



### The Buddha Still Sits in the Big Yard

Renzi and I used to take care of the Buddha. He sits outside the prison chapel on a small patch of earth that was allotted to Buddhist prisoners by a warden long since retired.

On this patch of earth our Bodhi Tree is a maple. It has a thick trunk and gnarled roots that have grown out of the ground in many places. Hard to believe it blew into this prison during a windstorm as a seed, sprouted from a crack in the sidewalk, then was planted where it now grows by a Buddhist.

A pair of apple trees are nearby. They are siblings; seeds from a single apple smuggled out of the chow hall. They too were planted by a Buddhist.

Between the trees is a pond. It is not big; smaller than a bathtub in the freeworld. But it is the only pond I have ever heard of inside a prison.

Beside this pond is where the Buddha sits. And for as long as any of us can remember, he has always been here, watching over our Sangha meetings and sitting with us in practice.

The only reason Renzi and I were allowed to take care of the Buddha was because the chapel officer, Ms. B., let us. When I first asked, she said no, because it was not our assigned work area. But a week later, she stopped me after a Sangha meeting and told me that she would permit it.

For several years Renzi took off from his job in the afternoons as a janitor and I took long breaks from mine as a clerk inside the chapel, so we could cut grass, rake leaves, keep the trees neatly trimmed so the captain would not make us cut them down, and pull the weeds that grew around the Buddha. It was while doing this we discovered that, like us, Ms. B. liked birds.

Whenever the northern flicker would fly in and issue its strange call, then hammer at the ground for insects only he knew were there, we would go and get her. She was not all that scientific in her observation. "Very cool" were the words she used to describe the flicker.

A meadowlark visited last fall. The first one Renzi and I had ever seen. Ms. B., too. We had to look it up in a bird book later in order to identify what it was.



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But, more than birds, Ms. B. liked the cat. A scarred and tough little girl cat who skirts around the inside of the prison like a ghost. The cat used to sleep behind the chapel during the day. In the summer, she curled up next to the building because the sun warmed its bricks. In the winter, she hid beneath the ventilation ducts in order to stay out of the rain.

At some point, I am not even sure exactly when she started, Ms. B. began to take bits of food out to leave for the cat. The food was from her own lunch and, whenever she left it, she always directed kind and encouraging words toward the cat. Once she even called to the cat and tried to entice her to come closer—an idea that, because of the cat's obvious feral nature, did not strike me as a particularly good one at the time.

But it was in her interaction with the cat, and her humane treatment of us, that I realize I was most clearly able to see the difference between a guard and a corrections officer. Ms. B. inspired change/correction through her example as a human being. And that does not mean that she was not tough. When it was time to lock us in our cells and order us around, she never hesitated to do that. But that is far from all she was.

Since Ms. B.'s murder [by an inmate] a lot has been said about prisoners by guards on television, in newspapers, on the picket line outside the prison, and in front of lawmakers at the state capitol. A lot has been said by people outside of prison who do not even know us, or what it is like in here. Even the governor at a recent press conference counseled the public, "You need to remember that those are bad people in there and they do bad things."

I wish I could say that this had no effect on us, neither as prisoners, nor as Buddhists who practice inside these walls. But the truth is, it nearly tore us apart. At times it made us angry. Quick to point fingers of blame back in the direction from which they were pointed at us. But, worst of all, it made many of us begin to doubt ourselves, question our ability to ever be more than we were before we were sent here.

In this, we have recognized our own failing/ignorance. As a Sangha we have since pulled together and resolved that we will no longer be a vehicle for anger; we will not point fingers of blame, neither will we any longer doubt ourselves.

We understand that referring to all of us inside these walls as bad people may help the governor and others make sense of what happened here. And, if that is the case, we invite them to continue to do so.

But, as a Sangha, we do not share that view. Neither about ourselves, nor others around us who are not Buddhists. We believe in the ability of human beings to change for the better by working with their minds to cultivate compassion and penetrate ignorance. We believe this because we see examples of it every day in here. In others, when they work hard enough to do it. And, in ourselves, when we do.

There is not a member of our Sangha who would not have done all that he could to prevent what happened to Ms. B. Our hearts are broken. And we miss her.

Since her death, no one has seen the cat. Her cat.

And the Buddha area is overgrown. Our Sangha is no longer allowed to meet there, and Renzi and I are no longer allowed to take care of it. We doubt that we will ever be allowed to again.

But we can see the Buddha from the big yard. Sitting nobly among the weeds, he is still there.

**Editor's Note:** On the evening of January 29, 2011, Corrections Officer Jayme Biendl was found dead in the chapel of the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, WA. Biendl – "Ms. B." – was well known by both inmates and visitors who used the chapel. An inmate confessed to killing her.

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