

The Feast

Sometimes when I think things are going my way, they aren't. And when I fail to notice this it's usually because I'm not paying sufficient attention. It's much better to keep watch over events as they unfold than to form doubtful impressions of them. That way I'm given a chance to notice that things aren't necessarily the way I think they are. The fact is that life refuses to be shaped into conformity with my own hopeful version of events. There's humility, gentleness, even wisdom that comes with the discovery of personal limits. I know all this, and yet I sometimes forget that my happy imaginings exercise no necessary influence over the way events actually unfold. That's when I'm most likely to think I have things under control, failing to notice indications that suggest otherwise.

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For two years now, I've served as Senior Buddhist Chaplain at High Desert State Prison, a maximum-security prison in Susanville, California. The Buddhist inmates at the prison had been without a teacher for more than four years at the time, and so I was asked if I would please come. I had my plans pretty well mapped out at the time and didn't really want to undertake another responsibility. Furthermore, High Desert State Prison is on the east side of the Sierra Nevada Range, a two-and-a-half-hour drive from the west side town of Chico where I live. I said I'd think it over.

The decision was taken out of my hands the day I first laid eyes on the prison complex and met the first of my potential students, most of whom are serving life sentences. After passing through the outer perimeter of the prison with its lethal web of electrically charged wiring and after negotiating a seemingly endless series of electronically controlled gates that opened and shut behind me, I finally arrived on a catwalk outside cell C5-218 where I peered through a thin slit of a window at the face of a nineteen-year-old Asian boy who was serving a sentence for first-degree murder and wouldn't even be considered for parole until he was in his mid-fifties. I told him who I was and what I'd come for. At first he seemed confused by the information, wondering what my appearance at his cell meant for him. But then, he suddenly brightened, a smile breaking out on his face, and he asked, "Are you my teacher?" And without a thought for the consequences, I said, "Yes, I'm your teacher," "Are we going to have Buddhist services?" "We'll have services," I told him. And so for all my plans to the contrary, life had turned me in a direction, the difficulties and blessings of which I could never have foretold.

The first Buddhist service in the C-Yard complex brought me sixty inmates, the guards patting them down one after another as they filed into the chapel to remove their shoes and hats and find themselves a cushion or chair to sit on. If circumstances were strange and unfamiliar to me, it was equally so for the inmates, most of whom were southeast Asians familiar with Theravada and Pure Land Buddhist traditions but unacquainted with Zen. Whatever their expectation was for a teacher, I wasn't it. For one thing, I'm Scandinavian, not Thai, Burmese, or Vietnamese. For another I wasn't a Theravada or Pure Land priest. I'm a Zen teacher, and when my own teachers put me to the task of teaching, it was understood that my qualifications were to teach in the Zen tradition in which I was trained. I explained this to the inmates, telling them that I would offer them what I could but that I wasn't authorized to teach in other traditions. I assured them that while Zen services might seem unfamiliar to them at first, they would be less so in time. "The elements of Buddhist practice that I'll teach you will be

those that are central to all Buddhist traditions,” I explained. At the time, that seemed right and reasonable to me.

But “right” and “reasonable” or not, it wasn’t going to work. For a year and a half, things went seemingly well. The inmates arrived faithfully for meeting after meeting and did whatever was asked of them. It seemed to me that High Desert Zen Sangha was a reality, and that together we were finding the Way.

It was a period in which I had the unfortunate comfort of reading only those positive evidences that left me feeling no need to adjust what I was doing. Still, from the very beginning, some of the inmates had repeatedly lobbied for a ceremonial feast, dedicated to Amitabha Buddha of the Pure Land, at which they could celebrate the Pure Land and give thanks to the ancestors. I kept putting the request aside, repeating that I was a Zen teacher and could only offer what I knew. And then one day I drove over the mountains to conduct a Zen service to which no one came. I laid out the thirty zafus donated by Chico residents, placing them in five rows of six each. I set up the altar with an Avalokiteshvara statue and another of the Buddha. I lit a candle and readied the incense for Zazen. And when the time came for my students to appear, the guards told me they had refused to leave their cells. When this was repeated a second time, I sat in the painful silence of the chapel and looked long and hard at the empty rows of cushions.

I don’t know if I can really say that I’d said or done anything wrong but it hadn’t helped much to be “right.” Right or wrong, I’d been effectively shut down. My reading of circumstances had been partial, failing to register anything contrary to my optimistic view of things. But regardless of how well I thought things were going and regardless of how reasonable and justified my actions had been, the work of eighteen months to build a sangha at High Desert State Prison had been brought to a halt. One of the older inmates who’d led the request for an Amitabha feast had called for a boycott, and once again C-Yard was without a Buddhist teacher. I’d lost control of the situation, or to put it more accurately, I’d lost the illusion of control.

Nonetheless, not getting my own way has often been a blessing in my life, and this turned out to be no exception. All the stiffness about being right and principled went out of me, and alternatives were clarified. I could either walk away from the whole painful and awkward situation, telling myself that I’d done my best and leaving High Desert State Prison for good. Or I could negotiate with the inmates. In the end, I couldn’t walk away. I’d come to love my students and couldn’t imagine leaving them if it was possible to stay.

I was brought by “misfortune” to listen this time, forced to listen actually, to what my students had been saying about a feast, because I obviously hadn’t understood the importance of it to them. I’d watched them come to the chapel, service after service, faithfully doing Zen practice under my direction, and had somehow failed to see that we were heading toward a breakup. When I finally talked to the elder inmate who’d shut me down, what I learned from him humbled me and brought me closer to the view of the world held by my students. “When you came, we thought you’d be on our side,” he said. “If you would just meet us half way....” he went on. “We have no joy here in prison. A feast would be a celebration. We could have some fun. I’ve been here twenty years, but the younger ones need this even more than I do, though they may not know it yet.”

He sat across from me in the “common” area at a little metal table bolted to the floor, the metal stools we sat on bolted down as well. He was dressed in the prison issue of worn

and faded blue pants and shirt, indistinguishable from the clothing of any other inmate. Beyond him were the tiers of cells, one of which had been his only home for half his life and where he might very well end whatever years life would allot him. And while we talked, an armed guard stood over us to prevent physical contact. He had virtually no control over the details of his outer life, the activities of every hour of the twenty years he'd spent in prison dictated by others. The only reason he was sitting talking to me now was because I'd requested it. Yet, ironically, he could at a word bring the students back to services or extend the boycott as he saw fit. Before we parted, he asked, "So, what can I tell them?" "Tell them we'll have a feast," I said.

I sometimes forget not to trust my own reading of surface appearances. I allow essential doubt to languish. I lull myself into a sort of lazy and comforting perception of circumstances and so lose touch with fact. When I do so, it's a lapse of the first and last principle of Zen: pay attention. And a sangha? I thought that my students at High Desert State Prison were so set upon with demeaning and demoralizing conditions that I, as their teacher, was called upon to create for them a refuge in which they could find at least a few moments respite from their ordinary deprivations. I characterized them as helpless, and myself as the helper. I underestimated their strength and didn't take them into equal partnership in the forming of our sangha. I didn't remember that I needed them every bit as much as they might need me. They taught me that and helped me return to the roots of my practice.

What I've learned from not getting my way at High Desert State Prison is that believing I'm in control of a situation is an isolating perception that leads to certain error. I thought I was "in charge" of Buddhist practice at the prison, falsely depending on that fact for maintaining control of a situation that by its very nature is always threatening to go to pieces. But I wasn't in charge. What little control I'd managed to exert was only by the grace and consent of my students. And isn't this the way it always is? Isn't actual circumstance the final arbiter of what is or isn't going to happen? Has it ever really been within anyone's power to dictate outcomes? At their insistence, the students and I are meeting each other half way now. I'm on their side and they're on mine.

They dutifully practice daily zazen, and I'm learning the Pure Land chant that calls upon Amitabha.