

# I. Zen, faith and religion

One part of Zen practice is something called a *mondo*, which means question-and-answer. In my ten years with Deshimaru Roshi I asked very few questions, only three that I can remember.

One day in Switzerland he spoke of the number of people who had come to practise Zen after losing some earlier faith or other. They had been brought up in some religion or church or faith and been disillusioned or put off by one thing or another, and then they had found Zen and that had become a new faith for them. But I got the impression that these people had always had a faith, so to speak, except that for a time it was without an object. There had been an object of their faith, then no object, then a new object. I was troubled by this, as I had had no religious education to speak of and when I tried to search around among my emotions and what I called my beliefs I couldn't find anything that seemed to me to answer what I imagined when I thought of the word "faith". So I wondered if I had joined this practice of Zen under false pretences, if I were in the wrong place.

I made a trip to Paris on purpose to ask him about it one Sunday. I said, "I don't think I ever had any faith. Is faith necessary?"

He made a joke, and pretended he hadn't heard, as he often did when he was waiting for an answer to come from inside himself, and then he started to speak. He spoke for several minutes and I have no idea what he said because I was staring at him so hard, concentrating so hard that I couldn't possibly hear. But at one point he made a gesture, as though he were unreeling something out of himself, out of his abdomen. Later, standing on the platform of the underground train, I realized that I hadn't heard a word he said and I was very cross with myself. But the gesture, the image remained always.

When, after a few years of Zen practice, something started unreeling out of me, I understood.

Faith is not in the mind only, it is also in the body. It is neither necessary nor unnecessary. It is, and it is in us all. Its object is not so important. There is the cross, or prayer, for some; for us there are the things that we chant and the outer garment we wear. There is the meditation we practise. For those of us who are ordained these are *objects* of faith and care, things which we protect. But the *faith* is the unreeling, the life coming out of us, the energy joining the world.

I asked him another question once; his use of the word "spiritual" bothered me because in the society I was brought up in, spiritual meant soulfully sighing, not practical, escaping from the real problems of the real world.

He said, "Spiritual is a word." Through my practice of Zen meditation I understood that no word is my experience of life or your experience of life. We must not be caught up on words, like sticks leaning against the current of the stream.

"Religion" is another word. I am not so interested in what people all over the world have understood by the word "religion" in the past, what they have believed, what wars they have fought, what noble deeds they have done, even what great literature, inspiring poetry they have

written, in the name of religion.

What I try to practise is, as my master said, "Religion before religions". That is, the basic state of being one, in harmony with yourself, other people, your life as it unfolds instant by instant. In that state there may not be what other people would call "religion" - because "religion" only came to exist when we began separating things, inventing something that was not religion.

Am I talking about the One? Many books over the centuries have talked about the One, about all things being, when all is said and done, One. For me, existing and doing moment by moment, breath by breath, there is not even One, and there is nowhere that is not religion.

## **II. Zen and everyday life**

My master Taisen Deshimaru Roshi was always asking, "What is most important? Right now, it may be this pain in your knee, this quarrel you are having, this touching of some person you love." "What is most important" changes all the time. But what is really important? Even the person you love, the person who loves you, cannot die in your place, cannot sneeze in your place.

One day, when there were two hundred or more of us sitting in the big meditation hall in France, he said, "Everybody is always talking about being happy. Everybody wants to be happy, but it is always some time in the future. If you are not happy now, you never will be."

Then he was silent. There is a great deal of silence in Zen meditation. A few birds chirped outside, there was an almost imperceptible hum of bees and wasps and crickets, a slight, slight breeze moved through the hall from window to window. I realized that I was not happy and that was not unhappy; there were no emotions, there was just sitting and the air moving through the room, the faraway sigh of an airplane trying to go somewhere miles overhead. Just here and now. If you are not happy now, you never will be.

Two famous Zen anecdotes may help. In one of them, a student was watching a very old monk spreading mushrooms to dry in the fierce summer sun, and he asked, "Why don't you get someone else to do that for you?" The old monk answered, "This is my work. Someone else is not me. I am not an other." In the second anecdote, a student came up to the master and said, "Please, tell me what is the essence of Zen." The master said, "Tell you? Why, you are absolute nothing."

The other great question Deshimaru Roshi was always asking is, "How do we live our life? How do we live our life here and now, exactly where we are with the exact people around us and the exact circumstances we are in? How do we live our life?"

Many people will object, saying, "This is all fairy tales, escapism, you go away to a temple and sit, you don't have to worry about food or rent it's all done for you, you have no decisions to make. What happens when you are in the real world, when somebody pushes ahead of you in the queue; when you come home and your house has been burgled; when somebody steals your parking place; when you lose your job; when the bank manager insults you; when your child dies?"

You do just the same. Here and now, you do what is to be done and not what is not to be done. You live your own life here and now.

All these things go together: what is most important, when all is said and done? Nobody can sneeze in your place, or die in your place. I am not an other. You are absolute nothing. If you are not happy now, you never will be. How do we live our life?

If you understand these questions and statements only as words, with your reasoning mind, with the words we have been taught and the ideas we have absorbed from all of the outside influences that act upon us from before our birth until the day we die, then you will not be able to use them to answer the question of your own life.

But if you understand them with your body too, with your whole self, then they can become the foundation of a life that is free, that respects every other life naturally and unconsciously and automatically, that can be truly useful and helpful in this world that seems to be made up largely of frustration and suffering and disappointment and terribly fleeting joy.

How is this understanding possible? By means of a practice called *zazen*.

### III. Zen and zazen

'A practice called *zazen*', I said. What is a practice? Although I do not know much about Christianity, I should say that the practice of Christianity is prayer and active charity. The essential practice of Zen is *zazen*.

Since there have been human beings, and in a different form even before that, there has been a form of meditation which the Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, developed, and through which, or in which, he had the experience called *satori*, waking up - sitting very straight on a cushion, with crossed legs and hands forming an oval in front of the abdomen, breathing deep and quietly, letting thoughts come into the mind and go out of the mind without choosing, without rejecting. "Do not run after", my master used to say, "and do not run away. Lean neither to left nor to right."

Zazen is a combination of concentration and observation. Concentration on posture and breathing and attitude of mind; observation of - what? Of one's own ego. Zazen is becoming intimate with the self.

But not self-preoccupied. Dogen wrote, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self." So what kind of study is this? Not like studying for an examination. And what kind of concentration? Perhaps a little, but only a little, like when you are standing on one leg trying to untie a complicated knot in your shoelace without falling over. Dogen wrote, about concentration in *zazen*, "Think from the very depths of not-thought. Not-think from the very depths of thought." How do you do that? It is beyond thinking and not-thinking.

The result of this sitting and breathing and neither thinking nor not-thinking, is not madness or idiocy but equilibrium, balance.

And when we can learn not to lean right or left in our body's posture and in our breathing and in the process of our mind, not choosing and not rejecting what we will think but letting our thoughts come and go like clouds around the mountain peak, then we can do the same thing in our life.

We can learn detachment. But detachment is not indifference.

The practice that follows from *zazen*, something on the order of the active charity of Christianity, is called the Bodhisattva ideal. That ideal is expressed in four vows which we chant every day. Very approximately, what they say is, "Living things are innumerable; however innumerable they are, I vow to save them all. Illusions, attachments, passions are unending; however unending they are, I vow to put an end to them all. Truths, teachings, cannot be comprehended; however incomprehensible they are, I vow to master them. The Buddha-way is unattainable; however unattainable it is, I vow to attain it."

Those vows, plainly, are directions to a practice, an ethics or code of behaviour, a way of living.

But it is the practice of *zazen* that governs all the rest - the *zazen* that we practise, not in order that we may become Buddhas and save all living things; not in order to free ourselves from all our weaknesses; not in order to master all the teachings; not for any personal goal or objective; not even just to practise.

In the end, all that can be said is: Here and now we practise.

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