

Freeing the mind

Interview with Droupgyu Karma

Lama Droupgyu has completed two retreats of three years and three months in Auvergne. She gives teachings and conferences on Buddhism with warmth and simplicity. For many years she was vice-president of the French Buddhist Union and for over six years she has served as the national prison chaplain for Buddhist worship.



You meet many prisoners. What are the recurrent sufferings they may experience?

A lot of anger of course, but also helplessness and feelings of being powerless to change the situation. This creates rejection and a fear of not being able to cope with what is happening, often leading to sadness and depression.

There are the convicted and there are the accused, who are still awaiting trial. The latter do not yet know what will happen to them: 1 year, 3 years, 10 years... It makes a big difference. It is a very uncomfortable situation that causes a lot of anxiety. Once the person is sentenced, after the shock of the sentence - which is always very bad news compared to the hopes that the detainee had - there is a time of acceptance and settling into the situation. From that point on, something else may become foreseeable. The person knows the length and term of his/her detention and can envisage beneficial activities to prepare for his/her release. On the one hand, there are studies, apprenticeships, vocational training for a better social reintegration, and on the other hand there is religious practice: study, reflection and meditation which invites to a more intimate reflection and introspection,

Even if the punishment to be served is 10 or 15 years or even life, we can talk about the aftermath. But we can also talk about the now, about the importance of the attention and vigilance that we can develop from moment to moment, in the benevolent quality of our actions, which then become the source of relaxation and wisdom. This is how to develop a quality of life even in a difficult environment.

Is the relationship to time different in prison?

Imprisonment replaced corporal punishment in 1789. In 1791, the Constituent Assembly established imprisonment as a punishment.

In 1819, the status of chaplain was officially created for the Catholic religion, and in 1905 the law of the separation of Church and State, which is currently in force.

In our society, where the principle of secularism applies, any person deprived of liberty has the right to have access to the beliefs of his or her choice; this applies to people in detention, in hospital and in the military.

The prison administration must "be able to meet the requirements of (their) religious, moral or spiritual life" (Article R.57-9-3 of the Code of Criminal Procedure extracted from the 1905 Law)

What is the link with boredom and apathy?

It is not that time in prison is different, time can seem long and boring because of not being able to control one's life with its usual distractions. Humans are very good at arranging their whole life in many activities and distractions; it is a way to avoid facing themselves. This is why it is difficult to find oneself in a situation where one is deprived of freedom.

Let's take a simple example. When we are stuck in a queuing or a traffic jam, we often tend to get bored, angry and upset. When we fully accept that we are in this situation, the emotion is de-escalated, so we relax and we can live each moment less difficultly, even comfortably. As long as we are in rejection and anger, this is impossible; we create boredom, agitation, and anxiety. When a person fully accepts the situation in which he or she finds himself or herself, and lives in tune with the conditions around him or her, then he or she can take care of the situation with a better state of mind.

Thus, individuals deprived of their liberty () by a court decision have the right to access spiritual accompaniment provided by chaplains of the religion or religions of their choice (in fact, they may attend several religions at the same time). The Buddhist prison chaplaincy has existed since 2012, organised by the Union Bouddhiste de France (UBF) and its chaplaincy management board. The national chaplain's mission is to recruit, train and accompany the chaplains in their activities. He/she is the interface between the UBF, the Ministry of Justice and the prison administration. Currently, there are about twenty Buddhist chaplains covering about fifty establishments out of the 187 prisons.

There is then a great joy in taking care of the present moment whatever its incongruity, its hardness, its difficulty. One can manage to put one's creativity at the service of the situation. This is why we encourage people in prison to put their benevolent skills at the service of others. The benefits are immense. Taking care of others is the best way to take care of oneself; it requires a little training and discernment to avoid falling into the trap of inappropriate generosity. Every situation can therefore be a source of enrichment.

Do detainees have much free time?

It all depends on what you call "free time", it's almost a paradox to say "free time" in prison because you are in a place of deprivation of freedom. The only freedom they have is to do or not to do what is proposed to them. Many activities are possible, sports, creative activities, studies, library, workshop work, vocational training, but places are limited because of overcrowding and security rules. Some of them, called auxis (for floor assistants), help with the distribution of meals, cleaning, help in the kitchen, etc. In their cells they have access to TV, radio and now telephones under the control of the prison administration.

(1) On 1 January 2020, exactly 70,651 people were detained in French prisons, for 61,080 operational places (figures from the Penitentiary Administration Directorate)

On the "spiritual" side, they can ask to participate in worship and/or to receive a visit from a chaplain in their cell, this being a right to which everyone has access. Currently we do not have enough Buddhist chaplains to meet all the requests..

Has the confinement of Covid19 changed the situation?

Yes, of course. During the March lockdown, visits from chaplains were cancelled, as well as those from outside speakers. That's why we set up a Buddhist chaplaincy hotline, which allowed detainees to call us free of charge in complete confidentiality.

For the second lockdown in November 2020, face-to-face meetings with the chaplains are being maintained in conditions that respect the barrier gestures, i.e. in dedicated rooms. This considerably reduces the number of possible meetings. This is why we have reintroduced a toll-free number to continue to meet the needs of those in demand.

What can a Buddhist chaplain offer to a detainee? What is the primary need? To be listened to and recognised?

"Much more than words, the simple attitude is to simply be there with the wish to relieve the suffering of the other" Trinlay Rinpoche gave this instruction during a meeting with the chaplains. It is a certain quality of presence, a welcome without judgement or limits. The chaplain responds to the written request of a detainee to meet with him. Sometimes it is simply listening. Other times the person asks questions and the chaplain is there to help them find answers. Sometimes it's existential questions, sometimes it's a simple curiosity towards the spiritual, sometimes it's an interest in Buddhism. Some come from a Buddhist background and are interested in their original tradition. Others are already Buddhist practitioners and are looking for specific guidance.

Is it necessary to have closeness with a detainee in order to accompany him/her towards less suffering? How is trust established?

It is in the quality of the relationship that more than a closeness can be established, a real trust. The chaplain is fortunate to be welcomed by the person who requests it in his cell, the only almost private space in detention. Being in their privacy establishes a privileged framework for exchanges. This is what allows for a space of encounter and authentic sharing where words can be released, resonate and open the mind to other perspectives.

The general public knows meditation and people in prison also come to Buddhism to practice meditation even if they are of other faiths. So we can teach them to meditate, there is no problem with that. In the Buddhist service we present the life of the Buddha and his teaching, and then meditation, everyone does what they want with it. The Buddha himself invited his audience to listen and reflect on his teaching. Buddhist chaplains are not there to convert people. Based on a benevolent ethic, they use the four noble truths and the four limitless thoughts to accompany meditation, which helps to develop emotional calm and mental stability. Those who wish to commit themselves to the path can take refuge in the Buddha and take ethical vows.

How can a chaplain welcome the suffering of the other without any personal resonance disturbing the relationship?

I am always touched by the suffering of others, sometimes it resonates very strongly in

me, but the more we understand the mechanisms, the less we let ourselves be carried away by it. The whole point of the Buddha's teaching is to guide us towards the beyond of suffering and its causes, thanks to methods and trainings, which allow a calming of the emotions and certain suppleness. The more we have experienced not letting ourselves be carried away by our own suffering, the more we can share with others the tools that have been useful to us.

One might think that prisoners are people who see a succession of very harsh situations that seem to constitute a spiral, a downward slope that will inevitably lead them to commit the irreparable and land in prison. Is this always the case?

There are some very painful experiences, of course, but not always. The situations that lead you to prison are multiple and can be the result of a simple negligence of your part, a lack of knowledge of the law, a sudden anger.

Let's be clear, without justifying anything, in the end we are responsible for our actions. The important thing is to understand how things work. Our actions are directed by our thoughts, so we must take care of them. Because of ignorance or carelessness we let ourselves be driven by so-called negative thoughts and emotions - negative because the result of the actions they produce is truly regrettable and pain producing. For example, some people have, in a moment of anger, killed a loved one and ended up in prison. It is probably not in vain that the Buddha warns us in a very direct way by telling us: a moment of anger can destroy kalpas of the double accumulation of merit and wisdom. So the more we are aware of the consequences of our actions, the more vigilant we will be about the states of mind that underlie them. Understanding the law of karma "cause and effect" invites us to think before we act and speak.

Yet the personal stories of detainees are very bitter. Is it more difficult to find the right balance?

Without minimising the suffering of being incarcerated, the suffering is the same everywhere. It is the same "outside" and "inside". There is a different environment, but the suffering is the same. The suffering is sometimes extreme. I have met people who are "free" in a "nice and comfortable" setting, completely trapped by their emotions and experiencing extreme suffering.

Are there prisoners who gain more inner freedom than people outside prison?

Yes of course, you can even meet philosophers in prison, it is not the setting that determines the capacity for inner freedom or not.

Could we say that incarceration takes on its full meaning here?

I wouldn't go so far as to say that, even though the original purpose of incarceration as a punishment was not to inflict physical punishment, but to allow, through isolation, an inner introspection that would allow social reintegration. For those who make the situation a path of reparation, evolution, awakening or inner liberation, then this particular time apart will make sense.

Accompanying detainees in prison means encountering situations of suffering. Yet chaplains testify to a certain joy that comes from this experience. How would you explain this?

I cannot explain it, I can see it, we have often reflected on it, the joy is there. Perhaps simply because we feel useful and that we are at the heart of our practice, which aims to liberate suffering. And then there are small moments of sharing, flashes of joy in the eyes, moments beyond time and walls. I like to take the example of the gardener who cultivates his garden; in the end we harvest what we have sown. When we want to grow beautiful flowers we must first prepare the ground, we start to pull out the weeds and sometimes the brambles that invade it. It takes time and sometimes you get scratched, but it is worth it. It requires attention and vigilance. If you leave a few weeds, they can quickly take over the whole field again. The important thing is to understand how it works, which is why you need to observe, study and ask a good gardener for advice. And then what a joy when the flowers bloom!

Contact the Buddhist Chaplaincy in France: aumerie.carcerale@bouddhisme-france.org

For more information:

- The International Prison Observatory, French section: <https://oip.org/>
- Testimonial on: <https://www.prison-insider.com/>

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