Dharma on the Frontline

First of two parts: Excerpts from a talk by Venerable Robina Courtin given to the Gay Buddhist Fellowship on July 30, 2000.

GBF: Our speaker has taught at Buddhist centers around the world and is the editor of Mandala, the international news magazine and foundation for the preservation of the Mahayana tradition. She’s actively involved with working with Buddhists in prison, writing to some sixty men in prisons throughout the U.S., helping them with their practice and studies. She visits many of them in California, Massachusetts, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia and Michigan, teaching them in groups and meeting with them one to one. Some of these men are on death row or with life sentences, and some have been actively involved in gangs both on the streets and in prison.

RC: Thank you very much, I’m happy to be here. I have a very quick mouth so I’ll probably be talking about a few things.

I’ll start with one of the things you brought up, the guys in prison, and incidentally it’s interesting that it’s mostly men. We send Mandala to about 300 people and we get new people every month who write to us and ask for the magazine. Only one person is a woman, I don’t know why, but it is curious, and the other 299 we send Mandala to are men.

I’ve really gotten a lot from working with these guys in prison, which has been for the last four years; it started in ’96.

One of the things that I see with these guys, particularly because they are in places that are like hell holes—and it doesn’t matter what they did to get there or whether it was their fault or not—what truly impresses me and humbles me is the way these guys really do use this appalling situation to try to find their own potential.

The majority of these people are either Mexican or Black or poor. And whatever our cliches about people in prison are, it is true that these are the ones who are using their incredibly intelligent minds and investigating the meaning of reality.

So the thing that really strikes me about all of this is how the ones who are reading the teachings and thinking about karma, which as you know is at the very heart of Buddhist teachings (and certainly as you know in the
Tibetan tradition, there's a strong emphasis on really studying Buddhist teachings quite intensively, is how it is that they are studying not just to get a head full of knowledge, but to actually use it as a basis for the way they lead their lives. And that certainly is something for me that I've found very powerful, being a nun, being a Buddhist. For me the implication here is really learning to take responsibility, really learning that due to past actions I am now in the situation that I am in.

Another thing that strikes me about these guys is that they take the teaching, especially of karma, to heart. One of the places where you can completely—almost happily—feel a victim is in a prison. Prison is a nightmare: the violence, the unbelievable noise, it's inconceivable. But somehow the ones who are really practicing, these young guys, they are truly learning not to blame, truly learning to find in these outrageous situations some kind of clarity and contentment and sanity in their own minds.

It seems to me that's really the purpose of why we're Buddhists. I mean, why would we want to be a Buddhist, why do we want to look at our minds, what's the purpose? It's to try to find what's in here, not out there, that's kind of making us crazy. We spend our lives pointing out there—it's so easy—because everything out there is more vivid to us, especially in our culture, isn't it, where we don't learn to look at our minds.

My mother, who was a good Catholic, and a really good human being, taught me how to play music, how to sing, how to walk, how to talk, how to write, but she didn't know how to teach me how to be less angry, less jealous, more loving. She didn't know; we don't have methods for that in our culture.

There's no such thing as a method for how to get less angry. There are methods of how to play the piano. So what I can see with Buddhism is practical methods about how to become a sane, content human being—forget even about long term future Buddha nature and all the rest—if we use it well, it can help us just focus very clearly on our purpose here, on why am I trying to transform my mind?

The hard one in this is karma. For me it rings loud and clear. I mean, it's fine if we watch our breath every day, and it's fine to learn to be kind and patient with people, that's all part of the deal, but it's almost as if you're playing basketball. The main point of all the training and all the special diets you go on and all the hours and hours of work and all the years of this and that and all the other things that you do on the court, the very heart of being a basketball player is getting the ball in the hoop, isn't it? This is the point. Everything leads to this.

Well, in Buddhism, getting the ball in the hoop is changing the mind, changing our mind, but from what, though, and to what?

The only reason to change something is because it needs it. So what is it about our mind that needs changing? One approach, one way of saying what a Buddhist is, is that everything has to do with conception, everything has to do with the way we interpret reality. This sounds like a cliché but the more, I think, that we understand the teachings, the more we practice, the more we really do see that truly, our own mind makes things up. And the more we look, the more we discover that it is truly so—it is how you interpret reality, how you interpret your situation. As one of my Lamas, one of my teachers said, "your prison is nothing in comparison to the prison of ordinary people."
The Lama means us, you know—the prison of attachment, of anger, the prison of pride, the prison of jealousy, that's the real prison. It's when we are in our ordinary environment where we have so-called freedom to do what we want, when we want how we want (which is what we think freedom is and what these guys don't have—they can do nothing). Many of the guys in prison have only this 8' x 10' cell, and whatever it is you can do in there 23 hours a day with ten books and a television. This is all they're allowed to have.

If you look at how we lead our lives, if we're deprived of these various activities that we call our life, that's what we call insanity, isn't it, that kind of deprivation. That's what many of these guys have. And so, indeed, insanity is the option for many of them. Truly going insane every day, or killing each other. Or, like Arturo, one of the guys I practice with, it becomes about finding something, being forced because of circumstances to find the reality inside ourselves—to find the depths of our own minds—to find the huge universe inside there.

And this is really, I'd say, the meaning of following attachment, which is so deep and pervasive in us, which is so subtle—way more than just "oh, I like that!", that's not attachment—and is such a very pervasive energy, that we're deeply and continually trying to uphold our comfort zone.

The second there's any dissatisfaction, what do we do? We find something to alleviate it. And because we have enormous freedom, even if we're not the richest most famous people on earth, to do what we want, how we want, when we want, the freedom to get a certain feel when we like it, a certain taste, a certain taste, a certain touch, we are able to satisfy our senses really easily. So we might not be maniacs with that, when we say we are practitioners, but it's still within that, it's still within sustaining the comfort zone. Whereas in an environment like prison, there is nothing you can do except go inside, or go crazy.

This is what I truly admire, that these people have gone deep... deep. They focus much more, concentrate much more, go far more deeply, question more deeply, really learn, because they have no choice but to give up attachment. They can't follow what they want when they want because prison has forced him to look deep, he's finding whatever there is inside. And he said, "Robina, I'm so happy," because he'd had 90 days in solitary which he used to do his prostrations, and to do a retreat, and to practice intensively.

This is coming from their own mouths: many of them who go for parole but don't get it, they're very able to quickly turn it around and say, "Okay, I'm actually relieved, I'm really grateful."

Another guy, again a Mexican, triple murderer, covered in tattoos, classic kind of gangster, 36 or 38 (mostly they're dead by then), but he's still alive, was taken out of his cell to go to the parole board. There's no question of his ever getting out of prison, but he really can see what he's aiming for, which is to get back in his cell, on his own, where he can be 23 hours a day. There he can be undisturbed by all the insanity of being on the main line, as they call it, where he's likely to be stabbed.

He's on about four different hit lists, so for him it is a blessing to be in a cell on his own all day where he can have peace of mind. That's the top aim of his life.

So it's kind of interesting, this whole other perspective on life. This is where you can see if people are truly putting their money where their mouths are and truly being Buddhist—I mean really investigating the mind, really transforming their mind, really taking responsibility for their environment, and really stopping blaming, stopping pointing fingers at the outside. Because that's where sanity comes from, that's where bliss comes from. That's where contentment comes from.

But sometimes, you know, it needs to be shoved in our face enough, the suffering, in order to really turn ourselves around.

As another one of my friends, who's in Folsom, said, "This is for me, my wake up call." It's like someone being
If you don't understand the Way right before you, how will you know the path as you walk? Practice is not a matter of far or near, but if you are confused, mountains and rivers block your way. I respectfully urge you who study the mystery, don't pass your days and nights in vain.

—Sekito Kisen (700-790)

told they're going to die. Got cancer, AIDS or something. It's then when we start to wake up. We should be getting ourselves to wake up before the doctor tells us something like that, before we get sent to prison, before we get a wake up call from the outside, that's the skill. And that's certainly what I can see in the way they practice in Tibet—that's the only experience I have, among these Tibetans. That's my tradition.

Tibetans are very fierce practitioners, I mean really fierce. For example, there's one old lama we interviewed for our magazine who did everything fiercely. At the time of being arrested, in the '50s in Tibet, he knew he would, at all costs, find a way to practice. And so he spent 19 years on a bed in a house pretending to be an invalid, even having them bring in the chamber pot. He never walked outside his door for 19 years, choosing to do this because it was the only way he could practice dharma, by looking like an invalid with his hair and his beard down to here. For 19 years not getting off that bed!

I mean it's inconceivable to even imagine this kind of determination, this kind of absolute will, this determination to use the worst situation in order to find what's in here. And that's what being a Buddhist is, it's not an external thing. Being a Buddhist, our amazing qualities are in here.

In our culture, we start from the very first point of Buddha's assumption, upon which everything is based, which is that we possess so-called Buddha nature. What does this mean in real terms?

I think this is something we all tend to hear in a nice religious way—we have all these religious rituals which are very Asian, and that's just the cultural part—but we often don't really penetrate deep below the surface, which is what we need to do. It seems to me that what Buddhism is talking about isn't this religious stuff that you believe in, but actual, practical things that we do with truth, reality, me, you.

We're not our body, you know, that's just a secondary way we identify ourselves, male/female, this/that. They're not the real person that we are. The real thing that we are is our mind, and that mind or that consciousness, as Buddha teaches, doesn't come from God or Buddha, isn't created by somebody, is not physical, doesn't come from Mother/Father, this is ours, and we bring this energy with us.

The natural potential of what this mind is is Buddha. Meaning: it's pure. It's not fundamentally collusive. A good analogy for me is water. As long as there's that liquid there, no matter how disgusting it is, now matter how polluted it is, we all know even without being scientists that it's nature is water, H2O if you like. And if you have the skill to remove the pollution, then you find, you bring up, make evident, the true nature of that liquid. No matter how much pollution is there, it never fundamentally destroys the true nature of water. As long as that liquid exists, in its nature it is pure water.

That's a good analogy for who we are. Our mind. This is Buddha's starting point. Our true nature is Buddha. Our true nature is pure. So the implication of this is that we can change. Yes, we are polluted now, and that's the attachment, the pride, the jealousy, the confusion, all the garbage that's in every single human being, every living being; that's our pollution. That's the stuff we need to remove in order to uncover, make manifest, our true nature.

I think having this as a starting point is incredibly profound. It can give us enormous sustenance, enormous perseverance to go through the garbage of life. The garbage of life, there's no question, gives us the
courage to never give up. Which is again one of the things I get from these guys in prison—an incredible determination, an incredible perseverance through difficulties. Difficulties that if I even had 5% of them in my experience would be overwhelming. The level of violence is incomprehensible. The level of the noise is something I never thought of until I got it from these guys. The noise is like being in a rock concert all day, every day, with maybe a 3-hour break during the night. Noise we can't even conceive of. This alone is a nightmare. And that's the point: what they get so strongly is you cannot change it, you cannot open that door.

That's to me an incredible level of renunciation, actually, if you think about it. Meaning, truly accepting “this is my reality.” Whereas with us, this is our nature, attachment. The energy of attachment is to constantly try to get what we want, to manipulate the external circumstances to make them just so, in order for us to be happy. If you think about it, that's what we really mean by happiness in this life—manipulating the external world to make it just so, so then I feel “now I can be happy.”

So to go beyond that, to truly let go of having to do this—this is sublime, this is truly renunciation. This is really a certain level of practice that many none of us will ever get to in this life, where we have the freedom to do and say and think exactly what we want when we want it. This is really practice. And really, this is where we find our sanity. This is where we find the person we really are. This is where we find our bliss and joy and kindness and therefore love and compassion and forgiveness of others.

What I'm again seeing with these guys, some of them for four years, five years (and you know from what they tell you that they've been truly abused), is that I don't get a single word of blame or self-pity out of their mouths. That's something quite profound: understanding what ego means. When we say ego we tend to mean this big, strong powerful thing that asserts itself.

Actually, as my main teacher says, “Ego is like 'self-pity-me'.” When you check the meaning of this, the more you look behind when anger arises (or attachment, pride, hurt, jealousy—you name any of these emotions that we all have which are the pollution that causes so much suffering, and then causes us to harm others) it is “poor me!” isn't it? That's ego.

Ego can be “I am so special!” You go to a very proud person, there's kind of a taste of a little kid there. If you just prick them they deflate. It's not a really strong person. A strong person is a humble person. A very proud person is actually very fragile; if you say the slightest thing, they're in tears. So it's “self-pity me.” “Poor me.”

You check the main way that we suffer, especially in this culture where there's a huge victim mentality—which is one of ego, “poor me,” “why me?,” “how dare they do that to me.” If we feel this, that's the energy of ego. That's the irony of ego. It's this miniature, small confined limited unhappy frantic

**GBF Homeless Project**

If you are available to volunteer your time to the Hamilton Family Center on the second Saturday of any month, please contact Clint Seiter

GBF volunteers prepare a dinner, funded by GBF, for homeless families.

**Your Thrift Store Donations Earn Money For GBF**

GBF members can donate their quality cast-offs to the Community Thrift Store (CTS) and GBF will receive a quarterly check based on the amount of items sold. This is a great way to support our Sangha, and the community. Last year we received over $800 through members’ generosity. Bring your extra clothing and other items to CTS at 623 Valencia St between 10am and 5pm, any day of the week. The donation door is around the corner on Sycamore Alley (parallel to and between 17th and 18th) between Valencia and Mission. Tell the worker you are donating to GBF. Our ID number is 40. Information: 415.861.4910.

GBF needs volunteers to listen to recordings of Dharma Talks and transcribe them for publication in the newsletter.

This is a great way to really listen to a talk! Contact David Holmes.

**GBF Website**

www.gaybuddhist.org
Local Dharma Centers
A list of local Dharma centers is available on our website and as a handout at our Sunday sittings. We encourage members to explore what these Dharma centers can offer to their practice.

Meditation Group in Sonoma County
A Buddhist meditation group meets near the town of Sonoma every other Wednesday evening starting at 7pm, and GBFers are always welcome. The group now has gay and nongay practitioners. For more information, contact Bob Hass.

Ongoing Meditation Group On Monday Nights
Led by Jon Bernie, a meditation teacher in San Francisco with thirty years' meditation experience (including eleven years of Zen Buddhist training and seven years of Vipassana training). The group is free and open to all; donations gratefully accepted. Quaker Meeting House, 65 9th Street (between Mission & Market), 7–9pm. For more information, call Jon

GBF needs you to contribute your services to the Sangha as a Host for Sunday morning sittings. Sign up to help provide a hospitable setting for our members to come together. Call Justin Hecht for information.

sense of little baby me. And ironically, the more that is there, the more small, the more fierce that we are in our anger, pride, whatever we call it, the more this little "I" lashes out frantically. That's what insanity is. That's what samsara means. That's what ego is. Again, my Lama, being very direct, said, "We're schizophrenic." The schizophrenic view of reality is: either all the delicious, gorgeous lovely things we have to absorb into us to make us real, which is attachment; or the horrible mean ugly nasty things out there that confront us and hurt us that we push away because they offend little baby me, which is aversion.

We need to somehow get to the feeling of the energy that is beyond the "self-pity me," that is something incredible. That is what sanity begins with. It's interesting, when they talk about ego, the fundamental root of samsara (the root delusion of samsara, the root delusion that is the source of why we're even reborn in the first place and why we have any suffering whatsoever and why we therefore harm any others), it is called ignorance, the ignorance that specifically is ego-grasping. Its manifestation is this grasping at this sense of "I".

In the West, we call this the instinct for survival, which is the symptom of this ignorance, ignorance of the true nature of how things actually exist: which is not separately, in the schizophrenic lonely sense of lonely- alienated-cut-off-bereft Me here and this Big Fat World out there.

Look at what we call the instinct for survival when someone threatens you. What arises like a sleeping lion is this "poor me, how dare they do this to me." Freak-out. Complete panic. That's "I". That's the symptom, the sign of the presence of this ignorance, this clinging to a fabricated sense of independent solid real Me.

As the Dalai Lama says, "It's not as if you find the "I" and then chuck it out." No, because the "I" we think exists doesn't exist. This is ancient projection we've had for eons that is an hallucination that our mind has made up. So it's not as though you chuck it out.

When you realize emptiness, you don't find the "I" and throw it out, you find the absence of the "I". That's what emptiness means; it refers to the absence. And why this is such a profound experience is because it's finally the recognition, it's the finding the lack of what you thought was there all the time. This is the very root, isn't it?

To be continued. ▼