

Susan Shannon, M. Div.
415-256-1816
ss108@earthlink.net

Death Row Butterfly

I hadn't been to Death Row to meet with my Buddhist Sangha for about a month due to my staff sponsor and escort being out of town. Last night I met with group one of the 3 Buddhist groupings I have there. A. and D. were both escorted by their tier guards into the telephone-booth sized holding cages at the back of the chapel where we met. They were very happy to see me, and despite my being tired from a long day at the prison, I was happy to see them too.

We started with page 17 of our outline, "The Elements of a Buddhist Service." Taking into consideration their hunger for meditation and relaxation techniques, I led them in a guided meditation focusing on posture and breath. We took several counted breaths together, and then scanned our bodies for tension, breathing into those spots with loving awareness. Death Row was louder than usual tonight, the five-stacked tiers and over 500 men above and around us providing a cacophony of voices. The three of us sat together in our own stillness, unifying our intention and giving praise to the enlightened energies of the universe for being present with us. As has happened often during our Buddhist Services, the chaotic sounds of Death Row quieted down as we sat in silence.

When I brought the man back to the awareness of sitting together, D. had a question. He asked me about mantra, saying he had been practicing the Nam Myoho Renge Kyo mantra and that he really liked it. He went on to say that he had been meditating frequently, sometimes sitting, sometimes lying on his bunk. He has discovered that chanting helps to calm his anxiety and focus his mind, something he has had challenges with all his life. I mentioned the fact that one of the gifts of chanting is just that, and praised him for finding this out on his own.

I asked A. what his experience had been over the last three weeks- had he had also been practicing mantra? When I gave the men my outline, I had included several basic mantras for them to practice. He said he had been practicing meditation and mantra, and that our group has already benefitted him in many ways. He went on to say that his favorite mantra for years was the six-syllable mantra, Om Mani Padme Hung.

It occurred to at the time that perhaps spending the rest of our evening on mantra would be more valuable than going through the outline especially because they had both brought up their experimentation with mantra. Since D. had asked the question, we talked about the Nam Myoho Renge Kyo mantra first. This mantra is the title of the Lotus Sutra in Japanese. We talked about how, in Buddhist tradition, chanting a mantra is a very pithy way of not only setting our intention, but also offering our intention for the benefit of all beings. The Lotus Sutra is one of the most popular and influential Mahayana sutras and is the basis on which the Tiantai, Tendai, Cheontae, and Nichiren schools of Buddhism were established. Among other points, it emphasizes that enlightenment is possible for all sentient beings, and that the Bodhisattva path is the way to that goal.

From there we focused on the Mani mantra, otherwise known as the six-syllable mantra. I wrote out the mantra in Tibetan and showed it to the men. We talked about the difference pronunciation of the mantra differs slightly whether they are based in the Sanskrit or Tibetan tradition, and that both are fine. The men were very attentive as I explained the very basic translation of Om Mani Padme Hung as “The jewel in the lotus.” What does it mean when we unpack that image? What we see is a lotus plant floating on the surface of a pond, with its roots extending all the way into muddy murky depths. We see the beautiful 8-fold flower floating on the water surface, its luminescent pedals facing the heavens. How does this image pertain to us imperfect human beings? The lotus is a perfect symbol of the human struggle, as each and every one of us has the essence and capability of uniting with the enlightened aspects of the universe. Each and every one of us has the capacity to bloom into a beautiful lotus flower. Just so, each and every one of us are rooted in the mud of our afflicted emotions. It is the journey of life to travel the stem from the mud of the afflictive emotions; the anger, the hatred, the pain, the hurt, the suffering- to travel all the way up the stem to where we achieve our highest vibration, to where we bloom and blossom into a flower pointed to the heavens. This is the path of human transformation- this is what we do together when we meet on Wednesday nights! We assist ourselves each other in this journey, this soul journey that is our birthright- the journey to the heart to the truth to love to interconnectedness and eventually to enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

All the while I was speaking I was aware of the cold hard fact that these men had committed heinous crimes in their past, and just as they lived here on Death Row, they would quite likely die here as well. This very location was as symbolic of the mud of afflicted emotions as one could muster, and yet here were these men, beaming, feeling the truth of this, doing their very best to travel up their own lotus stem despite the gravity of their past acts. Once again I pinched myself, as this very place and these very human beings are where the Dharma pedal hits the metal in all its power. Thank you, all my teachers, for giving me this blessing to serve here. I would not want to be talking about Dharma anywhere else.

A. and D. were engaged in this discussion to the point of nearly standing up from their chairs. I continued to discuss the deeper layer of the symbolism of the six-syllable mantra. My monk friends have told me that in the monastic schools there are books 8 inches thick describing the symbolism of this mantra. Each syllable represents one of the realms of existence, so when we chant Om Mani Padme Hung, we are actually sending prayers to all the suffering beings of all realms of existence.

I asked A. if he had anything to add to this discussion, given that he had been chanting this mantra a long time. He replied that he felt ecstatic with my explanation and that I had described beautifully what the journey of the Dharma feels like to him, and what the symbol of the lotus stands for. Now, finally, he felt he could explain this to the other men on Death Row who often asks him questions about our group discussions.

I glanced at my watch and saw we were almost out of time. I wanted to make sure that we could end with the closing elements of a Buddhist service, to keep with our agreed upon structure. A. saw me looking at my watch and quickly asked if he could please tell a story about something

that had happened to him since the last time we met. There was a tone of urgency to his request, so I took a breath and said, of course, take your time, you don't need to hurry.

A. said that one day he was exercising with the other men in his yard. The men on Death Row are divided into "yards" depending on their crimes, their race, their gang affiliations, etc. The yards on Death Row are about the size of a handball court, defined by high cement walls on one end with razor wire coils on the top, the other 3 walls 15 foot high chain link fencing topped with razor wire. Men in each yard can see into the other yards through the chain-linked fence. The men in any given shared yard get to spend about 4 hours a day together, unshackled, exercising or not, talking or not, but these men are the only other humans they get to share space with free of shackles and bars.

That particular day A. was having a conversation through the fence with a man from a different yard. They were talking about our Dharma group. The other man was curious as to what we talk about and what we do. A. told the other man that we talk about the teachings of the Buddha, our interconnectedness, and how we can transform ourselves and hopefully, eventually, those around us. A. went on about how he really loves our group and that this man might want to get on our waiting list. A. added that since we had been meeting, he had noticed he was getting more calm and peaceful. Not only that, but his reverence for life had changed. Now, if a fly or a spider came into his cell, instead of flushing it or outright killing it, he wants to protect it. He doesn't want to hurt or cause pain to anything for the rest of his life, and that this sudden change is stunningly unarguable to him.

At this point A's voice lowered and his eyes took on a soft shine. He continued to say that just at that moment, out of nowhere, somehow finding its way through the razor wire coils through the chain-link-fence a monarch butterfly had landed on the fence between the two men, a stunning image in full color in a drab and lifeless grey and dirty background. A. was intrigued and felt this was a sign that what was going on in our group was real, was authentic. At this, A said his throat tightened and he got chills of excitement. The other man continued to talk. Not sure if the other man had seen the butterfly or not, A. blurted out "Man, do you see that butterfly that just landed here? Do you feel like I feel that this is a miracle just as we're talking about the Dharma and this butterfly lands on the fence between us?" The man replied "You know, I did see it, but I didn't really pay much attention to it until what you just said and now I really get it! This stuff is real!"

A. looked at me questioningly as if to gauge if my interpretation of this auspicious event matched his. I'm sitting there, fighting back tears of joy, with the full recognition that my tears are falling on a bullet proof, stab proof vest as I witness this man's vow of non-violence, on Death Row no less? I was deeply moved, and aware, too, that this was the first time I had gotten teary with these men on Death Row. I wondered how they would perceive my display of emotion, but decided just to own it. I wiped my eyes and said, "A, that is beautiful, I'm crying." He said, "I sort of saw that as a sign that what we are doing together is really real!" D. excitedly nodded his head in agreement. I went on with a slight kidding tone, "Sort of a sign? Gosh A., do you think so? I mean what would it take to take away the 'sort of'? To me this is very clear."

A. nodded his head again. All three of us acknowledged that butterflies are a symbol of transformation and that is what Dharma practice is all about. I elaborated to say that once I asked

my teacher Dhubthob Rinpoche a question that relates to this. “Rinpoche, I believe that animals can be bodhisattvas too, but some people think they are just stupid beasts. What do you think Rinpoche?” He replied, “Bodhisattvas have complete power and ability to come to us in whatever form would best reach us and show us truth. If coming to us in an animal form will reveal to us the truth and the path, they will do that at just the right moment.” A, to me, you and this other man were visited by a Bodhisattva who was coming to give you a sign that yes, what we are doing is sacred, and we are on the right path.”

After that we closed our Buddhist service on Death Row with a dedication. “May any negativity in us and in our environment be transformed to positive energy and may all the positive energy we have generated together this evening be multiplied. May it extend out from where we sit, to everyone here on Death Row, to everyone here in this prison, beyond the prison walls, to all our loved ones, to all our enemies, to all those in our communities and beyond. May our work together continue to benefit others and may we continue to have the good fortune to meet again. May it be so!

With that, we concluded our Buddhist service on Death Row. A. and D. were retrieved by the COs, led out of the cages, shackled once more, and led back their cells.