

Our little-known spiritualities (5/5)

800

Spiritual communities

This is a figure probably difficult to imagine: in the canton of Vaud there are almost 800 spiritual communities, in other words groups of people who gather in one place to practice their faith, to give shape to their beliefs. Last October, the Intercantonal Centre of Information about Beliefs (CIC) presented this unpublished inventory at the initiative of the canton of Vaud. «24 hours» went and met 4 of these communities among the least known in the canton.



Silence

Japanese atmosphere and meditation in Clarens, in one of the 3 Zen dojos of the canton. FLORIAN CELLA

Nuns and monks meditate in the peace of the Clarens dojo

Zen Buddhism and its long sitting meditations give a tempo to the life of a handful of practitioners of the canton, seduced by a discipline as arduous as it is soothing

Chloé Banerjee-Din

The silence is as soft as the light in the room. If one is really attentive, one can hear the rumor of the street, the cars passing by and the doors slamming in the building. But the people who are here do not pay attention to it. In a small place in Clarens, a dozen people or so gather one or three times a week to “practice zazen”.

“For the public, to practice Zen is to be calm, to be cool. But literally, Zen means meditation and zazen means sitting meditation”. For more than twenty years, Chantal Baiettini has been leading this group, one of the three Zen dojos of the canton, dedicated to the practice of a Buddhist spirituality of Japan. This evening, she’s leading the zazen. Sitting with the legs crossed on the floor, silent in her heavy black kimono, nothing distinguishes her from the rest of the participants, except for one difference: while she is facing the dojo, all the others face the wall, in conformity with the Zen Soto way, one of the most practiced form of Zen in Europe.

Meditation, rituals and chanting

The session began at 6:30 p.m. sharp with a silent meditation of forty minutes. Chantal Baiettini’s voice suddenly burst into silence, but without breaking the peace of the moment. She invites the members to correct their posture and to stretch more their head towards the sky. Like the statue of Buddha,

“I sat on a cushion and something in me mysteriously responded.

Twenty five years later, I still don’t know why I am here, but I don’t care ...”

Catherine
A Zen nun
who lives in Clarens

placed in the middle of the room on a small altar, the participants are totally immobile.

A few moments more and a wrinkle of cloth disturbs again the silence. Without a signal having been given, each member rises gently while staying fully concentrated. The zazen meditation continues with a slow, very slow walk, millimeter by millimeter for ten minutes, before each person go back sitting. Thirty more minutes.

“The silence in the dojo and the aim of holding the posture are the essential principles of zazen. This is what makes us understand our interdependence with all that exists and decrease our egotism”, explained Chantal Baiettini. For it is not only a concentration exercise, but a practice rooted in spirituality. “Buddha Shakyamuni sat under a tree and said: “I will not rise before reaching the Awakening” And this is what we are doing”.

The meditation ends with drumming and the ringing of a bell, then with a short ceremony during

which the Hannya Shingyô Sutra is chanted: it is a sacred text of Zen Buddhism and it is chanted in an ancient language.

The suffering of the Buddha

“People are often led to try Zen Buddhism by suffering, as a mourning or a divorce for example”, observes Chantal Baiettini. “They find a parallel with the suffering of the Buddha before his Awakening”.

This is the experience she did herself after the death of her mother. “I sought responses in other spiritualities. Then I saw a TV show about a Zen master and I thought that it was what I had to do.” It was in the late '80s. She was nearly 40 years old and she started to practice zazen. Within a few years, she was ordained nun and founded a dojo

She explains that, as the other two dojos of the Vaud canton, in Gland and Lausanne, the dojo of Clarens became member of the International Zen Association, whose headquarters are located in a

temple founded in France by Taisen Deshimaru, the Japanese master who introduced the Soto Zen in Europe (see below).

Like her, most of the Zazen practitioners of the dojo have been practicing for several years. Their names are Gérard, Yvan or Catherine, they live in the region and they too were ordained monks and nuns by a Zen master of the association.

“It was the breaking of a relationship that brought me here,” says Yvan. “Five years ago, I suffered from burnout and depression.” In order to get better, he wanted to act concretely, not only in terms of therapy, but also in terms of spirituality. “The first three years were a real struggle” says he, smiling. “When you face the wall, your thoughts can be either good or bad. Making sure they don’t affect you is a work of each moment”. “I did my first experiment in 1976”, remembers Gérard. “It was so hard to maintain the posture that it took me 20 years to be really comfortable with it”.

But if staying still is a real challenge in Zen meditation, describing its purpose is not evident either. “It has brought me a lot of calm and gives me a kind of distance from things. But that’s not the essential point. Basically, we don’t ask ourselves why we’re coming here. We just come.”

To the question of why she comes, Catherine answers: “I discovered the Zen Buddhism by chance at a meeting. I did not ask myself questions: I went and sat on a zafu (ndl: a meditation cushion) and something in me mysteriously responded. Twenty-five years later, I still don’t know why I’m here, but I don’t care.”

The night is ending. Monks and nuns take their meditation clothes out, ready to leave the tranquility of the dojo and to resume the course of their daily life.

Read more about this series of articles - see:



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A Buddhist school imported in Europe in the years 60

In its inventory presented in October 2018, the Intercantonal Center of Information about Beliefs (CIC) identified twelve Buddhist communities in the canton. These groups consist of immigrants (Thai, Vietnamese or Tibetans in particular). They gather a large number of members around temples or pagodas.

Buddhist groups formed by Western converts, such as the Zen dojos of Japanese tradition, are smaller in size and they focus on meditation. While Buddhism has been existing in Japan since the 5th century, it underwent a renovation in the XIIIth century with the introduction of Zen Sôtô coming from China.

The Zen Soto School practiced in the Clarens' Zen dojo made its appearance in the canton in the 1970s, shortly after being introduced in Europe by a Japanese master, Taisen Deshimaru. In 1979 he founded the Gendronnière temple near Blois in France, which became the center of the International Zen Association (AZI).

To spread the practice of zazen, he trained many disciples who encouraged the creation of dojos throughout all Europe.

In Switzerland, the AZI counts eleven Zen dojos, three of which are located in the canton of Vaud: Clarens, Lausanne and Gland.

C.BA.