated, renew and deepened...*” [6].

Thus, it will manifest itself with fewer and fewer obstacles or resistances in our daily gestures. Maturing is a perpetual transformation.

These different steps, degrees of maturation, challenging to decline in a linear timeframe and perspective, are indications on the Way. Access to these markers – as they may arise at any moment - does not necessarily follow an order or a chronology of stages, but are intimately intertwined, deepening in an elliptical movement in the manner of all natural and universal movements. Manifesting themselves in small strokes, opening and closing like the act of breathing; what the “old sage” named “the touches of the Being” are revealed and awakened by a presence to oneself, simply during our daily life.

The privileged fields of experience, which favour the initiatory path, lie within the material framework of our everyday existence. He identifies the contexts of nature, the arts, the encounter between two people and finally religion worship. These are fields in which can be discovered the great, the beautiful, love and a way of feeling connected to another order that touches an often-unexpected depth of oneself. The “touches of Being” that need to be welcomed and recognized as such.

The work in the field of the initiatory therapy reveals that the fears and distress encountered by man, find their coun-

terpart in the qualities experienced in certain circumstances and lived as a certain inner strength, or during times when we feel everything is in order, or furthermore, during those magical moments that never fail to surprise us, caught up in a sudden feeling of unity.

Romain Rolland speaks of “the oceanic feeling” [10], Carl G. Jung following Rudolf Otto mentions the “numinous” [9] dimension. Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, by the therapy he offered his contemporaries, sought to lead them to this dimension of oneself. He often echoes Novalis’ words: “*All that is visible is the invisible elevated to the state of mystery.*” [1]

5. His Legacy

Karlfried Graf Dürckheim will pursue his teachings until his last breath. Many people from different countries, cultures and various confessions will come and work with him in Rütte. In his presence, and thanks to what he and his collaborators proposed, many found what resonated within or echoed in themselves. Psychologists, therapists, priests, teachers, industrials and individuals of all social standings... will taste the experience of the encounter with a deeper dimension to oneself.

Inspired by this work of transformation, many students will pass on his teachings to their contemporaries, certain will incorporate the influence of his work to other techniques, thus helping to spread his wisdom.

From this perspective, it is the “Way of action” to which Jacques Castermane invites us, whether it be in silent meditation, meditative walking, Ikebana, Aikido... or any other exercise you will choose as a technic for transformation, it is important to discipline oneself and to be a disciple on the Way of becoming oneself. Fellow student and disciple to Karlfried Graf Dürckheim for over ten years, author of “*La Sagesse Exercée*”, Jacques Castermane has been spreading for over fifty years the teachings of his master, to keep it alive. In the 80’s, Karlfried Graf Dürckheim, will recognize in him the figure of his own transmission and will ask him to work on his behalf. In 1981, Jacques Castermane will inaugurate the eponymous Dürckheim Centre in the Drôme. In a tribute to his master, Jacques Castermane will take up the essential points that he has passed on to him concerning the Personale Leibtherapy. Referring to the importance of the experience he writes: “*Whatever the content of the experience, the one who lives it feels increasingly obliged to use the words Force, Order and Unity to translate what they have just experienced. These three words are the key to the understanding what Dürckheim suggests we use to discover the meaning of life. The transcendent Being is what makes all that is alive, live... and manifests itself in the three aspects of Plenitude, Order,*

and Unity [...] All that we have come to consider concerns Leibtherapy, as its goal is Completeness, Order, and Unity” [8]. This path presents itself as a possible way for individuals and remains as topical and relevant for the postmodern individual, allowing to find ourselves both on the natural, existential and essential levels. A path that favors the transformation of man, which is not reduced to the body he has, but rather opens to the manifestation of the body-spirit that he is.

Author Contributions

René Monami is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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