

Inside Dharma

*A socially engaged Buddhist outreach organization
applying Buddhist principles in prison & on the street*

The Buddhist Newsletter Serving the Inmate and Ex-Offender Sangha

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is tied up with mine, then let us work together." - Lilla Watson, Aboriginal activist

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The topic posed in our last issue was...

"Experiences You Have Had Where You Have Overcome Ego to Experience Peace"

**by Brandon Duke (Döndrup Zangpo) -
Canon City, CO**

Bodhicitta comes in very handy in prison, and patience is a protection for one's bodhicitta. Very often we find others in prison with whom we don't agree. Jail/prison is a place to actually cultivate bodhicitta. We can sit there and argue, fight, cultivate hatred, etc., but where will that lead us? That person with whom we don't agree, like ourselves, does not want to suffer. So, it would make no sense to fuel the five poisons with any hatred, desire, ignorance, pride or jealousy. I have found meaning in "treat others the way you want to be treated". You may feel powerless in any given situation.

One of the Six Words of Advice by Tilopa is "Don't control." In other words, don't try to make anything happen...the way you want something to be. Just let it be. When you can do that, it not only safeguards your bodhicitta, but in a certain sense, it also allows one to "take control" of their emotions and be at peace. Our karma led us to meeting this person with whom we don't agree. We have to accept our karma. We're not in prison for heroism like the thousands of Tibetans whom

were imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution for being Tibetan, being Buddhist, and for bestowing empowerments and teachings – all arrested under false charges. What did many do? They accepted their karma, developed pure outlook, practiced in secret, and eventually transformed those prisons into a pure land.

Once one can accept their karma, develop bodhicitta and pure outlook towards all other sentient beings, then it will be easier



to be at peace with others. In short, my key words of advice are: Bodhicitta, bodhicitta, bodhicitta. Please remember that love is like milk, and patience is like a golden vessel to hold it.

"Many, That Are One"

by James (Kyugen) Bettis – Clarinda, IA

Have you ever wondered why some people don't band together or they hate other groups? It is my opinion that this happens because of ignorance and fear which causes people to put down, make fun of, and stay away from interaction with others.

People need to realize that there is no "real" difference between us. People simply act

differently because of how they were raised. Basically, they end up having this theory of difference embedded in their way of thinking as if it were a fact. We might have different ideas on certain issues....but, they are just that....ideas. Ideas of our own making.

I'm a Buddhist. I work as the chapel clerk. My boss is a Christian. We get along well. I respect his faith and he respects mine. A lot of people know that I'm a Buddhist, but they don't care. I'll admit that I've lost my relationship with some of my relatives because of this. But, if they would just realize that I'm the same person whom I was before, only better....then they might be able to see the positive effect that this decision has made within my life. It helped me grow up and reframe from labeling people because of their faith, color or other specific differences between us. My relatives might have given up on me, but I will not give up on them. I learned to love ALL people no matter what. If I can do it in here, then I know that people on the outside can do it as well.



In here there are gangs. I'm not in one, but I won't put anyone down that is in a gang. I have friends that are in gangs. I get along just fine with them. I even get along with some of the white supremacists. They respect my views and I respect theirs. They know that I'll help them out if they need it. It should be the same everywhere. Just because someone isn't the same as you are, there is no need to put them down. The Christian Bible, Dharma texts, and other religious books basically all say to love and respect thy neighbor.

It doesn't matter what group, race, color or creed we are because we are all part of the human

race....all are sentient beings, including animals. We are all the same within this same group. We all breathe, all bleed and all have feelings. Thus, we should model for one another how to become one group. There are many beings in this world. Wouldn't it be a better place if we all became one group?!

“Lawsuit Advancing Rights of Buddhist in Texas Prisons”

by Scott Zirus (Könchok Tingdzin Wangyal) – Abilene, TX

On behalf of Buddhist Prison Ministry and the “Inner Liberation Prison Sangha” (Robertson Unit Buddhist Community), we want to express our sincere gratitude to all Texas Buddhists who participated in our survey to evaluate the state of Buddhism in Texas prisons. We received responses from 24 units and every single one helped inform us about what areas we need to focus to ensure ALL Buddhists in TDCJ have the rights they need to meaningfully practice their paths.

For the Dharma to truly transform Texas prisons into Viharas of mindfulness and compassion, there must be a strong movement within prison to plant the karmatic seeds to create the conditions necessary for autonomous, peer-led prison sanghas to germinate and grow into a flourishing community of enduring support and loving-kindness. This is the ultimate objective of our LOTUS Ministry. Such organization of prison sanghas can only be done by prisoners themselves.

In August 2022, the “Inner Liberation Prison Sangha” (Robertson Unit) filed a multi-plaintiff civil rights lawsuit specifically designed to become

a class action representing all Buddhists in TDCJ. This litigation is supported by the National Lawyers Guild – Prison Chapter. The claims/rights that this suit seeks to have the courts recognize are:

- Meditation cushions
- All 12 Uposathas recognized as official fast days (plus a sack meal of no less than 1,400 calories)
- Peer-led Retreats on each recognized Holy Day (no less than 8 hours)
- Communal meal on recognized Holy Days
- Amend policy to remove requirement that an “Eastern Religion” be elected as faith preference in order to receive lay-in to Eastern Services (NOTE: “Buddhism” will still need to be on travel card to observe Holy Days, communal meals, mala beads, spends etc.)
- Allow at least 2 hours to conduct peer-led primary service
- Allow a weekly 2 hour peer-led doctrinal study (in addition to primary service)
- Allow the use of a kesu (brass gong bowl) during all peer-led meditation sessions
- Wrist malas
- Special Buddhist New Year spend (similar to Jewish Passover spend)

See, Zirus, et al. v. Religious Practice Committee, 4:22-CV-02858

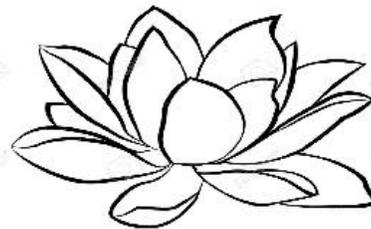
It is inevitable that once we are successful in our suit that it will create a genuine interest in Buddhism among Texas prisoners. We must seize that opportunity by making a dedicated effort to do the following so that our efforts in the courts are worthwhile and the Dharma can flourish:

- Strengthen your personal practice – meditate, study to develop insight and

conviction in your path; and genuinely make the necessary changes in your life.

- Strengthen your Sangha – foster a sincere camaraderie amongst Buddhist brothers and sisters; take your services seriously and make the most of the time you have together; and bow to sangha members on the run. – If there is no active Sangha on your unit, start one! Write: Buddhist Prison Ministry, PO Box 426, Orcas WA 98280 and request info on how to start an Eastern/Buddhist Service and a Sangha in TDCJ.
- Strengthen the image of Buddhism – let other like-minded people know about Buddhism, your service, and that there is a sangha on the unit; share Dharma books with others; and give Buddhism a voice by promoting it.

Buddhism has a bright future in Texas prisons, and it is guaranteed to become firmly established with a little organization and sincerity. That is our goal, and we hope that it is yours, too.



“Begin Again”

by Raven (Taido) LaBeau – Minneapolis, MN

I read a book recently called *Inside Vasubandhu’s Yogacara* by Ben Connelly and in it, Ben talks about the process of karma. Every single action we take, whether that action be physical or

mental, plants a seed. We can't know when that seed will sprout or exactly what will grow, but we can directly observe that action leads to a corresponding reaction. "This" gives rise to "that". We see this in our lives every time something arises that began with a previous action. The decision to quit smoking cigarettes, for example, plants a seed that gives rise to the sweet fruit of improved health. Responding in an argument from a place of rage and pain plants seeds that can give rise to the bitter fruit of damaged relationships. (And just to clarify the use of terms here, the words "sweet" and "bitter" aren't meant to convey some sense of moral "goodness" or "badness"; simply pleasant or unpleasant.)

One of the tricky aspects of karma is that we can't "unplant" seeds that have already been planted. In other words, we can't change our past and, more to the point of this talk, we can't choose how present actions will manifest in our futures. Personally, I find this to be pretty uncomfortable sometimes. It's easy for me to get caught in the trap of "what-ifs" and "if-onlys" when confronted with less-than-pleasant consequences of my past actions and that translates very easily into anxiety about how my present choices *might* affect my future. I mean hey, if I made a mess by acting unskillfully once, I might do it again, right? How do I know that the seeds I'm planting in this moment will bear sweet fruit down the road?

When I look back over my life so far, I can see that I've spent a lot of time dwelling on my past actions. Some memories are very pleasant and generate feelings of gratitude and warmth while others are unpleasant and bring up feelings of regret and shame. Considering our past in relation to our present has the potential to be a great practice as it can help us to see that our

actions don't exist in a vacuum; they're all connected. It can help us to see the always-unfolding process of karma in real time. It can *also* become an obsession and lead to us trying to exert some form of rigid control over our futures to avoid unpleasantness. If I can just make all the perfect choices today, then there will never be any suffering tomorrow, right? We can't know exactly how our current actions will manifest later down the road, but that certainly hasn't stopped *me* from trying to control my future by over-analyzing decisions in the present. So. We can't change the past and we can't predict the future. What *can* we do?



When we're looking at the present moment, whatever that moment consists of, we have a choice. We could choose to interact with that moment with the intention of trying to, say, remedy some past wrong or prevent some future hardship. There's certainly nothing wrong with doing what we can to heal wounds we may have caused with our actions, and it's entirely responsible to try and plan for our futures the best that we can; but what happens when the action we take with that intention doesn't turn out how we expect or want it to? Remember, we can't control exactly how present actions, or karmic seeds (to go back to that analogy), will manifest in our lives and so banking on one particular outcome over another isn't very

reliable. On the other hand, we can't deny the fact that we must engage with our lives as it unfolds and so making choices and taking action is unavoidable. So, we must take action, but it's often unclear how that action will affect our futures? I don't know about you, but that's pretty stressful for me!

What I'm learning though is that we don't actually *need* to try and control everything. The secret, I think, isn't in trying to control how those karmic seeds grow, but in being mindful of the seeds we're planting in this moment. I may not be able to predict exactly how every action will affect mine and others' futures, but I *can* look back over my own experience and see that actions based in compassion and empathy tend to lead to sweeter fruits than actions based in a struggle to control and manipulate outcomes. I can trust that a genuine wish for the wellbeing of myself and those around me is fertile soil within which to garden. So how can we practice this? It's one thing to talk about letting go of desired outcomes and trying to control our futures and another thing entirely to face that habit energy in real life circumstances. The answer is one we'll have heard many times from Kalen. We need to sit more.

Zazen is one of, if not *the*, most central practice with in Soto Zen Buddhism. Some might say it's the most fundamental expression of Zen practice in general. Dogen wrote in detail about the practice of sitting and had a lot to say about proper form while on the cushion. In his *Fukanzazengi*, he instructed us to "straighten [our] bodies and sit upright, leaning neither left nor right, neither forward nor backward." The



general idea here being, as I understand it, to let the body do what it knows how to do. Just sit. Wholeheartedly give yourself to the action of maintaining your posture and let go of the impulse to control or force our experience into any expectation or desired outcome. Just. Sit.

When we have anxiety about the future, as I know I do sometimes, we have a tendency to want to lean back, away from it. We hesitate and doubt ourselves. It can even be paralyzing and prevent us from engaging with our lives in an active way, instead being more like passive passengers. On the other hand, we can lean forward in anticipation towards a future we really, really want... putting a lot of emotional, psychological, and even physical energy towards achieving that specific outcome. While both of these are natural inclinations of the mind, neither of them is sitting upright in the moment. Neither of these are conducive to being present in this moment. Here. Now.

When we're sitting on our cushion and we find ourselves drifting down one avenue of thought or another, this isn't different from falling down the rabbit holes of fears or eager anticipations about our futures. Both take us away from the present moment. In zazen when this happens, we gently and compassionately return to the moment over and over again. We straighten our posture, resolve in this moment to sit for all beings, and take a breath... beginning again. We can use that exact approach off the cushion as well. In the face of an uncertain future, we can take a breath, resolve to act for the benefit of all beings, and plant a seed... trusting that we did the best we could with what we had at that moment... and let it go.

This definitely doesn't mean that we'll never experience anxiety or eager anticipation, but I've

noticed in my own life that it can take a lot of stress and blame out of the equation. I can guarantee that no matter how much I might want it to be otherwise, my actions will hurt people sometimes. This is what it means to exist in a world within which all beings are interconnected. Sometimes we bump into each other in painful ways. Approaching that reality with an intention to promote compassion and liberation for all beings, however, makes it a bit easier to tend to the present moment... whatever that moment looks like. You, after all, are one of those beings. You deserve your compassion too. We aren't perfect. We don't *need* to be perfect. We don't *need* to control everything and account for every possible outcome. We just need to take a breath, sit up straight, and begin again... and again... and again.



***“ An Explanation of the
Fukanzazengi – Part 2”***

**By Reverend “Shindo”
Tom Bradshaw
Inside Dharma
Zen Meditation Center
St. Louis, MO**

For my last newsletter article, I wrote the first part of a breakdown of the Fukanzazengi. (Dogen's guide to zazen). Thus, here is the second part.

Sit zazen in as quiet a place as possible. Eat & drink moderately.

Dogen is giving simple & practical advice; arrange zazen with as few distractions as possible.

Being too cold or hot is distracting. Being too full or hungry is distracting. Wearing loose clothing also helps the body relax into itself.

Don't obsess over these though. Before I had a place to share zazen, I sat under a pavilion in a park. It was open to gusts of wind as well as cold, heat, sometimes

rain, & loud traffic. It was good enough because that was the best that could be done. Sit zazen where you are with the best arrangements you can offer.

During zazen notice how the brain naturally judges, analyzes, gauges, plans, remembers & imagines; release each of these.

Notice how Dogen doesn't say **don't** judge, analyze, gauge, plan, remember, or imagine. The brain's job is to do these things all the time. Zazen is simply doing our best not to add to these naturally arising things. Finding yourself with these is not a sign of failure – it means you've become aware of their presence & can let them go.

Kosho Uchiyama Roshi says we have to do this *billions of times!* That's not how the *self* likes it though – we'll surely find the brain complaining about this. Uchiyama Roshi humorously describes it like this: “It is exactly as if we were told as babies, “From now on you will have to breathe, your whole life long, this very breath, again and again, every single moment. You will breathe in and breathe out billions of times.” What baby would say, “Oh no! I've got to find some way to take care of these billion breaths once and for all, with one really big breath!?””

How lucky we are that each of those things (thoughts, judgments, etc...) tap us on the shoulder saying, “Wake up, you're not paying attention!” Everything that crosses our mind is practice.

You go past zazen in trying to understand it.

When we sit zazen we find many thoughts trying to understand what zazen is & question if we're doing it right.

If we hold on to this then we're not sitting zazen any longer. We're thinking.

Don't *chew* on this *not-understanding* like a dog with a chew toy. When we start second guessing if we're sitting correctly then there is a problem we believe we have to solve to find zazen.

Zazen is found when we open the hand of thought by letting go of not understanding & questioning. Someone once said it's "resting in the question-ness." I think that's a great way to say it. If we let those questions & uncertainties be, without trying to answer them, zazen appears.

Both in zazen & daily life don't entertain thoughts about enlightenment.

An early Zen book I read discussed the conceptual nature of thought & ideas. It explained how thought & ideas are *not* the thing they represent and offered this example.

Let's say someone who's never experienced a tornado asked you what a tornado was like & this is what you did; you went outside during a tornado holding a jar out to the wind, screwed on the top & mailed them the jar labeled "tornado." Thoughts & ideas are the jar – they simplify reality so it can fit in the brain – BUT they're *not* the thing.

If we believe an idea in our head about what enlightenment is then we spend our time working towards a jar.

Sit on a cushion or chair so you're stable. With palms facing up rest your right hand in your lap & place your left hand on top with thumb tips lightly touching. Sit upright & as straight as possible, but also relaxed. Make your ears in line with your shoulders & your nose in line with your belly button by pulling your chin in a bit. In your closed mouth rest your tongue & breathe naturally through your nose. Keep your eyes halfway open to help stay awake.

This is more practical advice – this time about what we do with the body. If we look at this carefully, Dogen is showing us that every part of the body is engaged either for stability or in posture. Even our tongue & eyes are important in zazen.



**Kris (Kyoryu) Ash
Inside Dharma
St. Louis, MO**

EDITOR'S CORNER:

Dear Readers,

Please note that any mail sent to our old "PO Box" address will **not** be received by us and you need to use our **new address** which is located within the new Laughing Bear Bakery building (and listed on the outside "cover" of this newsletter).

My apologies for the printer failing to print all of the header on our last issue! And, thank you for your various submissions. I sincerely hope this holiday season finds you surrounded by the peace and joy of who you truly are!

In gassho,
Kris (Kyuryo) Ash, Editor

Reminder: We will publish once a quarter in **2023**.
Deadlines for submissions: 1st quarter – Feb. 28th; 2nd quarter – May 31st; 3rd quarter – Aug. 31st; 4th quarter – Nov. 30th deadline.

Submission Guidelines:

1. Submissions need to be typed or printed neatly (readable).
2. Submission writing needs to be of adequate font/written size. (Not small)
3. Include paragraph breaks between major points.
4. Length **1000 words or less**.
5. **Please proof read** your submissions for sentence clarity. (Know that the audience of your written work can not read your mind. Each sentence thought needs to be clear.)
6. Submissions will not be returned.
7. Topic submission should be anything involving Buddhism or prison life.

Reminder: **Our next issue deadline for submissions is Feb. 28th.**

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*For our 2023 Jan.-Mar. Issue
We will publish your thoughts on....*

*Your favorite Buddhist
resources that have
helped you find inner
peace and joy.*

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