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**About the master who
did not want to be one**

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**English
podcast transcript**

About the master who did not want to be one

About the sitting meditation Zazen

English Transcript

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AP = Alexander Poraj

MH: Michael Hampe

FM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, a podcast produced by METIS, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at www.metis.ethz.ch.

I am joined in the studio today by Alexander Poraj and Michael Hampe, who will be reflecting on sitting, specifically the seated meditation 'zazen'.

Alexander Poraj is a master of zazen and teaches it at the Benediktushof in Holzkirchen at the Center for Meditation, Mindfulness and Personal Development. He studied theology and law and has also worked in management consulting.

Michael Hampe is Professor of Philosophy at the ETH Zurich, initiator of the METIS project, and together with me, Frederike Maas, he will be leading the conversation with Alexander Poraj today.

A warm welcome to both of you!

AP: Hello!

MH: Thank you.

FM: There are many different forms of mastery. For example, a person can become a master baker, a master blaster, or a master hairdresser. One attains such mastery through apprenticeship and study, to achieve a certain perfection in an activity, certified in a masterpiece. Mr. Poraj, I would like to ask you what makes a Zen master. What does he master and how does he achieve it? Is there also a kind of masterpiece that proves his mastery?

AP: Yes, the title 'Master' is out of place in this sense and in the context that you have correctly drawn, which rather points to a kind of skill and ability in connection with Zen or with particular insights. It is rather the designation in both Chinese, later certainly also in Japanese, but above all in Indian contexts of a certain kind of, yes almost begging of a person of which one believes to know more than oneself. It is always an interpretation, in such small hierarchy, that someone possesses or achieves something that I haven't yet. And that is quite conceivable and possible in many areas, I can learn a lot from a master carpenter, if I have no idea about it. In Zen too, but not one to one. That is, a so-called Zen master, as I said, or, the title has been taken over rather culturally, because Buddhism especially in China, also later in Japan, but first in China, was not institutionalized. That is, we have isolated individuals who have realized something, and they talk about it. And these persons, Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, in India Hinduism was not institutionalized at that time, today also to the greatest possible extent not, that means we have individual persons who claim to have seen something, to have experienced something, who take to the streets and talk about it. Groups of listeners form, who somehow find this good, and follow them and then call the person a teacher and/or a master, depending on the culture. Whether the master then really has something more to say in terms of content, or experiences, than the ordinary mortal who listens to him, is very, very, very open to question, at least in Zen that is the case. This means that the master is not really one who possesses more and knows what no one else would know, or I'll put it this way, it's not a skill, but rather a realization. So if you now have 100 francs in your pocket, and I do too,

then the only difference might be that I know it and you might not. But you do. You and me. That means you don't get richer by knowing about it, and I don't get poorer by talking about it.

FM: So, the title 'Master' is first of all a self-designation, which you still have to prove?

AP: Always. And in this field already, in Zen anyway, because it is a perpetual insight into the nature of reality as the immediate, fresh, constantly evolving life. That is, any person who is present and more present than I am at that moment is a master to me. One is not a master permanently in itself because of a diploma, a work, a masterpiece in the sense that reality is not static.

MH: But isn't there a practice that makes it more likely to come to this insight, so that the idea that for example Aristotle had in the European-Greek context, that one can reach perfection in different activities, in carpentry, in playing the flute, perhaps in reasoning or in contemplating the stars, perhaps leads to gaining insights by chance. Simply while washing up something can occur to me, or if I constantly work with wood, I may come to the insight to glue the wood in a certain way. And in my mind, zazen, sitting, is somehow a paradoxical activity, an activity of doing nothing, that increases the likelihood of gaining insight into the freshness of life, into the reality of the present moment, or is that a misconception, that it's about mastery in a practice as well?

AP: Personally, I think it's a bit of a misconception because it assumes that there really are goals, which means it's a bit linear, it assumes the telos, as per Aristotle. So that's all, what it is aiming at, you can make it better or perfect it, how the 'to perfect' is used, but what the historical Shakyamuni seems to have pointed to, which is probably the brilliant notion also put into language, and what the Chinese 'chan' then focuses on, is rather to realize that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that is in itself separate, substantial and lasting. That is, it is not the achievement of a skill, a perfecting of a skill, a sudden, if you like, that's why suddenly, in Chan, in contrast to many other Buddhist directions, one often speaks of a sudden enlightenment, independent of training, moment, place and the like, suddenly it can dawn on you: "That's how it is!" With this we do not speak of a skill and we do not speak of

an achieved goal, but I distinguish now perhaps linguistically, it is an awareness of what already is. No matter where, with whom, under which circumstances, whether it suits one, how one reacts emotionally. Nothing in itself, nothing separate, nothing substantial, complex form of interactions and interrelationships, but not between, only interactions, interrelationships and we as part of it, if one could even say that, also purely of interrelationship, also the interrelationship of our consciousness, not lasting, and the realization of this, is in a way relatively interrelating and not final in itself and forever and forever. This is already interesting, so now....

MH: But that one pursues certain goals now in the Aristotelian sense, could be an obstacle...

AP: So yes...

MH: ...for this insight.

AP: ...because yes...

MH: ...so the ability to drop goals is something you can learn from a master.

AP: The irony is, you don't learn that, because if I wanted to learn that, I would have the goal to learn it. So that would be a contradiction.

FM: Now we've already talked about the term 'zazen', or we've used it, but I'd like to clarify again what it actually means. This podcast is about Zen and zazen, what does that mean, are there translations for that, into German maybe, and what is the connection between the two?

AP: So, of course there are translations or transmissions, rather, into the context in which we live. The Japanese word 'zen' refers to more the phonetic rendering of the Chinese word 'chan', which in turn is a phonetic rendering of the Indian 'dhyana'. And 'dhyana' again, and here's the thing, is often translated today as, for example, meditation, which is a bit tragic because the word meditation again is Christian: 'Oratio, Meditatio, Contemplatio', and has

been ripped out of a completely different cultural context and is used very generally. To translate 'dhyana' with immersion, for example...you see already in our linguistic picture, immersion raises the question: who immerses themselves where? It is always a certain activity also directionally, but it is rather a sort of nondescriptive process because the immersion is too plastic, still too material, it is used in such a way that people give it a different twist, that is then cultural history also of chan. It is not used in the same way as dhyana in Indian.

FM: You have now spoken of immersion, but in the context of the word Zen there is also often talk of awakening.

AP: Yes

FM: Are we in a state of sleep or dreaming when we haven't yet walked the path of Zen?

AP: Not in that sense, because it's a metaphor for a very specific process that stems from the fact that the historical Buddha, that is, Siddhartha, who was then called the 'Awakened Buddha', realized something. And the experienced insight is also said to be a kind of non-knowledge or awakened insight, which means that if we – very specifically Buddhist now – if we think there is a separate, substantial 'I', and that would also be permanent, then we live in a dream, or as he says, in non-knowledge. And it is even more, in the Indian culture the word knowledge: 'veda' plays a very big role. All the various gurus speak of divine knowledge, of knowledge that has been given to them, that they pass on under certain circumstances so that people can reach something. And Shakyamuni, similar to Jesus, against the Pharisees, always speaks very strongly against the Brahmins and calls their knowledge 'non-knowledge' and describes his insight as the awakening from the non-knowledge about how we and reality is constituted, and in this context the term awakening takes place.

MH: But in the practice of zazen there is not only an exchange about whether there is an 'I' and about awakening to an 'I-less' state, but there are also instructions to sit down, to stop moving when the gong sounds, to stand up when the gong sounds again. In some Zen schools, great importance is put on adopting a certain posture, holding the hands in a

certain way, perhaps sitting in a lotus position, and so on. So this already goes beyond the verbal, unlike in philosophy, when I teach my students then they can lounge around as they wish and can leave, go to the bathroom in between and so on, and then they listen to me again. It is somehow different in the meditation hall, there is no more talking, you sit still. So what is the relationship between this practice and the insight you have just described to us?

AP: The practice that you're describing is very strongly associated and was ultimately also propagated and applied in this way, in the 12th and 13th century in Japan, especially. It goes back to Dogen. If we take the older practice of Chan in China, the so-called meditative sitting is one, if any, possibility. Later, after Dogen, many masters, especially Bankei, a very, very, very grand one, but a little secondary now, due to the political promotion of Dogen in 19th and 20th century Japanese politics, a national epic. It very much relativizes zazen in the sense that Dogen propagated it, because it often leads to the fact that I just sit down, and I want to do it right. And the big question is, who wants to do it right?

MH: But you also do it in Benediktushof, that you sit still?

AP: Yes. But not as in: "I have to sit still". Rather, it is the creation of conditions under which it may be "easier to see", in quotation marks, how relative the ego is, because it arises from the fact that it usually identifies with something.

FM: The way you've described it now, it sounds like there's a very weighted cultural history behind Zen, behind the practice of zazen, and that's why there are different ways of practicing zazen. But I'm wondering if it's possible to give a general answer to the question of whether Zen is something that is detached from everyday life, i.e. is it something metaphysical or is it more a way of life that is compatible with daily routines, with my daily routines as a student, for example?

AP: I'm one of those people who think, otherwise I wouldn't be in the club, that Zen is not only not detached, but it poses the everyday question in general, namely the question that everyday life revolves around: "Who am I, who are you, what is the ego?" That's the basic premise in the first place for our self-understanding and is the core of self-understanding.

That's number one. Number two is: Zen doesn't ask the question intellectually but wants to create circumstances in which the answer can be experienced, a kind of experience that can be interpreted according to culture, amongst others. Thus, it is an experience in itself, positioned in everyday life, resulting in everyday life per se. Example: Imagine you are sitting in the cinema watching a movie and you think ok, I like this movie, I don't like it or I would like another one, and this war movie, not so good, a love story would be better or whatever and then you watch the love story, yes well, a bit boring, maybe something else, a bit action, whatever. Zen, or Chan, in this context, is not about wanting to understand the movie, if it's good or bad, in what context it could be done differently, but that it is a movie at all. And that's a basic question. In Chan, I wouldn't ask you to say, "What did you see there?" but rather, "I want to change your perspective and ask you to approach the screen. And then you'll see that there's nobody running around, but that it's a complex form of interrelation, for example, lighting conditions that make something appear from a certain perspective, but which is not substantial in itself." To have experienced this alters your attitude in the cinema of life. If you haven't experienced it, you're very dependent on how the experienced movie is then judged as good or bad from the perspective of viewers, and those are worlds apart.

MH: Now I find that a very interesting distinction because I think it's quite central to our understanding of wisdom. There's a reflection on knowledge by the English philosopher Bertrand Russel who talked about 'Knowledge by Acquaintance', Gilbert Ryle, another English philosopher distinguished between 'Knowing How and Knowing That', so knowing how to do something and knowing that something is. You know how to ride a bicycle, but you can't possibly describe what you do when you ride a bicycle. I make acquaintance with the water when I've swum in it, but when the swimming instructor on the shore tells me what swimming is like, I can sort of tell a story about it, but I don't really know what swimming is, and I have the impression that what you just pointed out boils down to that very difference. Would you say that the understanding of wisdom in zazen is one that couples wisdom to acquaintance, to contact, to experience, whereas in the Western traditions we tend to believe that discourse leads to wisdom via facts, theories, contemplations that don't necessarily have anything to do with experience and acquaintance.

AP: Absolutely. You've positioned that very, very correctly and pointedly. The way I experience it, but also to some extent in so-called Christian mysticism, it's not an understanding in the sense that we somehow understand connections, but it's fully realized knowledge, it's experiential knowledge, if you will. That is, the difference is like reading cookbooks and eating. And the cookbooks are not wrong, only they do not make you full. Being full doesn't give me an understanding of how it happens, but it gives a quality of life. That is, a form of lived wisdom, which often also somewhat blocks the access of generalizations, because it is not detachable from you, from me, from any of us. And that's a very, very, very important criterion, but I'm full and that's sufficient.

FM: Now, when you talk about quality of life, I wonder if the whole thing has something to do with a concept of happiness, maybe more concretely – I wonder if wisdom and happiness go together in Zen. Do I experience these moments that we've been talking about now as pleasurable, maybe even ecstatic?

AP: Well, there's a whole range of experiences that can be ecstatic, of course, measured against normal everyday life, because it's always the point of reference that is important in such ecstatic stories. But in this context, I would much rather refer to the Aristotelian happiness, so Nicomachean Ethics, which is something very interesting that I appreciate very much, namely where he says that we always live 'in order to', Aristotle, and happiness is something in itself. That is, one does something for the sake of it, and not as a means to an end. This brings us directly to so-called 'meditation'. If someone practices zazen as a means to an end, then that's aside it before he started, because it's always the same and exactly that. I sit because I sit, and while I sit, I sit and then live and the whole thing is like that right now. That is, there is no 'in order to', but we realize, and we experience it in open-ended dimensions, that your whole life is exactly the same. And to this 'exactly like this, now' there is no alternative, you may think it, but it does not exist. So, it's just the same and always just the same and always just the same, and that's a little bit of the happiness, if you will, that is, the stopping of looking for alternatives, and thus the more extensive experience of contextual 'suchness'.

MH: With Aristotle it's like sometimes we do something for the sake of something else, I run to catch the bus, I go to work to earn money, and sometimes we do something for its own sake, playing the flute is an example in Aristotle, so with him life breaks down, so to speak, into states where you do something for its own sake, and states where you pursue purposes. Would you say then that zazen is about completely dropping the pursuit of purpose, even in everyday life?

AP: No, of course, the way we organize ourselves, we can have that narrative for all I care, but that's our link. The insight first that it's just that, that the bus ride is an expression of life, and not something lesser, and that only starts when I arrive. I don't pay off the mortgage for 30 years and start living when it is paid off. It's all that already, and until we realize that the ticket to contentment is pretty problematic.

FM: Yes, you're talking about the logic of purpose, but for me my question hasn't been answered yet, because I asked about the feeling of pleasure, whether you would say that there is such a thing, and if so, whether it's a constant pleasure, as I understand it, from what you're describing, the practice you're talking about also has a very ascetic aspect, or whether there's perhaps also a pleasure that makes itself felt more selectively in the form of climaxes?

AP: I think the question, applied to Zen, is a bit problematic, because it's always pleasure or not pleasure, asceticism or indulgence. It actually has little to do with what is realized. These are our standards. It is sadness, it is joy. There is no pleasure without sorrow. If there were a permanent state, we wouldn't have any form of experience in that sense, because it is measured by a certain difference. To think that there is a form of meditation that lifts you or me to a static steady state and keeps you there would be a complete misreading of what I know in the Buddhist and especially Chan traditions. Whether there is such a thing, is very questionable, I personally have never seen such a thing and never experienced it, I know people who believe to have experienced it, but then they are oddly not in that state, so that means I have never seen, perceived, or could testify the duration of this state. You can believe that, but it has little to do with Zen.

MH: But there is, after all, a Western tradition of thinking, about happiness, the formulation of oblivion, which perhaps Ms. Maas alluded to, sometimes people talk about 'flow' and one could say, yes, if Shakyamuni's insight has been that we have no substantial self, then perhaps that has something to do with this state of self-forgetfulness that occurs when we are completely absorbed in an activity, and I also remember a course I did with you, where a participant said yes, she had come into a flow, so obviously Western people associate with the state of oblivion, yes, what Ms. Maas just pointed out, such a specific feeling of happiness where you no longer think about how you are evaluated, where you also no longer evaluate others, but are just completely focused.

FM: Exactly, maybe with oblivion, that fits quite well insofar as I asked myself whether it's about pushing back primary drives for instance, we spoke about hunger, these feelings: "I'm hungry, I want this now, I want that now,..." whether it's about putting that aside first in order to then reach another state, which is another form of pleasure than this primary drive satisfaction.

AP: I wanted to point out a difference also in the linguistic formulation: it's not about reaching another state that would be better, but to have a change of perspective, to see the relativity of the previously assumed state. This is what it is about, because otherwise we believe: "I am always me." Suddenly, however, I jog for half an hour and the 'I' disappears, merges into the running: flow. In it, I gain the realization that the I-perspective may vary, and is not fixed. And then I drink something or sleep or such and suddenly I have completely different states of consciousness, let's say, states of consciousness in which the I organizes itself differently or in which it is known that it doesn't appear at all. And inducing such states is a part of zazen practice, to see and then also to realize more precisely that the ego is not substantial and the reality connected with it is not substantial either. And this can be seen open-end more and more precisely, that we are amid a miracle of miracles, and that it is possible for us to taste it, but we will not be able to understand it because of its complexity – not because we are too stupid, but this is infinitely more complex than how we have organized ourselves until now.

FM: Yes, that sounds almost like a kind of aesthetic experience, perhaps like something that I perceive in relation to works of art, that I notice that there is somehow beauty, but I can't quite grasp what it actually is, and perhaps art also helps me put the reality of my life into a different perspective.

MH: Yes, perhaps we can once again refer to Western philosophy, Kant described the experience that arises in relation to a work of art as disinterested pleasure. So, there's a state of pleasure, I'm fine, but I'm no longer pursuing any goals. When I look at the ham in the still life, then my mouth doesn't water, at least according to Kant, and I run to the butcher's shop to get a piece of meat, but rather I'm, colloquially put, baffled by this composition and what you have just said, Mr. Poraj, reminds me of the miracles you mentioned, where one is baffled by the world, and how it is. And therefore, one doesn't see a reason to run to the butcher shop – is that what you mean?

AP: More like that. Perhaps as an example: music. Understanding music is somehow paradoxical.

MH: Because there's nothing to understand.

AP: Yes. You have to experience it. You can't understand it without having experienced it. If I present a score to someone who has never heard music before and say: "Look, here's St Matthew Passion," well, there is no St Matthew Passion. Poetry is the same. It is not about a few letters or signifiers on a paper, it is about experiencing, it is an emergence and an experience, and an arising itself that is never fixed, but constantly new. And when experiencing music no one would say: "I would like to understand this now, why, or this must go faster now"...yes this does not arise, but we are completely immersed – and if we play ourselves, then even more – we are completely immersed in the performance itself. We are the performance. We are then the music. We are then also the sorrow. Also sometimes, when you look at children, when they cry, that is sorrow par excellence.

MH: They are completely absorbed...

AP: ...yes they are absorbed. That's the sorrow. And that's the joy. And in that we often, of course, through control and various things more, also unlearn to be more often absorbed in certain things, it's a pity. And that is the joy of life, but not in the sense of positive joy, but the joy in oblivion, where you allow yourself to be absorbed in many events. Of course, the others should not interfere, but there are still enough who do that.

FM: You yourself are a studied theologian, would you say there are connections between the study of the teaching of God and Zen practice?

AP: Well, there can be many, depending on how you understand it. Because of course, the concept of God has been appropriated by many institutions in countries we live now, like Switzerland and Germany. But one can also use the term God in the traditional sense, as a human name for the incomprehensible, open secret, without knowing the who, what, with whom and why. We think of this very humanly, too humanly and therefore also too tragically.

MH: You have also dealt with Meister Eckhart extensively, as a theologian. Would you say that Meister Eckhart introduced the idea that there is no anthropomorphic being that pursues any goals, that has any plans with us, but that there is nevertheless a power to which we can refer, something similar to Shakyamuni, whom he recognized without knowing him, or would you sharply distinguish between them?

AP: Well, I belong to the group of people who see Meister Eckhart and Tauler as viable bridges for the path Eastward and back. Definitely. One can argue about the details, but I belong to the group of people who think that Eckhart has seen something, or accomplished something, which makes him unique. He really did de-anthropomorphize theology, so you could say. God is not God and a deity is a non-God and nothing is nothing and so on. While this becomes very, very interesting, he has no practice at all.

MH: He has no meditation practice.

AP: No, he doesn't say: "You have to do something specific." It's just like in Zen. So, in that case in Chan, there's no master saying....

MH: "You have to sit like this or like this..."

AP: ... "Do this and if you practice long enough, then...", on the contrary, if somebody says, "I practice a lot", then he's belittled, because that is an 'in order to' situation....

MH: Yes

AP: ...and neglects the immediacy. So, Eckhart I would see very, at least encourage to see, based on attitude and certain statements, Sermon 52, the famous 'Blessed are the poor in spirit...', clues come up there, and figures of speech and also a whole logic of thought that really is quite something.

FM: You not only have a doctorate in theology, but you also worked as a management consultant. What do you think about offers like 'Zen for Entrepreneurs' or similar?

AP: Well, Zen in companies and for companies is always a bit of an issue, because one believes that certain circles, certain people have different questions than others. You can also do Zen for doctors and so on, and I think that.... or help them in their professions, and I think that's often important, not because it's something special, but purely practical, because certain groups have certain questions and certain other groups have other questions. And then there's the issue of focusing certain, I'll say, points of view and possible experiences on that issue. Fears, responsibility, ignorance and whatever, play a very, very, very big role in the economic context. Helping professions have slightly different issues, I was once the managing director of a chain of clinics – and that's another thing, how do I deal with pain, suffering, with human support – and there the focus and the questions, the fears and the associated problems are also different again. Therefore, it makes sense to focus on certain groups, but that doesn't mean that one is better than the other, but depends on the situation.

FM: I would also like to talk about the various groups that come to you to learn from you, but I've made this point with the companies, because I'm wondering whether you actually see a contradiction between the, yes, perhaps you could say, 'consumer society' in capitalism, which is out for very fleeting pleasures, and such a practice of Zen? So are capitalism and Zen, are they compatible with each other?

AP: Well, one person who is attracting contemporary attention is Slavoj Žižek, who once said that Western Buddhism is a natural concurrence and companion of capitalism, with good reason. Of course, this gives a certain distance to what we are doing, as he believes that it is about distancing. You can do everything, in my opinion, with the classic I-attitude, 'I do something in order to do', everything, no problem at all. Even Zen, and Zazen and Chan, you can do 'in order to', and think: "I'm going to do it and it's going to be better" or "I'm going to increase my control, my attention, with better results or so". You can do everything like that. I can use a knife to hurt someone or cut a loaf of bread. It's not about the thing itself, it's the about the context, and that's why any kind of insight, experience will always be possible, or run the risk of being used in whatever context. Per se, for example, that's why you can also calm down as quickly as possible or techniques so that you can calm down or recover better, so that you can then, as many think, work even more productively. This is a way to do it, whether it works, is questionable. Because, point one, and there are interesting studies supporting this in the meantime, many people who move in these ways do not become more successful, but they realize that what they are doing is not beneficial for themselves and the environment and quit their jobs. They don't become better managers, but strangely enough they go into something completely different. So that's a not insignificant aspect, if you look at the 'vitas', some so-called nuns or monks in the Buddhist context, also seen in the Western context, there are very many ex-managers among them, amongst others. So that's number one. A second example to mention here, and which is becoming more established, from the same perspective, is a belief that has gained momentum in entrepreneurial circles, a belief that it is impossible to make a right decision. That would have been an absurdity recently, because many hire managers, or special ones, or very expensive ones, so that they do the right thing, and suddenly it turns out that this is not possible at all. But the insight that this is not possible is not a Calvinistic insight, to put it very diplomatically, but it is an insight that because of the context it is not possible, for

many reasons such things are not possible, and the result of meditation is not that one becomes better, but suddenly realizes that the whole context in which we now live and continue to organize ourselves, is perhaps not the be-all and end-all. Either way.

MH: But this question of decision-making does depend on egoism when you say: "I have hired a person who is supposed to decide something based on their value system", and when politicians decide, they perhaps decide about social development. How does this state of selflessness affect the question of whether you have to decide something or not? So, this is aimed at the connection between zazen and possible political or family involvement, where one says it's going in the wrong direction and I decide that it should go in the right direction, and if there is no 'I' at all, then one also loses the decision-making authority.

AP: That's going a bit too far. In this insight, it is not that there is no 'I', but that it momentarily organizes and appears contextually. So, there is an 'I', but not in itself and not fixed. That means, for example: 'Mensch ärgere dich nicht', one of the better-known games, is named: do not get annoyed. We need at most five minutes to get annoyed, although it is already in the name, don't do it. So now the big question, also to you, "Why do we get annoyed?", what is the actual condition for us to get annoyed in this game, and in others of course.

MH: Not reaching the goal, that we get kicked out.

FM: That there are winners and losers.

AP: No, that's all the consequence of it, but what's the real reason that I get annoyed? The real reason, to make it short, is that I identify with the character. Because I'm saying, "You kicked me out!"....

MH:...and not the piece of wood.

AP: Yes, "You kicked me out!" I forget that I identify, and I forget that this is a game. And say, "Nah, I won't play anymore. I always lose. Nope, that's not." Or I get very

compassionate, "Yeah I could kick you out, but I won't." Because I get my hopes up. This way and that way. But the point is the ability, the intrinsic ability, you could almost say, and the system to identify with anything.

MH: What does that mean for the politician, or entrepreneur?

AP: Exactly the same thing. He thinks he has to be the one. He.

MH: The one who decides?

AP: Yes.

MH: Okay.

AP: ...and he doesn't. It's an absurdity to say, but I have a company here with 10,000 people and I decide. I don't even know what's going on.

MH: Would you say that he should rather say that the situation decides?

AP: No, not that he bypasses the designation of a subject, but that he says, "I am aware that we are in the middle of complex processes, all the time. And then the question is, what structures do I establish so that I do justice to the complexity. And not persist on the apparent me and mine. And with that, it becomes more open, because we don't, we know, we don't, none of us can, not even a body cell, nothing works alone. It is only a complex form of entanglement, which a so-called entrepreneur or a so-called manager would have to do justice to, in order to make a decision he has to listen and observe, and not stubbornly want to enforce his vision, whether it's appropriate or not, and two years later it turns out that it was wrong, it was wrong all along.

FM: As you teach Zen yourself in a former monastery in Bavaria, I'd finally like to talk about the relationship between master and student. With Plato, for example, such a relationship is

quite libidinous or even amorous. The basis of the teaching relationship is the loving devotion of both sides. What does this look like in Zen? What form of authority does the teacher exercise there?

AP: Well, we discussed this a little bit following the initial question with the master, culturally. A lot has changed since Plato, at least theoretically, as we can see, what was common then is scandalous today. That is the case, partly also abusive, that is the case. And that is, well, different. And in part, we know that not everything we could do, and everything we feel like doing, etc. is good. That's number one. Number two is, I personally don't designate a teacher-student relationship. In Zen, we're all students, or all teachers. But not, there's these and those. For the simple reason that it's just about an immediate insight into what is anyway, everybody is, and everybody has access to that. Number one, in Chan and Zen, nobody needs a teacher. That's very important. It's a possible requirement, but not a necessary one.

FM: So I can also teach myself Zen....

AP: Not in self-study, but you can also come to the insights without ever having learnt what Zen is, or that there is a Zen at all. Because it's an immediate insight, and it's immediately accessible to everyone, no matter how, when, or where.

FM: Then how do you see your role as a person who somehow does teach Zen, or am I phrasing it wrong?

AP: In a certain sense, yes. That's kind of the question of how learning happens theoretically. Maybe you have children and if you remember when you were little – I can't say I taught my child to walk. That's wrong. I supported him a little bit, so that he would stick with it, but he would have been able to do it himself. Normally. That is, the Zen teacher is not someone who stands in a hierarchical relationship to the others, or who should think he is. That is quite different. That's the guru attitude from India, but that's in a different cultural context and that also plays a very different role. Not in Zen. That is, it's more of a role of someone who when playing, 'Mensch ärgere dich nicht' at a certain moment is able

to throw the game away, literally, or slam on the tray, so all the pieces fall on the floor and people are upset, but stay awake and realize that it was just a game. It could also be someone who maybe just at the appropriate moment, or someone else, it can be someone by chance who kicks the game and that doesn't have to be the teacher or a certified teacher. But someone who creates, I would say, consciously creates the conditions for you to realize that the identification is only accidental and not substantial. Namely, we should not imagine that would be something great.

FM: So that's the role of a kind of 'game changer'?

AP: In a certain sense, yes. It's someone who interrupts identity, interrupts self-evident things so that you realize they're not self-evident. But he doesn't possess anything more, or less, and he is not better in any way. And it doesn't require an insanely long attachment to anything else, least of all stories, which would be dramatic, because that would be a form of abuse of a hierarchical relationship. And that, as we know today, is a no-go for many reasons.

MH: That reminds me of another figure that is sometimes referred to in the West as a game changer, as Ms. Maas just mentioned, namely the wise fool who interrupts serious agitation, and just by doing that makes everyone realize something.

AP: Exactly. Nasreddin, for example, is often, in Islam, or among the Sufis, one. It's the holy fool, and if you read mondos of the Chan masters, they were literally crazy. So, a lot of people say, I'm doing something that maybe I don't understand, people think it's weird, and the sages know. Yes. Or Jesus in the context of the famous expression, 'The newly awakened one' or 'The awakened one' is like the wind, you don't know where it's coming from and where it's heading. Because he doesn't act causally and so he's considered as the holy fool, rather as an established master that you then, whatever. That would be tragic especially if he himself believes to be one.

FM: Unfortunately, we have already come to the end of our very inspiring conversation. I would like to thank Alexander Poraj and Michael Hampe for the interview.

AP: You're welcome. Thank you.

MH: Thank you.

FM: The podcast was produced by Martin Münnich, with support from ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation Forum Humanum in Hamburg. I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to explore the media offerings on the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and practices at www.metis.ethz.ch, for example by following the link below to access the booklets to the podcast. Thank you for your time and goodbye!