
Zen at the Festival dell'Oriente

From 26th until 29th October 2011, a small group of practitioners from the dojos of Roma, Carpi and Paris, with the support of Italian dojos, took part to the Festival dell'Oriente in Carrara in Italy. It was the 9th session of this huge exhibition dedicated to martial arts, holistic therapies and to spirituality in Asia: 40.000 m² 260 stands, 55.000 visitors in 3 days, 9 embassies, 300 shows... A must for anybody interested in Eastern philosophies and Asian culture.

After the experience with the Butsu Zen Zone at the Japan Expo in France, to animate a space dedicated to Zen during such event was the obvious thing to do.

"Zen Massages", "Zen Attitude", "Zen Songs", "Zen Shiatsu": the word "zen" was broadly used indiscriminately in dozens of stands of the Festival, we had the tricky task of introducing the public to what 'Zen is all about': mainly zazen and the tradition that transmitted us the practice.

Thanks to the posters that we borrowed from the stand Butsu Zen Zone and a slideshow that merged pictures from Japanese temples and our pictures of typical European sesshin, we decorated in a simple way a nice space of about 20 m². There we received personally a certain number of men and women, young, old or children who wanted to try sitting in zazen.

We took the time to talk with them, to show the important points of the posture, to sit in zazen together, at least for few minutes. A great number of people asked us highly diversified questions about our practice and our tradition. "But if I do zazen do I really become Buddha?" "Why are the buddhas so fat?" "Will zazen help me committing fewer sins?" "Can I come back tomorrow to do some zazen before the karate competition?"

The atmosphere among us was very friendly and relaxed. Visitors were keen to stay in our company and would sometimes pop in the next days to say hello, to bring us some tea, or to sit in zazen "another 5 minutes".

I think that beyond the information we convey what is precious is the experience of meeting people, whether through simple contacts or quality conversations and the quality of our presence...

It really was the opportunity for us to get back into the skin of a beginner for whom each gesture is new, each question is the right one, each word is relevant. It triggered our search to find ways of using a simple and accessible language to share our practice while dropping the "zen language standard idioms". And for the visitors it was the opportunity to discover zen, zazen and the people who practise it with a light, joyful and cheerful spirit.