
Zazen with children... Why not?

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As part of an inter-philosophical project, the Group of Oostende (Belgium) was asked to introduce Zen Buddhism to about 150 young people aged between 10 and 12. Besides the dojo, small groups also visited a mosque, a synagogue, a church, a convent of nuns and another secular Centre in town. It was an interesting challenge to make a boisterous and talkative group of teenagers have a personal reflexion and inner meeting within the serenity and calm of zazen.

“Before entering the dojo ... we are going to take off our shoes and remain quiet...” says Jackie Butaye already sitting in zazen in the dojo and (Jackie comes from the dojo of Brugge, and was there to help us). A little bit ill at ease while looking for a suitable zafu, there was a mixture of bewilderment and observation, interrogative little faces, guffaws which eventually died down to calm and stillness.”

My experience with a group of this age taught me that life is not always easy for children: without generalizing, I would say that a negative behaviour has nothing but one purpose: to attract attention and, in fact it is often a way to be accepted by a group and consolidate one's position. When I mention “negative behaviours” I am actually referring to the teasing and making fun of others, (some children are quite good with words), torturing animals, degrading trees and shrubs, reducing things into pieces with roughness; behaviours which develop in an environment of fear, self-doubt and sadness. To me it was the perfect starting point to reflect on some basics of our practice.

During a brainstorming exercise, we tried to introduce the children to concepts such as “Buddha”, “Buddha nature”, “interdependence”, “impermanence” and “emptiness”. It is not an easy task to bring such concepts into the world of children, but again to our own surprise, it worked! I gather from what I felt and experienced, that these topics should not be left out from conversations with children, and that their understanding of things is generally widely underestimated.

More concretely, we steered our discussion on what they had for breakfast. The typical “choco bread” was the perfect way to trace the production process back up to the source: the bread, the seller at the store, the baker, the miller, the farmer who ploughs his field, sows the seeds into a fertile soil that both the rain and the sunlight will germinate. Knowing how cocoa beans are cultivated on the other side of the world was a good way to address the issue of fair trade. This exercise could easily be extended to other components of their daily life.

Realising that “everything and everyone is connected with everyone” was easy and we talked about the special place of each and its participation in the chain of life. From that brainstorming, we swiftly moved on to talking about desirable behaviours children could embody in their daily life, considering what in their own behaviour or that of others could cause sadness or grief (link between “grabbing” and “suffering”).

Thus, some kai arose spontaneously: « « Sometimes it is allright that something provokes anger (e.g. in case of injustice), but « What do we do with frustration or helplessness feelings, and how do we make them positive ... » « What meaning is there in crushing a snail? »

And: « Sometimes what we say or our words are like killers... » or « A little lie is better than hurting,... or out of fear,... or to stick plainly a label on someone instead of .. »

We let the conversation move to the question of what makes them happy, themselves and others. Finally, the children easily define which behaviour can contribute to their happiness and that of the world around them AND - by extension - that of the whole world, in short: a children code of ethics.

When they saw some pictures of a person at different stages of his lifetime, the concept of "impermanence" became very tangible. So much so that some felt like sharing with the group their feelings about the death of a family member or an animal, disease, nature conservation, etc.

Each group activity ended with a moment of silence ... And thus the initial group of restless teenagers had turned into silent "zazeners". Their experience with silence, with the "here and now," was generally positively greeted. Children commented on their experience of silence: "I heard my stomach rumble", "I heard seagulls cry", "I felt happy" ... or "sad" ...

There was barely a moment left for personal questions ... that a new group already made its appearance. They left home with a bookmark with a Zen quote, as a souvenir.

Given the limited time we were allowed and the enthusiasm of the children, we were invited to continue this experience at school and come to talk about these themes.