
About the crisis of civilization

Master Roland Yuno Rech, Godinne summer camp workshop – July 2023

Welcome to this workshop!

The theme that I suggested to you was to reflect on the problem of the crisis of civilization. Master Deshimaru addressed this problem towards the end of his teaching career in Europe, around the years 1978-1982.

At the end of his teachings on this theme, he asked me to continue his analysis. He considered that I was certainly better placed than him to address this subject, which is not at all certain. But finally, I felt the responsibility to fulfil his wish.

Firstly, I will present Master Deshimaru's thoughts to you.

In a document I will present you with the reflections that I made at his request in 1978, which I believe are still relevant today.

The crisis of civilization

We could start by asking ourselves, if there really is one, whether it really is a crisis or not. For now, what matters to me is to provide Master Deshimaru's point of view on this subject. He gave kusens which were published by the AZI at the time, but they have been completely out of print for ages and have not been republished. So I summarized it and I'm going to tell you about it now.

Master Deshimaru told us that for him, the crucial problem of the crisis of civilization is the loss of moral and spiritual values which we have exchanged for an increase in materialism, the pursuit of pleasure and wealth, and of material goods. We could now also say the culture of well-being, but of a fairly egocentric well-being. For him this was the biggest problem. Also the fact that the development of intellectual thinking, left-brain thinking, analytical thinking, had swept away spiritual faith. He believed that Zen practice allowed us to reconnect with what can found a spiritual faith. Obviously, he was not at all against intellect and intellectual thinking. He said that at present, the left brain has completely invaded human beings' way of thinking. As you know, for most of us, this is the language of the analytical mind, of the elaboration of concepts which allow us to try to contain reality, which is more or less ungraspable, within notions that we manage to master, and then allow us to develop techniques, to develop what Descartes considered as essential functions of human beings, that is to become master and possessor of nature. It was Descartes point of view and Cartesianism which contributed to this development of the mind and technique, technique which of course allowed a lot of material progress in different fields. The fundamental spiritual or religious error is to deny the importance of reason, therefore to have developed the power of faith, the importance of faith to the detriment of the law of reason, which was the case in the entire period that was called

the obscurantism of the Middle Ages, where theologians considered that faith was the most important thing and that reason was almost something diabolical, because it risked destroying this faith

Another aspect emphasized by Master Deshimaru were the moral aspects, daily life was becoming more and more hectic and complicated. People live without having a clear direction for their lives, there is a kind of dissipation of attention. Attention that is constantly solicited by all kinds of information and encouragement to desire all kinds of things. With this tendency to always want to offer what it is thought will satisfy your desire. In fact, that's the whole problem with advertising. You are lacking, you are not satisfied with your life, but we have the car or the product that will fill you with satisfaction, regardless of all the different products available and all the products touted by advertising.

I believe that there is above all a serious problem among young people at the moment, which is that we have greatly developed intellectual education. We teach a lot of science concepts, all kinds of things. But teaching is not education. Teaching is the transmission of a certain number of notions which allow us to develop techniques which make it possible to master a certain number of phenomena in life. Obviously to exercise professions of all kinds, but it's not a real education which allows one to reflect on the meaning of one's life and which gives direction.

I receive quite a few testimonies where young people who have completed higher education ask themselves what's the point? With respect to the crisis of the modern world, what is the point of practising a profession that does not help us solve the problems of the current crisis. I think that for young people, it is particularly important to address this theme of the crisis of civilization, particularly regarding ecology and especially the protection of life on earth. I think this problem of the crisis of civilization is particularly important for young people. Because if young people fall back on consumption as a kind of consolation, just like people who lack love and who become bulimic starting to consume to compensate for a kind of inner emptiness. Something fundamental is missing and we try to fill this gap with all kinds of objects. I think our modern civilization works a lot like that.

I believe that this is one of the major aspects of the crisis -the lack of meaning of existence, a meaning which really motivates commitment and effort in a professional activity for example. And so with a kind of frustration that is not really compensated, we fall back on the benefits of the material realm that we can access thanks to the money we earn.

Master Deshimaru began by emphasizing the need for spirituality among young people. It turns out that, precisely when he arrived in Europe in 1967, almost immediately after, there was the famous crisis of '68, which was essentially a crisis that was very much caused by the revolt of the youth at the time. Master Deshimaru was quickly popular with young people - all of his disciples in the years 68-72 were all between 20 and 30 years old. So there were great expectations at that time. This is therefore what encouraged Master Deshimaru to develop his teaching and to emphasize the extent to which the practice of Zen could help resolve this crisis of civilization. He insisted a lot on the fact that one of the aspects of the crisis, that I talked about before, was the unilateral development of the thinking mind based on the left brain, the brain of language, of rational analysis which stifled the intuitive side of the right brain. , which is that of artistic creation, of the immediate perception of forms, therefore of intuition. He considered that the practice of Zen was truly capable of restoring balance in the functioning of

the brain in each individual. Master Deshimaru placed great emphasis on the means to regain inner balance in the way the mind functions.

Also, the fact of giving more value to everything related to body gestures. He underlined the fact that in Zen, we develop activities such as the tea ceremony for example, which is a ceremony through which we develop delicacy in gestures and attention to gestures. Also -very important - ikebana, for example, as a form of artistic expression in which we invest a lot with the body, with gestures, paying attention at the same time to the flower which we are working on, etc.

Master Deshimaru said that to avoid war and all the diseases of civilization, you need a strong religion. For him, the practice of zazen is a practice that allows one to return to the source of the religious spirit.

Zen, not as Buddhism, another religion alongside existing religions, but zazen itself, as a meditation approach which allows one to contact within oneself what is at the basis of the religious spirit, that is, to feel at one and also connected to different levels, most importantly, connected to one's own deep Buddha nature and connected to others. In a practice that encourages compassion, kindness, mutual sympathy. And also unity with nature. In the 60s we didn't talk much about ecology. In 1968, it was more politics that predominated. Deshimaru was one of the first to really emphasize respect for nature within oneself and around oneself.

He spoke of harmony with the cosmic order. The cosmic order is the Dharma and the Dharma is the understanding of the impermanence and interdependence of all the phenomena which constitute our life, which fundamentally constitute all the existences of the universe. Everything that exists from ants to stars is subject to this fundamental law of impermanence and interdependence. And the practice of Zen, in fact, is a practice that allows you to both become extremely attentive and aware of impermanence.

To accept it, whereas generally, we consider impermanence as a source of loss, therefore of mourning, something painful. But Zen teaches you that impermanence is also what fortunately allows us to abandon our illusions and awaken. If impermanence did not exist, we would be frozen in an unchanging attitude, no progress would be possible. So impermanence is life, that is to say evolution, the fact that everything is constantly transforming and therefore that the practice of Zen is the opportunity to use this impermanence in a favourable way.

Interdependence is also the counterpart of impermanence. Interdependence means that nothing exists separately. Everything that exists in the universe exists through relationships. Both at the level of living life, which is a relatively rare phenomenon apparently in the universe, as well as the very material existence of matter, stars, etc. Everything exists through relationships of interdependence, of energy. Being aware of this interdependence is truly wisdom. So afterward, it's about making interdependence play out in a favourable way, by being aware that everything we do, every action has consequences, and therefore by becoming attentive to the consequences of our actions, we must become much more responsible in our lives. And this responsibility is the expression of the fact that, deep down, we are not conditioned by karma that is impossible to transform. We all obviously have karma. We produce karma constantly through our actions, but we also inherit our past karma. We are the

heirs of our past lives. This is a common point between Zen and existentialism, to see that ultimately human beings are responsible for what they become through their actions.

Master Deshimaru insisted on the fact that he often perceived a sort of contradiction between what is spiritual and what is material. It is true that civilization developed in an extremely materialistic way. Through rejection of religions that have been misunderstood. I think they were seen as an obstacle to progress. The obscurantism side of religion. Modern education does not sufficiently embrace the spirit of adventure. For Master Deshimaru, adventure is very important because it means learning to face the unexpected, impermanence. Often, we live too much in a kind of routine. Our lives are a little too conditioned. The path of Zen is the path of the bird, that is to say, the path which is not on rails, channelled in a single direction, but on the contrary, which can go in all directions. Which means that in our life, we can be completely creative, we are not necessarily doomed. I think it's important. And at some point to take stock. What am I the heir of? What was transmitted to me? What do I want to do with education? Can I make it into something that thrives? Do I want to give up certain things? In short, re-appropriate what has conditioned us until now. I think we can periodically repeat this. It is even advisable. It would be interesting for everyone to think about this aspect. What is the teaching of Zen that I transmit and which is transmitted not only by me, but through the publications of Master Deshimaru and in general all the sutras, the Shôbôgenzô, of what we call the Dharma, of all this teaching, what remains for you? What do you do with it? How does this nourish your life? What's its use? How does this inspire you in your life? So the current assessment needs to be updated periodically, in my opinion. There is an interesting question that I ask myself from time to time and that I am also asked, what would have become of me if I had not practiced? So... what? I don't know actually. It's difficult to answer. If I hadn't encountered Zen, I would be pretty desperate. For me, the question when I was a teenager, the big question, was the meaning of existence. And at a certain point I took stock of what I had received through education and for me, it didn't have much meaning, it wasn't enough to motivate my existence. I was very desperate. I have often said that I travelled around the world wondering if somewhere I would find answers.

Speaker:

I think that the word "spirituality" has a negative connotation these days. I think young people don't want to deepen, or see spirituality in the religious sense, they already have their prejudices. It's difficult to get back to the sense of the word even.

Roland:

I think it's very important to separate spirituality and religion. The religions have made many mistakes. However, spirituality is really necessary. It gives meaning to life.

Speaker:

I don't think you can translate, right away, the word spirituality in terms of the meaning of life. When you talk about spirituality you talk about a kind of quest for the meaning of life.

Roland:

Yes. The values in life. It's really important. A problem of values. We have to work on our way of being in daily life, witness what young people can bring, what kinds of meaning, notably as regards work, the way we work the way we work in a profession, the way we can work like it's a service given, like in samu, a service given to the environment, everyone else, not simply as a means to make a living. I think, for young people in particular, it's really important. The way we behave generally, it's not just in work, even in the metro. The way we behave vis a vis other people, it's really important. It's meaning itself, the way we drive a car. Sometimes I've liked to think of my car like a dojo, the metro like a dojo. It's good to have patience, tolerance.

Speaker:

A report regarding young people which contradicts a bit what has been previously said. It's really true spirituality and religion is suspect for a lot of young people. They have a lot of doubts. But there was a survey in my town in secondary schools regarding this subject and it seemed that young people also wanted to know more about religion, different religions, to better get to know the different aspects, what Islam is about, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhists. We received a formal demand to participate in a workgroup to organise an event to try and present different religions, spiritual currents, better get to know the specifics. For the youth right now its an obstacle, a source of conflict.

Continuing with the Workshop.

Master Deshimaru insisted on the importance of body, of understanding with the body, not just mental activity. To understand with the body, rather than the mind, is to allow things to have a deep and profound effect on one. Practising like this we develop a way of living that can become a model for our way of living in daily life. As much as possible, what we experience in sesshin, we should continue so that our whole life becomes a kind of sesshin. We really have to concentrate. What are really the important things we can carry over from a sesshin into daily life? Practically speaking, not only in terms of intellectual understanding.

Master Deshimaru talked of the way the mind creates its own suffering. The attachments, to all kinds of objects. Desires – impossible to satisfy. All the useless things in our life which do nothing but provoke complication, agitation, fatigue.

A lot of our difficulties are due to our unstable minds, too influenced by our immediate environment like a boat, out of control, gone astray, lacking firm direction, buffeted by winds and waves.

Zazen roots us in the present, mind and body, in unity with the moment. Even if all kinds of phenomena rise, come at us, potential causes of emotional turbulence there is still a clear direction we can follow which is not altered or impeded by those phenomena, that which arises through desire.

However, Buddhism is often misunderstood in the West in this respect, the idea that desire itself is the cause of suffering, that we must rid ourselves of desire; for example, in Schopenhauer, who understood Buddhism in this way, and inspired his very pessimistic philosophy. Buddhism is, in reality, far close to the teaching of Epicurius who taught there are bad and good desires, but that desire itself is not something intrinsically bad. Because desire is life. I insist on that: desire is life.

If there was no desire, how could we ever be born? Our parents would never have made love, we wouldn't have come into this world. It's important to cultivate good desires and think about what kind of sense we can give to what we desire; a desire fundamental and really important, for me, is to live a kind of life where what you do has some kind of meaning, sense, because if someone is not able to do that, they start to live something of desperate life. A life that is no life at all.

Living a desperate life everything we desire must come as a kind of compensation to a fundamental lack which is never faced, let alone resolved. I compare this, often, to a baby who cries because his desire is to be loved by his parents, cherished, but, rather than give the love the baby require the parents give her sweets; that is to say don't address the fundamental need of the child in the effort to simply forget her cries by giving her something to occupy her, some immediate, superficial distraction that does nothing to help the child try and satisfy what she deeply needs.

I think human beings function like this. They wait, in some way, for their profound needs to be addressed; the need to have a sense, a meaning, to life. Otherwise, life is nothing but lack and frustration that lead us, inevitably, to the feeling that life is absurd.

We console ourselves as best we can by creating objects of desire sufficiently easy to satisfy in order to try and avoid awareness of what we more deeply lack, and thus our lives become like the barrel of Danaides which had no bottom, no end.

I think it's really a very important, rich and interesting theme to think about our desires and needs.

Like Master Deshimaru said, selfish, egotistical people become anxious and weak, for him egotism was really a sickness which engendered anxiety and weakened human beings. He also spoke of the excess of consumerism, echoing the critics of the consumer society in Mai '68, critics of the materialist society. It is important to return to a simpler life.

Master Deshimaru also spoke of the great inequalities of property and wealth which is a crucial problem of our contemporary world with its global minority of persons who snatch up all the resources while the great majority lack basic needs. The global disparities of wealth right now are stupendous, and the lack of sharing, of distribution, can only engender envy, jealousy and, ultimately, violence.

Master Deshimaru was also very aware of how traditional religion wielded the idea of Hell as a kind of threat against those behaving badly and how this was linked to conservatism and the prevention of social progress; something which had caused considerable damage to the religious impulse.

Marxism has called religion the “opium of the people,” as you know, this has left traces. It’s associated with a confusion that I will continue to criticise, the confusion between religion and spirituality, its such a pity to hear young people confuse the two and reject spirituality alongside religion. (*Throw the baby out with the bathwater*: as the English say. ((Trns)))

Master Deshimaru insisted on a clear distinction between religion and spirituality, saying to practice zazen was to return to the source of religion before religion, insisting that the religious spirit not be buried in dogma, institutions, systems of power which completely betray the true religious spirit.

And I think, in the dojos, we should really emphasise this, when we introduce zazen to new people clarify what it means in regard to religion and the spiritual in order that avoid misunderstandings and the risk of rejection for being too formalist, above all, when we use religious signifiers in ceremonies.

Personally, I was put off, at the beginning. I was sufficiently impressed by zazen practice to compensate for that which didn’t attract me in the ritual; but, with less faith in zazen, I might have been put off. I can understand the people who leave, put off, by the ceremony, the ritual.

What we have to show is that all the aspects of our rituals are forms of expression that spring from the spirit of zazen, that, in the end, there is no separation between zazen and ritual. Ritual, liturgy, are not things “added on,” things which are foreign to the spirit of zazen, the zen rituals we practice are an organic expression of the essence of zen.

This is why it is a bad idea to be dogmatic. I feel that spirituality needs expression in daily life and ritual is a step towards that expression.

Our societies are structured by ritual, it’s part of human culture, need, to develop rituals, what is necessary is that these rituals have a sense which corresponds to something profound.

Should we create new precepts for a future civilisation that represents a universality of values? I think so. I think we should work towards doing something like that.

The development of science and technology has not resulted in harmony between mankind and nature, and this is a problem linked to technology and the spirit in which technology is used. Descartes, Cartesianism, as a fundamental pillar of Western thinking posits the figure of Man as necessarily master and propriétaire of nature; ignoring that the meaning of human activity is to act in accordance with the laws of nature, understanding the laws of nature, using nature to satisfy our natural and legitimate needs, food, shelter, security in a way that doesn’t harm and is in harmony with nature’s laws.

We’re seeing right now, with the climate crisis, that so many are asking the same question and, in so far as it goes, I believe this is an unexpectedly good thing that has come out of this crisis, because, sooner or later, we will enter a situation of profound disharmony that adjusting our attitudes will no longer be possible. We really urgently must wake up and take account of the situation, ask where and how the situation has arisen, the causes and conditions, we must understand them, analyse them.

Once again Master Deshimaru alerted us to this error of psychology, of modern philosophy that springs from this excessive emphasis on the ego, on the “me,” to the detriment, the forgetting of the true self. The difference between the me and you which is the difference between myself and true Buddha Nature, a difference that zazen helps us to realise: this is the teaching in which I believe.

To study the self is to forget the self, to forget the ego, to find harmony with others, all beings the cosmos entire within the realisation of Buddha that encompasses, englobes, the small space of our little ego, the vast space, vaster than the self, which is our real life in interdependence with all beings.

We’ve already talked about the impossibility of the restoration of any natural equilibrium without respect, love for, the cosmic order, without the attendant recognition of the solidarity and interdependence of all being. For me, it’s fundamental. Everything is there, in our bodhisattva vows. Living within the precepts we make a contribution to the restoration of a natural equilibrium in this world in which we live.

As Master Deshimaru taught us, the abandonment of ego and the attachment to that ego opens us to an energy, a vital force, greatly more profound, for him the abandonment of ego and ego attachments was a fundamental aspect of the practice of zazen, which is the unity of body and mind, that which teaches us to think and act with body and mind, the whole body, not just mental, cerebral thinking.

Practising thus we contact Qi, vital, fundamental energy, and we – those who make a cult of energy, especially - can really feel this.

So, this is what I have gleaned from what I noted during the kusens of Master Deshimaru when he touched on the theme of the crisis of our civilisation.

Some thoughts:

Given what was asked I’ve produced a work on these themes and tried to particularly develop the theme of wasted potentials. Our civilisation has brought with it great progress in the development of all sorts of things which are potentially extremely important but are not being used right now as they should; for me, personally, I am touched by the terrible waste of energy and potential that comes in the wake of such development, energy and potential that could be used so differently.

And what is extremely important too is the crisis of meaning. I believe that a human being must have a sense to life. This is particularly pertinent for young people.

To see how zazen can give meaning to life, through the practice of zazen a sense, more profound, of life, appears.

What happened to me was something of a paradox; the first time I practiced zazen – although previously I had been obsessed, literally and desperately obsessed by the question of the meaning of life – I realised, as I practiced, that there was no need for life to have any “sense,” zazen revealed to me the absence of any need for any “sense.” And that’s also the paradox of history.

The sense of life, history, is in a sense, an extra, something added on, what, fundamentally, seems to me to be important is to develop experience, here and now, in unity with our lives and the life of the universe, which needs nothing else, nothing extra, nothing added on.

This experience of unity is a fundamental thing that appeases mind and spirit and takes away from us the constant urge we feel to fill in the gaps we feel inside ourselves and try desperately to plug, with all sorts of objects of desire, things we uselessly pursue, that appeasement, that letting go of that useless search, the experience of that is, itself, satori.

This presence, this being, in unity, is not something that can be expressed in words. It's simply a feeling. Being profoundly rooted in the zazen posture. This, itself, appeases the mind, the spirit, and we feel, intimately, we don't need anything else...Which is not to say we can live our lives entirely in the zazen posture!

From zazen, from the experience of being in unity with the present moment, this experience follows us, carries through to all the other aspects of everyday life.

To be as one with samu, when we are doing samu, to be one with eating when we eat, when we sit down to eat, with the ceremony, when we do a ceremony; this capacity to be absolutely and truly and totally at one with that which one does, through the life of body and mind, in unity in every instant, this, for me, is really the fundamental thing, there is nothing left to add; because it is out of this experience that our lives start to make sense, a sense that comes naturally out of precisely that experience; and this is the essence of life, it is that which we do wanting nothing other than that which we practice, to live what we are living, in practice.

The important thing is to be able to actualise what signifies, what means, this life lived in interdependence with all beings and that this becomes the source of all our values.

Master Deshimaru said we have to create universal precepts. I think the 10 precepts are universal. If we reflect carefully on these precepts we will come to know how they are the source of all real values in life.