



Newsletter
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Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the Gay men's community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of Gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Prison Time

by Terry Stein

The most profound horror of prisons lives in the day-to-day banal occurrences that turn days into months, and months into years, and years into decades. Prison is a second-by-second assault on the soul, a day-to-day degradation of the self, an oppressive steel and brick umbrella that transforms seconds into hours and hours into days. While a person is locked away in distant netherworlds, time seems to stand still. . .

—from *Live from Death Row*, by death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal

Perhaps time expresses impermanence like no other concept: it is ever moving, ever present, ever past, ever future. Yet according to Mumia Abu-Jamal and the prisoners I have met, time often stands still in prison and can thus become a permanent and excruciating reminder of an eternity behind bars. For some prisoners, sitting in meditation and writing about one's experience can be avenues through time; they can both expand awareness and deepen meaning.

I have been sitting and writing with men and women in prison for over a year. While I have formally served as their teacher in meditation and journal writing classes, these men and women are, in fact, also my teachers, sharing their deep suffering and wisdom with me as we serve time together. Unlike them, I am allowed to leave the prison building when I finish the class, but I also know now that we are similarly incarcerated within the mental walls of self that create a lifetime sentence for each of us. The designated prisoners have shown me that liberation can only be discovered within and that its denial can never be imposed by the jailer alone.

I began teaching weekly meditation and journal writing classes in jails and prisons one and one half years ago as part of my service commitment in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship-sponsored Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), which brings individuals together to spend six months in service or social action work combined with Buddhist practice. From January until November of 1998, I conducted one class in a men's substance



Jim Wilson Responds to Clear Englebert

May 18, 1999

Dear Editor,

This is in response to Clear Englebert's excellent letter in the May 1999 Newsletter. First, I do not mean to convey the impression that I consider the celibate monastic lifestyle wrong or invalid. When I give a talk to GBF I only have about thirty minutes, and often I find that I do not have the opportunity to give a more nuanced presentation. If I gave the impression that I oppose monastic Buddhism, I apologize; that was not my intention.

Regarding crankiness: I don't think Clear and I disagree. I only spoke from my personal experience and others I have spoken to. Six years of a celibate monastic lifestyle certainly left me cranky (incidentally, I kept my precepts rigorously). It became clear to me that I was not suited to such a way of life. But I do not mean to generalize to others from my own experience.

The food metaphor, like all metaphors, has its flaws, and Clear certainly found a central flaw. I compare sex and food because the two constitute regularly recurring biologically based desires. I also like to compare the two because such a comparison tends to bring sexual desire down to a more ordinary level.

I believe Clear misunderstood my symphony/Sangha metaphor, or I expressed it badly (maybe both). I was not comparing monastics to

abuse unit in a San Francisco jail, and I have continuously taught two similar classes at the Federal Correctional Institution and Camp (FCI) for women in Dublin since March 1998. The classes are between one and a half to two hours long. They consist of brief stretching exercises, sitting and walking meditations, a period of reading and writing about topics such as anger, the first day in prison, empowerment, or remembering dreams, and



time for discussion. From eight to fifteen women attend the classes, most on a regular basis. Some of the women are experienced meditators, having been taught meditation before entering prison or in previous classes at FCI; others are meditating for the first time. Many report significant deepening of their sitting practice and improvement of their experience in prison while attending the class. Because the members are self-selected, these positive outcomes reflect the women's interest in the class and their motivation to attend it regularly.

The stories told in these classes can be both heart-breaking and heartening.

Invited to write about her first day in prison, one woman recalled stepping off the bus which brought her to prison, looking at the arid ground at her feet, and deciding to plant flowers. She was assigned to a gardening job and created a flower garden. The blossoming of the flowers in her garden paralleled an internal growth in self-esteem and understanding; she was able to confront the conditions that brought her to prison and to prepare to return to her family and life with a new found clarity and dedication. In response to the same assignment, a man reported his terror upon witnessing a murder on his first day in prison. The stunned silence of those of us listening to his story revealed our own terror in simply imagining this event.

The stories told by the prisoners in these classes are not necessarily typical of the experiences of people in jails and prisons. The very fact that these classes are offered suggests, perhaps, a less punitive and more supportive environment. Nonetheless, each person who enters jail as a prisoner, regardless of the harshness of the setting, experiences a dramatic sense of loss of control and dehumanization. The capacity to use such an assault on the self as an opportunity for self-examination and personal liberation is undoubtedly unusual both inside and outside of prisons.

For myself, witnessing in prisons the possibility of turning suffering into healing and energy has profoundly affected my appreciation for the connection between suffering, compassion, and love. I began my prison work with considerable naiveté, trepidation, and ignorance about the conditions of imprisonment. During the past year, this work has helped to deepen my Buddhist practice and my access to the Dharma. I have enormous gratitude to both BASE for providing me with the opportunity to begin this work,

