

By Zenshin Michael Haederle

It is the noisiest zendo you could imagine. As we sit in semidarkness on donated zafus and zabutons, passersby in the corridor outside holler at one another and slam shut heavy steel doors.

Even when the cacophony dies down, there's the steady thrum of the ventilation system. It's never completely quiet here in Bernalillo County's Metropolitan Detention Center, but these inmates I'm sitting with are learning that the busiest place of all is inside their own heads.

Sometimes you can practically see the torrent of distracting thoughts. Mario, a tall, stoop-shouldered twenty-something, sighs, twisting from side to side as he shifts on the cushion. He has scoliosis in his back, but most of his discomfort is mental. He still hasn't learned the importance of holding your seat, no matter what is erupting on the inside.

James, on the other hand, sits like a pro, his legs folded into a neat quarter lotus and his mudra impeccable. He's a small, wiry guy with gaunt features, a droopy mustache and a delicate teardrop tattooed below his right eye. In the months since he started zazen, he's taken to sitting in his cell every night.

"I like to do the breathing," he tells me. "It calms me down."

It's safe to assume that most of the people incarcerated here have never even heard of zazen, let alone tried it. But now it is being offered several days a week to the guys in this pod courtesy of Comienzos, a small non-profit group that provides therapeutic programs to the jail's population.

I got involved a few months back after Giko David Rubin, a dharma brother, met a Comienzos volunteer and learned that they wanted to expand the meditation program at the jail. When Giko asked if I would be interested in helping out I said sure. I figured these folks could probably benefit from some zazen.

The meditation classes were pioneered by Cliff Wilkie, a laconic Texan who has been sitting on and off since the 1970s. Now, Cliff, Giko and I offer zazen four days a week, while other volunteers come in to teach yoga or lead classes in Non-Violent Communication.

The MDC sits high on a ridge southwest of downtown with a breathtaking view of the Rio Grande Valley. It's a long, low-slung building that could pass for a high school, except there aren't any windows. The inmates don't see any of this, of course. They're locked up in pods, self-contained units that sit behind several layers of security.

The MDC is the 39th largest jail in the U.S., processing some 40,000 inmates a year. It's comparatively well run, but it's over capacity, with three inmates bunking in cells designed for two. A county jail has two classes of inmates. Some are awaiting court appearances or trial. If they cannot post bond, they may be here for a long time. Others are serving sentences for misdemeanor convictions (364 days or less). Unlike state prisons, where people serve defined sentences, the jail's population is fluid, with people constantly cycling in and out.

Each pod consists of a big central day room lined by two tiers of cells. A lone corrections officer sits at a raised podium, presiding over perhaps 100 inmates while video surveillance cameras keep watch overhead. To enter the pod you pass through the sally port, an airlock with electronically controlled doors at both ends. I still get the

willies each time I enter and hear the door to the outside clang shut behind me, but then I remind myself to breathe.

The inmates mill around, some playing cards or chess at the steel tables bolted to the floor, while others playing handball in the open-air courtyard with its featureless patch of blue sky. Each wears an orange tunic and pants, white socks and sandals or tennis shoes with Velcro straps. I gather together the regulars who have been sitting with us recently – James, Luis, Mario, Sam – and jot their names on a sheet of paper, which I hand to the C.O.

I've gotten to know these guys fairly well over the past month or so. I don't ask them what they're in for. I could easily look it up online, but I don't really want to know. I'd prefer to see them as they are here, now, rather as the embodiment of their arrest record. It's safe to assume most everyone here has substance abuse problems, but now that they have been inside awhile and gotten clean, most of them seem like pretty nice guys.

We're buzzed out of the pod and walk across the hall to the small classroom that serves as our makeshift zendo. I have already unlocked the closet, pulled out the cushions and arranged them. Without much preamble, everyone takes a seat.

As we sit, I sneak a peek from time to time to see how they're doing. Luis, who can look intimidating, has a softer expression when he sits (he says it helps him deal with the anger that sometimes comes up). Sam, an older guy with a neatly trimmed beard, sits on a chair, breathing quietly. I recall him telling me that he reads his Bible every day.

One of the worst things about being locked up is the boredom. Spending every day looking at the same faces and staring at the same walls is mind-numbingly dull. Some people look forward to their trips to the courthouse downtown just so they can see some fresh air and scenery.

Another aggravation is the randomness of life on the inside. You never know for sure when anything is going to happen. Some days the chow cart is wheeled in at 10 and others it's at 11. Same thing with the meds cart that a nurse wheels from pod to pod, and countless other events during the day.

I've experienced this myself, in small ways. I have made the half-hour drive out to the MDC, only to find all the prisoners locked in their cells because the master hard drive controlling all the electronic locks was down. Another time, the entire pod was empty except for teams of COs and dogs searching each cell for contraband.

Lack of control. It's a recurring theme when you're locked up. Deprived of nearly every form of choice, you're treated like a child in an adult's body. Why would anyone want to live like this, I wonder.

And yet some people seem to come back here over and over. For them, jail has become a constant in their lives. They're not happy to be here, but it's familiar, and they accept it.

After half an hour I bring the sitting to a close. Everyone stretches as we take a few minutes to talk about what came up. Persistent thinking is the biggest problem for these guys – same as on the outside. I remind them that it doesn't matter whether their minds were busy or calm: the important thing is to steadily and persistently bring the mind back to the breath.

A few minutes later, as we enter the sally port to return to the pod, Luis pauses to shake my hand. "Thank you for coming," he says. Funny thing is, I feel as though I'm the one who should be expressing gratitude. At least I get to go home.