



Sangha and Service

Ligmincha's Prison Project



"If we listen to our hearts and dare with confidence – then wonderful things are possible." This quote from Nicolas Gounaropoulos of Belgium, student of Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, captures the positive realization he had when working with Ligmincha's Prison Project. This article features an update on some of the service work he is doing in prisons and elsewhere. In a previous interview with Ton Bisscheroux in the 2012 *Ligmincha Europe Magazine*, Hannah Lloyd in Virginia and Nicolas Gounaropoulos in Belgium discussed their work with Ligmincha's Prison Project, established by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche in 2009. VOCL recently caught up with Nicolas, who offered some news and insights about his recent efforts. (VOCL plans to have an update from Hannah about her work in a subsequent issue.) Read the entire interview in [Ligmincha Europe Magazine](#), Winter 20912

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VOCL: In your previous interview with Ton, we learned about some of the positive effects of the practices with the prisoners you were working with, Nicolas: *"We practiced The Nine Breathings of Purification, Tsa Lung, Five Warrior Syllables and resting in the nature of mind. During that time I realized more than ever how Rinpoche's teachings are accessible and totally adequate to modern society in all conditions and places. The inmates entered directly into the practice and were talking with me about the positive effects they experienced."*

Can you tell us what some of the biggest challenges and also biggest rewards have been with this type of service?

Nicolas Gounaropoulos: The biggest challenge for me was entering a jail and starting a group. But I have realized how if we listen to our hearts and dare with confidence, then wonderful things are possible. That was one of the rewards, and another one was to see that the project is not only useful to the inmates, but also has an impact on the guards and on the people from outside, as well. Hearing that these kind of things are possible helps in changing

the perception of the people and bringing more openness.

Sometimes I hear people saying, "Why are they doing these teachings in jail? These inmates deserve that?" And I always answer, "If it was your brother or your son who was in this jail, would you be happy that he could benefit from these teachings and practices?"

We have to use our creativity by deepening our connection with refuge. From there, it's an incredible place for transformation. I have so much gratitude for the gift of Rinpoche's teachings and for his views full of compassion. It's so deep and actual.



VOCL: Thank you, that's beautiful, Nicolas. Would you share an experience that you've had which illustrates the positive benefits of the program?

NG: I've heard from the participants that they are able to find more peace. A lot of the prisoners complain of sleep problems, and they said that the practice helped them a lot. They appreciated refuge, breathing and tsa lung, but they have some difficulties with sound practice. I was surprised at first to see how sound made them uncomfortable because for me it's a very powerful practice and there are so many benefits. But I realized that they are very conditioned by the external image and in doing sound practice we need to let go of our masks. This is difficult for them because they always feel they need to keep a kind of vigilance. That is probably a way for them to protect themselves.

VOCL: How has your work in prisons and elsewhere been going since we last heard from you

in 2012?

NG: In the last few years, I decided to participate in the first European 3 Doors Academy, and it has changed a lot of things for me. It was one of the most beautiful experiences in my life. I am a graduate now and doing the Presenter path, and that has opened new possibilities in sharing the practice in different ways.

I hold a group every month in a therapeutic center for people who have drug addictions. Some of them have electronic bracelets and are out on prison terms. The therapeutic team from the center is very enthusiastic, and the psychologist participates in every course and is very interested to have feedback on what I observe during the meditation. They asked for a subsidy from the city and they received it. We planned dates for the whole year. After that, we will see if we continue with the meditation program.

I continue, too, to teach meditation to children as a regular course, and hope to start a group in September for people with handicaps but that is also open to everybody, too. The idea is to practice all together.

VOCL: It's wonderful that you have been able to be of help in some very difficult environments and with people who can really benefit, Nicolas. Were you able to offer the meditation practices to the prison guards, as you had hoped in the previous interview in the *Ligmincha Europe magazine* ?

NG: Unfortunately not, but I continue to hope to do it. The terrorist attacks that took place in March this year in Belgium created a difficult climate, and the time is not favorable for these kinds of projects. At the moment it is very difficult in jail. We have the worst jails in Europe, and the situation is very tense. There is a lot of overpopulation, and the state has to rent places in the jails of other countries like Holland. The guards are on strike for weeks, and they even ask for the police, the army and even the fire department to take their place. That creates very difficult situations for the inmates where their rights are not respected, as though they never even had rights, and they are made to live in inhuman conditions.

VOCL: Is there anything else you'd like to share about the program? Your hopes? The future?

NG: I hope that we will find some ways to support one another. Alone, it's sometimes difficult, but together it can be very powerful.