

INTERFAITH MEETINGS IN ITALY

EXPERIENCES OF EXCHANGE BETWEEN DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS



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I AM HERE in my capacity as a missionary nun of Sōtō Zen Buddhism, therefore as a religious guide and not as an academic. So I will present my experience and the meetings I have attended as a representative of our tradition and will discuss how they have developed over the years in ways that are different, increasingly complex, and specific.

Our Shinnyoji Temple was founded in September 2004 by my teacher, Rev. Ryūshin Azuma Rōshi, formerly the 72nd Abbot of Tōkōzan Daijōji in Kanazawa, by composing in calligraphy on a wooden board: “*Shinnyoji Daijōji Italia Betsuin.*” In 2020, he confirmed my appointment as abbot, writing the following: “*Tōkōzan Daijōji, Temple located in Italy, Temple with the same heart: Shinnyoji, abbot Marradi Shinnyo.*”

On a personal level, I first experienced interfaith dialogue in Japan. In 2002, I asked Azuma Rōshi to receive monastic vows, while expressing my desire not to renounce my Catholic Christian faith. Azuma Rōshi, with the characteristic magnanimity, compassion, and open-mindedness that always distinguished him, accepted my request without reservation.

Later, following the same “inappropriate” criterion, I had my second experience with interfaith dialogue when I was interviewed on 6 August 2004 by journalists from the *Hokukiku Chunichi Shinbun* and *Hokkoku Shinbun* in Kanazawa as well as by a local television announcer following the ordination ceremony at which Azuma Tōshi conferred monastic vows on me at Daijōji Monastery. The first question they asked me, in various forms, was essentially the same: “Why did you, who live in Italy, a Christian country par excellence, where the Vatican is located and the Pope lives, start practicing Buddhism and not stay with your Christian

faith?” My answer was: “I approached Buddhism to overcome my sense of guilt, because of the absence of dogma and because, being an awakened religion and not a revealed one, it is up to me to decide every day whether or not to awaken to the ultimate truth.” At that time, their question surprised me greatly: I would have expected a request for clarification as to what had prompted me, at my age, to come all the way to Japan to be ordained as a Zen nun. Over time, I came to understand their curiosity, also because I have been asked the same question many times in Italy during meetings with monotheistic religions.

We began participating in interfaith meetings in 1995—long before becoming Shinnyoji in 2004—as a Sōtō Zen Temple officially recognized by the Sōtōshū Shūmūchō in Japan. At that time, we had founded the cultural association, Florence Zen Center (Centro Zen Firenze), of which I was the guide as a senior practitioner and because I had received the Jukaie Ordination as a bodhisattva. Together with practitioners from other traditions, we collaborated to organize the first interfaith meetings in our city of Florence, at a time when Tuscany had become the first region in Italy to promote dialogue between different religious faiths.

We felt the need to promote these meetings in order to dispel the fear of diversity and to engage with other faiths by opening ourselves to dialogue, while remembering that the path of Zen is never a solitary one but one illuminated by mutual support and shared awareness. There was also a strong search for brothers to walk with on a common path toward spiritual peace, to realize brotherly unity between different faiths. A true brotherhood, based on principles and not on conventional, emotional, or superficial dialogue. However, this was not the case for all of our practitioners. Some felt embarrassed to present themselves as representatives of Zen Buddhism because they attended the Catholic Church too. Others were afraid of being confused by the encounter with other traditions; evidently, they were not certain yet about their Buddhist choice.

Personally, I believe that in order to understand the meaning of interreligious dialogue it is essential that each person first undertake a journey of inner exploration to clarify what an encounter really is. Otherwise, participation in dialogue is merely intellectual, without a genuine understanding of an approach based on mutual respect. Such an authentic approach translates into concrete encounters and exchanges aimed at building relationships based on fraternity, as a contribution to a more peaceful world.

Opening up to others and welcoming them does not mean confusing or diluting one's own religious identity, but rather strengthening and reaffirming it in the light of the encounter with something different. That gives the opportunity to increase our knowledge by building a dialogue based on mutual respect, allowing those who participate in the dialogue to maintain their own autonomy.

In the beginning, the interfaith group consisted of members of the following: the Christian Meditation Center, the Tibetan Buddhist Ewam Center, the Japanese spiritual group Sukyo Mahikari, the Florence Zen Center, the Baha'i Community, the Jewish-Christian Friendship, and the Islamic Community. In the following years, the association "A Temple for Peace," the Hare Krishnas, and the Ananda Marga yoga center joined us.¹ We thus formed an itinerant meditation group that continued to meet until 2018. We had established a protocol according to which, on the last Thursday of each month, we would rotate meetings at various community centers. The meetings would follow a specific procedure: for each of them a topic was chosen (peace, compassion, generosity, anger, spirit of service, etc.) and a coordinator was appointed. After collecting the names of those who wanted to speak, the coordinator established the order of the speakers and called each person to speak for a set time of five minutes, marked by the sound of a bell at the beginning and end. Participants were free to choose, according to their own tradition, whether they would read an excerpt from a text or a poem, share a reflection, sing a sacred hymn, recite a prayer, or recite a sutra.

At the time, I had only received Jukai and, not having completed my training, I limited myself to reading a short excerpt from texts by contemporary Zen masters, as I did at our Zen Center during the second zazen of the evening. So, I could read words from Japanese masters such as Shunryū Suzuki, Shōhaku Okumura, Dainin Katagiri, Kōshō Uchiyama, Taisen Deshimaru, or from American masters such as Dennis Genpo Merzel, Bernie Glassman, and Charlotte Joko Beck. After the speeches, there was a twenty-minute period of silent meditation, which participants did according to their own ritual. In the early days, the meetings ended like this. Over time, a final session of sharing was introduced, which sometimes became a harmonious space, and some other times a time for the showing-off of some participants' egos.

Personally, I have always maintained that after a period of listening to words followed by meditation, it is recommendable to let what had been said settle down, without altering that very moment with new speeches. As we know the ego and its manifestations, which are more and more reinforced today in a world of opinion-makers and narcissists, at Shinnyoji the teachings of Dharma (Teishō) are always preceded and followed by a time of zazen.

In a slightly later phase, other meetings began in parallel in the Frantoio (the ancient oil-press room) of the Basilica of San Miniato al Monte, a Benedictine abbey in Florence. This is a special chapter in the history of Italian interreligious dialogue, because the meetings took place as a bilateral sharing between Catholic Christianity and Zen Buddhism under the direction of Father Luciano Mazzocchi. Meetings were held on the last Friday of the month, and followed this sequence: first the Mass and the reading of a passage from the Gospel, with a homily by

Father Mazzocchi about universal concepts common also to Buddhism; then thirty minutes of silent meditation with the Zen followers sitting in zazen on a zafu, while the Christians remained seated on chairs. The ceremony concluded with the Eucharist. After the ceremony, there was a time for dialogue with questions and answers. These meetings, which went on for several years, were mainly attended by Father Mazzocchi's Florentine group or by the students of Rev. Giuseppe Jisō Forzani, a Sōtō Zen missionary monk.² Sometimes we from the Florence Zen Center also joined in. Suddenly, however, the Abbot of the Basilica of San Miniato received an order from above to stop these meetings.

I would like to make a short digression on Father Mazzocchi's personal history. He entered the Xaverian Missionaries congregation and was ordained a priest in 1962. The following year, in 1963, he was sent as a missionary to Japan. In 1982, he returned to Italy and devoted himself to promoting interreligious dialogue in local churches. In 1987, as a Christian advisor, he founded La Stella del Mattino—Comunità Buddista Zen Italiana (The Morning Star: Italian Zen Buddhist Community) together with Jisō Forzani and Mauricio Yūshin Marassi, which from 1994 to 2005 ran a center of practice in Galgagnano (Lodi),³ a place where anyone could practice both the Way of Zen and the Way of the Gospel as a single personal and social path. It was from Rev. Kōhō Watanabe that came the impulse for this type of Christian-Buddhist community cultivating knowledge and witness of Zen Buddhism in Italy and Europe, particularly in dialogue with Christianity and Western culture. Rev. Watanabe had settled in Italy for five years, and his thinking and teaching had certainly shaped his two students, Jisō Forzani and Yūshin Marassi. In an interview, he talked precisely about his joint study of the *Shōbōgenzō* and the Bible.

After almost fifteen years of activity, as the result of a divergence of views, Jisō Forzani closed this place of practice in Galgagnano on 19 April 2009 and relinquished “also the responsibility for the direction of the Zen Buddhist community Stella del Mattino, while my brother Mauricio Yushin Marassi takes over its leadership in every respect.”⁴ Since then, *La Stella del Mattino* has remained active as an online magazine.

As for Father Mazzocchi, together with some friends in Milan, he founded the association Vangelo e Zen—Comunità di dialogo interreligioso (Gospel and Zen: Community of Interreligious Dialogue) in 2008, in which the values proclaimed by the Gospel and those preserved in the silent meditation of Zen illuminate each other.

I knew Jisō Forzani personally. He worked for Sokanbu Europe at its first headquarters in Milan, and visited Shinnyoji twice, accompanying Sekkei Harada Rōshi, the first European Sōkan, and then Gensho Imamura Rōshi, the second Sōkan, as their secretary. Later, when the Sōtō Zen Buddhism Europe Office moved to Paris, Jisō himself became Sōkan for Europe.

I was very sorry when I heard about the shutting down of the center in Galgagnano, but talking to Jisō Forzani, I could see his apparent distrust regarding Italians' ability to practice Zen. Certainly, in Zen centers and temples in Italy there is always a great movement of people coming and going, especially going. In fact, in thirty years of activity more than a thousand people have stepped into our Zen Center first, and then into Shinnyoji Temple, but no more than around ten have remained.

Reflecting on the reasons for abandoning the practice, on the possible difficulty of freeing oneself from a Catholic heritage, and also on Jisō's decision to close his community, I decided to carry out an anonymous survey using Google Forms among old, new, and former practitioners of Shinnyoji. Nine questions were asked, including: "Why did you approach Zen? What were you looking for?"; "If you left Zen Buddhist practice, what drove you away?"; "What put a distance between you and the Catholic Christian religion or your original religious beliefs?"; "Do you live or have you lived your spiritual path through an interreligious approach? If so, how?" The survey revealed a remarkable variety of personal motivations which are difficult to trace back to a common thread, even in broad terms. The pluralism that emerged reflects a Western egocentric mentality, which identifies with freedom of thought and interpretation. These factors, in my opinion, are the primary cause of people's departure from places of worship, as they conflict with entrusting oneself to a Way without clinging to self-centered dynamics by which the individual subject always want to have the last word.

As to the relationship with Catholicism, in my experience it is felt by most people as an insufficient answer to a spiritual question, certainly not as a deterrent to following Buddhism. However, for others—and they are many, especially in the middle-age bracket—the Catholic faith is an insurmountable obstacle, made so by the criticism that often comes from priests and confessors who accuse Buddhists of arrogantly and blasphemously replacing God with Buddha. Few practitioners of the Way of Buddha manage to reconcile the two faiths, partly because, in my opinion, it is not possible to integrate them, but only to live them in parallel without mixing the one with the other. How could it be possible to reconcile reincarnation with the resurrection of the dead? How can God's grace be reconciled with the concept of karma? How can original sin be reconciled with *hōngaku* (original enlightenment)?

Returning to our interreligious journey, the association "A Temple for Peace" was founded in 1996 in the fertile spiritual context of Florence, it was born "initially from the need to involve young people in the great themes of life, peace, and encountering 'the other,' in order to awaken consciences that are too often dormant or distracted."⁵ In the early years following its establishment, it became a bridge between various religious communities, hosting monthly meetings. The

ultimate goal, which unfortunately was never realized, was to build a temple for peace on the hills surrounding Florence, on land that had already been donated. The envisioned architectural design was that of a hemispherical building, which would house various niches each with specific furnishings for the celebration of rituals in different religious traditions. The association, A Temple for Peace, ceased its activities in 2015.

In Florence, and in Italy in general, interreligious dialogue is much developed, mainly between the religions of the Book: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. In September 2005, at an interfaith dialogue between imams and rabbis held in the Salone dei Dugento in Palazzo Vecchio on the theme “The role of religions in peace processes and the fight against terrorism,” the then mayor, in his greeting, reaffirmed Florence’s role as a city of peace and dialogue.

Since December 2005, thanks to the then President of the City Council, the Municipality of Florence has supported the interfaith group (of which Shinnyoji had been a member for a year in its new capacity as a temple) by allowing them to meet in the Municipal House of Florence (Palazzo Vecchio) for a series of interfaith meetings called Together for Peace, with readings, prayers, and silent meditation.

On 13 December 2005, the first interfaith meeting opened with a silent meditation walk called Steps of Peace, starting from the churchyard of the Basilica of Santa Croce and ending at Palazzo Vecchio. Hundreds of people took part, some with candles in their hands, others with small torches, walking in procession through the main streets of the heart of Florence, and gathering new participants along the way until they all reached the entrance to the City Hall. After an hour’s walk, going up the monumental staircase of Palazzo Vecchio, the procession arrived in the Sala Incontri, which had become the new venue for interfaith dialogue in Florence, open to all citizens. The meeting opened with a greeting from the President of the City Council, who expressed the need to “break the elements of conflict between cultures and religions and work for peace.”

The initial group consisted of the associations A Temple for Peace, the Christian Meditation Center, the Ewam Tibetan Buddhist Center, the Sukyo Mahikari Center, Hare Krishna, the Baha’i Community, the Florence Shinnyoji Zen Center, the Jewish-Christian Friendship, and the Islamic Community. It benefited from the patronage of the Municipality of Florence and the support from the Commission for Peace and International Solidarity.

Four meetings were held in 2006, at the first of which the Steps of Peace meditation walk was repeated.⁶ The meetings continued throughout 2007, always in the Sala Incontri.⁷ The cycle of initiatives aimed at involving individuals as well as secular and religious institutions in sharing moments of spirituality, silence, and prayer for peace. In this sense, meeting in the City Hall, the common house of every inhabitant of the city, became almost “natural” in cultivating a dimension

of spirituality beyond political and religious factions, with an open-minded and open-hearted approach to others.⁸ The meetings continued in 2008.⁹

For four years, following a change in political agenda, the Municipality of Florence no longer allowed meetings to be held in Palazzo Vecchio, until 2013 when it was opened again to the meetings. They were called Together for Peace: Meetings of Spirituality, Meditation, and Interfaith Prayer and were hosted in the Sala Miniature of Palazzo Vecchio from October 2012 to June 2014. Then the Municipality of Florence gave us the opportunity to meet in the spaces of the Oblate Library until 2017. In the meantime, the original group had expanded with the participation of new associations: Engaged Buddhism by Thich Nhat Hanh, Sakya Ngon Ga Ling Dharma Center,¹⁰ Clip2000 Yoga Center, Falun Dafa,¹¹ Himalayan Yoga Institute, Humanist Movement, and Native Americans.

Over time, however, differences and misunderstandings arose among the members of the interfaith groups that had formed, so that two separate monthly meetings were created: one continued the itinerant meditation meetings, the other met first in Palazzo Vecchio and then in the Oblate Library. There were two main reasons for the division among the participants. The first and most significant was that some considered the hospitality of the Municipality of Florence to be *political interference*, seen as a means to gathering votes in future local elections. The other reason was that, having been opened up to all citizens, the meetings had become difficult to manage. A wide variety of people attended the meetings: some took the floor and improvised fierce environmentalist speeches or harangue against certain kinds of people, for example against omnivores. Some, equipped with musical instruments, played songs by Bob Dylan or Bob Marley, or unlikely songs by Native Americans, or recited poems they had written on themes such as the environment or peace. It was difficult to enforce the established time limit of five minutes per person. Moreover, sometimes the speeches were far from the spirit of sharing and respect for the thoughts of others. They were more like self-centered proclamations with underlying nuances of verbal violence.

Personally, I withdrew our membership over time. The City Hall had become a stage, a sort of festival, often with strong political overtones, far from the early spirit of these initiatives, which had also included the opportunity to get to know each other in our own places of worship, as it was made possible by holding the meetings in different locations. In my opinion, the intimacy and sacredness of those places also contributed to maintaining the balance and sobriety required by the intention and purpose of the meetings. The itinerant meditation meetings, on the other hand, required a commitment that over the years I was no longer able to guarantee: I had to devote myself to the direction the Temple and to its growing Sangha.

Another initiative that developed over many years in Florence was a three-day series of interreligious and intercultural meetings at the Fortezza da Basso, as part of the international expo “Terra Futura.” This was an expo-conference aimed at spreading good practices of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The event consisted of cultural events, including conferences, round tables, and exhibitions, which offered reflections and insights on a range of topics related to sustainability, from the individual daily choices in lifestyle to the rediscovery and care of common goods such as water, air, security, but also peace, human dignity, and respect for rights.

In 2004, 2005, and 2006, we participated in the interfaith meditation that took place in the Sala Ottagonale of the Fortezza, right at the entrance to the expo. Each tradition was given one hour, which included half an hour for the presentation of a theme, followed by instructions on the form of our practice and a short meditation together. Our determination to bear witness to our practice was strong and constant, and many people visiting the expo approached us and participated, while having a wide choice of different spiritual paths available to them.¹²

In 2010, the online magazine *Lo Zefiro: Interfaith Newsletter* was founded in Florence. It was published every two weeks and opened with a significant picture accompanied by a caption related to its theme and an editorial on the focus of the issue. The magazine reported on the activities carried out in all the centers and associations involved in interfaith dialogue in Florence and in Tuscany. The magazine was published from 2010 to 2021.¹³

In November 2011, in the Salone dei Cinquecento in Palazzo Vecchio we were excited to attend the Koyasan Shingon-Shomyō Concert at which twenty Japanese monks performed with the Gregorian Choir Viri Galilaei of Florence and the Otsuma Ranzan Girls’ School. The chanting of the monks from Koyasan was offered as a sign of gratitude to the citizens of Florence for their support after the 2011 earthquake and as a prayer for all those who had lost their lives in such a disaster. The concert was also meant to be a message of solidarity to the survivors, a “light of hope” for the future as indicated by *kizuna* (solidarity) prepared in calligraphy by young Japanese people.

In January 2015, we participated in an interfaith meeting in Florence in the conference room of the Oblate Library as part of the series of meetings, Together for Peace. It was a special meeting, which, instead of customarily focusing on a specific topic of discussion analyzed in different ways according to specific traditions, was dedicated to all the victims of violence: those in France in the Paris terrorist attack against the headquarters of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, those in Nigeria in the Baga massacre, and all those caused by intolerance and fanaticism throughout the world.

Over time, the rotating meetings in different places of meditation lost their appeal. Over the years we found ourselves drained and exhausted, as if we had already expressed everything we could in the effort of building an interreligious network. We had become friends with each other, even though our faiths were different. We had learned to know and respect each other, not to be afraid of those who are different from us. However, our time had come to an end. Certainly, from the point of view of phenomena, everything rises and perishes, and yet the commitment and responsibility of those who had participated in the experience left a sour taste in our mouths. There were many reasons for our exhaustion, all equally valid and at the same time insufficient to explain that feeling. Then everyone drew conclusions and made assessments from their own point of view. In the end, however, what I believe remains valid is that this twenty-year long experience shaped the way we relate to the presence of others, and that the seeds sown during that time urged us to give new forms and content to future interreligious encounters.

Thus, new initiatives were born, which were the natural evolution of that earlier experience and were only apparently detached from what we had put in place before. Indeed, what we had built early on reemerged, at a later point, in other shapes or modalities.

In December 2016 I was invited to participate as a speaker at the conference “We Guard the Earth Together: Interfaith Cooperation to Protect Life on the Planet,” organized by the Municipal Administration of Bagno a Ripoli in collaboration with Religions for Peace Italy and the Municipal Commission for Peace and Rights. It was the first time I found myself in an auditorium with a diverse audience of citizens, practitioners, students, and politicians.

In December 2017 I met with students to talk about our Sōtō Zen tradition for the first time in a school in an Interfaith meeting at the Spinelli Institute in Scandicci. It was part of the project “The Culture of Dialogue,” which aimed at educating students through an approach of dialogue and discussion rather than closure, aversion, or ostracism. It was an exciting meeting, enhanced by many questions from young people and by the testimony of a Chinese student who declared his Buddhist affiliation. The students listened to me with interest when I spoke to them about how opening our heart to the other nurtures and educates us to respect the diversity of thought and faiths.

At the end of 2018, the City of Florence, in the person of its Councillor for Relations with Religious Confessions and Intercultural Policies, invited us to participate in the making of a booklet (published by the City’s printing house) in which the religious communities of our city were introduced. Thus, in February 2019, the booklet *Firenze Comunità In Cammino: Incontrarsi, conoscersi, accogliere* (Florence Community on the Way: Meeting, Knowing, Welcoming Each Other) was

published. Twenty-one religious groups were involved, each of which was introduced in page accompanied by a photo and contact information.

On that very occasion, the Councillor also proposed to create the interfaith peace flag. It was not a specific flag, but a symbol representing the commitment of the City of Florence to promote interreligious dialogue, tolerance, and respect for different cultures and religious beliefs. It was decided that each community would bring a 20 x 20 CM rectangle of cloth with a representative symbol, phrase, and picture. The pieces were sewn together to create the flag that was then displayed in Palazzo Vecchio for some time, hence becoming the symbol of all future interfaith initiatives in Florence and Tuscany.¹⁴

On 3 February 2019, an event organized by the City of Florence together with religious denominations was held as part of the World Week for Religious Harmony called by the United Nations. The event was called a “Florence Community on the Way” walk in which more than 2,000 people participated. From the Abbey of San Miniato al Monte the walk filed through the streets of the city to Palazzo Vecchio. Participants stopped at various religious sites to read some texts in the spirit of interreligious dialogue.¹⁵ The walk was followed by a buffet dinner with food prepared and offered by the various denominations as well as a concert in the Arengario Hall of Palazzo Vecchio featuring music from different traditions. The then mayor gave an opening speech, declaring Florence a universal symbol of dialogue, peace, and welcoming.

From the success of this initiative came the idea of the first interfaith dinner organized by the City of Florence together with the Religious Communities and Spiritual Traditions present in the Florentine territory. It was then held in March at the Teatro Del Sale, hoisting the interfaith flag that had been created for the walk. More than one hundred twenty people participated; representatives of the various religions brought dishes typical of their traditions, which they served and shared with fellow citizens most in need.¹⁶

In December 2019, we accepted the invitation from the then Councillor of Interreligious Dialogue to join a preliminary meeting toward the establishment of an Institutional Table for Interreligious Dialogue to be activated in the year 2020. Soon after that, the first signs of COVID19 emerged. The pandemic was officially declared in Italy on 29 January 2020 and ended on 5 May 2023, with lockdown from 9 March to 18 May 2020. For this reason, all subsequent meetings, which lasted for almost two years, were held on online with an average participation of twenty speakers (spiritual guides, religious leaders, academics) belonging to twenty-five spiritual traditions, each participant speaking for five minutes on the topic chosen for the day.¹⁷

Post lockdown, in June 2020, an official letter from the Vice President of the Tuscany Region invited us to work toward the creation a Regional Table for Dialogue

with religious denominations and spiritual traditions. At the first informal meeting, the various communities introduced themselves to the representatives of the Region of Tuscany, and a work plan was programmed based on four themes (health, food, prison, and school) to be discussed in sub-sessions, the results of which would be summarized in a plenary session. The sessions were held both online and in-person at the Sala Pegaso in Piazza Duomo in Florence. Six meetings were held between July 2020 and May 2021 on topics including religious diets in university cafeterias, spiritual care in prisons and hospitals, and burial requirements according to one's own beliefs.

On 26 July 2020, I was welcomed into DIM Italy (Monastic Interreligious Dialogue), an international monastic organization that promotes and supports dialogue especially at the level of spiritual experience and religious practice between Christian monks and nuns and followers of other religions.¹⁸ Although the natural dialogue partners of Christian monks and nuns are monks and nuns of other religious traditions, DIM has also engaged in spiritual dialogue with adherents of religions that do not have an institutionalized form of monasticism, particularly Muslims. Primarily the DIM community consists of cloistered and non-cloistered Catholic monks and nuns, with a smaller number of representatives of Zen, Tibetan, and Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Islamic Contemplative Tradition.

Each year DIM Italy meets in the fall for a meeting; for some days, a theme is discussed, comparing the different traditions. The meeting is held at a place of worship offered by one of the participating religious faiths, which serves as the host. The first meeting I attended as a new affiliated member was in October 2020, with part of the participants online and a small number in presence in mixed online and small numbers in attendance, given the COVID emergency.

In 2022, together with Ikuko Sagiya and Aldo Tollini, I edited a collection of essays *La dimensione mondana e il distacco. Lo Zen e le altre tradizioni religiose a confronto* (The Worldly Dimension and Detachment. Zen and the Other Religious Traditions in Comparison), published by Mimesis Edizioni, Milan, in the wake of the success of the international conference “Lo Zen e il distacco: essere nel mondo ma non del mondo (Zen and Detachment: being in the world but not of the world)” held in Florence on 27 March 2021.¹⁹ The conference was sponsored by our temple Sōtō Zen Shinnyoji and cofunded by the Italian Buddhist Union (UBI). The conference, which focused on Zen Buddhist practitioners' relationship with the secular world, highlighted the importance of addressing the issue from a larger point of view, in particular by sharing the topic with other religious traditions that could add an interesting perspective to the subject. Thus, was born the idea of a collection of essays dealing with the theme of “detachment.” Academics and religious

people belonging to the following traditions joined the project: Catholic and Waldensian Church, Sōtō Zen, Tibetan, and Seon Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism.

In the preface, Rev. Shōten Minegishi, then Director of the Sōtō Zen Buddhism Europe Office, maintains that interfaith dialogue is an urgent need for our modern society in which people from all walks of life and backgrounds mix and interact.²⁰ The book was met with great public support and was presented with panel discussions and debates in eleven Italian venues, including a mosque, a cloistered Benedictine monastery, a university and some Buddhist centers.²¹

In the context of the interreligious dialogue that has developed and consolidated over the years in the city of Florence as a result of the arrival and rooting of new ethnic groups, further forms of interrelation have emerged. Among them, a significant example is the creation of “rooms of silence” in some public service buildings: Meyer Children’s Hospital,²² Careggi Hospital,²³ and the University of Florence.²⁴ Such spaces have been designed to accommodate the need for inner concentration and spirituality in an inclusive perspective open to all religions as well as for secular meditation and reflection. Some of these rooms hold furnishings typical of each tradition; in others, there are no religious symbols to avoid any form of discrimination.

As a representative of the Sōtō Zen tradition, I have been invited to various conferences, roundtables and lectures with themes based on different religious perspectives to be presented and discussed in fraternal confrontation. I have never seen arguments or controversy at such meetings. Below are some of the events at which I spoke:

- “Spirituality for the Common Welfare: A Conference for Dialogue and Collaboration,” Palazzo Vecchio Municipality of Florence. Speakers: Catholic Church, Romanian Orthodox, and Adventist, Zen Buddhism, Soka Gakkai Buddhist Institute, Jewish Community of Florence, Hare Krishna, Islam.
- “Peace, ‘Deep Yearning of Human Beings of all Times’: 60 years of *Pacem in Terris*,” Triveneto Faculty of Theology, Padua. Speakers: Catholic Church, Zen Buddhism, Islam, Judaism.
- “The Feminine in Religious Traditions: the force of a voice - Dialogue between Buddhism, Christianity, Islam.” Organized by our Shinnyoji Temple with the contribution of the Italian Buddhist Union. Oblate Library, Florence. Speakers: Zen Sōtō and Rinzai Buddhism, Catholic and Waldensian Church, Islam.

We have just formed the Florence interfaith group of Religions for Peace Italy, an international nongovernmental organization founded in Kyoto in 1975 that promotes cooperation among religions for peace, justice, and human development. The organization is committed to building bridges of dialogue and cooperation between different faiths, promoting mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. Joining to date are the following traditions: Catholic Church, Waldensian,

Adventist and Romanian Orthodox, Zen Sōtō Buddhism, Hare Krishna, Judaism, Islam, Baha'i Community.

Conclusions, Reflections, and Final Considerations

It was and still is our firm belief that interfaith dialogue and discussion between different religions and their communities is necessary to seek ways of encounter that could foster peaceful coexistence, in the utmost absence of proselytism and propaganda, with initiatives that speak to the global community. Openness to dialogue with other religious traditions and practices has always been a fundamental pillar of our understanding of the practice and Way of Dōgen Zenji in directing the Florence Zen Center first and Shinnyoji later. Meeting in interfaith dialogue, besides being a free moment of sharing and exchange, is also a moment of mutual recognition and renewed inspiration, which strengthens one's sense of belonging to one's own community. The chance to see how different traditions, with different cultural and linguistic roots, continue to walk together on a common path, over years of shared work and growth, consolidates the will for peace and personal ethical responsibility.

The plurality of faiths and practices is not an obstacle, but an asset: a constant dialogue that is renewed in mutual respect, sharing and listening, a common path realized in unity in diversity. Interreligious dialogue is a practical example of possible harmony, a laboratory of coexistence that has peace at its core, and respect for diversity as its common guide. At a time when the world often appears divided, interfaith dialogue clearly shows that it is possible to move forward together, even in multiplicity, cultivating awareness, compassion and wisdom as shared values.

I approach the end of my talk with two quotes from the Catholic world. From Pope Leo XIV's address to representatives of other churches and ecclesial communities and other religions: "Today is a time for dialogue and for building bridges." Pope Francis in the *Abu Dhabi Declaration*: "There is no alternative: either we will build the future together or there will be no future."

I want to share with you a bitter *last-minute* reflection on the journey in interreligious dialogue since 1995 until the present, where each community has given its own contribution of wisdom, compassion and commitment for the benefit of humankind. Something frighteningly tragic for a civilized society is taking place in the Gaza Strip: the refusal to apply the norms of humanitarian law to citizens exhausted by starvation and deprived of medicine. After nearly three months of blockade, Israel is allowing limited access to food aid in Gaza. International food security experts have warned that Gaza is in danger of officially entering famine. This is unacceptable. This fact is a crime against humanity regardless of religious, political, economic or social issues.

Italian Head of State Sergio Mattarella, at the Quirinale Ceremony for the 79th Anniversary of the Italian Republic Day, said the following words:²⁵ “Let the Israeli army make the territories of the Strip accessible to the action of international bodies, thus making possible again full humanitarian assistance to people. That an entire population, from children to the elderly, be reduced to starvation is inhuman.” To date, despite requests and reminders from us as Shinnyoji Zen Temple Florence, we have been unable to organize a silent walk to say NO to the blockade of humanitarian aid that prevents the free flow of trucks with food and medicine into the Gaza Strip. Failing to intervene with a compact, orderly, silent march undermines our sense of collective responsibility as an interfaith community, guided by the meaning of the word *responsibility*: the ability to bring a response, to find the word in response to an event, to not remain silent. In Hebrew, being silent is spelled just like the word violence. If remaining silent and violence have the same root, then returning to the word, to a gesture of solidarity, can become a key to getting rid of violence.

I conclude with an act of faith, trusting in a shared dialogue of greater awareness, with a quote from the message of good wishes on the occasion of Vesak 2025 in Milan, “Buddhists and Christians in Dialogue of Liberation for our Time,” with which the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue puts emphasis on the commitment we share:

In our time, marked by divisions, conflicts, and suffering, we recognize the urgent need for a liberating dialogue that is not limited to words but is capable of translating those words into concrete actions for peace, justice, and dignity for all... The dialogue that takes place between us serves to communicate the treasures of our religious traditions and to draw on their wisdom to address the urgent challenges of our time.²⁶

Thank you for your attention. Gasshō

A word of thanks filled with gratitude to my Master for all that he has taught me, all that he has transmitted to me, and for the task he has entrusted to me.

Endnotes

1 A social and spiritual movement founded in India in 1955 by Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1921–1990), also known by his spiritual name Shrii Shrii Ānandamūrti.

2 Born in 1949, he studied philosophy at the University of Genoa. A Sōtō Zen Buddhist monk, he lived for seven years as a disciple of Watanabe Rōshi at the Antaiji Monastery in Japan.

3 www.lastelladelmattino.org

4 www.lastelladelmattino.org/archivio-2/rovofiorito/archivio-2/la-casa-di-galgagnano

5 From <https://www.untempioperlapace.it/chi-siamo/>.

6 In February, March, May, and November.

7 In January, February, March, April, June, November, and December, with themes respectively: Justice, love, nature, death, joy, peace and love, peace and justice.

8 <https://press.comune.fi.it/it/comunicato/500743>

9 In January, February, March, April, and June, on the theme of peace: peace and diversity, peace and nature, peace and compassion, peace and solidarity, peace and beauty.

10 A Tibetan Buddhist center founded by His Holiness Sakya Trizin in 2003, with its headquarters in Tresanti, Montespertoli (Florence).

11 Falun Dafa, noto anche come Falun Gong, è un movimento religioso fondato e guidato da Li Hongzhi. Diffusosi in Cina negli anni '90, afferma di avere seguaci in più di 100 Paesi. La sua pratica comprende esercizi fisici, meditazione e la lettura di testi scritti da Li Hongzhi.

12 <https://press.comune.fi.it/it/comunicato/508765>

13 <https://www.cmif.altervista.org/public/zefiro/default/index/page/2.html>

14 “EkiZen,” no. 38 spring 2019, *Shinnyoji Sangha Newsletter*, 15–18. https://www.zenfirenze.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Ekizen-Primavera2019_bilingue.pdf

15 <http://met.provincia.fi.it/news.aspx?n=284157>

16 <https://www.comune.firenze.it/comunicati-stampa/grande-successo-la-prima-cena-interreligiosa>

17 La Pira Center and Focolare Movement, Hare Krishna, Waldensian Church, Methodist, Adventist, Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Lutheran and Romanian Orthodox, Islamic Community, Jewish Community of Florence, “I Ricostruttori nella preghiera” Community, Shinnyoji-Florence Zen Center, Soka Gakkai Italian Buddhist Institute, Native Americans and Indigenous Peoples, Islamic Community, Sangalli Institute of Florence, Catholic Action, ADRA Italy, Franciscan Youth Monte alle Croci, Jerusalem Fraternity, University of Florence, Family Federation, Christian Science, Interfaith Dialogue School, Baha’i Community of Florence.

18 <https://www.dimitalia.com/>

19 <https://www.mimesisedizioni.it/libro/9788857591193>

20 Born in Gunma, Japan, trained in Zuioji Senmon Sōdō (Ehime Prefecture). Director of the Soto Zen Buddhism Europe Office from 2020–2023.

21 Milan Mosque in Via Meda, Civic Palace of the City of Sarzana, Benedictine Monastery San Giovanni in Lecce, Oblate Library in Florence, Association for Mindfulness Meditation in Rome, City of Milan, Episcopal Palace in Bologna, Far East Film Festival 25 in Udine, Sōtō Zen Fudenji Temple in Salsomaggiore Terme, Congress Hall of the Hotel Royal in Sanremo, DISSGEA Department of the University of Padua.

22 In 2007, the “Space of the Spirit” was inaugurated at the new Meyer Children’s Hospital following a project involving the Religious Communities of Florence designed as a place for free recollection, meditation, and prayer. Its circular, modular structure welcomes and embraces those who pass through and stop there. “Space of the Spirit,” plural and welcoming, holds the symbols typical of each denomination and is open to all worship, meditation and secular reflection. <https://www.meyer.it/images/pdf/utilita-spazio-dello-spirito.pdf>

23 In 2016, the “Hall of Prayer and Silence” was opened at the Careggi University Hospital Company. A place of recollection open to everyone, patients, relatives and staff, believers of various religions and lay people who need a quiet place to retreat to face and process the conditions of suffering experienced in the hospital, or to give thanks when the care provided has made it possible to overcome difficult and painful situations. An agreement between the hospital and representatives of all religious communities in the area plus atheists and non-believers provides for spiritual or moral assistance to non-Catholics (there is already a specific agreement with the Church) inside the hospital. The Hall of Prayer and Silence overlooks a small

flower garden, furnished with antique furniture from the Medici Villa and a large rug, available for anyone who wishes to gather, pray, meditate, or read the sacred books offered by the religious communities, put together in a special shelving unit. To encourage maximum openness and avoid any form of discrimination, no religious symbols are present. <https://www.aou-careggi.toscana.it/internet/come-fare-per/luoghi-di-preghiera/>

24 In 2024, the “Room of Silence,” a physical space dedicated to recollection, prayer, and meditation, was opened at the University of Florence in the atrium of the Library on the Social Sciences Campus. The opening of the space, furnished only with benches, is part of the path marked by intercultural dialogue initiated between representatives of different denominations and students of the University and is a plural, symbol-free place. In addition to the President of the University of Florence, representatives of the following Traditions attended the inauguration: Catholic Church, Zen Buddhism, Islam, Judaism. <https://www.unifi.it/itSpazio dello Spirito - Firenze/news/inaugurata-la-stanza-del-silenzio>

25 https://www.corriere.it/politica/25_giugno_01/mattarella-disumano-ridurre-alla-fame-un-intera-popolazione-i-palestinesi-hanno-diritto-a-un-focolare-ecfd4194-f2b9-40e6-9ab6-0c50d9eccxlk.shtml

26 <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2025-05/messaggio-dicastero-dialogo-interreligioso-festa-vesak-buddismo.html>