

Counseling Buddhist Inmates At the Singapore Changi Prison Complex

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Counseling services at the above mentioned prison complex are provided by an organization known as the Buddhist Federation of Singapore. It is headed by a monk of the Mahayana tradition. I was accepted as a member in September of 2005, and had my first encounter with inmates in the prison complex during that same period.

My initial assignment was to a group of young offenders at the women's section. Their ages ranged from 17-21 years. The group at that time consisted of only 12-13 persons, which suited a greenhorn like me very well. One of the reasons I was posted there was because I spoke no Mandarin and those young ladies were among the most proficient, among female Buddhist inmates, in the English Language. In fact, two or three of them were preparing to sit for the 'A' Level Examination. For the first session, I was paired off with a counselor who had had some previous experience with the group. There was some apprehension on my part, as I had absolutely no idea what lay in store for me. Before being allowed to go through the first gate that led to the 'inner chambers' my fellow counselor and I had to declare every article that we were taking into the premises- from a pair of spectacles to notes prepared for the counseling session. Security was understandably tight. To get to where the inmates had been gathered we had to climb four flights of stairs. At each landing, the female police officer escorting us would produce a huge bunch of keys and open a gate or door before ushering us on to the next floor. When we finally arrived at where the inmates were waiting, the atmosphere felt vaguely familiar to me. Having taught in schools for over thirty years of my life, it seemed for a moment that I had been transported back to the school environment but with one crucial difference. While students back in the days when I was a school teacher would have been talking at the top of their voices and probably running in and out of the classroom, the group of inmates spoke in hushed tones, were very subdued and most importantly they were locked in. As soon as the door was unlocked, they stood to attention, greeted the police officer in military fashion and then extended greetings to my fellow counselor and me with a hearty "Good Morning, Madams". After making sure

that all the inmates were present, the officer locked the door and left us to our own devices. For me, the first few moments of the next two hours were spent trying to get a feel of whom I was dealing with – a ‘getting to know you’ session. Surprisingly, it took just a couple of minutes before the ice was broken and initial tension thawed. Before long, half of the group had offered me some insights into their individual experiences at the center. About a third of them were first time offenders. The rest, unfortunately, were the products of recidivism. Apart from one inmate in the group, the rest had all been incarcerated for rather serious drug-related matters, ranging from possession of substantial amounts of the illegal substances to being apprehended for peddling them. A couple of them were thankful that they were fortunate enough to have escaped the gallows. In Singapore, trafficking in drugs beyond a certain limit warrants the death penalty. So far no known trafficker on death row, whether local or foreign has had his or her sentence commuted. Surprisingly the majority of the group was somewhat relieved that they had not gotten off scot-free with their unlawful activities. Had they not been locked up, they said, they would probably have gone on to more daring exploits and the eventual punishment could have been far worse than a stint in prison.

The lone inmate who had not been brought in for any drug abuse activity was about twenty years of age. Hers was a case of assault of a serious nature. She appeared to be sullen and distant at first tight-lipped, too. It took about three sessions for her to thaw a little. She started to shed much of her defense mechanism after a while. A couple of months into my visits I realized she was with child- it was visibly apparent. My newfound respect for her took a leap forward when I saw how well she handled her predicament. Her composure was truly admirable. What she had going for her was a supportive family. Her mother and sister were ready to stand right behind her. Her sister would provide for her child after its birth.

I remained with the group of young women for about five months. During that time, my Sunday visits to them averaged three a month. By the third visit to them, I was feeling as completely at home as anyone possibly could under those circumstances and in a prison environment. Over time, the group seemed no different from the students I used to interact with. They (the inmates) were in fact a lot easier to ‘manage’. For the most part, they were non-judgmental and very willing to co-operate. Possibly the conditions

they were subjected to, like loss of privacy and deprivation of comfort levels that they had been used to contributed to the positive attitude they displayed. They seemed to possess a level of acceptance of their situation that bordered on resignation. Some of them seemed to be imbued with an almost angelic quality. Many a time counselors have had to suppress the urge to put their arms around them as a show of affection because physical contact of any kind is strictly prohibited.

Each counseling session lasted two hours and included chanting, discussion of suttas and meditation. Some of the group was actually quite well versed in the areas, of chanting and formal knowledge of Buddhist scriptures. All but two were new to meditation but they were willing to try it. As I came to know the young women better, I felt that I was a friend rather than a counselor, that I was befriending them and not there to formally offer advice. Another observation I made during the period of my association with the group was that while they were relatively young in terms of chronological age, they possess a maturity well beyond their years. It was the result of their circumstance. It made them worldly wise and could work for or against them in time. As more counselors were assigned to the group of young inmates, I decided to ask for a transfer to the male section. There was a large group of older women (aged between 30 and 55) that needed more counselors, but they were Mandarin speaking so I was out of my element there.

My transfer to the male section took a while because of the difficulty of getting a male counselor to accompany me on each visit. Apparently, male inmates- at least those receiving counseling from Buddhist institutions- outnumber their female counterparts. Male counselors have therefore been stretched very thin. Because of the difficulty I faced, I had to limit my visits to the group of male inmates to fortnightly. The guys I was assigned to numbered about 16. Their ages ranged from the late twenties to the mid fifties. They were a motley bunch. Some had the air and bearing of well-cultured people who had experienced the better things in life while at the other end of the spectrum were a few that clearly personified the expression 'down and out'. Nevertheless, working with this group was an experience I would not have missed for anything in this world. They were supposed to be a 'high risk' lot and were behind bars for criminal offences ranging from serious drug-related activities to murder, but I have not met to date another bunch of

men that has touched the core of my heart the way this group has. Hearing them chant and watching them practice meditation with such earnest endeavour is an inspirational experience to say the least. To top it all the majority of them are well-built and truly a force to reckon with in times of crisis. A couple of them are covered in tattoos on all four limbs. In the time I spend with them, I have tried to relate the practice of Dhamma to their everyday activities. They have been encouraged to transform whatever hardships they face into conditions that will help them navigate the Path of Dhamma more effectively. They have been reminded that any punishment meted out to them could be utilized as tools to unlock the door to spiritual freedom. While they have accepted the points discussed at our Dhamma sessions, as relevant and meaningful, both they and I realize the immensity of the tasks ahead of them; but they are willing to put their best foot forward. My sessions with them have been a truly rewarding and enriching experience for me. I hope it has been so for them too. Most of them are in for the long haul.

As it got more and more difficult to find a male counselor to accompany me on my visits, I have decided to put counselling on hold for the near future. Instead, I will spend time and offer my services to the after-care branch of the society. I have volunteered to conduct English class for ex-offenders as well as members of their families on a weekly basis at the centre funded by the Buddhist Federation. The classes will commence as soon as registration has been completed. In time, I may find my way back to the prison complex and resume counseling. Nothing is certain after all.