

In Their Own Words

Reflections on Practice, Challenges and Aspirations

**by inmates at Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP)
and Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF)
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PART ONE: Introduction

The driving force behind the Buddha's spiritual quest was to explore and resolve the enigma of suffering; after his enlightenment he spent the remainder of his life talking to individuals and groups, observing their suffering and pointing towards a path to healing. Convinced of the reality of Buddha nature and interbeing, he welcomed everyone without exception into his community, regardless of their status within general society. There are numerous stories in Buddhist scriptures about social outcasts who, after a meeting with the Dharma, underwent a total transformation and became teachers and role models for others. Angulimala, a dreaded murderer, became a beloved disciple of the Buddha. Milarepa, embittered by an abusive childhood, was driven by a thirst for revenge. He learned the craft of sorcery and unleashed a storm that killed numerous people. Plagued by remorse, he undertook many years of harsh practice under the Buddhist teacher Marpa. Milarepa ultimately became the patron saint of Tibet.

Prisons are places of great suffering, and the teachings about Buddha nature and non-duality can be profoundly healing in an environment where "good" and "bad" are so clearly defined. Our work is simply to make the Buddha's teachings available to individuals who are cut off from the many temples and Centers that are available to the rest of us. Through meditation, classes and talks, we focus on self-study, accountability, choice and ways to transform "greed, anger and ignorance" into "generosity, love and wisdom." In other words, what we offer is an opportunity to work through unhappiness and negativity and to discover a way of life that is beneficial to both self and others.

Whether the seeds we plant will take root and grow is, in a peculiar sense, irrelevant. Our commitment is to show up and do our best regardless of outcome.

This article is a compilation of excerpts from writings by inmates involved in Buddhist practice at Oregon State Penitentiary and Coffee Creek Correctional Facility. Sixteen people, nine at OSP and seven at CCCF, responded to an invitation

to contribute to a collective article focusing on practice, challenges and aspirations. Because of space restrictions, the article is divided into two parts, which will be published in two consecutive issues of *StillPoint*. Part Two will be published in the May-June 2007 issue of the newsletter.

The Contributors

The sixteen contributors are serving sentences ranging from a few years in prison to “Death” (one person). Several are sentenced to “Life,” which means that they are eligible for parole after twenty, twenty-five or thirty years. Even after having served the specified minimum number of years, however, parole is not guaranteed.

A long time member of our OSP group informs us that he is nearing the end of a “Life” sentence and expects to be released relatively soon: *“I’ve been in prison twenty-two years and eight months and have a date of 10/27/08.”*

One of our women at CCCF, on the other hand, has many years of incarceration ahead: *“I have been in prison for five years now,”* she explains. *“I [‘fell’\(1\)](#) in 2002. I am currently serving a ‘Life’ sentence. I have the possibility of parole after twenty-five years, which is 2029.”*

A third “Lifer” writes that he has given up hope of ever returning to society: *“I have been in prison for approximately fourteen years and I don’t expect to be released.”*

When I started to work on this project, my plan was to consolidate the contributions into a coherent whole, but the handwritten pages, some in letter form, moved me so much that I decided to present them with minimal editing and minimal commentary.[\(2\)](#) I wanted our incarcerated friends to speak in their own words with as little interference from me as possible. The stories of incarcerated people are almost always co-opted by others, a few well-meaning, many extremely hostile. Even in the best of cases, they tend to objectify and disempower people and deny them the opportunity to own their personal stories and to tell them in their own words.

How did you become interested in Buddhism?

While some of the contributors have been interested in Buddhism for many years, others are new to the practice. Some came to Buddhism through yoga or the martial arts, through auspicious meetings with a spiritual guide, or through reading. A man at OSP tells the following story:

“I have been in prison for almost two years, and my expected release date is in 2011. I have been in Buddhist practice since 2001. I started out reading about Taoism. One day I was sitting on a bench outside the mall and a guy walks up to me asking for a

cigarette. I gave him one, and he offered me a nice Zippo lighter in return, saying 'what goes around comes around.' He had a little pocket-size book on Taoism, and proceeded to read excerpts out of it to me. It really struck a chord with me, so I went back to the bookstore and there began my interest in Eastern religions."

A woman at CCCF writes:

"I became interested in Buddhist meditation when I read The Art of Happiness by the Dalai Lama, but I did not pursue it. I took part in "Non-Violent Communication" classes in 2003, and eventually became the inmate facilitator of NVC. One of our instructors was Getsushin, and I begged and badgered her to help us women by instructing us in meditation. She and Kisei formed our Friday night meditation group, first bi-weekly, then weekly. I have not missed a single one (unless there were extenuating circumstances beyond my control)."

Another tells us:

"I began studying Buddhism in county jail. I am truly grateful to have been able to receive meditation guidance through the Buddhist studies I practiced there. At first I set aside time to copy down Zen writings every day, using this time to think about nothing else but Zen. Then I began meeting with a Buddhist once a week. I sat quietly every day, though I was not yet meditating. I was not clearing my thoughts away, not quieting my mind. I began after meeting a Buddhist teacher for meditation guidance. I have been meditating and practicing Buddhism for about six months now."

A newcomer explains:

"Not long after I arrived at prison I ran across a book by Thubten Chodron that attempted to answer questions about Buddhism in a general fashion. I very much liked many of the concepts, especially the idea of non-attachment. After reading Chodron's book, I was referred to a book by Bo Lozoff titled We Are All Doing Time. Reading it helped motivate me to make a habit of daily meditation, and I began to meditate for fifteen to twenty minutes every morning.

"A couple of months ago I attended a weekend Shambala retreat here in the chapel at OSP.[\(3\)](#) After the retreat I signed up to attend Buddhist services (is it called a 'service'?) and my first service was Tuesday evening, November 28, 2006."

Inclusivity

Our goal is not to create more Buddhists, but to help expose each person to his or her Buddha potential, and to make Buddhist practice available to everyone who can benefit. We explain to the people who come to our groups that Buddhist teachings are based on common sense that will benefit anyone who is willing to do the necessary inner work, regardless of religious affiliation. We emphasize daily life practice, which

means to look deeply at our reactivity and negativity, learn to let old attachments and grudges go, and become freer, happier, more compassionate human beings.

While several of the people who practice with us consider themselves to be primarily Christian, Muslim, Native Americans, etc, they all seem to enjoy and benefit from the practice.

An old-time participant in our OSP group reflects:

“Why I got involved in the practice, even though I am Muslim? I enjoy the Peace I receive from the meditation part of the group, and also the strength I receive from the practice helps me be a better person at all times.”

A newcomer explains:

“I am Native American, and this is the first time I’ve practiced another spiritual path. The teachings of Buddhism appeal to me, so I look forward to them. Life poses many challenges no matter where you are; you find the tools to meet the challenges in odd and rather inexplicable places.”

Whether we live inside or outside the prison walls, many of us were drawn to Buddhism, not because we were looking for a “new” religion, but because the exposure to the Dharma struck a deep inner chord. It pointed to a truth that we had always vaguely sensed without comprehending its meaning and potential power. One of our writers describes this familiarity:

“I feel as though something deep inside me resonates with the principles espoused in Buddhism. I sense there are beautiful and simple truths that, if only I can somehow open my eyes, will contribute dramatically to my quality of life.”

One Woman’s Story

We want to end Part One of this article with a coherent piece of writing from one of our Medium Security women at Coffee Creek. Our hope is that it will convey an impression of the kinds of teachings we present in our groups, as well as glimpses of life and practice in a women’s prison in general.

Babysteps: Fragments of Life and Practice at CCCF

It was my two year “incarciversary” yesterday. A close friend who visits every Sunday remarked that she has witnessed a great shift in me.

“Somehow, despite your desperate surroundings you have undergone a rebirth,” she said. “You are changed. It’s remarkable.”

I humbly say, she is right. I feel as if I have awakened. The first days in prison are guaranteed to be the worst in your life. I “fell” long and hard and felt cracked wide open. My puny but pure heart only allowed truth to come back in. Negativity had no foothold. I was awakened to my Buddha nature, but I was entirely dependent on the sangha and the Dharma to put the insight into practice. I needed a behavior blueprint. My first lesson was “presence.”

Our group and cauliflower saved my life. The kitchen is a vile frontier land. I can picture a scene in the veggie room, chick fight and bare buttocks. There I am in kitchen while chopping cauliflower. I am mindful of the “Honey-I-shrunk-the-kids” depth of the flowerets, and mindful of my peripheral boundary and the drama thirsty felons milling about. I learned it all in meditation. I can hear Kisei’s voice guide me through sound distractions and discomfort.

As time passed, my awakening deepened. The numbness that my family mistook for courage wore away and a hunger for knowledge surfaced. I learned about habit behavior. I discovered I was a green energied grasper. I dove in passionately to personal growth. And just like a sneaker wave, I was introduced to the Big News: “Connection really is what it is all about.” (Getsushin)

No longer could I sequester myself in wool blankets with Tara Brach and Suzuki.

Therefore I will put this way of life into practice.
For what can be achieved by merely talking about it?
Will a sick man be benefited by merely reading the medical texts?
—Shantideva(4)

When I am practicing more skillfully, there are some of the teachings that have stuck:(5)

- “Just like Me.”
- “What else could be true?”
- “Sacred pause.” Clear seeing / compassion
- What a great opportunity to work on my karma.
- Will this bring relief or more suffering?
- “The good works of a thousand ages shatter in anger in one instant.”(6)
- Suppressed feelings usually come out with a poof instead of a bang.
- You are a wave, but you are also the whole ocean.
- “Taking responsibility empowers; blaming others makes you a victim.”
- Rumi’s “Guest House.”
- Rumi’s words: “Is it really so that the one I love is everywhere?” (7)

My teachers arrived like they do devotedly every Friday. I am grateful I was there to accept their presence. I am learning every day, every week. I am being rebuilt from the Buddha nature chassis. The meditation group and teachings are replacing the dim mists of selfishness with an awareness to open up to others, be useful, be helpful, button your beak, and, if I must speak, let the best part in me speak to the best part in you.

Notes

1. This is an expression used to denote the incident that led somebody to prison.
2. The only corrections I have made are occasional spelling errors, punctuation, and minor changes in syntax. Very rarely I substituted one word for another for clarity.
3. Our group at OSP meets regularly two Tuesday evenings a month. A Shambala group facilitated by our Buddhist chaplain, Karuna Thompson, meets on the remaining Tuesday evenings. Bi-monthly retreats are a part of the Shambala program. Many of the inmates take advantage of all these opportunities to practice.
4. The correct reading is:
For all this must be acted out in truth,
For what is to be gained by mouthing syllables?
What invalid was ever helped
By merely reading in the doctor's treatises?
5. The list is based on some of the teachings we have presented and discussed in our group. They are taken from or inspired by Buddhist teachers such as Tara Brach, Thubten Chodron, Pema Chodron, Thich Nhat Hanh and Shantideva, and by the Sufi poet, Rumi.
6. The correct reading is:
Good works gathered in a thousand ages,
Such as deeds of generosity,
Or offerings to the blissful one –
A single flash of anger shatters them.
7. Rumi's poem reads as follows:
If the beloved is everywhere,
the lover is a veil,
but when living itself
becomes the friend,
lovers disappear

