
Zen with the children

By Thierry Barnet

Since last year, our dojo of Ceyreste-La Ciotat offers zen practice sessions designed for the children. We let our "Zen for Kids" known by the Associations Forum of our city. Of course, the idea is not to copy the practice we have among adults, we'd rather try to plant the seeds of our zazen practice to the children since they are the future.

Last year, we had two children, then three, and this year they are four, and very diligent. We practice every other Monday, the session lasts one hour.

The children arrive at the dojo about ten minutes before zazen. They take a blanket or zafuton where upon they lay their zafu. They sit as they want, but they usually sit in Burma style (crossed legs, knees on the floor). We begin with observing silence and a short zazen of five minutes.

Then, we start again, but this time we observe our mood, what we call our "weather report", we look within ourselves whether it is sunny, meaning that we feel good, there is nothing special to report. But it can be sunny and windy, it means that we feel good but there are few restless thoughts. If it's cloudy there are some disturbing emotions, etc. We make these observations, as we would observe the climate outside. They also practice the same observation at home. It's quite like a homework, it is not an obligation, it's up to them.

After this weather report of the current moment, they take out a small notebook where they have reported their observations made at home, we found that they do it quite regularly. And we discuss how it went and about the rigors of the "indoor climate" :)

We have started sewing the kesa point to the pace of the inhalation and exhalation. We play the "body explorers", sitting on the zafu or lying down, we explore the different parts of our body, what we feel. Children are extraordinary in their feelings. One day, playing explorer, a seven years old girl, began to giggle, she kept laughing and then laughter spread in the dojo, it was simple and joyful. We asked Camille: "Why did you start laughing?" She said she did not know what was happening, her body tickled everywhere, she felt her body moved by itself, it was alive and joyful, and the others said: "Yes, that's it." And this is how three small Buddha taught us where the joy that suddenly loomed in the dojo, came from.

Once, during a short zazen with the children, one practiced with the eyes closed and the other with open eyes. At the end, the one who had practiced with his eyes closed was bombarded with thoughts on what he had done before, and what he would do in the evening. The child who had kept his eyes open, had no thoughts about himself, but described all that had happened outside: birds, a passing motorcycle, etc. This is why we practice with the eyes half-closed :)

There are so many anecdotes... Children are interested in everything; somehow they are close to something adults are oblivious of. They are interested in the sounds of the drum, the

mokugyo, the bells. Sometimes we pretend we have a ceremony, and it is amazing to see how regular and accurate children are when they play the instruments.

What is also interesting, is that zen for the children is a skillful means to get the parents interested in zazen. A mother came to practice and a dad said he would come.

Here, we wanted to share our enthusiasm with you. For those who would be interested in starting up zen sessions for children, do not hesitate to ask us, we would be glad to exchange and share our little experience.

It should be noted that a kindergarten is interested in this approach of zen, and some college professors are also interested.

We remain convinced that there is much to do.