

2006 FGS (Europe) Dharma Study and Ch'an Retreat

Ramon Klugt bezocht vorige maand de 1-week Retraite in Berlijn. Zijn verslag (in het Engels) volgt hieronder:

Have you tamed your monkey yet?

The mind often wanders off to faraway places, has worries, and even thinks sometimes irrelevant or useless things from the past or the future. It is hard to find the "heart" if the mind is hanging in the trees like a naughty monkey. Then how can one concentrate or really find once true nature? This wondering mind was called a monkey mind by venerable master Ben of the Fo Guan Monastery in Taiwan. She is an expert in meditation and also published loads of books over the last few years. Even though her schedule is always overloaded, she offered some of her precious time to teach us in a 5-days meditation course at Fo-Guan Shan temple in Berlin. For me it turned out to be one of the most valuable times in my life. Here is the story of how mediation set me more free from reckless wondering, how I experienced my first retreat.

When I registered for the Berlin 2006 meditation Course a month ago, I thought my life was fine. I did not have any illness, I am married to this great woman and I can pay for the bills. Then a week later I heard I have an eye disease which the doctor thinks is not curable. It was quite a shock in the beginning, but instead of falling in a black hole of worries my approach became one of dealing with this situation. And after the Berlin course I realized I had a powerful tool at hand and more hope on recovering.

My objectives where: to experience how a retreat works, know more about Buddhism and meditation and getting more self knowledge. My only expectation was that it would be tough. My limitations were the legs: I have vascular veins; I have to keep the blood circulating. So in this retreat I would be facing myself and my medical problems.

DAY 1, The piano and the Noble Silence, June 3rd 2006

The alarm clock had no mercy on my battered body when it woke me up at 4:00 am. A thick hour later I stood inside an abandoned Schiphol airport in the huge main hall. All around me daylight slowly faded in through the colored glass, as it was only 5:20 am. I saw a bit of a nervous smile behind the glasses of Carlos and Ed, who just walked in. Together we formed a very sleepy Dutch delegation, going to the FGS 2006 European Meditation Retreat in the Berlin Temple. As planned we touched German grounds two hours later and I said goodbye to Carlos and Ed at the airport, cause they first went to Poland for a day.

When I arrived at Berlin I was full of tension. First I paid a visit to our friends Shankar and his wife Ian-wen, that live in a fancy Berlin suburb. Shankar was, as in a movie, outside the porch like he was waiting for me. Shankar was moving to the other house in the same street, so soon I found myself carrying loads of interior including a full-sized piano that seemed to weight about a 100.000 kilo. Then we all had the most delicious homemade cherry and rhubarb pie. Shankar's phone was not jet connected so I helped him out. In a record time I fixed the wires and then I was taken to the metro station cause the temples registration was about to close at five that day. I got more nervous when I got in the FGS Berlin Temple. It looks massive compared to the He-Hua temple in Amsterdam.

I am greeted by the friendly nuns and they lent me a gray meditation robe, a washing bag, a badge with a room number and chore group number.

Then I got up to the dorm room. Inside kind faces were greeting me in different languages. One was a Chinese guy Chen from Norway; another was the Englishmen John from the large London group. Two beds remain to be filled by Carlos and Ed.

Directly after registration the briefing of this busy 6-day retreat started. I had a headache and worried how I should pass the coming days?

The schedule was simple and totally full: get up at 05:30 am, morning exercises, meditation, breakfast at 07:00 am, zen-tea ceremony, walking meditations and meditation till noon, lunch at noon, then take a rest till about 13:45 pm, then meditation and Dharma study till dinner, then our evening meditations and 10:00 pm exhausted-go-to-bedtime. Participants took chores every other day like cleaning, serving food and housekeeping. I kept my dairy just before the Dharma study or whenever I had time. The introduction was in Mandarin so we got an ear-piece to get English translation. A venerable master of Berlin told us about the discipline: there will be noble silence during the entire retreat. During dinner she taught us how to eat, sit strait, chant and behave as monks. In the evening the venerable master Ben from Taiwan gave us a Dharma lecture. There wasn't much to remember as tiredness set in.

It was clear to me that the coming days I would be facing myself. The evening meditation was a search for the right position and adjusting myself mentally to the retreat. Would I be able to get trough the first day? Or would this quest be too much for me? How would I reach peace if I was not able to pacify and control my own mind? And the biggest question: will I find a cure for my eye disease? Finally it's bedtime!! Thanks for silence! Thanks for this wonderful place where we have the opportunity to make friends with ourselves and each other. The lights go out and I sink into dreams.

BLIA ZOMERKAMP 2006: Chinese cultuurkamp voor jongeren

Vanaf vandaag kan men zich weer inschrijven voor het BLIA Zomerkamp, een speciaal kamp georganiseerd vanuit de Boeddhistische tempel dat zich richt op het onderwijzen van Chinese cultuur voor jongeren. De doelgroep zijn kinderen vanaf 6 jaar tot 18 jaar. Ook volwassenen kunnen meedoen, voor hun wordt een speciaal programma samengesteld zodat ze ook bij de kinderen kunnen zijn en toch op vakantie kunnen. De deelnemers worden vervolgens in aparte groepen ingedeeld op leeftijd om voor elke groep de juiste lessenspakket en begeleiding samen te stellen.

Dit jaar loopt de zomerkamp van 31 juli tot vrijdag 4 augustus. Gedurende deze 5 dagen krijgen de deelnemers les van drie docenten uit Taiwan. Zij zijn gespecialiseerd in Chinese Kungfu, Chinese dans en Chinese handwerken. Daarnaast zijn er jongeren die fungeren als groepsleiders en de kinderen begeleiden en ervaren zijn in het begeleiden van het zomerkamp.

Je kunt je inschrijven voor deze zomerkamp bij de He Hua tempel. Ook via onze website kan je terecht voor het verkrijgen van een inschrijfformulier.



DAY 2 Eat, Meditate, Sleep and Meditate again!

I got the good sleep I bargained for but it did not give me the relaxation I was after. Instead this day turned out to be a long durability test: trying to relax muscles and getting more tensed by the minute. At some point on this day I felt like bursting into tears. In the afternoon we slept for an hour and I was exhausted. It was such a good sleep! Quality matters after all! I woke up fresh, the pain was gone and I felt tranquil. As I got up Ed and Carlos entered the bedroom. Their eyes showed how tired they were. It must have been an adventure in Poland. I won't ask; we have noble silence. Master Ben started meditation and Dharma teaching again. Basically if we do meditation it is only dangerous if we do it without proper guidance or with no prior knowledge. Then she explained about all the phenomena that could occur during meditation. It sounded more like a science to me rather than a course. But she could teach fast, efficient and very nice. If you think meditation is having a nice sleep or laid back? Think again! It may look simple but the mind is one of the hardest things to master.

After the study in which I thought my head would explode (which it did not) I felt more motivation for meditation. The evening sessions went more peaceful and the last 24 hours already had a great influence on my body and mind! We went upstairs. Carlos was so tired; he fell asleep like a log. I had to cover him with a blanket! I went to bed full of energy and relaxed. I fell asleep in a great fashion, without worries in my head. Good, considered someone in the dormitory snored around the clock!

Day 3 Sam: Tai Chi on an abandoned Temple Square

The sunlight hit my eyes and my roommates were still fast asleep. Would Carlos take it today, and the others? Me? My attitude changed to try and see. I brushed and went for Tai-Chi on the empty temple square. Sun covered the area. And that is rare. Spring was not fantastic this week with all the rain, but the golden-green rays emanating from the sun set of on the Asian rooftop and touched my face. Hard to imagine we are in Germany! This looks like Ali-Shan! The wooden board called us for morning exercises.

During those, it appeared people are starting to pick up the rules and regulations. They seem more organized than they did in the first day that was filled with some disorder and even a bit of clumsiness. I wonder how this group looks on 8th June? The sounds people make during these morning sessions don't seem to disturb me, but yet I can't observe my mind. As an advanced beginner I am too busy with concentrating on my breath. My wondering mind is like a horse that has to be tamed by dragging it by the tail again and again everyday. After the lunch that was full of some of the best vegetarian food I have ever tasted, we had time to retire. Everyone fell asleep like a rock. Today I noticed I have less worries and that this "regime" makes me feel free. The night came soon, I must have enjoyed much!

Day 4 An endless search for position

Nothing better than a good night's sleep and we need every minute of it! I woke up totally fresh at five. That has not happened to me since the falling of the Berlin wall! The golden sun that bursts through the windows is just asking for a tai-chi. On the square I heard my private symphonic birds' orchestra. The smell of morning glory penetrated the sky. It gives such a relaxing feeling to be outside so early. It did not feel cold though it was barely ten degrees. Later that day it all got very difficult. My legs started to hurt and I searched for a better position. That search was to last until the end of this day and this retreat.

Day 5 The best was no position

The proximity of the end was being felt strongly by me. I still wanted to get some things done but my leg made sitting totally still impossible so I tried to accept that and move legs during meditation. Actually I had no position. It was hard to concentrate today and I tried repentance (kneeling before the Buddha) to get back in the rhythm. Fortunately the walking meditation offered inspiration. Concentrating on that helped. I wanted to stay in retreat longer and it was kind of sorry that tomorrow it would all be over. Maybe I have the chance to go for a month in the future? It was such an inspiration to feel that special contact with spiritual life so close by.

Day 6 Résumé

When I got up I felt the sorrow of parting. In the last week I became friends with strangers, now the last day has come for all of us. In the dorm, where we spent 5 good nights, people started to pack up and dress up for the last sessions and taking group pictures. The pictures were taken, as in Asian tradition with loads of fun. Our group was wonderful, hard working, and everybody followed and finished the training! I ended the day like I prefer to end it in He-Hua temple: sweeping the floor of the main shrine. A small group of us did some cleaning up so the main shrine could go back to daily life. Catherine Yang from London interviewed me and others about our experience during this retreat. I took my backpack and then I closed the door and stood outside on Berlins' streets again. I went back to Shankar's house to spend a nice day with them. Then I returned home to Holland and to my wife.

Final thoughts

Now the retreat was over it was a transition going back to normal life considering we barely spoke for 6 days. I learned about the power of silence. I experienced what creating affinity with others meant. Wherever I am I am amongst friends. Most of all I learned and experienced meditation in a pure form. After coming home my mind was still in this refined state of awareness for a few days.

It's one month later now. It was an experience to never forget and to carry with me. I have been practicing meditation and exercising in my own way every morning in the park. My body feels softer and also has lost weight but I feel strong. It takes more practice to tame a monkey mind. If my eye disease will cure? Time will tell. I trust that what I learned in Berlin could also help me to get through life more graceful. With this trust I leave you. Omiffo.

