

Prison Dhamma
By Eric Wilkins
Tuesday, August 06, 2013

Today is a day I've been looking forward to for quite some time. When I was doing time in a San Diego, California prison from 2008 until 2010 I came in contact with quite a few volunteers who would regularly take time out of their busy lives to visit those incarcerated there. They were a great source of comfort, inspiration and encouragement. After my release I returned to college back in Detroit to pursue my long term goal of becoming a substance abuse counselor. That being a ways off into the future I sought to be of some use to those who are now suffering as I did back then. I was fortunate enough to have been introduced to a group of people from the Ann Arbor Zen Buddhist Temple who went to the local prison on a regular basis to provide friendship and support. It took almost two years, but finally I walked back in through Michigan prison gates as a free man to give back and share the power and compassion of the Dhamma that has changed my life.

I was an addict. I was lost in the chaos of chasing the next hit of cocaine and the lifestyle that came with it. Eventually this life style sent me to county jails repeatedly and then to prison twice for minor drug sales cases. I don't know the details of why these men have been incarcerated. I only know that they deserve the chance to find some strength and dignity as they work to turn their lives around. Living as a prisoner myself I have acquired some empathy for these men and what they are trying to achieve. I am hoping that my presence in the prison outreach program may be a source of some benefit to them.

The morning was grey and damp as I began the 30 to 40 minute drive from Detroit to Ann Arbor, but my anticipation made the trip a pleasure. Wanting to be on time, I left too early to arrive close to the 8:45 meeting time in front of the Ann Arbor Zen Temple. So I waited in my

car for a half an hour for C to arrive & drive us the rest of the way to the prison. She was kind enough to suggest that I leave my old car there so as not to overtax it with another half hour of driving. We soon arrived at the visitor's entrance and parked the car. She recommended that I only bring in my driver's license and so I left all else in her car. As we walked to the door in our grey Buddhist robes she told me it is her habit to gently bow to all she encounters along the way in and out of the prison. It kind of caught me off guard, but after quickly mulling it over I decided that it made perfect sense, especially in this environment which can be a bit cold and uninviting.

As we made our way through the three check points, one requiring that we go through a metal detector, get patted down and remove our shoes and socks so our naked feet could be inspected, we crossed a courtyard of intersecting walkways and patches of emerald green grass neatly placed throughout. Down a hallway we passed some type of Christian service that was just letting out and we went into the room we were assigned. It was there that I first met the men awaiting our arrival with gentle glowing smiles on their faces. We exchanged names and firm handshakes.

The men quickly set up the altar area very neatly and arranged the chairs in a semicircle facing the altar. After a chant C asked one of the men to read from the Dhammapada. When he finished she asked him what he got from the passage he just read. He shared and in turn each man gave his own view into the reading. Then each of the four men introduced himself and shared shortly about his experience with Buddhism so far. When they were done C asked me to speak a little about myself and my history. I spoke of my past as an addict who eventually ended up in prison and how I began to practice Buddhism. I spoke of now being in college and of my goal to achieve a bachelors and then a masters so I could go on to become a counselor. Lastly I

tried to encourage them to form a regular practice of meditation outside to the Monday and Saturday gatherings so that they could begin to really nourish and then taste the fruits of their faith in the Middle Way. They asked a few questions and we ended the service because in prison things are run on a schedule and the staff appreciates if volunteers do not over stay their welcome.

I believe the men truly appreciated our presence. I was honored to be among them and share in time we spent together. I believe I made a connection with the men that previously they had not been exposed to, which is spending a little time in Dhamma services with someone who had once been in their shoes – an inmate. And not only an inmate, but an inmate who was still living on the right track once released. As C and I walked back across the prison courtyard towards the exit a couple of the men stayed nearby on the way to their perspective yards for count. The one closest bowed deeply to us, looked me straight in the eyes, his gaze reflected a depth of inner joy as he said his goodbye. I returned his engaging eye contact and told him to stay strong. As we walked away I could feel a peace on the prison grounds and within my essence. I knew that I'd been privy to something very special and powerful. I will return again next month and the month after that and the month after that for as long as I am able. I think I can spot a good thing when I come across it and this is definitely it.

On the way to being dropped back off at my car we stopped at a gas station. C enjoys picking up a coffee after these services and she offered to buy me one as well. Instead I had a V-8. As she paid I noticed a display of little glass tubes with flowers in them for sale on the countertop. I pointed them out to C. She looked at them curiously and the lady clerk told her, “You don't want one of those. Those are for crack heads”. I laughed to myself at the irony of seeing crack pipes sold at a gas station not very far from the prison and how in the old days those

pipes used to be one of my favorite toys, a source of amusement, pain relief, self destruction and the gateway that led me to prison. I've come a little ways since then and the men I've just left appear to be on the same path that leads to where I am today and where I am headed. Today I've enjoyed and shared one of the greatest gifts of being human and of being alive – simple honest caring friendship.