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# Zen, coming back to the source of religious mind

**Teisho by Roland Yuno Rech – La Gendronnière, 28 April 2012**

When we planned this commemoration of the 30th anniversary of Master Deshimaru passing, I remembered what he said upon his arrival in France: *“I didn’t come to bring a new religion to Europe, but a practice, zazen, which will help Europeans to recover the source of the religious mind.”*

For the last thirty years his close disciples have continued to transmit this practice, and the majority of them share this concern about preserving its profoundly religious essence, in spite of the negative opinions many have on religion, especially in France.

Therefore we say « *religious mind* » and not « *religion* » for this word has many negative connotations due to the errors and crimes which have been perpetrated in its name. We mistrust religions deemed too dogmatic, stiff, formalist, attached to rites and dogma or influenced by problems of power.

One remedy for such errors can be the contribution of Zen to the crisis of our civilization. This implies an understanding of how such errors are possible. In my opinion they are due to multiple causes.

As for violence, it often comes from politics assuming power over the clergy. We might wonder how such people can be dominated in this way, unless they also lack spiritual awakening? The same is true when power and issues of institutional influence overtake the deep practice required for the blossoming of a inclusive and compassionate mind.

Yet instead of merely condemning such errors, religious people should understand the causes behind them. In this way they can be corrected, bypassing the frequent rejection of religions in the name of spirituality. Repentance is not enough: this understanding should be extended into wisdom.

Human beings are spiritual beings. If deprived of their religious dimension, they might sink into materialism. This, in the form of spiritual materialism, appropriates certain elements of religious practice such as meditation in order to develop the ego. We call this “personal development”. Along these lines, the religious dimension is often placed at the top of the pyramid of needs, like the icing on a cake, something to further satisfy the ego's greed. However, I think it is at the root of human existence, as fundamental as breathing. Furthermore, it is not only a need but also a reality: the essence of our existence is religious.

“Zen” is nonetheless often associated with well-being, especially if used as an adjective. Well-being is what is longed for by many who are disenchanted with the ideologies that promise salvation later: after the revolution or after death. Yet true well-being cannot be reached as long as we are greedily running after it with the help of various techniques and products. True well being implies awakening to the reality of being, not as substance but as a way of being in

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the world instant after instant. Doesn't "*being*" mean being interdependent with the entire universe, connected to all other beings, as when Shakyamuni exclaimed: "*I have realized the awakening with all the existences.*" Actualizing this is living with benevolence, love and compassion, without separating yourself from others. Thus true well-being implies spiritual awakening and ethics: two essential aspects of Zen.

In this way, well-being enables all sentient beings to realize the happiness they aspire towards. In the Mahayana Buddhist Way, happiness is the fruit of the merits of the practice. Yet this is only truly possible if we do not cling to it and if we accept its impermanence, and that implies awakening to the non-substantiality of the self and to the vacuity of the objects of its desire and aversion.

To realize this ultimate dimension, far beyond the realm of merits, is without doubt the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming to the East, and of Master Deshimaru's coming to the West.

However, if we teach only this absolute dimension, we lose contact with those who are not yet ready to hear it and live it. This is why, out of compassion the bodhisattva also helps human beings in their present needs – without however reducing the Dharma to that. The door to the ultimate dimension is always kept open, encouraging human beings to return to the source of their life.

To recover the source of the religious mind that preceded all religions is to come back to the Dharma which existed before Buddha, to the old Way, the one Shakyamuni merely rediscovered, like an old path covered up by a jungle.

As you know religion has two etymologies: *religare*, to bind; and *relegere*, to collect, to re-examine carefully, the opposite of neglecting. These are well suited to Zen practice which enables us to connect with ultimate reality or Buddha-nature. Since this nature, without substance, is what we share with all beings and is what binds us together, there is no authentic existence as long as we ignore it, neglect it or do not harmonize with it.

Yet religion is often regarded as a one-God creed: each religion strives to be a comprehensive system, often claiming to be the only one which is authentic. It then becomes totalitarian and tends to oppose other religions, often creating conflicts which contradict its ideal of love and peace. All of this increases distrust of religions.

It is often said that Buddhism is a religion with no God. Yet Zen is neither theistic nor atheistic: it remains in the middle Way between affirmation and negation. Thus it allows an experience of Buddha nature as the intimate dimension of our existence beyond all concepts, including those of God or Buddha.

Moreover, though Buddhism has often integrated local divinities, masters like Dogen have warned their disciples that no genuine liberation can be expected through such practice.

Zazen is also religious in the sense of a contemplation, which allows us to reunite what our dualistic mental activity unceasingly scatters, leading to a serious lack of attention to that which is.

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*Sanzen*, which Master *Nyojo* called the essence of Zen, means to assemble, to gather, like a master and a disciple reunited in that practice which brings us in communion with the ultimate truth we call "Dharma".

Isn't this the deep meaning of religious aspiration?

To acknowledge the existence of a principle or a power superior to our small ego – whether we call it God, Buddha or the cosmic order – is to partake of religious mind.

It disturbs individualism, but this is a good thing, because being self-centered leads to much more serious problems! Master *Deshimaru* constantly advised us to follow the cosmic order through being *mushotoku*, which is possible only if it is not our ego that is steering us, but the mind awakened by *zazen*.

We trust that: with a faith which drives our life much more deeply than any creed. We owe it to Master *Deshimaru*, who transmitted it to us and to whom we express our gratitude, not only during these two days but each time we sit in *zazen*.

To sit in *zazen* is like a ritual that refreshes and revives the awakening of all the buddhas from the past. It is transmitted in the dojos where the Way is practiced from one generation to the next.

Thirty years after Master *Deshimaru's* death, we renew the vow that we made on his grave to continue *zazen* eternally. That is how the essence of his life continues to be transmitted well after his death.

This is also what enables each of us to experience the eternal life which is within us, but which religions often situate outside of us. Zen is thus the life beyond the life and death conditioned by our dualistic mind; and *zazen* is what liberates us.

It does not only mean coming back to the source of religious mind: religious mind is itself coming back to the source. With that motion, our mind becomes vast, dwelling on nothing. The source is that which is always flowing, so it remains pure like the awareness in *zazen*.

Out of this transmitted practice, values arise which give anew a deep meaning to our lives, which often seem deprived of value. This enables us to live in harmony with the Dharma, with the cosmic order. To live like the Buddha, animated by the same awakening, is naturally to practice the *paramita*, which all express the awakening of *zazen*.

Thanks to *prajna*, *bodaishin* and the religious mind appear and the practice of the precepts, of generosity, of energetic effort, of patience, of meditation and wisdom are in themselves awakening and liberation here and now.

That is what gives life the sacred dimension which we vow to protect as a living reality, because it is originally awakening and liberation. The four holy truths, *arya satya*, are holy because their practice is the realization of this awakening and this liberation, which do not allow attachment to religious dogmas.

That is what the Buddha and the patriarchs have transmitted from one generation to the next in the Soto Zen School so as to keep this religious mind alive. This is also the sense of this

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commemoration: to remind us of our great responsibility and to protect the purity of the practice of zazen and the gyoji which extends zazen into our daily life.

How? By protecting the practice-realization which is not a means of obtaining satori, but the immediate realization of awakening. *Gyoji*, continual practice, is not a spiritual technique but Buddha's life itself. All those who follow him, can experience this.

Bossuet used to say: « *Religion has God as its object* ». In Zen, neither Buddha nor awakening, are objects. It is what we are in reality, and what we live when we are no longer deluded by our ego, nor by the ego of others. That is revealed by the practice of *Jijuyu zanmai*, which is at the heart of the transmission of Zen.

The religious mind is also the mind that is able to go beyond the ordinary vision of reality and to perceive its ultimate or deep dimension, and simultaneously to see *ku* and *shiki* in all of the phenomena that we are made of or that we encounter. It is seeing with one's own two eyes that gives depth to existence. It is neither supernatural nor occult though we often make it so. The mystic dimension of Zen is not mysterious, nor irrational for those who experience it. Mysticism has been said to be "The belief in the possible intimate and direct union of the human mind with the fundamental principle of being, a union that constitutes at the same time a way of life and a way of knowing, external and superior to ordinary existence and knowledge."

This sounds like Zen. Yet the true return to the source has us abandon the mind that discriminates between normal and supernormal. "The ordinary mind is the Way," said Master Nansen to his disciple Joshu. Yet trying to approach it separates us from it because by following our ego we are still turning it into something special.

Different from other religions, Zen is known to favor inner experience rather than beliefs and rites, hence the disappointment of those who find out that ceremonies have again been given an important role in certain places of practice.

On that point Dogen quoted Master Nyojo's teaching: "*Sanzen, the practice of Zen, is shin jin, datsu raku, body and mind cast off. It is not necessary to light incense sticks, to pay tribute, to chant Buddha's name, to do penance or to chant sutras. Practice shikantaza, only sitting.*" And when Dogen asked him what "body and mind cast off" meant, he added: "*Body and mind cast off is zazen. When you do zazen with one mind, you are freed from the five desires and the five obstacles.*"

This quotation from the *Hokyoki* is often mentioned by Dogen in the *Shobogenzo*, and this indicates that it expresses well his intimate experience. Perhaps he also had in mind Shakyamuni's warning against attachment to rituals and rules as an obstacle to awakening.

However, this does not mean that we must reject rules and rituals, otherwise Dogen would not have set up so many for the practice of his disciples, both at *Koshoji* and *Eiheiji*.

This only means that we must not cling to them, as if we thought that something would be missing in the practice of zazen without them. In this way, practiced without attachment, ceremonies are the expression of the liberation realized in zazen.

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Likewise, Dogen in the *Kyojukaimon*, sees the precepts as the transmission of the buddhas' living wisdom, whereas at the beginning of the *Shobogenzo Zuimonki* he says: *"You must respect the precepts and the rules of the meals. However it is wrong to insist on them as being essential, to establish them as a practice and expect the realization of the Way by respecting them. We follow them simply because they are the Zen monks' activities and Buddha's disciples' way of life."*

This confirms that the Dharma is transmitted as a Way of liberation, and that all the attachments that occur in the practice are traps that betray its true meaning.

After arriving in France forty-five years ago, Master Deshimaru did his utmost to transmit a Zen freed of those traps and centered on the essential points: the practice which enables us to return to the source of religious mind. Master Dogen did the same upon coming back from China when he wrote the *Fukanzazengi* and the *Bendowa*.

At the start of the *Shobogenzo*, the *Bendowa* begins with a description of the right practice of zazen as *Jijuyuzanmai*: *« The practice, free from all human fabrications, through which Buddhas have transmitted the marvelous Dharma, from one to the other without alteration, and realized supreme and total awakening. The entrance gate to this samadhi is sitting upright in zazen. »*

Dogen adds: *"This Dharma is largely present in each person. However, if we do not practice, it is not manifested; if there is no realization, it is not reached."*

So, this Samadhi of zazen is at the heart of the transmission of Zen. It is the source of religious mind because not only does it make us realize our true nature, but it also has all beings within the same realization by virtue of the principle of doji jodo, the mutual assistance or resonance which is produced within the pure practice of zazen. Dogen writes, *"If, even for a short time, you sit in this samadhi, imprinting the Buddha seal in your three activities, everything and all things without exception is the seal of Buddha, and all the space without exception is awakening."*

This was Dogen's teaching to transmit the essence of the religious mind that he realized with Master Nyojo. It includes the joy of our own awakening which we share with others and which Master Deshimaru never stopped expressing from the beginning to the end of his mission in Europe. We can only renew the expression of our gratitude for this by continuing to practice what he taught us.

Just as in the Soto Zen School, the transmission is a transmission of the mind of awakening, the mind of Buddha, it is manifested in what we could call the religion of the bodhisattva, which shows Buddha nature in practice, gyobutsu, freed from all concept about Buddha.

It manifests itself in the practice of generosity, of sharing, which is a cure for greed and which contributes to the advent of a peaceful world.

Benevolent words contribute to this as well by enabling to overcome hatred and reconcile enemies. The religious mind of the bodhisattva prompts him to be helpful to all beings without feeling separated or different from the others. Hence, Zen does not consist only in getting back to the source of the religious mind, but in constantly swimming in the stream to help the others to cross to the other shore. While practicing like this, the other bank comes to us and there is

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no more separation *between samsara and nirvana*. It was undoubtedly this spirit that made Dogen write:

At each moment  
Awakened or asleep  
In my straw-covered hermitage  
I offer this prayer:  
Let's make all efforts to save  
others before ourselves.

Whoever makes that vow is already saved from being self-centered and awakened to the reality which embraces the source and its branching streams. Such a person has no effort to make to save others because they are already saved by their own buddha nature, which he invites them to acknowledge by allowing it to radiate from his own practice.