



Practice for Self, Practice for Others: A Prison Minister's Reflections on Faith and Freedom

by Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin

In "Practice for Self, Practice for Others: A Prison Minister's Reflections on Faith and Freedom," Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin, the first woman to hold the position of bishop in the Nichiren Order of North America, shares stories from her work with sanghas in the Texas prison system. She frames her reflections with crucial concepts and teachings from the Lotus Sutra and the schools of Buddhism it has inspired.

In the Lotus Sutra–based Nichiren schools, three concepts describe Buddhist practice and the arc of growth in faith. The first is *jigyo keta*, which translates to “practice for self, practice for others.” The second is *ichinen zuiki*, “a single moment of rejoicing”; the third, *ichinen shinge*, “a single moment of faith.” These three concepts can shape and develop the practice of a beginner and keep them on the path of the bodhisattva.

For most of us, beginning practice is often self-directed as we each seek our own particular goal, whether it be peace, happiness, mindfulness, or joy. My own practice of Buddhism began when I was between the ages of eleven and thirteen, so it is easy to imagine that the journey of my understanding and practice continued for some time before I

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became truly grounded as a Buddhist. The shift into becoming a more serious practitioner happened on the edge of my twenties as I became more independent and self-sufficient. At that time, the women who modeled practice and faith for me taught me how to survive and overcome difficulties, and I was able to live on my own, using my practice to guide how I moved through everyday living and all my relationships. It might seem strange that the transition to living on my own was significant; yet I grew up in the protected environment of the U.S. Army as the daughter of a career soldier. Eventually, I was led to the Buddha's teachings on equality, which were actually modeled by my father, a devout Methodist who opened our home to the young soldiers under his charge.

My first experience of going to a prison occurred when I was barely into my twenties. While working in a hospital, I met the head of a project designed to help inmates reacclimate to the outside world. Working with other former inmates, he had developed the program to address some of the difficulties they had encountered in interacting with women for the first time after years of no contact. I became part of a group of ten women who traveled on a monthly basis to be in conversation with short-timer inmates at La Tuna Federal Correctional Institute located in Anthony, TX, about 12 miles north of El Paso. Significantly, the inmates involved were all incarcerated for drug offenses.

I had a bit of a romantic notion of what visiting a prison would be like. Reality was a rude shock. I've never forgotten walking through the gates and hearing them slam behind me; it was difficult to ignore the reality of not being able to leave. This was followed by the long walk through the courtyard of the prison, where we were bombarded by the whistles and catcalls of hundreds of incarcerated men. It was frightening and incredible at the same time. Finally, upon arriving at the room where our meetings would occur, we met the men we had been asked to engage. They were all relatively young and quick to sniff out untruths from any of

us. We were met with a grueling Q&A session about our motives for coming to visit. Frankly, none of us were truly prepared to be 100 percent honest and upfront about who we were or why we were there. From that first day, these men showed us that truth was important and valuable to a meaningful relationship. Each of them had experienced something I literally did not understand at the time. The truth of the three poisons of greed, anger and ignorance was being revealed to us women, and at first we were not prepared to receive it. As I participated in the program, basic concepts in Buddhism began to be revealed in my daily life. Slowly I was beginning to realize the importance of practice.

Eventually, this program led to my employment as executive assistant to the head of a halfway house under the Bureau of Prisons. This position offered an eye-opening experience into a different dimension of human nature than what I had previously experienced. The inmates had nothing on these other men, who showed me the reality of power—I found myself suddenly faced with a dog-eat-dog world, misogyny, sexual harassment, all coming from my employers and others higher in the chain of command. In sharp contrast, the care and concern that the men coming out of prison showed me were unexpected gifts. As I was the only woman to engage them on a regular basis, I became sister, mother, and daughter; very rarely did I encounter anyone who tried to cross the line and enter into a more intimate relationship. I cut their hair, spoke to them about what they might encounter in meeting free-world women, and engaged them above all as human beings. These men in the halfway house looked after me and interrupted the harmful actions and comments from my employers. It was a real pleasure to be surrounded by men around whom I felt extremely comfortable and protected. After a while, I left the position, and my dad took my place. A veteran and former heavyweight boxer, he had strong stature and presence, and he remained in the position until his death.

Thirty years later, after taking vows to become a priest, I was invited to serve as clergy for an emerging Buddhist group following the Nichiren tradition within the prison. I agreed to come and visit. Until that point, I had not experienced first-hand the racial divide in prison. This visit brought me into abrupt contact with it. When I went to meet the group, accompanied by two female colleagues of color, the members turned out to be entirely white, and their leader was determined to drive the direction of the group. I had to be quite forceful about the fact that I would have sole responsibility for the direction because I was the teacher, and I hoped I could provide deep education and open their hearts and minds.

We learned years later that the group was predominantly made up of white supremacists and Neo-Nazis, many of whom initially used the group as a means of contact with each other. The fact that they were white did not deter us from sharing the dharma; however, we all had to face our fears about the nature of the folks we were meeting. My earlier work with inmates incarcerated on drug offenses did not prepare me for meeting murderers, sex offenders, and individuals who were prone to menacing violence. Fortunately, we never learned what offenses the group members had committed unless they opened up on their own. This was a blessing in disguise, as we came to care for these men as persons.

A singing bird in a cage attracts uncaged birds, and the sight of these uncaged birds will make the caged bird want to be free. Likewise, the chanting of the *Odaimoku* will bring out the Buddha-nature within ourselves.

—*Hokke Shoshin Jobutsu Sho* (Appearance of Buddha-nature)

We were often told that we smelled liked freedom and liberation. Like uncaged birds, our freedom produced a desire for freedom in those around us, and this reminded us of the importance of embodying our faith and practice. It kept us on track with the teachings of the Buddha and the foundation for our prison ministry:

*I see all living beings equally.
I have no partiality for them.
There is not 'this one' or 'that one' to me.
I transcend love and hatred.*

*I am attached to nothing.
I am hindered by nothing.
I always expound the Dharma
To all living beings equally.
I expound the Dharma to many
In the same way as to one.*

[Lotus Sutra, Ch. 5]

One of our most serious practitioners, Al, was a sex offender with an abusive background of parental sexual assault. He was determined to use Buddhist practice to change his life and soon became a leader in the community. But when another inmate became jealous of Al's role, he outed Al as a sex offender—the lowest form of life in the prison caste system. Nearly the entire sangha walked away; Al lost his prized job assignments and was unanimously shunned. This situation continued for about six weeks, and yet Al continued to practice as if his life depended on it. Observing his efforts, new people came to explore the practice, and even some of the initial group returned.

As we practiced together, we also faced the scrutiny of other groups and the prison staff, most of whom had never encountered Buddhism. Our journey was quite a challenge, as we had to fight for nearly everything we needed to do services and to support study. Typically, when faced with

restrictions like these, inmates or volunteers would file a grievance. Instead, we mounted a campaign of respect, continuing to seek what we needed to advance our cause. We bowed to the Buddha within everyone and practiced radical hospitality. At times, it was damned difficult because most of the folks we spoke with came from a Christian evangelical tradition and were totally unfamiliar with Buddhism. Sometimes our meetings were restricted because they were perceived to be a meeting ground for gay men or for others to plan escapes. Buddhism was so unfamiliar to most, and we had to win them over with kindness and respect. It was not easy, as guards would complain about our incense or object to our use of candles. In the process, the inmates become quite well acquainted with the laws governing faith and how to use them, especially when it came to religious practice.

All things are possible if people are united in one spirit. Nothing can be accomplished if they are not united.

—*Itai Doshin Ji* (One Spirit in Different Bodies)

Eventually, as our sangha developed, we held the very first day-long intensive practice retreat in the entire Texas prison system. Our chaplain was eager to support the retreat so as to demonstrate his efforts to support diverse religions. The program also attracted the attention of the *Houston Chronicle*, and a reporter came out to run a story on the retreat and the sangha, which, by this time, consisted of about thirty individuals of mixed ethnicities. To this day, we have continued holding retreats at two different prison units at least twice a year, during which we offer ceremonies for taking refuge. We also bring in a vegan meal, which many of the inmates appreciate, especially those who work in the fields yet are unable to have fresh fruit and vegetables for themselves.

Those who believe in the Lotus Sutra are like the winter season for many hardships come incessantly. Winter is surely followed by spring. We have never heard nor seen that winter returned to fall. We have never heard that the believers in the Lotus Sutra go back to ordinary men. The Lotus Sutra says, “All people who listen to this sutra will attain Buddhahood.”

—*Myoichi Ama Gozen Goshosoku* (Letter to Myoichi Ama)

Over the years, many of these men have become our friends, despite all the obstacles. I am no longer so naïve about people behind bars and recognize there are still those who, for a number of reasons, would continue down a path of crime. But I still hold hope for the work we do. One of our greatest success stories is Ed, a man who has been out of prison only two and a half years. He was incarcerated as a juvenile at the age of 16 and given a life sentence. By the time we met Ed, he had already been behind bars for 27 years. Though cocky, he was always sincere and took to Buddhist practice readily. He soon became the coordinator for the group and understood and responded to many of the issues we had to deal with.

Somewhat unexpectedly, he received parole and was transferred to another unit to begin his training to prepare for the free world. In this new unit, he was entirely alone as a Buddhist. This was his moment of *ichinen shinge* (a single moment of faith), which revealed to him that he must chant the *Odaimoku* (the sacred title of the *Lotus Sutra*) and follow the dharma. Later, I met Ed after he was released. The person I met outside of prison was a different individual entirely—no longer cocky, and possessing a sense of himself as a man with confidence. Very few could believe that he had been behind bars for so long. He had a plan for himself and worked to achieve his goals. He now owns his own trucking company, has purchased a new house, and is preparing for his

wedding this summer. Ed is one of four formerly incarcerated for whom I will perform marriage rites this year.

One of our most unforgettable members was John, a white supremacist, who worked in the fields. During the summer, he would get very dark to the point of gaining the new nickname “Mahogany.” Our conversations about race and racism were deep and far ranging. He shared that he finally understood why it took so long for him to receive parole—he had to meet the Dharma so that he could change his life. This was his moment of *ichinen zuiki*, the joy of realizing the value and impact of the Dharma in his life. Shortly after this realization, he became eligible for parole and it was finally granted.

There are many more stories that could be shared. Some of the men continue to practice Buddhism, while others have found other paths. The Dharma gave these men the aspiration for awakening and the ability to have faith in and respect for themselves. Those of us who came in to share the Dharma overcame our own personal prejudices and stereotypes. We learned to love those considered unlovable and unworthy and, by doing so, allowed them to see themselves through the lens of Buddhism. We taught them the foundational concepts which allowed them to challenge themselves to see the Dharma and its impact on their lives. We learned to be a sacred community together and work together to accomplish our goals. Most importantly, we all realized the truth of the equality of all beings.

We are fully aware that for some, Buddhism was simply an avenue towards self-advancement. Practice awakens that ability to perceive where some are or are not. Still, I believe some learned the value of faith—on whatever path they’re on—while others valued the spirit of the community. All of us gained something through the interaction and the witnessing. Even those who managed to find themselves reoffending continue to seek the Dharma. All of us continue to challenge ourselves to practice according to the teachings of the Buddha and Nichiren Shonin. As we

continue to practice, we all change as the Dharma continues to polish the mirror of our lives. These changes are also reflected in our relationships with others, as we realize the true value of *jigyo keta*: practice for self is actually practice for others.