



WHAT IS ZEN?

Zen Buddhism and Meditation



禅 ASSOCIATION ZEN
INTERNATIONALE





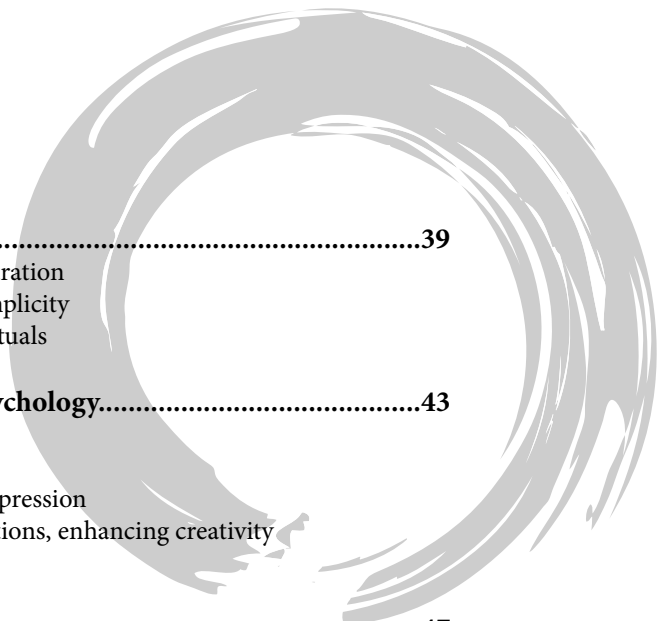


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ZEN BUDDHISM AND MEDITATION

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«With a meditation cushion or a chair»

THE SECRET OF ZEN:

ZAZEN MEDITATION

«When the mind dwells on nothing, true mind appears»
Diamond Sutra.

ZAZEN

To practise zazen – zen meditation – sit in the middle of a *zafu* (a round and thick cushion), hold yourself straight, tilt the pelvis forward from the fifth lumbar vertebra, and stretch the spine.

Cross your legs in the lotus or half-lotus position, so that your knees are rooted in the ground. Push the sky with your head, feel the earth with your knees (depending on your health, alternative postures are possible, such as *seiza* (sitting on your knees) or sitting on a chair).

The left hand rests in the palm of the right hand, the thumbs are in line with each other, pressing lightly against one another, and the edges of both hands are in contact with the lower abdomen.

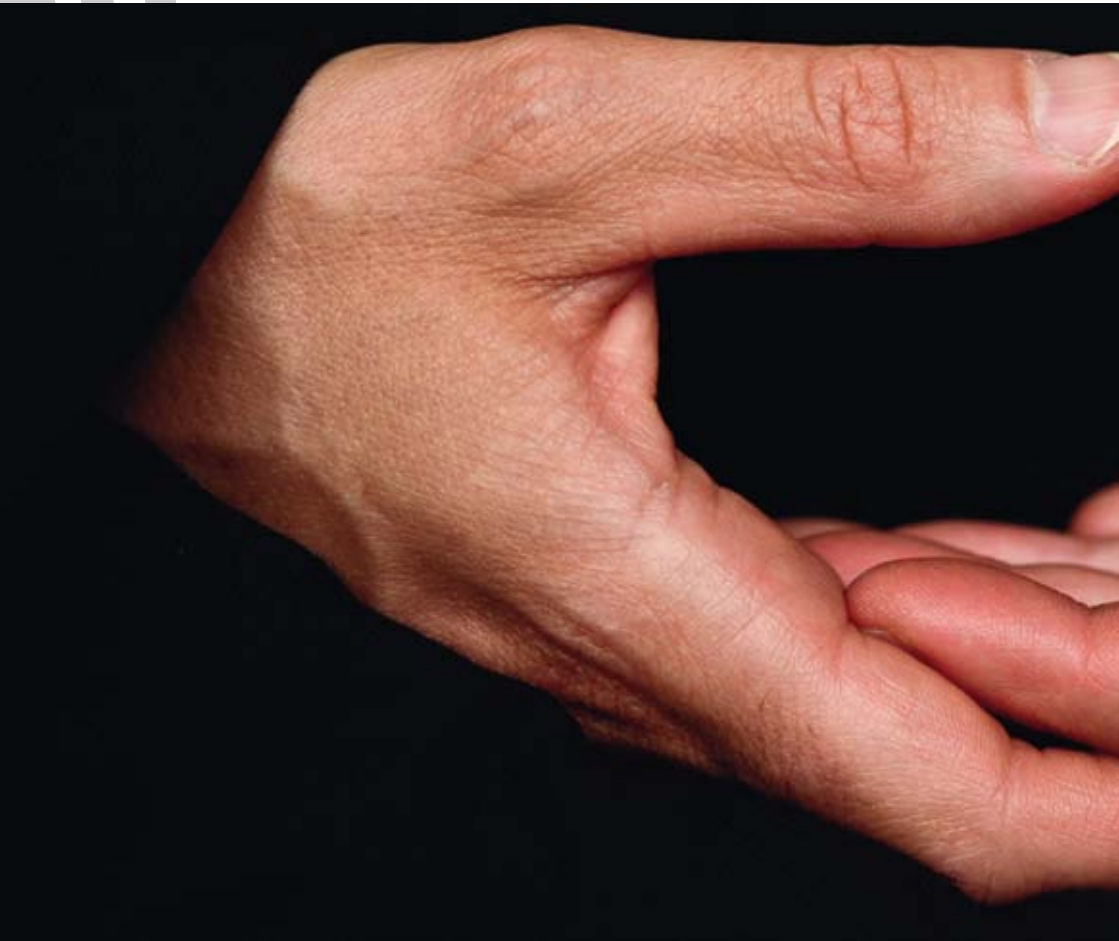
The chin is pulled in, the back of the head is stretched, the nose is on the same vertical line as the navel, and the shoulders are relaxed. The mouth is closed, the tip of the tongue is against the palate, and the jaw is relaxed. The eyes are half-closed, the gaze falls naturally toward the ground in front of you.

The breathing becomes gradually calm, long and deep. At the beginning, you can focus on the outbreath by gently pushing down with your belly. The inbreath will come naturally, effortlessly. After a while, you can simply observe the breathing, without modifying it, by being fully present to it.

In this posture, the flow of thoughts is quieted simply by focusing on the right muscular tension and on the breathing. The longer we practise zazen, the more we understand, within the very fibres of our body, that our thoughts are devoid of substance, that they come and go. We

realize that there is an intuitive, original and universal consciousness, completely different from our usual self-awareness. If you maintain the right posture and let your breathing become deep and peaceful, your mind will also become vast and peaceful.

The functioning of the brain will naturally become clearer, but that is not a special type of consciousness; it is simply the mind returning to its normal condition. The dualistic way of thinking of our ego is cast off and original unity with all beings is realized. Intuitive consciousness, hishiryo, thinking without thinking voluntarily, occurs naturally when we concentrate on the posture and the breathing.

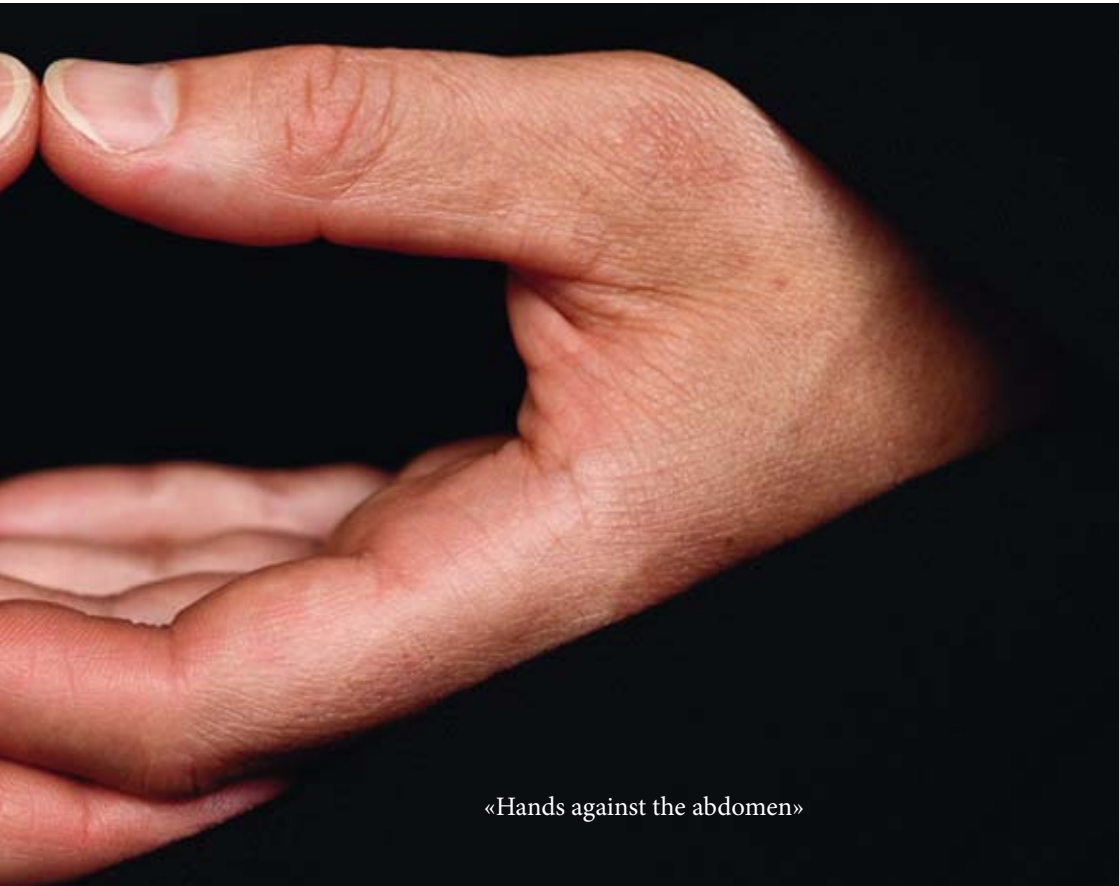


KIN HIN

Kin hin is a slow walk that follows the rhythm of the breathing. It teaches us to focus on the here and now, going to the end of each breath, each action.

«The zazen I speak of is not meditation practice. It is simply the dharma gate of joyful ease, the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment. (...) If you grasp the point, you are like a dragon gaining the water, like a tiger taking to the mountains.»

Master Dogen, 13th century.



«Hands against the abdomen»





WHY MEDITATE?

The Western world discovered Zen Buddhism in early 20th century, through arts such as aikido, tea ceremony, flower arrangement and Japanese gardens. The depth of its philosophy and the purity of its aesthetics generated a strong interest in artistic and intellectual circles, but it did not lead to an actual practice, the source of which is zazen – zen meditation.

Nowadays, faced with the challenges of our Western societies, the practice of zazen is not only important; it is necessary.

It is through meditation that Buddha attained true freedom, 2,600 years ago. And today, it is still through zazen that we can experience a life which is meaningful, anchored in the present moment, open to the natural changes of existence.

By practising regularly, we can rediscover an inner stability, a solidity that helps us face the different stages of life with confidence. Zazen offers a precious opportunity: the experience of stillness and silence. Remaining seated when everything is bustling around us, learning to stay still when the world speeds ahead and learning to «disconnect» are some of the benefits of zen meditation.



HOW AND WHERE TO START

FINDING A PLACE OF PRACTICE

To begin zen practice, it is suggested that you contact one of the dojos (places of the practice of the Way) of the International Zen Association. There, you will meet monks, nuns and experienced practitioners who can guide you, having learned zazen alongside teachers or older disciples for many years. Person to person transmission is one of the keys of zen spirituality. Each place of practice is linked to a teacher who gives it his stamp of approval.

Most dojos offer regular sessions for beginners, which you are welcome to attend. Afterwards, beginners are encouraged to sit with the other practitioners in a spirit of sharing, which is one of the principles of zen.

You can find a list of places of practice around the world at www.zen-azi.org

WHAT GOES ON THERE

Places of zen practice can take the form of groups, dojos or temples (= monasteries). Groups meet on a weekly basis in a rented space. Dojos have their own space which they administer and where various activities are organized: zazen, traditional ceremonies, lectures, dharma talks, practice days, etc.

All year round, temples welcome those who want to experience monastic life. They organize retreats which are open to the public and where beginners receive special attention.

THE STRENGTH OF THE GROUP

Zen spirituality emphasizes group practice, togetherness. Together we evolve, we learn to face our fears, doubts and desires. The others become a precious mirror of our progress on the Buddha Way.

Furthermore, practising zazen together in a dojo or a group has an extremely motivating and encouraging effect. As Buddhist master Tai-sen Deshimaru (1914-1982) used to say: «It's the difference between a fire made of one log or several...» The second one will keep us warm much longer..

Lastly, in an increasingly individualistic society, returning to a sense of community is probably one of the best solutions for a better future.

SAMU

To become part of a place of practice and deepen the way of zen, it is a good idea, at some point, to offer your help for samu - volunteer work done in the spirit of giving and concentration. Becoming actively involved in the association's activities (cleaning, cooking, external communications, website management, graphics work, etc.) is a way for beginners to get to know the other members and to gather precious information on zen practice.

Because it is so concrete, samu is one of the key aspects of zen practice. It could also be called «meditation in action». Samu enables us to put zazen concentration into practice in daily tasks, learning, for instance, to work peacefully.







A FEW TIPS FOR VENTURING FURTHER

In order for the practice of zen to progressively infuse every aspect of our lives, it must be long-lasting. Since the way of zen is not always easy, here are a few useful tips to help you in this regard.

REGULARITY

It is preferable to go to the dojo on a regular basis (always on the same day, if possible), to develop consistency in your practice. Over time, it will become natural, and it will no longer be necessary to use your will.

JOINING A SANGHA, FINDING A TEACHER

The word sangha means community of practitioners. The dojo is a sangha. Broadly speaking, sangha can also refer to a group of individuals who practise under the leadership of a spiritual teacher. Joining a sangha or a group is a great help on the path of zen.

So is meeting a spiritual teacher. Having walked the way for many years, he is able to guide the practitioners. The teacher doesn't get involved in the lives of his disciples, but he can help them in difficult times, when they have doubts or existential questions. The International Zen Association's teachers, men and women, followed Master Deshimaru's teaching (or his successors') before starting to teach. They meet regularly to discuss, share their experiences and grow together.

SPIRITUAL RETREATS

Retreats are called sesshins. During a sesshin, the focus is on sitting meditation. It's the perfect opportunity to immerse yourself in the heart of zen spirituality.

Beginners are always welcome and receive special attention.

The days follow a strict schedule, alternating between zazen, ceremonies, samu and meals, usually taken in silence.

This structure allows the participants to let themselves be guided; freed from the necessity of organizing their life, they can put all their energy into zazen.

Certified teachers provide the teaching during the sesshins and can answer your questions during mondos (question and answer periods) to help you further your understanding of Zen Buddhism. Sesshins last on average 2 to 9 days.

You can find a list of upcoming sesshins at www.zen-azi.org





SPIRITUAL RETREATS

THE GENDRONNIÈRE TEMPLE

One of the most beautiful places in Europe to experience that type of retreat is the Gendronnière zen temple. Other monasteries have flourished in Europe over the past years (a sign of our school's good health), but the Gendronnière will always remain our «mother temple». Here is a guided tour:

INTRODUCTION

The Gendronnière (commonly called «la Gendro» by the regulars) was founded in 1979 by Japanese master Taisen Deshimaru. It is located in the Loire region (known for its castles) in central France, 15 km from Blois, and is easily accessible by rail or road. It is made up of several buildings surrounded by a beautiful forest and small lakes, and can accommodate up to 350 practitioners in a comfortable setting. More specifically, July and August are devoted to the summer camps, 9-day retreats which constitute an ideal opportunity to discover or deepen the practice of zazen.

TYPES OF RETREATS

Every month, sesshins are organized at the Gendronnière temple. The teaching is provided by the oldest disciples of the founding master, Taisen Deshimaru. Apart from sesshins, various types of thematic retreats are offered, where zazen is complemented by the practice of an art or a discipline: «Doigts d'or», «L'esprit du geste», «Arts et santé», etc. You can find the full program at www.zen-azi.org

THE RESIDENTS' DAILY LIFE

Outside of retreats and sesshins, daily monastic life continues at the Gendronnière. The schedule is similar to that of a Christian monastery, with meditation, collective work, meals taken in silence and a bit of free time for study and physical activity. At any time, you can share the residents' life for long or short periods. It's a wonderful opportunity to take stock and discover a new way of living, in harmony with nature, while experiencing a spiritual practice based on age-old wisdom.

The temple is under the everyday leadership and peaceful guidance of a senior teacher who, with his team, can guide you on this spiritual path.

The cost and terms and conditions of a stay at the temple can be found on the website.







A BRIEF HISTORY OF ZEN BUDDHISM

ORIGINS

Zen can be traced back to Buddha Shakyamuni's realization of awakening in the posture of dhyana (zazen, zen meditation) in India, in the 6th century BC. This experience was transmitted uninterruptedly from master to disciple, thus creating the zen lineage. After almost a thousand years, the teaching was brought from India to China by the monk Bodhidharma in the 6th century CE. Zen, or ch'an as it is known in China, flourished under favourable conditions. It is mostly during that period that it asserted its originality, simplicity and purity of practice.

In the 13th century, after spending some time in China, the Japanese monk Dogen established Soto zen in his country. Master Dogen is the founder of our school; he is also considered as one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers. Zen was to have a profound impact on Japanese culture: today, there are over 20,000 temples in Japan, a testimony to zen's widespread development.

In the 20th century, people in the West became interested in the philosophical aspects of zen. At the same time, in Japan, Master Kodo Sawaki, who was part of a reformist movement of zen, gave a new impulse to the practice of sitting meditation, mainly outside of temples. At the end of the 60s, one of his successors, Taisen Deshimaru, brought the essence of that teaching to Europe, just like Bodhidharma had done in China 1,500 years before.

MASTER TAISEN DESHIMARU

All that Europeans knew about zen was its aesthetic and philosophical aspects, so they are very lucky that Japanese master Taisen Deshimaru came to France. Under his guidance, they discovered a true practice, old and totally innovative at the same time, which can be realized in all our daily activities.

Master Taisen Deshimaru settled in Paris and, over the following fifteen years, he created about a hundred dojos and zazen groups on four continents. He founded the first major European temple, the Gen-dronnière (near Blois), as well as the International Zen Association. With the help of his disciples, he published many books and various periodicals. He also developed excellent relationships with scientists, artists and therapists from various countries, thus bringing Eastern and Western cultures closer together. He believed that zen meditation and Buddhism could greatly help us face the challenges of our modern world.

Taisen Deshimaru died on April 30th, 1982, bequeathing the essence of his teaching to his disciples and entrusting them with the mission to transmit the practice of zen.

Niwa Renpo Zenji, who was head of Eihei-ji temple in Japan (founded in the 13th century by Master Dogen), certified this mission by conferring the certificate of Dharma transmission to several of Master Deshimaru's disciples in 1984.











ZEN IN EUROPE: THE INTERNATIONAL ZEN ASSOCIATION

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

The International Zen Association (AZI) was created by Master Deshimaru in the 70s. After his death, most of his disciples continued to work together, to teach, to open places of practice and monasteries, and to take care of the mother temple, the Gendronnière. Working together in this way for almost 40 years allowed them to grow together, like a great sangha.

Towards the end of the 90s, the ties with the Japanese Soto zen school were strengthened, leading to the opening of an administrative office in Paris in 2006. Collaborative projects were developed, such as the celebration of «40 Years of Zen in Europe» at the Gendronnière zen temple in 2007. Most of AZI's teachers now have links with Japanese zen, with the goal of developing an enriching spiritual and intercultural cooperation.

In 2007, a spiritual association was created: the Soto Zen Buddhist Association of the Gendronnière temple (AZG). It is namely responsible for the «Remembrance Garden» at the Gendronnière, and for various aspects having to do with ceremonies and rituals. It can receive tax-deductible donations, which play an important role in the spread of zen in Europe.

Please enquire about the advantages of making a donation at azg.contact@gmail.com

RICHNESS OF THE SANGHAS

Currently, various sanghas coexist within AZI. They are led by Master Deshimaru's old disciples, who chose different approaches based on their sensibilities: some focus on study, others on rituals, monastic life or even a form of iconoclastic spontaneity. Each one of those paths is highly respectable, and their richness enables all practitioners to find a teacher and a sangha who will help them deepen their practice. In fact, it reflects the diversity of life itself.



A list of teachers and sanghas can be found at www.zen-azi.org
Many «first generation» teachers gave the Dharma transmission to their advanced disciples, as it's been done since the Buddha's time. Practitioners are now starting to gather around those disciples, which is a good indication of the vitality of our school.







BENEFITS OF ZEN MEDITATION

ZEN AND THE BRAIN

Recent developments in neurobiology have shown that the brain is a neuroplastic organ, able to change through learning and training. The practice of meditation slows down the impact of ageing on the area of the brain responsible for motor skills, learning and memory. The number of neurons increases in that area, and nerve transmission is improved.

ZEN AND STRESS

Meditation reduces our sensitivity to stress and anxiety. It improves endocrine balance, which slows down cellular ageing. It also increases the body's immune response.

CANCER

Meditation helps improve the physical and psychological health of individuals living with cancer or a chronic disease.

NERVOUS BALANCE

Meditation decreases sympathetic activity and increases parasympathetic activity, giving rise to a feeling of deep calm and acute vigilance. It reduces the risk of heart diseases.



SLEEP

Meditation reduces the need for sleep in experienced practitioners, who are less prone to insomnia and have a more restful sleep.







EVERYDAY ZEN MIND

The richness of Buddhist spirituality is not limited to the practice of sitting meditation. Although zazen is the source of zen mind, you can experience that state of mind in various aspects of daily life.

THE ART OF CONCENTRATION

Concentration is the ability to stay mentally focused on an activity for a long period of time, without being distracted. In modern society, the pervasiveness of screens (ipads, smartphones, etc.) is a distraction: we move quickly and mostly unconsciously from one activity to the next. In zen, the practice of concentration encourages us to pay attention to what we do, whether we are using our computer or cutting vegetables. Being fully aware of the moment, learning to appreciate the present moment, become the treasures of our everyday life.

REDISCOVERING SIMPLICITY

The aesthetics of zen is characterized by its purity: a flower in a vase, and a lot of space around it. Beyond that refined style, the point is to feel the joy of simplicity, to aspire to a life where we are not attached to material goods: a «happy sobriety», to quote Pierre Rabhi. A life centered around respect for the environment. A life where, at peace with our emotions, we don't resort to consumption to fill a void.

THE MEANING OF RITUALS

In zen monasteries, dojos and groups of practice, rituals give another dimension to the practice of meditation. Ceremonies help us harmonize with the others, and are often dedicated «to the good of all beings». At meal times, especially during retreats, Buddhist chants invite us to feel gratitude for everything that contributed to the simple fact that there is food on the table, and to think of those who are not so lucky. Indeed, meditation goes way beyond personal development.





ZEN MEDITATION AND PSYCHOLOGY

ATTENTION

During zazen, the brain remains vigilant, attention is renewed moment after moment and we stay responsive. We don't need as much effort to remain attentive. The areas of the cortex involved in attention become thicker.

PAIN

Meditation reduces the feelings of pain, without lowering our sensitivity to pain. The unpleasantness is attenuated.

ANXIETY, STRESS, DEPRESSION

Being open to what happens moment after moment helps reduce the harmful effects of mental ruminations and stress. Zazen regulates the spontaneous flow of thoughts by improving our control over automatic idea associations. This in turn alleviates depression symptoms and suicidal tendencies.

COPING WITH EMOTIONS

ENHANCING CREATIVITY

Meditation improves our control over our emotions, first consciously, then, with experience, automatically. It gives us better access to unconscious information, which promotes creativity.

COGNITIVE AGEING

Meditation reduces intellectual impairment and counteracts cognitive decline associated with ageing. It can even increase the cognitive capacities of older adults. It requires vigilant detachment and letting go, which are needed for problem solving. Putting things into perspective allows us to see them for what they are.





SUGGESTED READINGS

SELECTION OF BOOKS BY MASTER DESHIMARU

Sit: Zen Teachings of Master Taisen Deshimaru. This book answers questions and provides vital instructions and inspiration for both beginners and long-time practitioners. Hohm Press.

Questions to a Zen Master. Questions we might all want to ask. The answers are an excellent introduction to zen philosophy and practice. Penguin Books.

The Zen Way to Martial Arts. The essence of Master Deshimaru's teaching on bushido, the way of the warrior. Penguin Books.

The Way of True Zen. A compilation of the most influential writings of Master Deshimaru, covering many fundamental zen and Buddhist ideas. American Zen Association.

Zen & Karma: Teachings of Roshi Taisen Deshimaru. Completely reviewed edition of *The Voice of the Valley*, Master Deshimaru's teachings given during the 1977 summer camp in Val d'Isère. Hohm Press.

The Ring of the Way: Testament of a Zen Master. The last teachings of Master Deshimaru. Rider.

OTHER REFERENCE BOOKS

Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.* Weatherhill.

Shundo Aoyama, *Zen Seeds: Reflections of a Female Priest.* Kosei Publishing Co.

Koho Chisan, *Soto Zen: An introduction to the thought of the Soto Zen Sect.* Shasta Abbey Press.

Dogen, trans. by Shohaku Okumura, *Shobogenzo-Zuimonki.* Kyoto Soto-Zen Center.

Kosho Uchiyama, *The Zen Teaching of «Homeless» Kodo.* Sotoshu Shumucho.

Philippe Coupey, *Zen: Simply Sitting.* Hohm Press.



USEFUL INFORMATION/ RESOURCES

Website (5 languages)

List of practice centres across the world, videos, a glossary, a schedule of retreats at the Gendronnière zen temple... and a wealth of useful information about zen meditation. www.zen-azi.org

Facebook

«Temple zen de la Gendronnière»: pictures, videos, stories...

YouTube

«Association Zen Internationale»

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEXYt8d8gBKjZQ-B-6sGKbA>

To reach the Gendronnière zen temple (retreats):

accueilgendronniere@zen-azi.org

To reach the AZI (International Zen Association):

secretaire.generale.azi@gmail.com

To reach the Japanese Soto zen school (Sotoshu):

[www.http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp](http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp)

info@sotozen.eu

Address (near Blois, Loire region)

Association Zen Internationale

Temple zen de la Gendronnière

41120 VALAIRE

02 54 44 04 86

To join the Association and receive the AZI publications:

45 euros / 35 euros (students, unemployed):

secretaire.generale.azi@gmail.com

To make a tax-deductible donation to AZG, the Gendronnière's spiritual association: azg.contact@gmail.com



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www.zen-azi.org