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## CAUGHT IN THE PEACE OF MEDITATION

Jorgen, an 'old friend' of the Danish prison authorities, for a couple of hours each Friday for the last five months, has been sitting quietly in a meditation group...and he is truly relishing it.

He began meditating in 1985 in the psychiatric ward of Herstedvester Prison and continued when he was transferred to the state prison in Vridsloselille. Jorgen was sentenced for life (for manslaughter). In Vridsloselille he was meditating regularly for 6 years until he was released two and half years ago.

After 15 years of seclusion there was quiet a bit to catch up on and so he didn't find time for meditation. Now the 43-year old jailbird has found time again. The court has revived his life sentence after finding him guilty of armed robbery.

We are meeting Jorgen at the office of the Niels Lindholm, Director of Education for Prisons, in Copenhagen. You find colourful paintings on the walls, vases with dried flowers, coffee in recycled cups and solid bars behind the windows.

Niels Lindholm has 'very good experiences' with meditation in prisons and believes that quiet a few of the prisoners are happy with the meditation classes. *"You can feel that it really helps the inmates, that it is important for them. It's like a totally different kind of peace comes over them"*.

He was the first one to introduce meditation into Danish prisons as long ago as 1985, in Herstedvester Prison, where he had the responsibility for the education. *"It was a success"*, he remembers. From 1990 meditation has been offered in Vestre Prison, where Niels Lindholm is working today.

Meditation has continued to be taught here for eight years. The weekly course with 10 to 12 participants is always overbooked and half a dozen of the inmates are on the waiting list. For security reason the class has to be kept at maximum 12.

### **'A peaceful soul'**

*"I had been sitting in solitary confinement for 21 months, when I started to learn meditation",* Jorgen explains in a smooth voice. *"In the beginning it was two hours out from the prison ward - two hours for doing something else. We were a small group who made up our own rules. Nobody was taking drugs that day we were meditating and what we were told in the meditation classes we kept as a secret. A doctor from our ward planned to supervise us, which, of course, we rejected.*

*When I was transferred to the state prison of Vridsloselille, I continued with my meditation for a further six years. Now I am here again, imprisoned for robbery. The*

*more you practise meditation the more things come up from deep within. No matter where you are physically sitting, in a cave in Himalayas, in a prison ward or in meditation, you are bound to think quite a bit: Why has my destiny become like this? Is it karma? Ones' way of thinking and behaviour gradually starts to change. One becomes a little bit more positive."*

- So what is the reason that you are sitting here again?

*"Well, I was part of a gang who robbed a national lottery collection. I remember clearly, that I considered if it was worthwhile. I would never have robbed a bank or Mrs. Jones. When I re-entered the prison five months ago it was important for me to understand, why I did it. Ten years ago I was another person. Today I'm a much more peaceful person and I gave it more than one thought before I let loose the aggression, I build up here. When one meditates, one understands why you carry the anger inside."*

- Do you also meditate when you are alone?

*"I practice meditation for at least one hour every day. It soothes me inside. It would be good for everybody here to learn meditation. But many believe it to be a kind of hocus-pocus. You have to be ready yourself."*

### **Brahma Kumaris**

The classes in meditation in Vestre Prison have, for the last eight years, been conducted by Sonja Olsson from the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University in Copenhagen. Niels Lindholm, the Director of Education, has himself been going through the meditation course at the Brahma Kumaris. He says, *"My time was well spent. It did give me something"*.

The method of meditation which Sonja Olsson is teaching is called Raja Yoga. *"It's a form of meditation where you use the power of thoughts to experience yourself as a peaceful soul. The experience that this provides translates into practical motivation in daily life"*, says Sonja Olsson, practically without Swedish accent. She believes there is a huge need for this kind of thing between the inmates.

*"First I ask the participants to share their good qualities. Some don't even believe they have any, but after a while they will usually find them. After some time they can sit still for a quarter of an hour to a guided meditation. For some this is the only time in the week, where they can truly relax"*.

In the cell some are listening to the guided meditations, which Sonja Olsson has recorded on tape. Jorgen's last word: *"Everybody should have this to relax to"*.