

Being Zen-Buddhist in the Land of Catholicism

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Introduction

In this century, the West saw a fast expansion of Buddhism, which until then had been confined to the East. (Dumoulin, 1992: viii) With Buddhism, we see a radically different way of thinking and seeing the world because it is based on the absence of God and in the idea that everybody is his own Buddha. Through the practice of meditation, discipline or devotion (depending on the Buddhist school), anyone may get enlightened and become a Buddha (literally "an enlightened being"). Moreover, for Buddhism men and nature are part of the same whole. Nature was not created to serve men as dictates the Christianity. These elements - the possibility of individual enlightenment, of liberating mind and of union with nature - had a big appeal and opened the doors for Buddhism to arrive and disseminate itself in the West through the most varied schools from the whole Asia.

To trace the history of the expansion of Buddhism in the West goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to relate Buddhism with the Counterculture movement that started in 1950s and its development - the New Age movement - because they are also part of the history of how Zen Buddhism evolved in Brazil. The beatnik movement opened the doors for Zen Buddhism in the United States. The beats saw in Zen's plea for unattachment to worldly things the answer to their rebellion against the consumerism of the post World War II. Jack Kerouac, one of the movement's main spokesperson, predicted a "rucksack revolution", where young Americans would leave the production and consumption society and would meditate in the mountains. In his book *The Dharma Bums*¹ 1957, Kerouac wrote: "What we need is a floating *zendo*², where an old Bodhisattva can mush (Tricycle, 1995: 73)." The possibility of freeing the mind as taught by Zen Buddhism was confused with freedom from social convention (Tworkov, 1989: 7). Zen boom flourished among artists and intellectuals in

1 Word originated of *dharman*, which appears in the Vedas and has the sense of decree, law, practice, obligation, morality and religion. Buddhism uses *dharma* meaning Buddha's law or teaching (Tricycle magazine, 1997: 63).

2 Zen Hall, that is, Zen meditation room.

late 1950s. Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki were the ones who popularized Zen through their books written on it for a Western audience.

According Robert Bellah Zen Buddhism was a new trend as the religion of Counterculture:

"(...) The biblical arrogance in relation to nature and the Christian hostility to the impulsive life were both, strange to the new spiritual atmosphere. Thus, the religion of the counterculture was not, in general, biblical. It was drawn from several sources, including the one of the American Indians. Its deeper influences, however, came from Asia. In the several ways, the Asian spirituality offered a more complete contrast to the rejected utilitarian individualism than the biblical religion. To the external accomplishment, it opposed the inner experience, to the exploitation of nature, harmony with nature; to the impersonal organization, an intense relationship with the guru. The Mahayana Buddhism, above all under the form of the Zen, supplied the more penetrating religious influence to the counterculture (Bellah, 1986: 26)."

Indeed, from the 50s on, people in the West were in search of other forms of spirituality out of Western canons, as the Catholic or Protestant religions. People started seeking holistic movements that are characterized by symbols attached to nature, to the idea of healing the planet and the individual³. Hence, a way of life which integrates man and nature. As Bellah mentioned above, Eastern religions answered to that search. The idea that a new lifestyle, which included meditation and a connection with the sacredness would bring health and happiness paved the way for the popularization of several Buddhist sects, among them Zen.

It is in the wake of the movement, which began with the Counterculture and is now called New Age, that we can understand how centers that work with healing practices, be it shamanic, of the past lives, of the astral body, phytotherapeutic, tai-chi-tchuan, acupuncture, energetic massage are associated to self-help, spiritual and of angelic wisdom books (*The Happiness of Discovering Guarding Angels in Our Lives*, by Sara Marriott), scientific books (*The Tao of Physics*, by Fritjof Capra) and medical books (*The Quantum Healing*, by Deepak Chopra) in the construction of a new lifestyle⁴.

3 "Disease is lack of harmony, it is opposed to healing, which is the way to the psychophysical (physical body), psychological (emotions and feelings) and psychospiritual (subtle energy) liberation. The path to healing has as a goal health, that is, enlightenment. The way to transform disease into health is the spiritual practices, purification and accumulation of merit and wisdom (through virtuous actions). The Buddhist body is a healthy and enlightened body (Lama Shakyia in a workshop in São Paulo, 1996)".

Japanese Buddhist, Zen Buddhist, Tibetan, Korean and Sri Lanka monks are increasingly present in the city of São Paulo. Dharma Centers (Buddhist centers managed by Brazilians) bring their spiritual mentors from abroad (in general twice a year) so that they can give workshops, promote spiritual retreats and disseminate their teachings. Many followers undertake trips to the centers, which originated the religion, being they in the United States, Japan, India or in Nepal. These Dharma Centers spread in the city help to disseminate this new holistic view of life. The city of São Paulo is getting organized in a new circuit, where practitioners travel to well-known places and share the same lifestyle. However, not only in the city of São Paulo there is a circuit centers of Eastern religions, which many of the followers of the Zen Buddhism belong to, but São Paulo itself is part of the circuit of the metropolises that shelter these centers. Indeed, having branches in many countries, the spiritual mentors travel the world giving lectures, workshops and making retreats.

The metropolis propitiates the spiritual encounter with the East due to the easiness to obtain and to exchange information through mass communication, and due to the interest of the middle and upper middle classes who inhabit neighborhoods which thoroughly provide services and urban facilities that characterize a cosmopolitan religious practice (Magnani, 1996b: 11)⁵.

If in the United States the movement of the Counterculture of the 50s and 60s helped the popularization of Zen Buddhism among Americans of non-Japanese origin, in Brazil, its arrival was due more to its connection with the Japanese-Brazilian community than to a search for inner spirituality. However, even if in the midst of Counterculture and New Age trends Brazilian intellectuals of non-Japanese origin interested in Zen Buddhism in the 60s, it was only popularized among the Brazilians in the end of the 70s (Paranhos, 1994).

4 The growing demand for a non-rational knowledge of life can be seeing in the recent creation of a list just for "esoteric and self-help" books, besides the traditional "fiction" and "non-fiction" in Brazilian magazines and shelves for such category of books is Brazilian bookstores.

5 "(...) The progressive construction - instead of a plunge in the tradition - of sincretic systems, more and more spiraled (...) which are supported by a religious culture in constant enlarging movement. That is: through the process of massive diffusion, since a kind of universal religious culture is more accessible to everyone, and it is build from standard information of how the religions of the world were - of the Aztecs, Incas, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, etc. Everything is molded in a kind of religious common knowledge, which emerges as 'pantraditional' or cosmopolitan (...) (Carvalho, 1992: 153)".

Zen Buddhism in Brazil

There are three schools of Zen Buddhism in Japan (*Sôtô*, *Rinzai* and *Obaku*). *Sôtô Zenshu* School⁶ is the one that was spread to the West and to Brazil. *Sôtô Zenshû* privileges meditation (*zazen*) as a practice for enlightenment.

Zen was first introduced by the Japanese immigrants in 1950s in the State of São Paulo. The aspects of Zen emphasized were devotional practices, "masses" (as Japanese-Brazilians call the rituals denoting the influence of the Catholic environment) and funeral rituals. This population sought (and still does) the temples to perform Buddhist rituals that besides attending to the immigrants' religious needs, also assist in the affirmation of their ethnic identity.

It is well known that the identity of a group is built in relation to other group. As states the Anthropologist Eunice Durham:

"The concept of ethnic identity, as a contrastive group identity, it is built in the context of the concrete intergroup relationships and conflicts (Durham, 1986: 32)."

Conflicts emerge when this ethnic identity is under threat, that is when immigrants feel that Brazilians of non-Japanese origin are using the same values (in this case Zen Buddhism) to identify themselves as a group. It is in this context that one can understand the coming up of the issue of which group (Japanese immigrants and descendants or Brazilian of non-Japanese ancestry) has the "true" ancestors' culture (Oliveira, 1976: 5; Reis, 1993: 77; Rocha, 1996: 30, 86-99). Here there is a conflict of motivations, practices and aspirations similar (but in a smaller extent) to the North-American one. In the US, there is a conflict between what is called "white Buddhism" practiced by the white upper-middle-class and upper-classes that praises meditation as a path to enlightenment, and the so called "ethnic Buddhism", of the immigrants, which is basically devotional and oriented to the community (Nattier, 1995: 42-49; Fields, 1994: 54-56; Foye, 1994: 57; Prebish 1991, 1998, 1999).

⁶ *Sôtô* is the Zen Buddhist sect brought to Japan by the Japanese monk *Dôgen* (1200-1253) after a trip to China. Zen is the Japanese word that corresponds to *dhyâna* in Sanskrit and *ch'anin* Chinese. It means concentration or meditation, that is, *Mahayana* Buddhist meditation. *Mahayana* is what is called the great vehicle and it developed in China, Korea and Japan as opposed to *Hinayana*, or small vehicle, which developed in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Cambodia. Japanese Zen Buddhism is the result of an amalgam of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism and its introduction in Japan. Zen Buddhism values the direct and personal experience instead of intellectual and rational speculation and worship of images. This differentiates it from traditional Buddhism. Hence, meditation (*zazen*) and paradoxical thought in the form of *koan* (questions without a rational logic) play a fundamental role in the transmission of knowledge (Dumoulin, 1992).

Brazilians of non-Japanese ancestry are involved in Zen Buddhism for reasons which mainly have to do with the experience of living in an urban environment and the New Age movement trends. On the overall, according to interviews, they are interested in Zen Buddhism as way of acquiring inner peace, getting rid of the stress of the metropolis, learning about Japan or acquiring a spiritual practice. Even in the rural areas, the practitioners' population comes from the cities and seeks the monasteries to live Zen Buddhism more intensely, in retreats (*sesshin*) of four to seven days or of three months (*angô*), or even to reside in the places as a life alternative. In this context, it is the city, and not the identity, that should be associated to the way as the Zen Buddhism is appropriated in Brazil.

However, departing from that conflict between immigrants and non-Japanese descendants, one can extend other nets, among the Zen Buddhist practitioners, which cover several points of Brazil where there are other ways of being a practitioner. In 1985, the Center of Buddhist Studies (CEB) was created in Porto Alegre (capital of Rio Grande do Sul State). It included practitioners of several Buddhist schools. In 1989, the Japanese monk Ryotan Tokuda inaugurated, in the same city, the temple *Sôtô Zen Sanguen Dojô*, which focused exclusively on Zen Buddhism. As the Japanese-Brazilian community does not exist in Porto Alegre, practitioners are basically Brazilians of non-Japanese origin. Therefore, there is emphasis in the practices of daily meditation, retreats and studies of the *dharma* (Buddha's teachings), and there is an absence of rituals and funerals performed.

The Zen Buddhist *Sôtô* monasteries⁷ of Morro da Vargem, in Ibiracú, in the State of Espírito Santo, and the one of the Pico dos Raios, in Ouro Preto, in the State of Minas Gerais, were established respectively in 1977 and in 1985 by the Japanese monk Tokuda. Today they are already managed by Brazilians of non-Japanese origin, who were disciples of Tokuda and studied in monasteries in Japan. According to the Brazilian magazine *Isto é*: "the Zen monastery Morro da Vargem is visited annually by four thousand people and receives seven thousand children of the State, who go there to learn environmental education" (*Isto é*, 03/12/97: 62). Besides maintaining an ecological reserve and the Center of Environmental Education since 1985 (Paranhos, 1994: 151), the monastery owns a "House of Culture" to

7 The organization of monasteries is different from that of temples. In the former the practitioners reside and have their lives ruled by the monasteries' ways. Monasteries are training centers for monks and nuns. In the temples the practitioners participate in their activities without dedicating themselves entirely to them because they still keep their profession and personal lives.

receive fine artists that, away from the city, can be devoted to creation. The monastery Pico dos Raios has also a link with the external community - monk Tokuda teaches the Chinese technique of acupuncture to its practitioners, who offer this service to the local population.

These monasteries are part of the circuit of those that, coming from the city, share the same interest in the oriental religions and meditation, whether they are converted Zen Buddhists or just "sympathizers".

Buddhism and New Patterns of Behaviour in Brazil

Currently, the interviews with practitioners show that, for Brazilian of non-Japanese ancestry, the interest in Zen Buddhism happens via the United States, through the media⁸, books on Zen, movies⁹ and trips. In fact, all of the people interviewed described their first contact with Zen through books. The United States is a strong source of material and ideas on Zen for various reasons. One of them being that the English language is more accessible to Brazilians than Japanese. In fact, most of the books on Zen, which are translated to Portuguese, were in English originally. Moreover, due to the fact that the practitioners interviewed come from the intellectual upper-middle class and the vast majority is of university graduate liberal professionals, many of them can read the books in English before they are translated. Some practitioners even choose to do retreats in North-American Zen Centers. Here are some reasons practitioner gave for their interest in American Zen:

"In San Francisco I felt Zen is more incorporated into US culture [than in Brazil]. There the abbot is a whole unit, it seems that Zen is already blended in his personality, emotion, action, intellect, in his whole being. So much so that the lectures aren't on classical texts. There [in the US], the monks are American and the community is already 40 years old. So they have a local color, the main core of Zen was preserved, but it is not so much Japanese.

"After I arrived home from a *sesshin* [retreat], I looked up a book about the experience of *zazen* by an American nun, Charlotte Joko Becker. Her talks with her disciples were published in two volumes. She is also a Westerner, so she understands well what goes on in

8 The word Zen is fashionable in the West: one sees Zen perfume, shops, beauty parlors, restaurants, magazine articles and architecture. It is also in everyday conversation as a synonym of inner tranquility and inner peace.

9 The recent Hollywood movies "The Little Buddha", "Seven Years in Tibet" and "Kundun" were very successful in Brazil.

the mind of a Westerner who embraced Zen Buddhism. She speaks as we do; we understand very well what she says about the psychic processes, about the psychology of a Western person, in this case of a Brazilian person. I really didn't feel any difference. The American style of Zen is closer to ours."

"I think the Americans and Brazilians have a similar language to talk about Zen."

Dwelling in the cities, these practitioners seek to relieve stress and to acquire inner peace. As some practitioners opine:

"I went through various other practices before I found Zen. Zen answered my needs of harmonization. Because my job is very stressful and I have to deal with a lot of people, I need harmony in everyday life. Life in big cities is very stressful."

"I became more careful since I started studying Zen. Also my anxiety has diminished with Zen practice. I find more satisfaction in what I am living now. Zen practice is this tranquility, this fruition of what I am living in the present moment."

The vast majority of the interviewed people were Catholics before starting to "shop around" in the religious marketplace and find Zen Buddhism. Adherents who left Catholicism and are studying Zen Buddhism explain their disenchantment with Catholicism in various ways, such as its dogmatism, its separation from daily life and its problems, its hierarchical organization, its way of dealing with nature and its almighty God. Looking for an alternative, Catholic adherents try to compose their symbolic universe with something that they can construct by themselves in daily life. Similarly, they praise the authority of the individual to interpret the scriptures and the possibility of practicing mindfulness in daily life, outside the temple, which according to them is present in Zen. Three different practitioners asserted these qualities of Zen when interviewed:

"I have a Catholic background; I used to go to Church till first communion. You go more because of your parents' influence. But after that never more... because the Catholic Church is very dissociated from daily life. I guess that's why Zen is so interesting. Christianity is too separated from reality. Zen is not; it is a very practical thing, very down to earth on how to face difficulties. Its pragmatism attracted me."

"[In Zen] I don't need an interpretation; I don't need hermeneutics, somebody telling me which is the correct way. It is Zen itself that says: 'Don't let the *sûtra* command you, you must be in command'."

"What called my attention to Zen was mainly its simplicity. Zen is very much this experience of meditation, it's to practice and observe what happens in your daily life. Zen does not make this separation, as the majority of other religions do, between the religious place, where you practice (the temple, the church), and your normal, daily life. Zen puts these two things together. The practice is not only when you do *zazen* [meditation], but also it is something you'll practice in your daily life."

The close relationship between Buddhism and the ecological movement as opposed to the Catholic way of approaching nature is mentioned by a practitioner to explain her religious choice:

"Buddhism has a distinctive trait if compared to Christianity. For Buddhism there is life in all the elements of nature besides men themselves. There is life in the plants, rocks, mountains, and water, in everything. But in Christianity things are different. I realized this reading the Genesis, which deals with creation. God creating things and so on. Then it says God created the animals to serve men. That shocked me. Men took their ethnocentrism too far. Men subjugated animals and plants. Today we are watching the destruction of the planet. (...) Buddhism has a different way of approaching this problem. And this is fundamental for me. To integrate nature is for me a spirituality which has to do with my life story."

Furthermore, *Zen Quarterly*, a magazine published by the Sôtô School of Zen Buddhism in Japan also deals frequently with the ecological issue in its articles:

"As we approach the 21st century with the mindfulness of compassion and non-violence, our Buddhist challenge is to cultivate the Buddhist teachings that will stop the crimes against the environment and will reform our money-oriented world (Okumura: 1998: 01)."

Various studies have shown that privatization of religious conviction is a characteristic of modernity, that is, religion has become a matter of private choice and not of tradition or social pressure (Dumont, 1985: 240; Hefner, 1998: 87; Berger, 1974). Following this trend, through a process of *bricolage*¹⁰, the practitioner chooses characteristics from different practices to

10 In the concept of 'bricoleur' created by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensée Sauvage*.

condense them into a spiritual quest. This mixture of various traditions in order to build a new contemporary spirituality is, according to the French Anthropologist Marc Augé, a characteristic of supermodernity:

" In the situations of supermodernity (as in those Anthropology has called 'acculturation'), the components are added without destroying each other (Augé, 1994: 42)."

The anthropologist Louis Dumont, in his book *Individualism* (1985), dealt specifically with the idea of spirituality of the contemporary world, where the religious practice is a choice of private forum, since "The dimension of value, which until then had been projected spontaneously in the world, was restricted to what is for us, its only true domain, that is to say, the spirit, the feeling and man's volition (Dumont, 1985:240)."

Therefore, each practitioner constructs his/her religion as a unique praxis, different from all the others by mixing various traditions in order to build a new contemporary spirituality. As two practitioners told me:

"I don't think there is only one line of thinking. Only one line of thinking can't supply all your needs. You have to pick some things that have to do with you, and if you think that something is too radical to one side, you should look for something on the other side. I think you will end up disappointed if you pick only one thing. ... There's a word nowadays that has everything to do with the end of the millennium, when you stop following only one thing, it is 'holism'. I don't care much for strict lines of reasoning. I think you have to get the whole, the essence, because everything is basically the same, all these practices say similar things."

"Meditation can be a holistic practice too. It will never be an affiliation, an exclusive form of work or technique. I'll never do this again in my life. I want to stay absolutely free. The moment we live decides which practice we should do. I think we have to be open to the different praxes, which are offered to us. I like to have a plurality of instruments at hand.

There are several groups of practices, associated with Zen Buddhism, which are recurrent in the interviews: practices of healing (Yoga, Shiatsu, Do In, Tai Chi Chuan, Acupuncture), practices of self-understanding (many kinds of psychotherapy, Astrology), martial arts (Aikido, Karate), eating habits (vegetarianism, macrobiotics) and other religions (Spiritualism, African religions, Mahikari, Rajneesh/Osho).

This approach to religious practice is justified using the Zen Buddhist idea on non-attachment. According to Buddhism, what causes people to suffer is their attachment to things and their lack of understanding that everything is impermanent. This ignorance of impermanence creates the expectation things will be the same. There is a famous Zen saying: "If you see the Buddha, kill the Buddha", meaning you should not get attached to the idea of Buddha, but practice it. This is interpreted, by practitioners, as the impossibility of one religion being the permanent answer to your spiritual needs. For instance, one practitioner praises Zen Buddhism as a religion that does not request loyalty:

"You have to keep picking the little things you believe in and they will work for you as a step to go further. So, you will leave things behind when you have no use for them anymore. You shouldn't say 'I believe in this....' It's funny because the monk himself said this. 'You cannot get attached to Zen Buddhism'".

That is probably why being a regular practitioner in one place does not stop someone from doing the same in another. It is usual that the same person participates of meditations in a Center of Tibetan Buddhism, and, at the same time, goes to a Japanese Zen center and even is ordained lay monk, receiving a Zen name (Paranhos, 1994: 155). In the same way, a person can participate in Tibetan, Theravada Buddhism or Zen retreats, indifferently.

"I regularly go to the Zen meditations at the temple and to Tibetan meetings at the Gompa¹¹. You see, Zen Buddhism gives me peace and quiet, but doesn't answer to my needs of ritualism. I am a lay nun in both places so I have a Zen name and a Tibetan name."

Most of the adherents do not go as far as having two Buddhist names, but many do frequent several Buddhist schools or other religious institutions at the same time or subsequently, as a quest for the religion which best answers one's needs. According to a Brazilian lay ordained practitioner who works in the Temple in São Paulo, many of the practitioners that come to meditate for the first time are going through a difficult moment in their lives.

"When a new practitioner arrives here, he/she is usually going through a difficult moment, a crucial moment ... His/Her cultural background is Western, it is Christian or Jewish, hence very close to the concept of miracle. When you are emotionally sick, you go to a hospital, you go to a Candomblé, Umbanda [Afro-Brazilian religions], to a priest or to a temple. This works

¹¹ Tibetan temple.

as an anesthetic, it calms you down. ... People arrive at the temple hoping to find the answer to their troubles here. But when they sit to meditate hoping for tranquility (this is their goal), everything starts to hurt, the whole body starts to hurt ... and then the mind is in pain too. There are people who don't want to know about this. They are afraid, they are looking for a miracle, and they don't want to see the horror of their troubles. Sometimes people leave the temple very upset. Their idea of meditation is of being in heaven. Only one out of ten people who come here for the first time end up staying."

As we can see, this lay ordained practitioner mentions another characteristic of the population who seeks Zen Buddhism - they are in search of their "inner self". Many practitioners mentioned doing various kinds of psychotherapy and equated it with Zen as a way of getting in touch with the "inner-self".

"Self-understanding is one of the main things I look for in *zazen*."

"I did group therapy. It's a therapy called *somatherapy* developed by Roberto Freire in Belo Horizonte. It helped me develop myself. Now my Zen practice is helping me"

Zen Buddhism becomes an activity made in leisure moments when we see practitioners exchanging the spree of carnival for retreats (*sesshin*)¹², and movie nights or free weekends for meditation sessions with their *sangha* (meditation group). The consumption of goods is easily identifiable in the sales of books, magazines¹³, courses, retreats, clothes and utensils adapted for meditation, as if *satori* (enlightenment) itself were possible to be reached as you acquire merchandise.

"(...) *Samadi*, enlightenment, *satori* appear now also as a fetish, almost as a commercial exhibition, as image of power, as merchandise. The possibility of a trance, of a touch of energy, of a hug of divine love, etc., is so desired in the present social context as the acquisition of a car, of an appliance, of a trip to a famous place. The religious advertisement (...) has already incorporated, as any other advertisement of the consumption society, the mimetic desire of ownership (Carvalho, 1992: 153)."

¹² "It was Carnival and I was going to Bahia and saw the sign for the Monastery on the road. I felt an irresistible attraction, 'you have to go, you have to go'. It was like a call".

¹³ There are four magazines published quarterly in Brazil. Two of them are exclusively Zen Buddhist: "Flor do Vazio" is published in Rio de Janeiro, "Caminho Zen" is published in Japan by the Soto School in Portuguese for the Brazilian market. "Bodigaya" and "Bodisatva" are two Buddhist magazines which comprise articles mainly on Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.

The Western religious field incorporates a holistic view of the individual that is opposed to the fragmentation of the modern societies. This problematic is characteristically Western and through it one can understand the appeal Zen Buddhism has to Westerners.

Conclusion

It becomes stimulating to map the population that practices Zen in Brazil, to focus its aspirations, motivations and lifestyle when one thinks it is inserted in a movement that characterizes not only the contemporary spirituality, but, also a lifestyle.

As we saw in this article, it is a characteristic of people in modern urban society to shun the idea of a religious institution, which is organized in a hierarchy and has dogmas to instruct people how to behave and what to believe. All the people interviewed made a point of choosing attributes of different religions and constructing their own, as a "bricoleur" would do. Each person had an idea of sacredness, which was constructed by him/her. The central practice of Zen Buddhism, meditation (*zazen*), is seeing as an individual practice and, enlightenment (*satori*), its consequence, is taken as a result of individual effort. Zen Buddhism is chosen because it is a simple religion, that is, it has no dogmas and it is connected to everyday life of practitioners.

In Brazil, Zen temples and monasteries are located as much in the cities as in rural areas, in each place with a different function. In the cities they assist, in first place, the Japanese immigrant population (as we saw in the case of the Japanese-Brazilian community in São Paulo) as they help in the affirmation of their ethnic identity.

Besides the immigrant community in search of its identity, in the Brazilian metropolises Zen Buddhist temples are frequented by people that seek them precisely for the problems generated in the urban life (stress, search of peacefulness, self-understanding, silence and of a more spiritual life) and for the need of a new spirituality based on integration with nature and self-understanding.

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Buddhism in Japan. Buddhism is a religion that offers a spiritual path for transcending the suffering of existence. Samsara, the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth to which all beings are subject, results from the consequences incurred by one's karma, the sum of good and bad actions that accumulates over many lives. In the late Heian period (until 1185) and following centuries, Pure Land Buddhism became very popular. The salvationist Pure Land Buddhism taught faith in Amida (Amitabha in Sanskrit), the buddha of the Western Paradise. Believers trusted that the diligent recitation of his name enabled the soul to be reborn in a heavenly Pure Land rather than in a Buddhist hell or other undesirable rebirth. The basis of Pure Land Buddhism is devotion. In this way, it is the more traditionally religious expression of the teachings of the Buddha, who did not talk about gods or promise heaven (or hell). Buddha was, if anything, a philosopher who had found a secret to understanding life; he never claimed divinity. Through devotion – prayer, chanting Amida Buddha's name and other acts of devotion, one is assured one's place in the Pure Land, or Western Heaven or, as Westerners of any religious stripe would call it: Heaven. In Pure Land, moreover, one's own work and deeds have no impact on one's salvation. All that matters is one's devotion to Amida Buddha. Today there is a proliferation of resources and retreats dedicated to combining Zen Buddhism and Catholicism, suggesting that the Catholic Church has finally "awakened" from its "outdated" and "exclusivist" ecclesiology. While Buddhism has not been in the news recently as much as Islam, its influence and attraction has steadily increased in the West. Can Catholic doctrine be reconciled with Buddhist beliefs and practices? The Coming of Buddhism. Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world, with about 370 million adherents, or about 6% of the world's population. Although less than 1% of Americans identify themselves as Buddhist, interest in this ancient belief system is growing.