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On Sunday; Zen Quest: Serenity In Sing Sing

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WITH the quarter-century burst of nostalgia under way about the 1960's and the tarnished idealism and even jail time of its middle-class protagonists, it is proper to salute Kobutsu Kevin Malone this morning on the quiet, yea silent occasion of his ordination to the priesthood of Buddhism.

Finally, the Malone family has a priest after all its hopes for young Kevin's parochial school years saw him cycle out into the personal searchings of the 60's, in which, among other things, he sampled the Rinzai Zen sect. He never abandoned its simple but laborious discipline across a checkerboard of survival in a dozen different pursuits. It took him 25 years to become a priest. Others have done it in five years, but that only leaves him prouder this morning as he is ordained at the age of 43.

More important for society, Kobutsu -- he took this additional Buddhist name -- already has a working congregation, a zendo, to see to once a week inside Sing Sing prison in Ossining, where he drives every Monday night from his job in Queens and leads a group of a dozen prisoners in the absolute silence and bodily stillness of Buddhist meditation.

Squat and merry-eyed with short gray hair, Mr. Malone seems more leprechaun than priest until he dons his long, deep blue Buddhist robe and enters the maximum-security prison. (He ascends to the black robe today when his abbot ordains him.) The background clang and clamor of men kept from freedom nibbles at the serenity of the zendo in a basement meeting room.

Initially, he found mostly convict dabblers looking for a social outlet, more than a spiritual inlet, when Mr. Malone, a strictly nonfelonious outsider, took over direction of an informal Sing Sing meditation group 18 months ago.

"A typical meeting consisted of 15 minutes of desultory meditation and the remainder of the two hours dedicated to jailhouse politics," Mr. Malone recounts in a deep voice laced with amusement at life's turnings. "The inmates tried to con me into setting up a post office box and soliciting donations and volunteers. I told them I was going to teach serious, grueling Rinzai Zen meditation and if they wanted to sit and shoot the bull they'd have to get out."

They all finally left, he says. "At first I'd go inside and sit by myself for the two hours, but then guys got curious," Mr. Malone says. "Of course, Zen is useless for most people, but there is that 1 percent who can handle it. It's a method of becoming sane, I tell the inmates. There's no beliefs involved. It's a life practice and is probably the most effective way to bring about change on a fundamental level."

In his no-nonsense sessions, Mr. Malone, assisted by another outside volunteer, Elizabeth Potter, ejects newcomers who might want to make noise. "If they slouch I go over and apply pressure to make them kneel properly," he says of his role in teaching the breathing and meditation discipline. "We keep perfectly still. It's about experiencing natural breathing and noticing how the mind works."

Prison officials have been skeptical, especially when Mr. Malone arrived with a traditional kesaku, a firm, slender paddle that, in ritual procedure, is used to relieve muscle tension with the delivery of a sharp blow. "They were reluctant but they finally allowed that in," he says, smiling and saying that Sing Sing administrators like Brant Kehn and Elias Carrillo have been "open minded and fair" as he brought in other vital needs like incense, mats and cushions, altar makings, bells, candles and books.

Apart from con-job convicts, Mr. Malone says, he has met "some guys who really do want to make amends, but there's no mechanics for that inside." He found a few who decided at least to tackle themselves spiritually and to try the 2,500-year-old Buddhist discipline, much as others take up serious body building for the first time while locked up.

"It's a self-filtering process about surrendering," he says. "I mean, there's no point in faking being perfectly still for 35 minutes. What better place for this than inside the joint?" Mr. Malone says his goal now is to become a full-time Buddhist prison chaplain. His long-term dream is to see a minimum-security prison allow a monastic discipline for the right inmates, and even a halfway house monastery on the outside.

"I fell in love with this. A challenge: the zendo from hell, a macabre-appearing place, but there's something there," he says, describing the serenity that the hulking old prison gives him. He was first influenced by a Tibetan monk when he was an aimless high school dropout. He is self-educated and spends his work day as a manufacturing engineer at a medical instrument company. At night he makes sashes and other special needs for his silent flock of convicts.

"Hey, we're all doing time, right?" asks Kobutsu Kevin Malone, a Buddhist priest surviving well beyond the 60's.