



UU Sangha

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Fall 2008

American Union

By Hu

Only a few hours after the West Coast polls closed, and Barack Obama was declared the next American President, trouble began inside the prison housing unit. Disgruntled McCain supporters watching the numbers pour in hurled razor blade epithets at the rising tide. One man began spitting on a poster of the President-elect. Another held his head and declared that the world had come to an end. Arguments over petty issues escalated. A fight broke out. I need to get away from the negativity but my escape was blocked when, as Obama took the podium to declare victory, the sky above me opened up and cried.

Instead I sat anxiously watching the television broadcast celebrations exploding across the world. As an Obama fan, I was deeply conflicted as I tried to hide my growing enthusiasm. My fervor had begun months ago after reading his poignant search for identity in *Dreams From My Father*. The son of a black Kenyan father and a white Kansas mother, his parents' union took courage during an era when, in some states, interracial marriage was still illegal. Yet growing up in a society healing from racial wounds, he realized that hybrid blood is an innate form of Americana. By the conclusion of the memoir, his racial fusion had become a symbol of hope.

As a first-generation immigrant from Vietnam, I relate to Obama's journey. I married a white Nevadan woman and welcomed the birth of our daughter. Now, with the election of a mixed-race President, I envision limitless dreams for my child.

Such euphoric delirium inspired me to

write my daughter a letter. There was so much to share, but where would I start? I could describe Obama's election as the end of the racial-prejudice-ceiling in America, the poetry of tears streaming down the face of civil rights leader Jesse Jackson or the carnival of a quarter-million people gathered in a Chicago park to cheer Obama's win. I wasn't sure how to open my words, but I knew I would close with the sound of collective voices singing in rhythm, while people of all colors held hands to dance down the streets of America.

My heart ached to share the unity spreading across the rest of the world and it frustrated me that other inmates didn't feel the same joy. I consulted an older black man's opinion. His answer was concise: Progress is toughest for those who perceive it as a setback. But how could that be true? Wasn't that a paradox?

Still conflicted, the next morning I went to walk around the track. Inmates always circle in the same direction and long ago I had learned not to reverse the course. The day I tried walking the opposite way, I was quickly run over by multitudes of people who refused to accommodate my experiment. They cursed and blocked my path until I accepted the status quo.

But now the flow was swift, and I settled in to ponder my thoughts. Moving in a perpetual left-bank, I looked into the crumpled faces of old men still stuck in lifestyles of crime. These were the people who would return term after term. The ones who never seemed to figure out how or didn't want to reform. Year after year they walked around the same track, in the same direction, surrounded by the same people, complaining about the same misfor-

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Notes from the Editor

Greetings.

I must admit it—the winter solstice arrived before the fall issue. Just the same, we are on track for four issues this year, and the winter issue will arrive well before the vernal equinox; our target is March first. As always, we welcome your articles, stories, poems, and letters.

We are pleased to present several pieces sent to us by prisoners. Every one of them is thought-provoking and challenging, as are the conditions in prisons. They offer perspectives on Unitarian Universalism and Buddhism which draw us, and sometimes push us, out of our comfortable existence. We hope you like them and think about them. Again, we extend a special invitation to prisoners to send us their work.

The *UU Sangha* is distributed to prisoners interested in UUism and Buddhism in cooperation with The Church of the Larger Fellowship. The prison ministry of the CLF includes a well-run penpal program. We hope you will join them in this important outreach; see the notice on page 15 for details. And kudos to Chaplain Pat.

If you are involved with a prison dharma project, we'd like to hear from you. If you are interested in participating in a round-table discussion (by telephone conference) among UU Buddhists working in prisons, We would also like your articles about what you do and stories about your experiences.

The Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis, your editor's home Sangha, has been active. Elsewhere in this issue you will see that we have become the first "Supporting Sangha" of the UUBF. We challenge you to join us..

The MPG has just received word that our workshop proposal, titled "Fostering a UU Mindfulness Practice Group", has been chosen for the 2009 Joseph Priestley District Spring Conference in April. The MPG model emphasizes practice and does not require teachers or adherence to any particular approach to Buddhism. The focus of the workshop will be *practice* and using practices to imbue the group with UUism. We'll tell you about it in the Summer issue.

Gassho, Robert Ertman, Editor

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tunes.

Suddenly a lesson from the Dharma struck me. suffering did seem to dig deepest into people who refused to release their demons. In each broken man I could sense fear clinging to some idea of safety by remaining in the same current of life. There existed a stubborn refusal to withdraw, regroup or reconsider which maintained this endless whirlpool that never went anywhere and never changed. The man holding his head had spoken the truth: for those unwilling to accept progress, the world will come to an end.

I pulled off the track and spent the rest of the day on the bleachers where I could enjoy the fresh scent of rain. Closing my eyes to breath in deeply, I reveled in the smell of a new era, one in which isolationism is rejected and diversity is embraced. Finally the world had been washed and reseeded with opportunity. glory seemed to be sprouting everywhere. All we had to do was nurture it.

Later that day, I wrote that letter to my daughter laced full of hopeful dreams. By then I knew exactly how to begin. I told her that the sky had opened up and cried, when Barack Obama made history.

About the Author

Hu is the fictitious name of an inmate in the California State Prison System. He is a member of the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship and participates regularly in its prison ministry program. He considers himself a UU influenced by Buddhism, Taoism and Humanism. Hu continues work in social justice programs as part of his devotion to the UU seven Principles. His current restorative justice project focuses on building communication support webs between inmates and their personal communities in an attempt to combat recidivism.

Hu is involuntarily estranged from his daughter but is saving letters, essays, stories, and numerous other artifacts he hopes to share with her one day.

Karma At the McDonald's On Wall Street

By Phyllis Culham

When my daughter was in middle school, I sent her off on a Friday to Sunday class trip to New York with the recommended amount of money, plus another \$20 for emergencies, saying "I expect this to be returned intact or to be accounted for." I assumed that if she got anywhere near the stuffed animals at FAO Schwartz, my \$20 would vanish, but I did intend to ask for it just to see what would happen. She apparently understood the seriousness of my intent.

She immediately brought up the subject after her dad picked her up from the bus. She said not "hello" but, "I can't give you back your \$20." I said, "What stuffed animal did you buy at FAO Schwartz?" She said, "Oh, the only one I really liked was this small one, and I bought that out of my food money." "So what happened to my \$20?" "Well, just before we got on the bus to come back, we stopped at this great big McDonald's. It was incredible. It was three stories of this building with a glass front." "Where were you?" "I think we were somewhere near Wall Street. There were bank offices everywhere—whole skyscrapers. So anyway, when we got out of the buses, there were street people everywhere. They were holding out their hands as people walked into the McDonald's. I wanted to give them something, and I didn't have much money because I'd just bought this toucan at FAO Schwartz, so I only had two dollar bills and your twenty, and there were so many of them, so I gave them the twenty." "You gave them my 20 and not your 2???" "Well, Mr. L [home room teacher] told me it was stupid too. All the teachers did, and the kids made fun of me, especially the boys. They told me I should have given them money, because they didn't really have enough left for lunch. Mr. L told me that she'd just spend it on getting drunk." "So did you ever see this woman actually go into McDonald's?" "No, I

just saw her come out. I only had a vanilla shake, and most people didn't have much money left, and everybody kept making fun of me during lunch, acting like they were drinking, glug, glug. So we went outside to meet the buses pretty soon; they weren't even there yet; and she came out with two other old women." "You gave it to somebody old?" "Yes, she seemed really old, the oldest, and she was with two other older women who seemed sort of confused. She was shy and wouldn't really get very close to people to put her hand out, so I walked over to her and gave her your twenty." "So she came out with food?" "Yes, she and the two other women carried out bags of hamburgers and trays of small coffees. It must have taken them a long time to wait on her." "What happened to all the food?" "She handed it out to some other women there. She even went over and woke up a couple of the teenagers who were zonked out against the wall. They wouldn't take the hamburgers, but they did take the coffee. One of them was so zonked out one of the older women had to hold her hand to help her drink it." "They didn't give anything to the men?" "No, some of the older men hung around like they were hoping she'd give them something. They looked really sad." "So the men got nothing?" "No—because Mr. L pulled out his wallet and gave one of the old guys a \$20, and then the other teachers said, 'I guess you were right, Hallie,' and they handed out bills, and then the girls got out their money and started handing out what they had left, and even the guys, but they didn't have very much, but they gave it to guys." "So did anyone go off down the street looking for liquor?" "Nope, they all went into McDonald's. But what was funny was that this was still going on just as our buses pulled up to meet us, so there was a real jam on the street, so all these other people looked around and looked real surprised, and then a lot of them stopped and started handing money to the homeless people." "You're kidding." "Nope, they stopped, looking at this gang of kids and bunch of homeless people on the sidewalk, then they looked around some more, real confused, then most of them started

handing out money. Then more people had to stop because there was this sort of mob covering the whole sidewalk outside McDonald's for like half a block. And then they looked around and looked confused and started giving out money. Some of them had to stop and bend down and get money out of their briefcases." "Who were these people?" "I don't know. More and more bunches were going by. The men and the women were wearing really nice suits and had briefcases. They looked really confused, like someone screwed up and forgot to tell them it was Give Money to the Homeless Day in New York. Some of them kept looking around like they were looking for cameras. Or cops." "Geeze." "So that's what happened to your 20."



Photo courtesy of Wendy Winters

About the author

As our constant readers know, Phyllis Culham is a long time member of The Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis and is married to your editor. Their daughter Hallie is now a senior at the Corcoran College of Art and Design. She isn't a Buddhist but she is a Unitarian Universalist. Here they are, meditating at City Dock during the Annapolis street retreat.

Karma and the Life of Scrooge: A Buddhist Perspective

By John Edwards

A *Christmas Carol* is the most familiar and beloved of Charles Dickens' works. After all, everybody loves a happy ending. But the story starts off, "Marley was dead, to begin with." Indeed, "Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail."

Scrooge knew this of course. He probably knew too that he was of a nature to die, that there is no way to escape death. What he didn't seem to realize is that he is both the owner of his actions (karma) and the heir of his actions (karma). This is what the Hungry Ghost of Jacob Marley came to tell him:

"It is required of every man... that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander through the world – oh, woe is me! – and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness! ... I wear the chain I forged in life ... I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you?" Scrooge trembled more and more. "Or would you know ... the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!"

At this point in the story, Dickens is asking the reader to examine the nature of karma. "I wear the chain I forged in life", said

Marley. When one hears the words of Marley (who has become a hungry ghost), what does one reflect on? Karma is what we forge in life, it is the habitual energies that we carry through life and death, and life, death, and rebirth, if that is one's belief. Others too may take the seasonal opportunity to look at the direction of one's life. To say the least, the tradition of Christmas calls us annually to the rebirth tradition and the examination of our life's priorities. Thich Nhat Hahn says, "When we celebrate Christmas or the birth of the Buddha, we celebrate the coming into the world of a very special child" (*Living Buddha, Living Christ*). That child is each one of us and we are the ones to see the world anew. Scrooge is being asked to be that child and re-examine his life's vision, to break from the chains of bondage that he holds so tightly to: hatred, anger, fear, depression,



and unhappiness. Scrooge's fetters, or cravings, bind him from first, self-examination, and, second, the ability to change his life through practice. As in Scrooge's case, unless a change is made, he is as dead and "hungry" as Marley's ghost.

As the story progresses, we eventually see Scrooge's transformation, as he is forced to face the reality of his own tombstone - a marker of a life not well lived. Upon his "awakening" from his nights slumber, and the nightmare of the bondage he had created, Scrooge is renewed. He has experienced a "transformation of consciousness" and is "mindful" of his actions (karma) and how his actions affect others. Dickens asks us as readers the same questions Scrooge had to ask himself. Are we willing to "wear the chain...forged in life"? Karma is the choices we make. "As the Buddha pointed out, your intentions create your karma. Your will and intentions direct your mind, which controls the way you think, speak, and act. Your intentions establish the priorities in your life. Your past intentions condition or perpetuate your present intentions, habits, and propensities"(Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within*). When we look at Scrooge, we are given the opportunity to look at the Scrooge within ourselves and ask, "Are these the Karmic imprints I wish to live with?"

In the closing stave of *A Christmas Carol*, we see Scrooge born anew in a state of mindfulness. "Running to the window, he opened it, and put out his head. No fog, no mist; clear, bright, jovial, stirring, cold; cold, piping for the blood to dance to; Golden sunlight; Heavenly sky; sweet fresh air; merry bells. Oh, glorious. Glorious!"

Thich Nhat Hahn sums it up best: "Most of the time, we are lost in the past or carried away by future projects and concerns. — When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy" (*Living Buddha, Living Christ*). The choice is ours!

About the author

John Edwards is a member of the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis and the leader of the prison dharma project through the UU Church of Annapolis Restorative Justice Project.

Wood engraving of Marley's Ghost by John Leech, 1843. Scanned image courtesy of Philip V. Allingham.

The Five Remembrances

(Thich Nhat Hahn's version)

I am of the nature to grow old.
There is no way to escape growing old.
(Bell)

I am of the nature to have ill-health.
There is no way to escape having ill-health.
(Bell)

I am of the nature to die.
There is no way to escape death.
(Bell)

All that is dear to me and every one I love are
of the nature to change.
There is no way to escape being separated from
them.
(Bell)

I inherit the results of my actions in body,
speech, and mind.
My actions are the ground on which I stand.
(Two Bells)



Realm of Hungry Ghosts, detail from photo of Wheel of Life by Maren Yumi, flickr Creative Commons license. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/360o/241724351/>.

A Letter and a Poem

Dear Editor:

I am writing in response to your invitation to those incarcerated to share a little of their experience and practice with *UU Sangha*. Although I have been a member of the UU church since childhood, I am new to the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship, so this will serve as an introduction, as well as a thank you for introducing me to your journal and your community.

I am currently incarcerated at a California State prison. I have practiced yoga and meditation in one form or another for 30 years. I had the good fortune of growing up in the rather progressive city of Eugene, Oregon, where I attended the local Unitarian church with my family, and where I was exposed at age twelve to Kundalini (of course) through the wonderful public school system there. I have also long held an interest in Buddhism, though it remained for the most part peripheral until my incarceration two and a half years ago. At that time I began pursuing it with a kind of natural dedication, the groundwork for which had been the periodic reading of Buddhist ethics, the many thousands of references in conversation and media, and, most powerfully perhaps, seeing the dharma manifest over the years in those friends around me that practiced it. It appealed to me intellectually as well as spiritually, and the circumstances of incarceration produced in me the necessary determination to cultivate a serious practice.

Upon my arrival to the "mainline" general population, I began exploring the idea of starting a meditation class. There was already an Ananda Marga Yoga class, offered by a wonderful and very experienced teacher, which I attended regularly. I soon came to find out that one of the custody staff "guards" had been a practicing Tibetan Buddhist for more than twelve years. With his help, and the help of the chaplain, we began a once week session with a Tibetan Buddhist teacher from a local sangha. It was a godsend. The yoga, and the Tibetan class that was part instructional meditation, part dharma talk and Q & A, made life bearable in that first year.

I also began in earnest to read every Buddhist book I could get my hands on. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, The Prison Dharma Network, the Liberation Prison Project, and friends and family provided me with a wealth of material to read and study. There were times when I thought despair would drown me, only to find a passage in a Thich Nhat Hanh book that not only lifted my spirits, but touched something deep within me; I found veracity and freedom in the

words of so many of the teachers I read that caused an organic clarity to arise, that made the obfuscations fall away so that I became acutely aware of a liberation that did not need to be pursued: that in fact already existed. My task then became to continue to open that eye of awareness so that I could not only survive this place of great mental as well as physical violence, but know the freedom of the pure heart (one whose machinations are inspired by the dharma) throughout all this journey of life.

In addition to receiving material from the organizations I mentioned above, I also began corresponding with a teacher, the Ven. Dr. Karuna Dharma, Abbess of the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles. Dr. Karuna, who is of the Lien Quan School of Vietnamese Zen, has not only had a profound effect on the lives of myself and hundreds of other students both inside and outside of prison, but has contributed to the global community of Buddhists by ordaining woman in extinct lineages. She has thereby helped to restore and spread in spirit and fact the wholeness of sangha that existed in the Buddha's time, but has not existed in some parts of the Buddhist world for more than a millennium: a sangha that included both men and women, monks and nuns. Dr. Karuna has met with the Dalai Lama and other prominent figures in the global Buddhist community, who have not only given their blessing to her work, but have helped facilitate it. I am lucky enough to be able to work with her as my teacher.

I was transferred a year and a half ago to another prison, one that fortunately is less violent. As soon as I arrived I began work to start a "Buddhist Meditation Service" for any interested prisoners. It took some time to get off the ground, though, as prison work-place culture is very conservative, fundamentalist by nature, and generally antagonistic towards non-Christian and even liberal Christian activities. But we found allies, not only in some of the staff, but in recent case law regarding freedom of religion and religious practice in U.S. prisons. Although there are presently just three of us in our little sangha (as opposed to around 15 in the Tibetan class at the previous facility), we meet regularly to support each other, share materials, and practice zazen.

My practice has evolved quite a bit in the last 30 months. Though from the beginning I have found Zen to be a most natural expression for me. I have been asked by Dr. Karuna whether I would like to "take refuge" now, or wait, It can be done over the phone with the help of the chaplain. I have decided to wait, however, until my release next August when I will be returning to the Los Angeles area and I can do it in person, with her, at the I.R.M.C. Taking refuge,

although it is an important public as well as personal commitment to the Way, is not as pertinent at least so it seems to me now—as remaining determined to continuing to build a practice, here, now, in a place and situation that calls perhaps more than most for the lessons and expression of the dharma. I can't imagine an environment where there is a stronger sense of differentiation, of otherness and othering, of aversion and attraction—of ignorance and greed and hate—than in prison. And nowhere else is there a more pronounced need for compassion and equanimity, for loving-kindness and the ability to share in another's joy.

And nowhere better to cultivate the Way. So perhaps I should count myself lucky for this opportunity, as my karma ripens and so do I. For when and where else would I have been able to come into possession in such vast quantities of what in Zen are referred to as the Three Essentials of Great Determination, Great Faith, and Great Doubt?

I have appreciated the support of the CLF, and in particular their prison ministries and letter writing project. I have a wonderful UU pen-pal who shares with me her retreats (most recently with Pema Chodron) along with anecdotes from her life that help to sustain me in this very difficult time in my life. I am proud of my UU heritage, and eagerly look forward to attending the UU church in Sherman Oaks, California, that I had begun to attend not long before my incarceration. (My attendance at church has been admittedly spotty in my adulthood, though I never felt far from the people I unhesitatingly called my spiritual family.) In addition I look forward to becoming part of a practice sangha in the Los Angeles area, as well as continuing a relationship with this family within a family of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship!

Thank you for adding me to the *UU Sangha* mailing list. If there is any way that I can contribute, please let me know. Also, if anyone has any questions about practice in prison, or my experiences, please feel free to contact me.

Gassho
Stefan

STRIVING

What to expect?
The bud
the bloom
a naked branch

— Stefan

Prison Meditations

By “Tom”

We do not have to be afraid of entering unfamiliar territory once we have learned how to meet events with the gentleness of our minds. Learning to transform obstacles into objects of meditation provides a much needed bridge between the stillness of the concentrated mind and the movement of real life. As the practitioners of many martial arts often put it, we must learn to respond rather than react.

Rather than making a division between sacred and profane, the lesson of meditation is to bring awareness to bear on the (so called) disturbances of life. Rather than getting all worked up about how the noise in the prison dormitory is disturbing my meditation, as I have on many an occasion, I have learned to listen to the sounds rising and falling in the space of my mind.

Disturbing emotions do not have to be excluded; they can be doorways into an aliveness that is as vivid as a moment of spontaneous laughter, or irritation. By learning to be with these emotions in a new way, we can, in fact, energize our lives and enrich our personal relations.

As we learn this, boundaries begin to break down. The ego starts to reveal its innate permeability. I am no longer sure where I start and where you leave off. I discover that I cannot isolate myself from my world. I no longer need to make thoughts or emotions the enemy. I can make use of all aspects of myself to build my sacred space.

I no longer have to push away disappointment; I can use it to develop my tolerance. The very passions that once seemed so threatening to my meditative stability can become special opportunities for self-discovery.

I can feel the freedom that comes from accepting “what is,” and, as I sit here writing this in a prison dormitory, I don't feel half bad.

Meditation, Nature, Community

Rev. David Scheuneman will lead a week devoted to "practicing presence" – being aware, open and grounded in the moment – at Star Island, July 11-18, 2009. For more information visit <http://www.starmeditation.org/>

“Rocky Road”

by Hu

The hundred degree sun blisters my mahogany neck but that won't stop me from completing a monthly pilgrimage to the commissary. I eagerly plunk down a worn California State prisoner's I.D. to spend a full tenth of my monthly janitor salary on a single pint of Rocky Road ice cream.

Such a rich treat is a reward for making it through another thirty days but the frozen dessert will be lucky if it survives a full thirty seconds. I jam my plastic spoon into the cup and admire the texture of marshmallows and almonds attempting to deviate my path. The first bite rises, and I tell myself to slow down, enjoy the experience, try a modicum of restraint and yet by the end of the pint, I am all fingers and tongue desperate to absorb every last drop.

It occurs to me that I probably look like a young child in both decorum and presentation. And in fact, as the sugar titillates my tongue and the temperature freezes my brain, I fade into memories of my daughter enjoying her first ice cream. In every flashback I can see the sweet sugary dessert smeared on her cheeks, down her yellow sundress and all over her clattering sandals. Her smooth dark hair bounces to a gleeful cadence, and her smile burns into my mind like the brightest flashbulb you've ever seen.

I am thankful that I had a chance to be with her that day but now that I'm locked up, she's so far away I can't even count the days and miles between us.

You can't begin to imagine how glad I am that at least she has ice cream. I was born with a cleft lip, and I could not eat ice cream. In fact I could not eat much of anything. Perhaps these difficult circumstances led to my abandonment as an infant but then again, the times were scary and my home of Saigon was months away from falling.

I was lucky to receive shelter at the Hy Vong Nursery but in April, 1975, as the Communists closed in, some of the children were evacuated on a US mercy mission called Operation Baby Lift. I had been scheduled to fly out on the first C-47 but I still wasn't strong enough, so the planners bumped me to the second flight hoping I'd be ready. Tragically that first cargo plane,

filled with hundreds of children, nurses, volunteers and crew, crashed shortly after take off, sinking the hopes of many in the rice paddy it came to rest in. Days later with North Vietnamese troops swarming the airport, we finally flew to the US where I was given a new lip, a new family and a new future.

One of my life's goals has been to pay forward the gift I had been given. I wanted to be in a position where I could help another person obtain corrective surgery. I began to hear about nonprofits such as the Smile Train and Operation Smile which provided such services in underprivileged countries, including Vietnam. Acting on this dream came with plenty of self doubt. Fears of what I might discover inside made me anxious. But then I'd look at my daughter's beautiful face and realize, had it not been for my gift long ago, she might never have been.

Then suddenly I became wrapped up in legal problems. My world as I knew it was ripped out from under my feet. And before my disorientation was over, I found myself in prison, confused, debilitated of efficacy and entirely dependent on others.

But dreams don't die just because you are locked up. They may get unfocused, hazy, a few cobwebs might droop gently from their eaves, but the passion behind them is still deeply rooted. The challenge of incarceration is to continue to nurture your dreams in a place that purposefully stagnates.

Thankfully I have a close-knit support group who can still see the soft bits of my personality through the calloused layers of sadness and hurt, anger and angst, frustration and turmoil. Over the last year these loved ones have donated in my heart and spirit to organizations that repair cleft problems. They completed my goal and helped to open one of my dreams by closing an important circle.

The wisdom of Buddhism tells us that everything is in transition, permanence is an indulgent illusion. By the time I'm off parole, my daughter will be nineteen, and, like my biological parents, I will have only the vaguest idea of where she is. But I am satisfied, for now, knowing that she and I have ice cream. Because that little cup of enlightenment reminds me of our lives. Inevitably our memories of each other will slowly melt away; yet what lingers will always be a taste of sweetness.

Chowtime

By Michael

Chow! Meal time is announced by the clank of the door, the raised voices, the passive march to the feedlot trough. Another dinner in prison. Not much to look forward to especially if you are a vegetarian. Almost anything good is meat or has meat in it. Joining the others in the line, I was in a foul mood. Knowing my dinner would consist of odd tasting meat substitute, overcooked, bleached out vegetables, a salad of wilted lettuce and chopped up “horse carrots,” the same carrots you can buy for your livestock for pennies on the pound ... they are ever present.

As my tray was filled, my low expectations were met. Wanting to be alone, I found an empty table. My goal was to shovel the food down and leave. As I worked at my task I was joined by another inmate. Dan is a casual acquaintance who falls into the large group of those whom I know by name but otherwise interact with rarely. I know Dan plays tennis, is an outstanding artist, and an avid science fiction reader. We have shared a few novels over the course of the past year. I weakly said hi, silently hoping he did not want to talk. But of course he did.

Almost immediately Dan asked me if I had heard about the meditation group that has been meeting in the chapel. Reluctantly putting aside my melancholy I forced a smile and responded yes, allowing that I attend and serve as one of the inmate facilitators. Dan went on to describe a book where he had read about “meditation, enlightenment, and mindfulness,” asking if I know about such things? My mind screamed NO! I've always felt uncomfortable responding to questions about practice and often simply offer books written by those who seem to understand better than I. How can I possibly help others with the Dharma when I need so much practice just to get through some days? Returning my attention to Dan I responded that yes I have had some experience with these concepts, but that his questions

could perhaps be better answered by some other books I would be glad to share with him. I went on to invite him to join the meditation group on Sunday. I was still kind of hoping he would move on to an easier topic or just shut-up. He pressed on asking a question, followed by another, and another. My meal sat forgotten.

Finally, Dan asked about Mindfulness, describing how the book had mentioned being in the moment. “This I know about!” I thought. Responding I talked about the past being history the future being fantasy, telling him that our only chance to live is here and now. Turning to our meals I began to explain that being mindful included understanding that many things died so we could eat: a cow to provide the beef in his dinner, the plants for the vegetables and salads on our plates, the countless insects and microbes that have been wiped out to provide us food. Sure of myself now, I share that many humans had labored for this meal: farmers, field hands, shipping clerks, truckers, prison guards, and inmates. How all of us rely upon each other to live. How everything is interrelated, had always been so, and will always be so. I went on and on, ending with the scientific understanding that components making up our meals had once been part of a star, how each of us had been part of a star, how everything had been energy in the Big Bang. This, I explained to Dan, is the understanding needed to live in the present moment.

I just repeated to Dan what I had seen expressed in many Dharma texts in many ways over the past two years. I thought I had grasped these concepts. I was wrong. Returning my attention back to my tray everything I thought I had “known” fell away. It was beautiful. I took a breath and with tears in my eyes I ate as if it was for the first time.

About the Author

Michael discovered Buddhism and UUs after he made it to prison. This story is the first stand-alone story he's written about practice.

Letters

Dear Robert,

Thank you so much for sending me the spring '08 Sangha – funny though, pages 9& 10 were missing. I was reading part II of the essay written by Rev. Doug Kraft on mindfulness and it went abruptly into a *very* different tone in Andy Agacki's piece. I laughed, but was still disappointed that I wasn't able to finish Doug's piece (and that I had never read the first part). But thank you, and I look forward to reading the next installment—and anything else you care to send.

I have wandered in and out of my own thoughts for a long time, gripped with a profound loneliness and emotional pain; questioning my place and worth in relation to all things. What I've found is that I possess a deep love with a willingness—almost a need—to suffer. Although it would seem incredibly dramatic, it does reveal the depth of my hurt, and my thoughts—and of my hope! Despite the horrible circumstances I've had to go through and deal with throughout my life, I've always fought hard to hold on to my love, to questions the reasons why things were and are what they are— even when the answers hurt more than the asking, and to keep in mind the life we all share and ways we can all live without feeling a “need” to hurt one another. So I see where my suffering can be put to good use. My greatest fear now is being completely ignored, still, and running out of time. – I cannot separate from all other “persons” into a “self,” within, I mean. It feels wrong, somehow. False. We are all of one, in one, by one, to one. That we *are* separate is the most painful. and, the greatest source of further confusion, fear, and prolonged pain—I believe our ability to foster our intelligence to overcome what we're taught to see as “instinct” is what is so badly needed in drawing an honest picture of “ourselves;” and how the hurt we carry with us is often left over from previous generations who—for whatever reasons—could not resolve or bring light to their own hearts and minds, or in those of others.

I don't believe my suffering is necessary for all others to go through—but I would make a case for my willingness to love and to see one another as a part of oneself that needs to be loved; and by loved, I mean seen, dealt with, and told the truth about truth, and to do what's needed to be complete with one another. Only when we begin to heal ourselves and one another can we truly understand our true worth and value, and begin to take better care of this beau-

tiful Earth that gives its life in all of us—whom we should honor most. So much of humanity has lost touch with its own goodness and the honest joy that comes with it; I fear for my safety and for those who would be further victimized by the darkness that dominates the lives of so many others.

That reality hurts me, deeply. That such a gulf exists between humanity—one to another—breeding such a contempt for essentially *ourselves* seems like complete madness. How can we hate each other and claim love even for our own “self”?

I believe there is an appropriate outrage that is often mis-directed and wasted on the thinking of it being displayed as somehow wrong itself—but *needs* to be shown: in the face of negativity that seeks to harm others in thought, word, or deed. We all need to know that when we hurt one of us we hurt *all* of us. And how can we reason with a basically suicidal person ... – by giving them what they want? Or giving them back what they never had? Because that's what humanity has been led into being: a completely fearful, vengeful, suicidal race. – How do we turn this tide? Can we? ... Or do we see this poison has infected so many beyond our ability to even try to combat, and basically “run for our lives”? – But no, I think life gives us all a taste of all things of its making—at times not easily understood why—that will always keep us guessing of its ways ... and that's okay too. I guess it's okay to just be who we are and try our best to get through our days and understand we all know suffering in much the same ways, and try to have the courage and resolve to love in the face of such need, pain, want, doubt, loss, and hurt. – I daresay “what choice do we have” – so we have to fight off the desire to simply settle for what we think we know and learn to listen to our hearts. “The light”; “that still small voice”; “inner child”; – *whatever* you wanna' call it— but to identify the basic truths of living and its posing hurts that keep us from believing in one another and protecting each other from being confused, feeling alone, or from believing in the “worthlessness” of ourselves and of anyone else. That's the hand I wanna' have to hold out for anyone who could ever have the need to reach out for it or be touched by it: one of a loving brother, a faithful friend; and maybe even that of a child in need of knowing and/or being shown, etc. – can we value one another like that? Like children who ask for nothing but love and the chance to bring happiness into lives of everyone around them? – can we – as the human race – ever achieve this mass enlightenment – this nirvana? I hope so.

Christopher

Hi, it's me again ...

I think I'm more than a little curious why you guys decided you wanted to be "homeless" for a day. What did you think it would really mean, and to whom?

You will never see or feel the circumstances that bring someone to that point; you will internalize the emotions that go with the hurts, shame, or the utter powerlessness to feel any social identity or significance involved; you will never realize that something as simple as eating can reduce you to the level of having to essentially prostitute yourself and your principles in the name of survival.

So really, what the fuck were you thinking? Did any of you hate yourself afterwards? Did any of you come away knowing the people that passed you by would just as soon piss on you for fun while no one was looking, and say "what a shame it all was" while they were? Did any of you see the reality of "nothing you could do" and having absolutely "no where to go"? – Were any of you ever alone?

Dude, you guys went camping.

There are some things you don't need to pretend you understand. First, you will never have the true ability; and secondly, the only thing you would wanna' do had you had that experience is to try and forget it. You mock the very idea of "suffering" by trying to basically entertain yourselves on the notions of your "sympathies". Be glad you don't know.

Please do yourselves a favor and consider your little experiment a failure. It's "nice" to wanna' see how other people "live" or how they experience any given situation, but there are just some things you can never wrap your mind around. And realistically, it's not your place to try.

Effective outreach begins and ends with directions to existing organizations and agencies established to assist those who really want a way up and out of that fuckin' misery.

Lack of trust aside, if some notion of "greater need" and "personal pride" don't kick in and get somebody to wanna' better their own situation and utilize what's available to them to improve their own situation ... fuck 'em. fostering dependency cripples integrity.

Pain is necessary, suffering is optional.

Try and remember that day you were left to sit there by yourself and no one came no matter how loud you yelled or cried and you were all alone to figure it out and somehow get it done—eventually you learned how to wipe your own ass.

If people wanna' go through life with shit

running down their leg, that's their business. Pretty silly thing to wanna' sign up for.

I was "out there" at 13. You don't wanna' know. You decide how you live. Otherwise, you're fucked. Be grateful you get to make the call.

Love begins within!

Christopher

Hi Robert,

I hope you and your family are well. I didn't say before, but I thought that your wife speaking on her realization of the actual threat to one's safety that a cop could pose was really a good place to start in seeing the world through the eyes of someone kept on the outside of a form of humanity that most people take for granted. – in a way that they don't even know they're doing. The "Third World" is right under our noses. There is a battle of wills and beliefs raging so strongly in this society that the simple truth of what is left in it's wake and the irreparable harm that is done is never given a second thought. – Like, I would like to believe that there was pure love and compassion at the root of what your intent was in going about with the whole "wandering aimlessly" thing but I have no way of knowing. Was it more a curiosity based on the story you'd heard to "examine" the experience in your own way—and if so, why did you equate "wandering aimlessly" with "homeless people". That was the insult. And why did you not go for a walk by yourself with no particular destination in mind and see the simplicity of the world around you and be in remote observance and enjoy your presence in bearing witness to the reality of all that is beyond the confines of your own mind and need for thoughts, and be grateful for the chance to just ... see. That is what the story meant.

But of course I cannot be critical of what you did or didn't see – that you dared to "look" at all was most important – I only feel it an obligation in defense of simple truth to point out what you might have missed. Also, that I think you've provoked quite a bit of thought from me on this is because the idea that "actual" or "real" homeless people would wander aimlessly anywhere is the kind of bad joke that only someone in that situation would "get": they are doing everything they can with what they have to simply survive. There is a reason to everything they do.

* * *

It has been a few days. I have been mourning the Mets.

I read, reflect, and basically just observe the

world around me. And the one inside me. With it, I try to build an understanding. I don't claim to be 'right', I just sorta' know what I know, ya' know? And I'm grateful. My mind does what it does, and that's cool. It's on me to be patient and to allow it to process all it does on any given thing and wait for what it has to say. "I" am not involved in that process. And really, that's the coolest part. It is in the understanding of that that enables me to see how and why there is so much confusion, strife, conflict, ignorance, hatred, rage, and blatant stupidity and "dis-ease" in this world. We're told to "think things through" – like we have a part – instead of "see things through", and then to question our choices.

I think so many of us buy into this ego-centric idea that "we are" this light, blah blah blah EENNNEHK! wrong. If anything, we might be the little sparks that pop off a weld—lucky enough to know and appreciate that we are (or were) a part of something so big, beautiful, and beyond ourselves and at work in the hands of all creation necessary to serve its need that the thing we should be most grateful for is simply having been. Meanwhile, I still like eating, dreaming/sleeping, music, sex/love, laughing, etc., etc. ... It is cool to be alive, yeah? so I think I'll enjoy it while I can. and what I have always found the most enjoyable is the beauty and simplicity with which things are by themselves. I can appreciate them each for and as they are and why they are cool, and then how I might experience them in an enriching way. YIPPIE! – But yes, no matter how you could imagine trying to see my current situation as having any beneficial anything to it ... it just sucks. Don't kid yourself. this is a pretty dehumanizing, degrading, and violently oppressing place. Given the concepts of what it's billed as in its intent, it seems to me that it clearly defeats its own purpose—and moreover is designed to fail. Nothing good is meant to come from any of this, I assure you. It will destroy all it touches. But you don't need to hear about that. That's part of a larger story that you need not have to think about right now. I apologize for bringing it up. I will be okay.

I must wait to experience true quiet, warmth, calm, solitude, and peace amongst the trees – to roll around the grass with a dog – to ride a bicycle around and feel a breeze while soaking up my surroundings. – the smells of fresh fruit and vegetables. A good slow roast, and the taste of a graham-crusting strawberry cheesecake. The idea of being in a safe, nurturing, loving embrace ... well, that may hafta' wait. I've been single for a little

while now, and I'm not prone nor inclined to jump into anything too deep with "the first-girl-that-comes-along" sorta' thing. I've been I love before. It's hard enough to be me, let alone inviting someone in to essentially share any of my memories ... That's a lot to ask. I guess right now I'd be happy (ier) with just a little companionship (with just a little hint of "pinch & tickle"). I'm going to be here for another year and a half, on top of the 5½ I've been here already. It's very hard and it hurts very much. It truly is a job to divorce this pain every day. And at this moment. I'm here for running away from a cop for fear of going back to jail. Once they get you they own you. It's pure slavery, through-and-through. If you resist, they punish you worse. I've got right now 10 years for running away. I'm stuck in a world where nobody has really ever told me the truth, and I feel very, very alone. And this is the greatest truth of all: the human need. Or, the living need. The one that cries out from deep within each of us to feel and know a connection—a validity; an identity; a value to someone or something else; significance; a yearn to give. Love.

That and so much more. Instead I live a true horror of betrayal, deceit, abandonment, abuse, lies and malice, and a whole lotta "been done wrong" kinda' stuff. Unfortunately, we witness a culture and society with its greatest growth industry the production and manufacturing of complete sociopaths. It has been this way for several years. And well throughout my family, community, and visible municipal leaders and civil servants! There appears to be no shortage of those willing to knowingly destroy the lives of others to satisfy their own self-serving agendas. The idea of "trust" in my life ... is a scam. that's akin to "blind faith" – which sounds just as stupid. It's along the lines of why they don't put 5-year-olds in charge of roller-coasters at amusement parks—it just wouldn't end good. I am very grateful to be aware of this universe within me, but I am moreso grateful and very much aware of the reality of the world around me. And the one within the ones around me. Lessons learned in a very, very hard and solidifying way. I wake up each day in a factory/warehouse of human ticking time-bombs—all with random and defective timers. But I hafta' say ... it's not too much different from the house I grew up in. The difference is I'm not as miserable as I once was about all of it. because I recognize (if that's even possible, in a sense) something beautiful and awe-inspiring that truly lives inside of me that is well beyond the reach of any finite circumstances.

Christopher



Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship

Convocation 2009

At the beautiful and historic Mission San Luis Rey, Oceanside, California
(north of San Diego), Friday dinner through Sunday lunch, March 27—29, 2009.

Featuring Shinzen Young on The Science of Enlightenment



The search for awakening is not limited to a chosen few. The liberated state is as real as the sensations you are having right now. It is through the investigation of your own thoughts and feelings that you can awaken to clear insight and a happiness independent of conditions: the state of enlightenment.

Shinzen Young brings to this program a life-long involvement with Eastern cultures. He has trained extensively in Asian monasteries and in each of the three major Buddhist meditative traditions, Vajrayana, Zen, and Vipassana. He is an ordained Buddhist monk and has widely explored the psychological and scientific aspects of the meditative state and biofeedback experience. He is the director of the highly respected Community Meditation Center of Los Angeles.

Registration:

Early bird: before February 15, 2009 ... \$80
Regular, on or after February 15, 2009 ... \$100

Accommodations, including meals, for the
Entire Convocation

Single room (limited availability) \$220
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Commuters \$120

Mission San Luis Rey information and directions: <http://www.sanluisrey.org/>

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Mission San Luis Rey



Wanted: UU Penpals for UU Prisoners

Looking for a social justice project that UUs can do alone or in groups, in their own homes, whenever it's convenient? Over 400 prisoners have joined the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) seeking liberal spiritual support by mail. About half of them are writing to a (non-incarcerated) UU 'penpal' through CLF's "Letter Writing Ministry", but dozens more CLF prisoner-members are still on the waitlist.

All letters are sent through the mail (so UUs without email can still participate), and all letters from prisoners are forwarded through CLF's prison ministry (prisoners are told only their penpal's first name). The CLF's prison ministry staff makes the 'matches' and remains available for advice/support. Individual UUs are welcome to apply, or a group of UUs from the same congregation can apply and ask to be 'matched' all at the same time (if they want to form an ongoing study/support group).

Please visit CLF's website www.clfuu.org/prisonministry to review the Guidelines for the Letter Writing Ministry and request an info-application packet, or write to the CLF Prison Ministry, 25 Beacon St, Boston, MA 02108 (PrisMin@clfu.org).

Our First Supporting Sangha!

By Rev. Wayne Arnason, President, UUBF

Congratulations to the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis, our first "Supporting Sangha." The Annapolis group has decided to contribute not only individually to UUBF's work, but collectively as a Sangha. They are, we hope, the first of many.

Our membership is composed of individuals and it is their contributions which support the UUBF. We have never before put out the possibility that the sitting groups and sanghas that are listed with us might consider a collective gesture of occasional or annual support. This kind of support from UU sitting groups and sanghas would enable us to do so much more. Our financial capacity right now is enough to sustain our newsletter and make it from one UUA GA to the next. In the years we have convocations, a low registration turnout has the potential to wipe out our reserves. So please consider becoming a Supporting Sangha.

And if you are an individual looking for the support of a UU Sangha, the list of affiliated sanghas and sitting groups is available and regularly updated on our web site, www.uubf.org.

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Don't miss Shingen Young on the Science of Enlightenment at the UUBF Convocation, March 27-29, 2009, at the beautiful and historic Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside, California. And don't miss the Early Bird Registration rate. See the flyer on page 14.