

My first teaching trip to Israel

Given the situation in Israel these days, I was expecting very strict security checks on my flight from Paris to Tel Aviv. However, there was only a bit more security in Paris and Vienna for the flight—much less than I had prepared for. After a three hour flight I arrived at the Tel Aviv airport. It felt just like at any airport in the world. I took my luggage and went to meet sangha members Yuval and Gal, who were there smiling, and off we went. In the car I was all eyes and ears, expecting I don't know what... almost anything.

The weather was great: blue sky, streets filled with handsome people on errands. I thought, "This is nothing like what I saw on television." In the evening Yuval took me for a long walk along the sea. The beach was beautiful. We sat in chairs in the middle of the beach, having wine and watching the sun set over the sea. What could be more relaxing and peaceful?

The retreat started the next day in Tevon. We drove to the retreat through the Carmel Mountains, from which I could admire some more of this beautiful country. Now, being closer to the people, I had started to feel more of what's behind their handsome faces and beautiful scen-

ery, a shadowy sorrow and sadness that does not surface easily. People live, work, have families—try to continue "normal" life, no matter how heavy the emotional "backpack" they drag around.

The retreat started; twenty people crowded into a small dharma room. There was a warm, nice fragrance coming from the surrounding trees. A constant bird's song accompanied our practice. It was the very first retreat in Israel with formal meals. Step by step, the students learned the forms, with laughter and "yuk" faces when the "tea time" came. At the same time, "try mind" and "just do it" appeared strongly.

In the middle of the day interviews began. One student came with "I killed a man"; another with "I poured gasoline on myself and burned my body"; yet another, "I was in the army... now how can I make a change in this world?" The teaching words are the same everywhere in the world: great love and compassion, forgiveness and tolerance, keep a wide mind clear like space. The same words everywhere, but here, because of the suffering, they sounded heavier and seemed to have a more poignant meaning. During the dharma talk one woman with tears

rolling on her cheeks asked, "Is it possible that IT will end some day?" In that question great doubt and great hope became entangled; everything comes and goes, ends... one has to be patient and strong to let go and return to a loving and compassionate mind, to forgive and be tolerant.

The day the Yong Maeng Jong Jin ended, there was a peace demonstration in Tel Aviv in memory of the assassinated prime minister, Itzhak Rabin. From Yuval's home we could hear the music and speeches. Heavily armed security and army people walked by us as we sat on a bench having a glass of wine. The security people gave us short but warm smiles, cautious eyes looking for any danger.

The next day I left for home. At the airport, a security guard questioned me for more than an hour. The guard's eyes were accusing, the words raw and sharp... unforgiving. I did a strong "they are only doing their job" mantra to stay calm and not let any personal anger appear. The questions: "Where do you come from?" "Why are you here?" "What is Zen?" "What is meditation?" "What do you care?" Again a new dimension to the old dharma words appeared. In just three hours I was in the Vienna airport, and a universe away from that world.

Sitting in the Paris Zen Center's garden a few days later, my heart felt shrunken. I thought, "Oh, how lucky we are," but at the same time I would like to stay with the Israeli sangha. A few days later I received a letter from one of the participants saying, "Thank you for your teaching and for coming to Israel, when most people just want to run away from it."

*Israel*

*Blue sky and  
Blue mountain  
Warm sun and  
Warm faces  
Red flowers and  
Red blood  
People bow in repentance and  
People bow in anger  
Where is the mistake?  
Katz!  
Outside, in the green trees  
Birds are singing  
Peace song*

