

# Ask-a-godo - IZAUK Zen News - Autumn 2010

---

**Question: How do we reconcile those who want to practise Zen as a religion and those who don't?**

## **- HOSETSU LAURE SCEMAMA RESPONDS**

Often, when I give a talk, somebody asks: "Zen, Buddhism ... are they a religion?" And I often reply, "As you like."

You can practise zazen as a technique for well-being, to feel better, to have a more interesting life, to be happier. That's possible. It is also possible that you will achieve those goals to a greater or lesser extent. And then, having achieved that, it is likely that you will give up this practice, telling yourself, "I got all I could out of it."

But if you do that, you will only have touched the surface of Zen, only scouted the periphery; you will not have touched the heart, the marrow, the essence. You will have passed by a treasure without even realising it.

Most people, especially in the West, want to see everything and decide with their personal consciousness: "*I want, I decide whether Zen is a religion or not.*" But Zen is not what you want it to be, nor what you believe it to be: Zen is what it is.

What is Zen? Nobody can say. Nobody can define it. Nobody can enclose it in words, in beliefs, in categories. Nobody can use it for their own ends. Nobody can grasp it.

Because to be precise, that which cannot be grasped, cannot be defined, cannot be used, that which escapes our personal consciousness, escapes our will, our ego, that which completely passes us by ... that is what belongs to the realms of religion.

Zazen is the heart of religion, the profoundly religious practice, the religious mind itself. I'm not talking about religious systems, I'm not talking about churches, I'm not talking about beliefs. I am talking about that deeply religious mind (or spirit) which is at the heart of every human being, at the heart of all existence, even if we decide not to believe in anything.

It is religion before ideas, before words. Master Deshimaru used to say, "It's the religion from before religion." Zazen awakens our religious mind, it awakens that which is deepest in us; zazen leads us unconsciously and naturally to our highest dimension.

When I was in Japan, they asked me, "How did it happen that you, a Westerner, became a Buddhist nun?"

I replied, "Through the power of zazen." When I began zazen, I knew nothing about Buddhism and I wasn't interested, I had received a completely atheist and rationalist upbringing. But zazen led me, without words, without ideology, without philosophy, naturally, to the heart of Buddhism.

The word 'religion' comes from the Latin 'religere' which means to be joined, linked.

To be linked to the human heart, to be linked to all existences, to be linked to the universe, to be linked to the heart of the mystery.

Touching the heart of reality, the heart of the mystery, without trying to grasp it or use it, that is the true religious mind.