

New York's Boldest Have a New Chief Buddhist

* * *

Chaplain leads jail staff in meditation; 'step into a private jet'

BY CORINNE RAMEY

NEW YORK—During a recent meditation class, Justin von Bujdoss, a 42-year-old Buddhist lama dressed in a tie and navy windbreaker that read "Chaplain von Bujdoss," instructed his 19 students to close their eyes.



Justin von Bujdoss

"Imagine a sphere of light above your head," said Mr. von Bujdoss, as the students, seated in a circle, reclined in gray plas-

tic chairs. He instructed them to release the tension in their shoulders, and bring the ball of light down into their arms.

Several students had smiles on their faces. One snored softly. The slamming of a metal door outside went seemingly unnoticed.

Mr. von Bujdoss isn't teaching this class at a temple. He is the first chaplain dedicated to staff in New York City jails, according to Department

of Correction officials. "I'm here to be a Buddhist presence, but without bringing the religion here," he said. His mission, he said, is to provide spiritual care for jail staff and administrators, in a bid to relieve stress. "If I can maintain the container of non-judgment, they can throw whatever they're experiencing at me," he said.

Rikers Island, New York City's sprawling jail complex, is at best a difficult workplace. At its worst, it's a violent environment critics say should be

Please see LAMA page A10

That the vote went ahead at all is a testament to how much Turkey has changed in the past year of Mr. Erdogan's tenure. After he was almost toppled in a failed coup last July, he has been ruling with extraordinary powers under the continuing state of emergency.

His Justice and Development Party, or AKP, drafted and parliament passed the constitu-

ing the state of emergency. Since last summer, some 3,000 judges and more than 100,000 other civil servants have been fired or detained, according to Turkish media reports.

More than 500 electoral board staff members were detained or arrested after the failed coup, according to Euro-

endium; Servet Akman roused himself at 4 a.m. As chairman of the country's main opposition Republican People's Party, or CHP, in the Altindag district of the capital city of Ankara, he had been responsible for vote monitoring in three prior elections. On April 16, he led a team of 200 ballot-box observers. Each had had two days of training.

voting observers at eight polling stations, according to Hurof Yasar, a local real-estate developer and party member.

In some cases, police removed observers after they had entered schools, Mr. Yasar says. The officers either gave no explanation or said they were just following orders, he says. An officer at the Reyhanli district police department told the

was aware of "heavy volumes" of reports about irregularities and declared the suspect ballots would be counted. It gave no further details about its decision.

The AKP representative to the YSK board, Recep Ozel, told the Journal he petitioned the YSK to count the irregular ballots after consulting with AKP headquarters. "We couldn't ig-

the time, results published by Anadolu showed the "yes" side ahead by 1.1 million.

More than an hour later, the YSK declared the "yes" side won, but it didn't provide numbers.

"This nation has realized the most democratic election, the likes of which has not been seen in any Western country," Mr. Erdogan said the next day.

LAMA

Continued from Page One shut down. Correction officials have said they have taken measures to fix a litany of problems, including the treatment of inmates.

Mr. von Bujdoss said he considers Rikers Island a "charnel ground," a term for things thought to be scary or evoke revulsion. These are powerful places for spiritual practice, he said, because one must cope with how to respond to spiritual difficulties.

The Department of Correction employs 27 chaplains—eight Protestants, eight Catholics, seven Muslims and four Jews—all of whom serve inmates. Mr. von Bujdoss, by contrast, focuses on corrections staff, who are known locally by the nickname "New York's Boldest."

During the recent meditation class, in a cinder-block room at the jail complex, Mr. von Bujdoss asked each officer to name the easiest and hardest part of his or her day.

Easy: "When I'm not here" and "going home to my family." Hard: "Not knowing how the day is going to go" and "personalities."

The Buddhist lama led the class in several meditation exercises, including one in which officers imagined leaving the island. "Step into a private jet," he said. "Look at the upholstery and imagine what it smells like."

The sounds of radio beeps and pounding came from the hallway. Someone could be heard yelling for restraints.

They imagined the island fading into the distance. When their private jets arrived at their destinations, they imagined loading into their dream cars. Eventually, Mr. von Bujdoss led his meditators to a secret box.

The exercise is meant to develop resiliency, he said later, and to highlight aspects of people's lives that get lost when they are working inside jail. The opening of the box, the chaplain said, allows for some deeper image to come up that is relevant in the moment.

Afterward, the lama polled the officers about their journeys. "Who had leather upholstery?" he asked.

A female officer tentatively raised her hand. "What color?" he asked. "Pink," she said. She had flown to Tahiti.

"How'd it feel? Luxurious?" he asked.



Chaplain Justin von Bujdoss, second from left, leads a meditation session on Rikers Island.

"Oh, yeah," she replied.

A male officer told the chaplain he had flown home to Saint Lucia, a Caribbean island. He had imagined a small, simple plane, with blue seats.

"What was in the box?" the chaplain asked.

"I don't know," the officer said sheepishly. "I fell asleep." The meditation class was

officially over, and the officers all went back to jail.

Mr. von Bujdoss began volunteering and conducting meditation classes at Rikers Island in 2013, when the Brooklyn dharma center of which he was executive director was looking for a social project. "The staff were so interested from watching the in-

mates do it," said Warden Helena Smith, of the inmate classes he led.

When the department posted a full-time chaplain job, Mr. von Bujdoss applied.

He began in September, and, said Warden Smith, has been well received by staff.

"It's a very stressful job," said a 33-year-old officer from

Brooklyn after attending the class. "It helps you clear your head."

"We always joke and say, 'Please don't speak,' because when he speaks he's so relaxing," Ms. Smith added.

Mr. von Bujdoss said he has met a handful of Buddhists who work in the jails. About 1% of adults in New York state are Buddhist, according to Pew Research Center data.

Born in Albuquerque, N.M., Mr. von Bujdoss lives in Brooklyn's Bay Ridge neighborhood with his wife and three children. He attended Antioch College in Ohio, during which he went to visit India. He subsequently spent about five years training in monasteries there.

He largely did his clinical training in places such as locked psychiatric wards and medical intensive-care units, that he said were in near-constant crisis—not unlike jail. He also spent years working for a home-hospice provider.

At Rikers, his job includes visiting officers who are seriously ill or have mental-health issues and helping officers cope with loss. "My theological point of connection is crisis," he said. "Trying to bring peace to a place of pain and suffering and trauma—that's what I connect to."

BYRON SMITH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL