

Dear Friends,

This year the beginning of spring coincides, for me, with the end of my assignment as director of the European Sōtō Zen Buddhism Office: therefore on the occasion of this occurrence of an end and a beginning, allow me to address to you few farewell words.

I thank you, each and everyone, for keeping company all these years: it has been a good company for me, in an atmosphere of frankness and peace.

I would like to add just few considerations, which are also the synthesis of what I wrote, last January, in the farewell letter addressed to the responsible of the Shūmichō International Department in Tokyo, under whose jurisdiction the European Office falls.

European Sōtō Zen is assuming a rather definite institutional form. This form was not conceived to realize a common aim and to follow a project aimed to pursue that goal, but arose to fulfil a demand, firstly felt only by a few and then becoming the actual guideline for everybody, to solve contingent problems of management, especially in the administrative field. I am mainly speaking about the acquisition of a Japanese Sōtō Shū system to define and recognize the figures who in Europe perform the activity of missionary work and of diffusion of Sōtō Zen, but not only this. The Japanese model, once strongly criticized in Europe, almost without knowing it, is today almost uncritically assumed to be the only traditionally valid one, may be with some additional touch, to adapt the Japanese form to the European reality.

In that way we are now inside a progressive and almost thoughtless Japanisation of European Sōtō Zen as a clerical institution. An outside observer couldn't help concluding, rightfully, that we are trying to import into Europe Japanese Sōtō Shū, recreating here the same atmosphere, the same structure and the same function as the Sōtō Zen Buddhism found in Japan. This is an easy way, and probably there will always be in Europe many people fascinated by Japanese aesthetics and strongly touched by the Japanese ethic of seriousness and reliability, willing to imitate it and believing that this is the "true practice of authentic traditional Zen Buddhism". This is the wave now in fashion, which seems to be successful at the moment, but that I personally think will soon fade away and very probably leave no trace in the long term. Europe has a completely different cultural and religious background, and European people have a different anthropological structure, so that just imitating the Japanese way will produce only some ephemeral results.

But even if this prediction would be wrong, we cannot ignore that Japanese Sōtō Shū reality is far from being a model pattern. A large number of Japanese Sōtō Zen priests today recognize that the educative system for young priests is superficial and anachronistic and should be urgently and deeply reformed, because it does not stimulate the spirit of query of individuals and does not offer valid instruments for nurturing a spiritual evolution. This system is structured in a way that does not exploit what we call the spiritual vocation. The adoption of this system in Europe, where the historical and social conditions that make it justifiable in Japan are absent, risks extinguishing the very impulse of query and vocation that marked out the first phase of the presence of Zen in Europe. The dramatic absence of young people in most of the European Zen communities is a clear sign of this situation.

I think that the first generation of European Sōtō Zen priests, which is my generation, cannot give, with its own strength, any further contribution to the renewal of the future development of European Sōtō Zen. It is composed of people in their late sixties or early seventies: we did great pioneering work, but now we are in a physiological phase of conservatism, therefore no more in the state to produce the necessary renewal. It is time to give this task to young, energetic,

intellectually curious people, not burdened by the heritage of a history which, however brief, is not free from shadows and weights. Until this new generation is formed and made autonomous, the willingness to establish a European common standard rule for religious education is fanciful and premature, even admitting that this should be an aim to pursue.

On the contrary, it is time to furnish adequate instruments for the study and for the practice of the teachings of Buddhism and Zen for the new generations, because they will be the living interpreters of the future of Buddhism. To move in this direction, the collaboration with Japanese Sōtō Shū could be precious, provided that from that side too there would be a clear willingness to be really together at the service of the European reality, listening to its voice and learning how to understand it.

Finally I address my best wishes of good health and good work to every one of you and to the new staff of European Sōtō Zen Office, the director rev. Sekiguchi Dōjun, rev. Tōgen Moss and rev. Terumoto Taibun.

Brotherly

Jisō Forzani