
Zazen with prisoners

By Eveline Pascual, Aachen Dojo, May 2012

Once a month I go to prison, from my own will. For I do zazen with few prisoners. One of them had written to ask me to create a group of zazen in the prison of Aachen. After several months, we managed to do it, and since January 2008 we have been doing zazen on a regular base.

The prison rules are strict : zafus are banned, we sit on the prison folded blankets. We are granted two hours sharp, not one extra second. We already had to put our shoes in the corridor several times, because we had to leave the room. Only minimum equipment is allowed. In the beginning I had to go through tough negotiations for each accessory I was bringing in : a statue of Buddha, the bell, kusen file etc. But we improvise and what really matters is that we do zazen.

As the time granted is short, I must limit the introduction to the beginners. Ceremonies are adapted, almost all chant the Hannya Shingyo with a strong and firm voice.

Many have physical problems and consequently have troubles sitting in the posture of zazen. But they try hard. In order to correct the posture, at the dojo or during sesshins, we touch the sacrum of the practitioner, there I have to ask politely (and respectfully) whether I am allowed to correct the posture. The practioners are « tough » guys, that means they have imprisonment sentences of several years, Why ? (What did they do ?) I don't want to know, they can talk about it to a therapist, to my knowledge there is no one who has committed rape, sexual offences with children, since those ones are imprisoned separately and have no priveleges.

I never feared to spend two hours alone with my « blokes ». They are between 25 and 60 years old, a third of them are Muslims and they have a strong posture. Although some of them have injured back or knees, or an impressive amount of metal in their body, as a consequence of bones fractures, they force themselves to get the best posture adapted to their situation.

They are very eager to share their views, they don't want unfocused conversations that go in all directions, but they would rather talk about the practice, about a kusen from the Shobogenzo or about zen in the daily life, which is very different here (in the prison) from outside. Every time it is demanding and challenging for me. When I prepare a kusen or speak with them, I must be very cautious since their life and situation are so different. Sometimes question arise such as « Would it be good or normal if I beat up a children sexual offender ? Would it be actually a good deed ? »

It is unfortunate for the group, each time a regular and diligent practitioner leaves or is transferred somewhere else. Of course there are some who stop after three or four times, because it is too strenuous, or because there are no biscuits ... But the ones who do stay practise very seriously. They have time to get into it, in their ways. In the sangha we have already gathered many books on buddhist subjects and we gave them to the library of the prison, so everyone can borrow one. Some of them have even bought books like the Shobogenzo.

To me it is refreshing to see how some of them get transformed with the practice. In this microcosm of the prison, it is more obvious than in the outside world. They begin to open up, they learn to get to understand, ask the right questions, want to know and learn more and are craving for further teachings.

Two of them asked the bodhisattva ordination. After talking with Roland who gave me his approval, I made an ordination workshop especially for the two, which didn't really please the guardians, because it meant more work for them, and they made it clear to me. But with the help of the social worker, of Silvia Leyer and of other few members of our dojo, I made an ordination ceremony, although rather improvised, but somehow alike the one of Grube or Maredsous : with the same sutras, sanpais, vows, repentance ceremony, rakusu, the transmission... They were greeted by the sangha and they wear their rakusu during zazen, of course.

Once a month I go to the prison and help few prisoners to run away... not from the building with its bars at the windows and at the numerous security doors, but the prison in their head. Most of the liberated ones, drag the prison in themselves for the rest of their life. The ones who practise zazen, leave behind them the prison within the prison ...