Agnès Villette in conversation with Philippe Reiryu Coupey

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.

“Horse Medicine is a meditation discipline that typically constitut...”

“...-tates 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. Concept did not have ‘religion’, but they were certainly religious or spiritual. They were affected by the sun of 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 – languages of the social or economic lexicon em-