
A festival announced at the last minute

By Chiara Pandolfi

Just coming home from a deafening but exciting weekend at the Zen stand of the Festival of the East in Milan, I would like to share with you some impressions.

We arrived at the Zen stand on Thursday afternoon. We had a vague idea about how to organize a zone of 6 square meters, with the material Edo prepared for us, as he is a professional graphic designer in publicity: posts and professional cables, beautiful photos on cardboard with the images created by Geneviève Gauckler, logos of the AZI, some tablecloths for the tables, Buddhas and the material for an altar, benches, wooden cubes, a table for the shop, some flowers, and the material for a small rest zone.

But then, we met the person in charge of the Festival organization and she had a very clear idea of what she wanted us to do: create a zone which looked like a real Zen temple. No tables to sell anything, but a simply spiritual zone, with monks in kesas ... "I want a big stage, with a big Buddha in the middle. Wait, I will fetch you a beautiful Buddha!" And she came back with three statues, borrowed from a stand of oriental furniture.

At that moment, Elena and I remained a little bit taken aback and also not too happy: "all this work to print everything, the purchase of books and incense etc. and now, we were told that we couldn't expose anything". But finally, "yes, we could, but without being too obvious!" And as the stand was lent to us free of charge, we agreed and let things go.

We only discover the final lay-out on the morning of the first day. Not bad at all! Both Buddhas and the Buddha's big head made a beautiful set and there was a small table where we could put our brochures and leaflets. We were satisfied.

It was a very colored stand, the deep red color was nice and went well with the black zafus. Everything had found its right place. The black fabric which we wanted to use for the table of the shop became the background for the big altar and protected us a little bit on one side, offering us more privacy. An attractive piece of wood, similar to a bamboo stick and which came from joinery works in the "Zen Garden" zone, served as threshold of the zendo.

We were ready! Let's go!

Punctual, on the Friday morning at 10:30 a.m., the stream of the visitors began. I was doing the initiations and Nilska was at the reception area. The initiations followed one another continuously till 1:30 p.m., when Nilska told me that "she had to leave to go back to Bergamo, but that Elena was arriving... "At 4:30 p.m., it was better to swallow something and I ran to the Indian restaurant. We continued without stopping with the initiations: we went from private meetings to groups from 5 to 7 people, but when the noise was so strong that it was necessary to remain very close to them, because I discovered that - otherwise - people were trying try hard to read on my lips what I said, because they did not hear me!

It was too much... Music, noise, sounds, smells, an uninterrupted flow of moving people. And the thoughts? While explaining the posture, I noticed that - in such a situation - there are so

many sensory stimulations that the thoughts were lost, that they did not appear anymore! It was useless to say: "if a thought appears, let it go ...". The only solution in such a noisy chaos was to keep in touch with the breathing and the visualizations which can be used as support, rocks in which to hang on in this stormy sea. Otherwise there was almost nothing, in such a situation, which could make us reconnect ourselves with our body, with our mind.

The images, the Zen metaphors helped, all those which I could remember. And if I used the same ones, it was a good exercise to try to propose them each time without repeating always the same words. In fact, as each explanation was always new, I tried to understand the person in front of me. I saw that a lot of people were breathing while raising the shoulders, and that they had a very short, high, agitated breathing: then I referred myself to other teachings.

It is important to be in touch with the people, to ask some questions at the beginning to have more information beyond their physical appearance, their difficulty to sit, and to know why they wanted to try the meditation, which kind of life they led, which work they did. All this information we tried to get before crossing the beam of the zendo, after having aligned the shoes with care.

What people wanted to try is to meditate, to disconnect themselves for a moment from the outside world, to find some inner peace, to understand what that is and to know how to contact it again once they are back home.

I understood that, if we wanted this experience to be useful, it was important to give something of ourselves and that even there, in this chaos overloaded with an almost painful excitement, we could find a new way of being and of walking, step after step, body stretched towards the sky and the breathing going down to the hara. "When you will get up and go beyond the threshold of this zendo, when you will put your shoes back and will resume your walking in this mess, your step will be more aware, as your breathing will be, your eyes will be less hungry, less wanting to see everything and to miss nothing, less focused on the possession of all sorts of objects, less greedy to possess.

The variety of the people who sat down with us to meditate was incredible: a police officer just back from a mission abroad and who felt a strong need to meditate (he will tell us the next day that when he arrived home, he went to the dojo of another sangha near his home); a 9 years old kid, curious about everything according to his mother, who sat in zazen while she was waiting for him outside; four friends between 16 and 22 years, one with a strong sensation of emptiness in the stomach, another who noticed that her neck was trembling and wanted to understand why; a father and a mother with their adolescent son and daughter, obliged to sit down with them; a couple on the verge of hysterics (she wants her companion to sit down because he was "full of anger" and when they sat, I noticed that she was the more agitated of the two, the most needy at that moment); a young Muslim very attracted by meditation; two very sweet friends with their dog who also meditated with us; a group of young engineers who giggled as teenagers, but who discovered for their work the importance of the posture, the importance to do one thing at a time, and who understood the impact all this can have on the atmosphere in the office, the importance of peace and of having a vision which goes beyond work only; somebody as well who practiced in another sangha, but who wanted to sit down and have a little bit of peace; a lady who did not managed to sit on a zafu and to whom we offered a chair, and who was happy about it ...

All this, thanks to a zazen session enjoyed in a pure chaos.

And I, who would have liked so much to go to the sesshin in Pégomas, I was there practicing zazen non-stop and receiving such a multitude of invaluable teachings!

According to our approximate calculation, we gave in three days a zazen initiation to roughly 500 people and collected more than a 100 contact e-mails.

Thanks you to our friends: Alba, Beppe, Alessandro, Arianne, Eli, and the others ... You opened an important door to continue the transmission of the Zen of Deshimaru, of Roland!

Thank you also to the friends of the Milano and Bergamo dojos: such a great team!