

Zen Buddhism arrived relatively late to the Western world, compared to other Eastern practices. Often Zen in this context is associated with a kind of Americana, with the Beat Generation and the writers who were influenced by its philosophies such as Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder or Allen Ginsberg. But a few Japanese Zen masters chose to settle in Europe. Among them was Taisen Deshimaru, who started teaching at the back of a bookshop in Paris and rapidly developed a devoted following throughout the 1970s. Among the young practitioners who met him was Philippe Coupey, an American writer who was living in Montparnasse. After Deshimaru’s early death, Coupey stayed in Paris and continued the practice, eventually becoming a Zen teacher himself. DUST met with Coupey in Paris to talk about opacity, practice and clarity in the Zen mind.

Philippe Coupey has edited and published several books on his master’s teachings, and has expanded upon his own spiritual teaching in several essays. His two novels, Horse Medicine and Temple Rapidly Vanishing, were published under the pseudonym M.C. Dalley, and are part of a trilogy following the adventures of a Zen monk. Dalley/Coupey’s protagonist struggles to consolidate his Montparnasse nightlife with the hardship of Zen practice, both of which are informed by philosophy, charisma, presence, flesh, energy.

AGNÈS VILLETTE in conversation with PHILIPPE REIRYU COUPEY

Agnès Villette: Is transparency a concept that belongs within the vocabulary of Zen practice? You hardly use the word in your own teachings...

Philippe Reiryu Coupley: True, I never use that word. There are a lot of words I prefer to that one, like ‘transformation’, ‘transmission’ and ‘transmigration’. Transparency concerns other Buddhist branches. It’s a socio-political word, without much resonance within my own teaching. It’s a dualist concept: transparency as opposed to opaqueness. Zen, though, tells us to drop all opposites. It is mainly about departing from the dualist representation. Once you have experienced it through the practice, the separation of opposites no longer needs to exist.

Though there is a line that comes quite often in your writing: “Don’t get attached to words!” When I say something, one does not have to take it literally. Don’t be duped by the sounds – it’s just a sound. Thereby it becomes possible to use a word one way today and another way the next, without attachment.

And do you find people get too attached time to words? Sure, all the time. Kodo Sawaki said the most important thing is to be led by *zaZen*. It means being pulled by the spiritual quest of why we are on earth. It means being pulled by what is the highest in each of us. To always practice *zaZen*, or to know what it means, is not important. Not being hooked up on the word or concept of *zaZen* is what we’re trying to do. I don’t practice *zaZen*, *zaZen* practices me! The cosmos pulled me into the practice. A lot of practitioners might come to it with personal issues, but those are superficials.

(Editor’s note: zaZen is a meditative discipline that typically constitutes the primary practice of Zen Buddhism: one sits cross-legged with hands folded on top of the legs, with a straight back, half-closed eyes, breathing with the mouth into the stomach. By doing so, one suspends all judgmental thinking, letting words, ideas, images and thoughts pass without becoming involved in them.)

Yet it seems that we are overloaded with the ‘superficials’ – the concepts, words and expected definitions. This is why practice is so important; it’s a way of getting rid of that junk. With the digital revolution, the world is speeding up more and more.

That is the sickness of our time. As we grow more sick, I think we have a greater and more urgent need not for a religion but for religion. This kind of religion means intimacy with oneself and the world, and comes before the concept of one religion amongst others. Cavemen did not have ‘religions’, but they were certainly religious or spiritual. They were affected by the sun or the moon.

Zen is such a religion before religion. Zen is sampai, prostration before the world. Of course, it later put emphasis on the posture, but originally, it is about prostration. This Zen is not a tool, it cannot be adjusted to the modern world. If you try to adjust it, you would totally undermine it, outlining its end. Words like karma (actions driven by intention, which are passed through time), dojo (where the practice takes place), and satori (awakening) have entered contemporary social jargon, and this is fine. These words can help us understand the social world. But the reverse – language of the social or economic lexicon en-

tering into the practice of Zen – would mean the end of Buddhism. Buddhism would be swallowed up by the terrible machine of superficiality.

The modern world adapts forms of spiritual practice to reinforce one’s ego. Too much of this can spell the end of the true teaching.

But I don’t think it will ever happen with Zen, as the true teaching is too strong. Zen does not need to adapt to the modern world: in Zen, we are the modern world. We sit facing ourselves and forgetting ourselves every morning – this is not only modern, it is eternal.

I remember you recalling the first time you met Deshimaru, who later become your Zen master, in Paris in the 60s. The first time you practiced in his dojo, he spoke about Mushotoku, a Japanese word which means ‘practicing without aim’. You were immediately taken by that idea. Those were the first words I heard him utter, and they went deep inside. I was sitting with my knees in the air, my back bent over and hurting. All I wanted was to get out of the dojo. It was 6AM, all was quiet – one couldn’t even hear the birds outside, and everybody was sitting motionless. Then I heard Deshimaru’s words; they hit me immediately, and what he said that day was clear forever after. A satori the first time I heard the master:

Real freedom is not trying to obtain anything.

But still it was hard to practice. Sitting every morning like that did not make me more enlightened than anybody else. I remember other disciples asking questions during the mondos: “Sensei, how can I get from first satori to second satori?”. Deshimaru’s answer was always that Zen is not like an elevator. He taught that there was no progression from satori to satori. This is what one has to understand. In the social world, there are grades and hierarchies because we have to function. There are no levels to the deep teaching. There are no grades of awakening.

(Editor’s note: A mondo is a recorded collection of dialogues between a Zen pupil and their master.)

Our society is totally structured on these evaluative structures, which lend themselves so easily to materialism – people trying to obtain things and reach certain goals. Apparently it is very, very hard for people to consider doing something without any gain. The moment you take away their function, their grade, their role, they start shaking in *zaZen*.

I don’t mind having my function taken away. Then I can do anything. But what do we discover in our practice if it’s not related to a goal? Money, fame, sex, recognition, wellbeing? We are free from that. This is real freedom. One can be free even be-

hind bars. When Thoreau was in jail for contesting the government, Emerson came to him and asked, “What are you doing there behind those bars?”. Thoreau replied: “What the hell are you doing not behind bars?”. Freedom is not about which side of the bars you’re on, but rather understanding one’s fears.

Funnily enough, people have a hard time coming to that understanding, despite how much time they invest in individualistic thinking. We are thinking about ourselves all the time, leading ourselves around by our nose rings. All concepts are limitations, and we should not get attached to them. Buddha, after his satori under the Bodhi tree, said, “I really did not obtain anything”. This is the true awakening – when we don’t get attached to doctrines, religions, concepts and words...

With all the chaos in the world right now, there does seem to be a profound change underway. Chaos is necessary. From chaos, things can be renewed. It means we are coming to an end of how we’ve been living before. Chaos is dangerous, but also an opportunity. Chaos goes against stability, comfort, luxury, similarity. What do they breed? More of the same. Chaos is not in contradiction with calm and peace, it is continuous. This continuity flows through all of us, it’s like the primal heat.

In Zen we say, ‘He who sits is changing the whole world, but he who kills is changing the whole world too’. What I find more important is the world is changed by the one who sits. And if it was not this way, what would I be doing practicing? Practicing *zaZen* is good for humanity. When we practice, we drop everything, and it gets transferred, and it goes from chaos to awakening. You don’t come to Zen without chaos. As Dogen said, ‘Looking at oneself and forgetting oneself brings an understanding of our own movement, and the movement of the whole. It is of great help to the world. Zen practice is an internal revolution. *(Editor’s note: Dōgen Zenji was a Japanese Buddhist priest, writer and founder of the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan.)*