



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 Justice

by Terry Stein

I saw the limits of prison justice during my first year of teaching a weekly meditation and journal writing class in the Women's Federal Correctional Institute (FCI) in Dublin, California. I took a small amount of hummus and carrots to share with the women during an eating meditation period. Periodically I conducted day-long sittings with my Zen teacher, during which we ate silent meals. The women obtained food for these meals from the commissary and cafeteria. Our meal had been appropriately authorized by the authorities, and I had showed the food to the entrance guard. Nevertheless, a secretary saw the food after it had been carefully laid out for lunch and, believing that I had brought all of it into the prison, immediately called security. When the armed guards arrived, the women surrounded the food, saying that it belonged to them. I acknowledged what I had brought in, and the hummus was confiscated. Although I had not technically violated any rules and no action was taken against me, the secretary never spoke to me again and for a long time I was eyed with suspicion. While not a serious act of injustice, the "hummus incident" gave me a small taste of how easily events in prison can spin out of control and how quickly blame, guilt, and punishment can be assigned without due cause. My body shaking after the guards left, I felt ashamed, unfairly blamed, powerless, and alienated. My attempts to explain were met with silence. These are the feelings prisoners are at risk for every moment of every day.

I developed these classes in early 1997 as part of my service placement in the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement, or BASE, program, a six-month service and spiritual internship sponsored by the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Before I agreed to teach these classes, I had to examine my own feelings about participating directly in what some ironically label as the "criminal injustice system." Two questions arose for me: Could I personally tolerate being inside prison with all of its injustices and cruelty? And, would I be implicitly allying with this system if I helped prisoners deal with their suffering? I learned the answer to the first

