

Master Deshimaru and Universal Zen

Zen Temple La Gendronnière, October 16th 2010

Dear Friends,

Nine years ago, in June of 2001, we met here for the first time at the Temple of the Gendronnière on the occasion of *Daionki*, the commemoration of the 750th anniversary of Dôgen Zenji's entry into nirvana. On that occasion, we came together again, we elder disciples of Master Deshimaru who had been separated for a number of years; we met European monks and nuns from different lineages and various backgrounds; and at the same time a number of representatives of Japanese Zen discovered for the first time the practice of Zen in Europe. This was an important and precious moment: amidst our celebrations for Master Dogen, something came about which marked the beginning of a new period for Zen in Europe – and the initiative for this came from Japan. Over these past nine years, numerous developments have taken place: the foundation of a new *Sokanbu*, first in Milan, then in Paris; regular meetings, general assemblies and seminars held in various temples, which have allowed us to cultivate both our tradition and our relationships; the changing of Sôtôshu's rules concerning Zen outside of Japan; the first ango intended for Westerners etc. This path we have taken has been beneficial, it seems to me. This is why it is important to remember all of this as an introduction to this day on which we have been brought together to reflect and exchange views with one another about the future of Sôtô Zen Buddhism in Europe. I would also like to mention the late Reverend Myogen Otake who was significantly concerned with Zen in Europe and as the president of Shumicho at the time contributed substantially to these developments.



“Where are we going? And what are we doing when we get there? Our future direction for Sôtô Zen Buddhism in Europe.” The title of this seminar was certainly chosen to put us to the question, to make us stop and consider: we, who run the risk of keeping to our training by not moving, not doing anything and not thinking. Certainly, we can also see a line of questioning on the adaptation of Zen by Europeans, our relationship with tradition and with the institution. I am going to tentatively approach my contribution to the theme by first of all evoking the person who stood at the source of the dissemination of Zen in Europe: its founder, Master Deshimaru. I do not intend to resume here either his life or his teaching. Taisen Deshimaru was a man who was vast and complex enough to resist any condensation; and as for his teaching, the way in which he expressed the dharma in precise circumstances had such numerous facets that it would be futile to want to summarize them here. In any case, Deshimaru had a decisive influence on the practice of Zen in Europe: a direct influence on his disciples and on their disciples, and an indirect influence on others due to his personality and to the numerous people who followed him.

Master Taisen Deshimaru arrived in France in July 1967, invited by members of a macrobiotic group who had stayed in Japan the previous year. He did not come by chance, but very clearly as the bearer of a project: that of bringing, establishing and transmitting Zen in the West, especially in Europe. He expressed this undertaking in a series of six short articles which he himself wrote in English in Tokyo between November 1966 and June 1967 and which then appeared in French in macrobiotic review entitled *Yin-yang*. These articles later constituted the heart of his first work, *Vrai Zen* [“True Zen”], which appeared in 1969. On the original carbon copies of these articles mention can be found of a “Deshimaru Zen Institute” located in the Yoyogi neighborhood of Shinjuku.



The titles of these various articles are significant:

- one single title for the first and second articles, “Orthodox Zen in oriental spiritual culture”;
- two titles for the third article, “Zen is practice of sitting in true and traditional style” and “Zen is not a spécial condition of mind”;
- the fourth article, “Zen is not a self-complacency”;
- the fifth article, “What is the true religion of a cultural man?”;
- the sixth article: “Zen is understanding of true ourselves”. [Zenglish?]

He speaks of life and death, of Dôgen's teaching, of a zazen without any object, of intuition, of the shortcomings of a civilization founded on materialism and comfort, and so on. Deshimaru's demanding nature, which would drive the years of his mission, shines through these articles. We see in them at the same time: a seeking and an expression of a universal dimension, Zen's human and transcultural dimension; “authentic religion”, “truly knowing oneself”, “just sitting” and faithfulness to tradition as the expression of this universality, namely the tradition of the spiritual culture of the East, which Deshimaru, like most Japanese, doubtlessly saw as entrusted to Japan.

In this vision, universal and traditional, we recognize in Taisen Deshimaru a man of his times. He was born in 1914 in Saga on the island of Kyushu. He was a man of traditional Japan. In his autobiography he tells us, “My character was forged out of the contact between ancestral traditions transmitted by my family and the stories which were still being told of our victories in the Russo-Japanese war, which had only been won thanks to the traditional spirit of the martial arts.” He was just as profoundly influenced by the teachings of Shinran and the Jodo Shinshû school, to which his mother belonged. He was personally involved in this school, and as an adolescent and young adult, he participated in a club of



Shinshû practitioners who studied Buddhist teachings and Oriental philosophy. Later, after meeting Kôdô Sawaki (who had also frequented the Shinshû school during his school years) and turning towards Sôtô Zen, from 1935 on he sensed a contradiction between the teachings of Shinran and Jôdô Shin on the one hand and those of Dôgen and Sôtô Zen on the other, a contradiction which was for him an inexhaustible source of reflections over many years. I believe that the unshakable faith which he had in the objectless practice of zazen is to be understood in relation to an unshakable faith in the vows of Amida Buddha in the Jôdô Shin school.

The traditional Japanese world which Deshimaru belonged to was also one which was opening towards the outer world and rapidly assimilating foreign cultures. It was a world in which Japan saw itself as the carrier of a universal message and as the defender of Buddhist faith, a world in which Zen was reinterpreted as an essential element of the national spirit. Deshimaru grew up during the era of imperialist Japan. Declared unfit for service due to his near-sightedness, he escaped military service but spent several years of the war in Indonesia serving Mitsubishi. Once he returned to his devastated country, he worked in various sectors, frequented the worlds of politics and business, experienced success as well as failure, returned to Indonesia, the entire time keeping a close bond with his master, Sawaki. It was only in 1965, shortly before Sawaki's death, that he received monk's ordination.

So when in 1966 Taisen Deshimaru wrote those first articles and when the next year at the age of 53 he took the Trans-Siberian for Europe, he was at the end of a path which was completely atypical for a Zen monk. He had not received the transmission, nor even done the *hossen* ceremony, he had not done training in a monastery and was completely unknown by the Sôtôtshu. Many Japanese monks



would criticize him because of this. This is hardly important. History will remember that it was he who undertook the voyage to the west and who planted there the seed of Zen.

Once he arrived in Europe, he was confronted with a public coming from quite a different milieu. It was *les trente glorieuses* [the 30 prosperous years after WWII (translators note)], the easy life and the triumph of materialism and individualism. Among those who flocked to his dojo, there were many intellectuals and many young hippies seeking themselves. Looking back, I say now to myself that very few of his disciples, in the libertarian and hedonistic atmosphere that reigned at the time, understood Deshimaru's path, his motivations and his way of seeing things, and that he in turn must have felt quite distant from their preoccupations. Yet in spite of this mutual lack of understanding, the faith in the practice and in the transmission of the dharma which drove him so intensely has been passed on.

During the fifteen years of his apostolate, he strove to transmit the dharma, teaching zazen and various aspects of the Sôtô Zen tradition. One of the expressions which he used and which made an impression on our minds was “religion before religion”. I believe that in order to address the question which has been proposed, it would be useful to pause on this expression. It was for Deshimaru, it seems to me, a way of indicating the essential and universal character of zazen, and also signifying that the practice of zazen opened the door to a rediscovery of the sacred, the founding spirit of the religious, something which he thought had been forgotten by the materialist West. [However,] it must be seen that this expression, by evoking the act of going to the essential without being preoccupied with ornamentation, is seductive, but it might obscure the fact that the fundamental unity of the essential and ornamentation is precisely what



we call the sacred. Thus, through an extension of this misunderstanding, the expression has come to symbolize firstly an individualist and areligious conception of Zen, a sort of anarchistic and fundamentalist Zen (a deeply rooted tradition in itself), and secondly a purely utilitarian conception of the practice and even of the doctrine.

This is notably true in France, where half of the population, intoxicated by old ideologies, is allergic to the word “religion” and for whom religious feeling is taboo. More generally, the modern Westerner who turns towards Zen is often in an ambiguous position with respect to its religious dimension. He seeks something which goes beyond himself, being at the same time deeply immersed in an ideology of self-preservation and self-development. Thus, the concept of “religion before religion”, understood as referring not to a religion but to something which might be useful for oneself, becomes an argument for the promotion of a minimalist Zen, a Zen reduced to a technique (essentially that of the physical posture of Zazen), a Zen which has been emptied of its universal dimension in which the singular attains its universality by retiring from itself.

In fact all religion is founded on a fundamental religious experience which we could call “religion before religion”. This can take diverse forms: it could be zazen or prayer, shock and wonder, losing oneself or awakening, meeting God and meeting Buddha. What is particular about religion is that the mystic heart expresses itself through an assumed form. “Before” is intimately linked to “afterwards”; authenticity rests on the perfect fit of personal and collective practice. The function of a religious tradition is to furnish a framework to this religion before religion: techniques to reproduce it and to canalize it, rites to express it collectively, doctrines and myths to give it meaning, and through this even illuminating our path in this world of life and death.



Of course, this fundamental religious experience, as an integral part of the structure of human consciousness can be manifested in many ways, notably outside of established religious frameworks. Poets, artists and Mr. “Everyman” can sometimes testify to this. Yet apart from a few shining lights, much egoism, egocentrism and fear of losing oneself hides behind the rejection of ancient forms.

In my opinion, the religion before religion perpetuates itself by wearing naturally the robes of tradition. It is allowing our personal practice to abandon itself and become the practice of the buddhas. I believe that we must take care to protect this and to see that minimalist Zen does not become the norm.

Thus Taisen Deshimaru taught us, with remarkable energy and faith, the study and practice of universal Zen through tradition, including in this not only the teachings of Mahayana and Sôtô Zen, but also numerous aspects of Far Eastern and Japanese culture. He himself was a man of traditional culture, at ease in the worlds of calligraphy and poetry, in oriental medicine and martial arts. He had deeply studied Buddhist doctrine, was intimate with Dôgen's *Shôbôgenzô* and the Zen classics. Nonetheless, as he lacked a temple education, he was no expert in either rituals or in monastic organization. Despite this, he managed to put into place (sometimes in a rudimentary and poorly understood fashion) the basic rituals of Buddhist practice and monastic life. He was helped in this by young Japanese *kaikyoshi* monks who stayed in Paris and through his regular visits to Japan where he recharged. Such exchanges between Europe and Japan were numerous at the time.



While pursuing the ideal of his great project: transmitting authentic Zen to the materialist West, he adapted himself each moment to circumstances. His personality and his teaching embraced many contradictions, and he presented us with an open field where the possible could be realized. The diversity of the directions his disciples took was witness to this. It was also like this when it came to his passing away, which took place without him having given the transmission nor having designated a successor. Years later I realized that this could have been for us an opening to look further, to look if necessary towards other masters, to dedicate ourselves to deepening our understanding ourselves and to considering the teaching as well through other expressions.

For many of us, myself included, we did not understand it like that at the time. Believing that we had been entrusted with a sort of “true Zen”, we referred to a chimerical “Deshimaru Zen”; which – though Master Deshimaru did have his own style – had no place. Truthfully, it was a case of a common tendency: having had a strong experience one is quick to create one's own Zen world, one's own magical city of Zen, raising the flag of Deshimaru-Zen, Antaiji-Zen or any other Zen labeled “true Zen”.

It is part of the charm of our school that everyone can express their uniqueness, that each temple is imbued with its own atmosphere, that we can taste the “wind” characteristic of different “houses”. It seems to me that we must nonetheless be careful not to enclose ourselves in a closed system, and above all not to enclose disciples. If we define too precisely just what our Zen is, based on our current understanding, we prevent ourselves from changing, from renewing ourselves. We close the door to the opportunity of going beyond our own awakening.



By chance, Shakyamuni has brought us together, put us in connection with one another. In the image of the interdependence which constitutes the network of the universe, this set of relations among monks and laypersons is what constitutes the fabric of the Sôtô Zen school. Even though our individualistic culture does not push us in the direction, I believe that the practice is to practice at the heart of this network of relationships, those of one's own community and those within the whole of our school.

On this subject, it is important to examine what is still a source of misunderstanding: the relations between Master Deshimaru and Sôtôshu. As I said, when Taisen Deshimaru came to Europe, he was virtually unknown by Shumuchu. So after his arrival in Paris, he labored for the recognition of his mission, both by writing home about what he was doing and by having his connections intervene for him in Japan. These efforts bore fruit, for the first time he returned to Japan in 1970, he was able to receive the transmission from Yamada Reirin Rôshi, who was Vice-Abbot of Eihei-ji at the time. A few years later, in 1976, he was named Kaikyosokai for Europe and received the title of Gondaikyoshi in 1978. Thus despite his atypical education and the sometimes stormy relationship with Shumuchu at the time, he always tried to remain integrated in and to receive help from Sôtôshu and from Shumuchu – and this did come to pass. Let me add that at the end of the 1970s, a time when his mission was very successful, he was perfectly aware of his charisma and of the possibility of creating his own movement, his own school. As his daughter later told us, he confided to her and said that he considered himself to be a missionary of Sôtô Zen and that he did not at all want to be the founder of a dissident school. This should be made clear.

Concerning the institutional form of the Sôtô Zen school, it seems to me that we



can recognize that it is quite simply necessary. It brings together today a certain number of historical rules, and if we think that they should be gradually adapted to the present situation, let us take our time in trying to orient ourselves towards a broader vision of the future, and not simply upon our momentary personal preferences or the preferences of our disciples. As for the future, I am persuaded that the collective practice organized at the heart of our school is the indispensable complement to the practice at the heart of the master-disciple relationship. I believe as well that for the moment help from the Japanese institution and from Japanese monks, is very precious to us.

To finish, I would like to say a word about the question of Western Zen or European Zen or American Zen. I do not deny the reality of the establishment of a Western version of the teaching of Buddha, as there are Japanese, Chinese and Indian versions. But I am uncomfortable with the blatant will to affirm this Westernizing. I have the feeling that it is a matter of marking off one's territory, showing distrust towards Japanese Zen, affirming one's special statute as a Westerner. The Zen tradition is young in Europe and it enjoys several thousands of years of history in the East. Over the centuries it has been imbued with contributions from Indian, Chinese and Japanese civilizations and we would like to impose our own model in a couple of years. I do not doubt that the West will bring its contribution to the edifice – as India gave the Dharma and China gave the Tao – but I believe that it will need to take its time, the time to study with our Western body and our mind universal Zen, the visible and the invisible, in diversity of its forms.

I thank you for your attention.

