



Newsletter
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Gay Buddhist Fellowship

The Gay Buddhist Fellowship supports Buddhist practice in the Gay men's community. It is a forum that brings together the diverse Buddhist traditions to address the spiritual concerns of Gay men in the Bay Area, the United States, and the world. GBF's mission includes cultivating a social environment that is inclusive and caring.

Prison Time

by Terry Stein

The most profound horror of prisons lives in the day-to-day banal occurrences that turn days into months, and months into years, and years into decades. Prison is a second-by-second assault on the soul, a day-to-day degradation of the self, an oppressive steel and brick umbrella that transforms seconds into hours and hours into days. While a person is locked away in distant netherworlds, time seems to stand still. . .

—from *Live from Death Row*, by death row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal

Perhaps time expresses impermanence like no other concept: it is ever moving, ever present, ever past, ever future. Yet according to Mumia Abu-Jamal and the prisoners I have met, time often stands still in prison and can thus become a permanent and excruciating reminder of an eternity behind bars. For some prisoners, sitting in meditation and writing about one's experience can be avenues through time; they can both expand awareness and deepen meaning.

I have been sitting and writing with men and women in prison for over a year. While I have formally served as their teacher in meditation and journal writing classes, these men and women are, in fact, also my teachers, sharing their deep suffering and wisdom with me as we serve time together. Unlike them, I am allowed to leave the prison building when I finish the class, but I also know now that we are similarly incarcerated within the mental walls of self that create a lifetime sentence for each of us. The designated prisoners have shown me that liberation can only be discovered within and that its denial can never be imposed by the jailer alone.

I began teaching weekly meditation and journal writing classes in jails and prisons one and one half years ago as part of my service commitment in the Buddhist Peace Fellowship-sponsored Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE), which brings individuals together to spend six months in service or social action work combined with Buddhist practice. From January until November of 1998, I conducted one class in a men's substance



