



A POMEGRANATE OF HEARTS

A taku, four inkin bells, and a group of hearts, close as the seeds of a pomegranate, addressing the koan of existence in the silence of the meditation room.

They've been coming every month for almost forty years, men and women of all ages from completely different social and cultural backgrounds, most from Italy but others from Austria, Greece, Finland, and Germany. They come to take part in the most absolute equality of rights and obligations, the sesshin of the Zenshinji Monastery of Scaramuccia, located in the Orvieto countryside, cultivated with vines and olives.

Zazen and kinhin, chanting and dokusan, mondo and keisaku, work and tai ch'i alternate in tracking the Way through an uncharted land that each practitioner has to reach; and then the teisho, which mysteriously appears to have for each disciple the word that helps to go beyond, a word "leeward of poetry".

Even if it is the thousandth sesshin you have attended, each time it is, in a way, like the first time. The path we follow, hugging the breath, is always something of an unknown quantity. Moving through the world, relating to the other, places every being within a storm of contradictions in which we have to immerse our entire being.

The sesshin is a privileged workshop in which we apply our practice to whatever we encounter. It is a different space in which we systematically look into ourselves, realizing our fundamental nature of hand shadows, one of the great perceptions of Buddha Shakyamuni, so that we are then able to experience this in the innumerable events of our existence (ordinary, extraordinary, happy, tragic, comic).

We are sustained in these arduous trials by the unshakeable awareness that 'the world is perfect just as it is' (1) and that it is to be lived by transforming the body-mind into flowing water and floating clouds like unsui, which is the Japanese name given to the Zen monk.

And within the big pomegranate tree of the zendo, everyone by their own free choice, alone with themselves while being close to their Dharma sisters and brothers and the teacher, experiences the physical and spiritual pain and realizes in the end that there is no fabulous nirvana devoid of suffering awaiting us—no otherworldly paradise—but that we can acquire—here and now—the greatest possible freedom, which is not freedom from suffering, but freedom in suffering.

And time rushes on like an impetuous river. The frisson that we feel every time a sesshin begins, thinking of how many hours or days lie before us, the sense of existential solitude enwraps us, and that, over the years, we learn to accept, and with it the laughter, the good humor, and the self-deprecating irony that is shared by all the participants, and with the Maestro Engaku Taino – albeit in the strictest, reciprocal respect, both formal and substantial –everything contributes to the arcane 'chemistry' of sesshin.

And when our legs, the bicycle, the train, the car or the plane bring us home again, we retain in our hearts the awareness that the little sesshin we experienced at the monastery has been seamlessly replaced by the vast sesshin that is contained in our every breath.

(1) "The world is perfect just as it is" is the title of the Case n. 14 of the collection of koan "Bukkosan Roku" by Maestro Taino, published by the press of the Monastery.