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# Did he really leave?

## Speech for the 40th anniversary of Master Deshimaru's death

By Jean-Pierre Romain, La Gendronnière, April 2022

I discovered Zen practice right here, more than forty years ago, with Master Deshimaru. It was his last summer camp. I was 25 years old and starting my professional and family life; there was - at the time - no question of me following a master. Too bad.

But I undeniably acknowledge that I received a strong impression at that time, and above all a strong impulse to continue. And by continuing, it happened, among other things, that I found myself in charge of the largest and oldest dojo in Europe, the Paris Zen Dojo, founded by Master Deshimaru himself.

This Dojo, just like this Gendronnière temple where we are now, were two essential poles in Master Deshimaru's vision, and I think they are destined to remain so.

The Paris Dojo was recognized in 1974 as a temple under the name of *Parizan Bukkoku Zenji*, by the Japanese Zen authorities. However, its layout and way of functioning are in no way comparable to those of a Japanese temple: one should speak rather of a Zen center in a large metropolis.

In any case, whether it's a temple or a Zen center, we have to live up to this heritage. In what way?

First of all, by preserving faith in the teaching received and continuing to transmit it. How can we sum up this teaching? For some elders, it seems that the important thing would be to continue to make *kusen*, to give *kyosaku*, to cook *genmai*... Certainly, we have preserved these traditions at the Paris Dojo. But I would like to emphasize three points which seem to me to be more fundamental:

1. "Zen is zazen": a great leitmotif of Master Deshimaru. Of course, practice is essential.
2. "Zazen is going back to the normal condition of body and mind". This "normal condition" was his definition of Awakening, which he called *satori*. There is no particular state to seek in zazen, just "harmonize oneself with the cosmic order," as he put it.
3. Finally, Master Deshimaru saw the practice of zazen as the remedy for what he called "the crisis of our civilization". Our vocation is therefore essentially to act as bodhisattvas: M. Deshimaru's aim was not to found a new clergy.

Moreover, we have seen an evolution in Zen since Sensei's death, simply because society itself has evolved. Until the 2000s, the disciples were keen to preserve the dojo's manners and ceremonies as they were before. Pretending to forget that Master Deshimaru was constantly innovating, creating. We should not retreat into conservatism.

**Didn't he say: "We must not follow a railway track. We must go on the path of the birds".**

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Master Deshimaru also claimed to have brought the seed of Zen to the West, but he did not intend to create a Western Zen: he simply transmitted it, which is in itself an extraordinary adventure. So, we cannot dispense with studying the teachings of all his predecessors, masters and patriarchs - and first and foremost the teachings of the Buddha.

After his death, little by little, many of his disciples went to Japan. This movement was probably unavoidable in order for the sangha to recharge its batteries and not withdraw into itself.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep faith in our master's teaching, first of all by avoiding the belief that "true Zen" (one of M. Deshimaru's saying, which is questionable outside its context) can be found elsewhere than here and now.

As always, it is a question of keeping away from extremes: on the one hand, conservatism or fundamentalism; on the other hand, the idea that Zen is an imported product, a Japanese speciality. Neither this nor that. This is how we can advance along the path shown by Master Deshimaru, and, as far as we are concerned, within the Dojo he founded. As you know, when we speak of the "Middle way", the cursor can be more or less to the right or the left. And in fact, since Deshimaru's death, the Paris Dojo has always welcomed several trends.

Gratitude towards Master Deshimaru is essential, and I want to express it here, as do all the other speakers. But this should not, in my opinion, be the sole purpose of a gathering as this one: let us not lose sight of the fact that we must always move forward, and from the seed planted by M. Deshimaru, help the tree to grow for the years and centuries to come.

We have been told that "Sensei left 40 years ago". But did Sensei really leave? To this question, I will leave it to everyone to answer.

Thank you for your time.