



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 Justice

by Terry Stein

I saw the limits of prison justice during my first year of teaching a weekly meditation and journal writing class in the Women's Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) in Dublin, California. I took a small amount of hummus and carrots to share with the women during an eating meditation period. Periodically I conducted day-long sittings with my Zen teacher, during which we ate silent meals. The women obtained food for these meals from the commissary and cafeteria. Our meal had been appropriately authorized by the authorities, and I had showed the food to the entrance guard. Nevertheless, a secretary saw the food after it had been carefully laid out for lunch and, believing that I had brought all of it into the prison, immediately called security. When the armed guards arrived, the women surrounded the food, saying that it belonged to them. I acknowledged what I had brought in, and the hummus was confiscated. Although I had not technically violated any rules and no action was taken against me, the secretary never spoke to me again and for a long time I was eyed with suspicion. While not a serious act of injustice, the "hummus incident" gave me a small taste of how easily events in prison can spin out of control and how quickly blame, guilt, and punishment can be assigned without due cause. My body shaking after the guards left, I felt ashamed, unfairly blamed, powerless, and alienated. My attempts to explain were met with silence. These are the feelings prisoners are at risk for every moment of every day.

I developed these classes in early 1997 as part of my service placement in the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, or BASE, program, a six-month service and spiritual internship sponsored by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Before I agreed to teach these classes, I had to examine my own feelings about participating directly in what some ironically label as the "criminal injustice system." Two questions arose for me: Could I personally tolerate being inside prison with all of its injustices and cruelty? And, would I be implicitly allying with this system if I helped prisoners deal with their suffering? I learned the answer to the first

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question when, after attending a series of volunteer orientation classes, I decided that I could not teach in an Oakland jail because of the negative attitudes expressed by the jail personnel and the sterile environment. While I realized that the prisoners in the Oakland jail might need these classes even more, I decided to begin teaching in a San Francisco jail and the women's prison and camp in Dublin.

As I continuously looked at my ability to tolerate being "inside," I learned to shift the focus of the lens with which I examined justice. Instead of seeking some absolute justice, I began to attend to what justice could be found there and to my own reactions to instances of injustice as they arose for me and for others. This lens seemed not unlike my sitting practice: Do I argue with what arises in my mind? Do I wonder if what I am thinking or feeling is just or fair? Do I resist the pain with which my body and mind confront me? Probably most of us would acknowledge that we do fight with ourselves, to resist what is painful and unpleasant, to end our suffering. Then, at some point, if we continue to sit, we learn how to be with this pain differently. Depending on our practice, we learn to observe or perhaps even to transform these experiences, to no longer deny the shadow, the darkness, the suffering, to be with ourselves with greater compassion.

My relatively innocuous exposure to injustice pales next to the more serious instances of injustice

described by the women in prison. One woman was placed in isolation because she repeatedly became the victim of violence from others; prison authorities told me that this was the only way to protect her from further harm. Other women described instances of denial of adequate medical care and accusations by fellow prisoners of "satanic worship" because they attended meditation class. Then there are the prisoners who say they have been unjustly accused (most, in my experience, do not say this) and imprisoned, that they are innocent. How should a meditation teacher respond to hearing about these perceptions or acts of injustice?

Perhaps the best we can do is to sit with the pain of those who are suffering. Justice at this edge of our experience must become an internal event, and we must resist the temptation to take sides or to take action. I do not mean here that we should teach acceptance or resignation, but rather that we should know the playing field and trust our practice. When resisted suffering may become much more intense. Similarly, justice may recede even further when we demand it yet have no hope of achieving it.

The answer to the second question about my presence as a teacher in prison was clear to me from the start and was repeatedly reinforced by all of the women who attended these classes. No, I was not supporting the prison system as a result of entering it to help alleviate the suffering that occurs within it. Such a conclusion

