
Zazen with children - status of the question

By Thierry Barnet

The end of the school year is near and here is a short description (or rather an inventory) of our experience, started five years ago, of setting up a practice in the dojo that would lead children to practise zazen. And similarly, the result of this experience conducted at school for two years.

We would like to share our experience, because - in our opinion - whenever you can, you should try giving this precious help to the practice to the children: at the dojos, at school, anywhere really.

As M. Roland Yuno Rech says, children are the seeds of future generations. It is important to give true foundations to the young generation, a spiritual base that, in our opinion, they lack cruelly.

Most of them are left to themselves and often the child is lacking guidance, confronted with feeble parental control, and constructs himself without knowing any boundaries. The limit is always pushed further away.

Without criticising, one can observe through discussions and when we listen to nowadays parents that they are themselves children rearing children. They only know external activities and excitements, incessant stimuli that lead them into a perpetual mental movement. They lose the sense of the quest for meaning and it is frequent to see young children being desperate, in great suffering, and who can't find another outlet than violence under all its forms. It's a pity, because these children are close to something that we, adults, have sometimes forgotten.

This is a description which fortunately is not general, but unfortunately too frequent. We don't have the ambition to change the world and besides, not all children are responsive to what we propose to them.

Sometimes it's hard for us, and sometimes, confronted with the range of what we think should be necessary to help these children, we are tempted to give up. Hopefully we are two persons working together and we stimulate each other. This enables us to have more feedback, more ears to listen to what the children tells: "Ah, Corinne you know what? Zen makes me feel good" or "Now I do as you told me, when Mum and Dad are arguing, I go to my room and concentrate on my breathing, it calms me".

There are also parents who had a positive feedback from their children and who wish now that their children keep practicing this "Zen adapted to children" (as we call it) at the dojo. All this gives us the courage to continue and it motivates us to keep on trying on lighting the small light of spirituality in those that are not receptive. We wish to show them that there are other things than mental activity, than unbridled search for external pleasures which will always be transient. For us, this approach towards spirituality, even in a lay environment, is not a problem. This spirituality, which we call "the mind of the heart", consist on trying to help them to feel directly through their bodies.

The assets acquired by the heart are always positive, but the assets gained by the mental are always fragile and temporary. When the heart speaks, the children see us as friends. We arrive in the schoolyard and some of them jump in our arms as they would do with their parents. We are the only external school workers with whom the children react this way. We don't try to explain it, but we look with joy at the small seed of spirituality that was planted.