

## IBMC Monthly Guide - February 2006

On Tet, Lunar New Year's Celebration, We Honor the IBMC monks, February 5

The Lunar New Year falls on January 29 this year and continues until February 12. It is very important in Chinese culture, for that is the time when everyone becomes one year older. It is also time to honor superiors: parents, ancestors, teachers, bosses, etc. and to thank them for everything they have done for you in the past year.

This is the time of year for parades, firecrackers and a lot of merriment. It is also the time when houses are completely scrubbed and fixed up to invite the kitchen god to take a good report back to the gods and ancestors in heaven. (Confucian tradition) Firecrackers scare away evil spirits and invite good spirits to bless the people. They also paste up New Year's greetings (there will be one on every exterior door in the Center) to assure good fortune and to drive away any trouble.

The people hand out red packets to their children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren. The monks also give small gifts to the children who come to temple, and the children perform the intricate dance steps of the lion dance to gain money, drinks and sweets. The faithful flock to temples to pray and to honor the monks, thanking them for teaching them the Dharma.

This year we will honor our monastics and Zen priests on February 5. We will begin with a Dana (formal lunch) ceremony, where we offer food to them at 10:30. This will be followed by Sunday service at 11. You can join us by donating money or small gifts either directly to them or to the office by February 1. We will take the money and buy small gifts for our monks and Zen priests. This is important since our monastics devote themselves entirely to Buddha Dharma and have no other source of income aside from the small stipend the center gives them. The monastics repay the laypeople by chanting special blessings. Following service there will be a potluck luncheon in the garden. So bring either a vegetarian dish or drinks to share.

### IBMC Updating its Mail List

If you want to remain on our mail list, you must inform us either by phone, email or sending in the envelope sent to you in December, indicating you want to be on the mail list. If not, this will probably be the last Guide you will receive. So, please call or write us so you will continue to receive the Guides without interruption while you are thinking about it. IBMC is a non-profit organization and every donation you make is tax-deductible. If you are low

on money, we happily accept work as well. Call the office at 213 384-0850 to sign up. We would love to hear from you.

### Weekend Retreat

He who has not realized Essence of Mind and seeks for Buddha without  
Is on a wrong path and acting foolishly.

He who seeks Buddha by practicing certain doctrines  
Knows not the place where the real Buddha is to be found.

He who is seeking to realize Buddha within his own mind  
He alone is sowing the seed of Buddhahood.

Our next weekend retreat will be held February 17-19, with the IBMC monks leading the sittings. The retreat will be held in traditional Zen style and will feature a good amount of zazen (sitting meditation), interspersed with kinhin (walking meditation) and samu (work meditation).

Wear comfortable clothing and bring bedding and any toiletries you will need for the weekend. Vegetarian meals will be provided. The fee is \$75, \$50 for members and \$30 for residents. Please inform the office by February 8 and send your check to IBMC by the 10th.

At the close of the retreat we will give Refuge to anyone who wants it and who sat the retreat. This retreat celebrates the end of Tet, the Lunar New Year.

### 108 Bows Ceremony

The 108 Bows Ceremony will not be done on February 6, but instead will be held February 18 at 10 am in the Zendo.

### IBMC's Sunday Shop

The IBMC Sunday Shop has gifts to provide you with everything for your spiritual needs. Check the Sunday Shop for items from all over the world: brass Buddhas from Thailand and Buddhas from Sri Lanka, hand carved from jak, mahogany and ebony woods. We also have statues of Ananda, Buddha's closest disciple, who convinced him to ordain women as Bhiksunis, thus placing women on equal status with men. We also carry 10 oz. coffee cups, with the footprints of the Buddha and the logo Following the Path. We carry prints of Rev. Sunya's paintings and whimsical creations, a number of hand malas and 108 bead malas, from \$2 to \$25.

Miracles in Buddhism - by Ven. Dr. Dharma, in a talk given at IBMC

In trying to decide what to put into my talk today, I looked up on the internet "Miracles in Buddhism" and came up with over 100 articles. Unfortunately, many of these were written by Christians or other non-Buddhists, and therefore were seriously skewed to one side. I was looking for a particular incident that I had read of years ago. I do not know its details accurately and since I could not find it on the internet, I will relate it now, with my own faulty memory of it.

In World War II, thousands of Chinese witnessed the figure of Kwan Yin floating in the sky above them. I do not remember why she was seen then or what happened after the sighting. But it most definitely was proclaimed to be a miracle.

There are many similar stories among the Vietnamese boat refugees. You know that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled their country in small, leaky fishing boats, which were loaded with 2 to 3 times the number of people who should have been on them. The result was that half of the people died at sea. But in some of the boats that were beginning to sink, someone would start chanting Namō Quan Te An Bo tat. (I bow respectfully to Kwan Yin Bodhisattva.) Suddenly a Saudi Arabian tanker would come along and save everyone.

Nam has a similar story of a miracle that occurred to him. He was on a boat which was crowded with people. They had to outrun pirates, heating the engine so much that it gave out. They were left drifting without food or water. Then people began to chant the name of Quan Te Am Botat, who had vowed that she would save any person who called upon her. One of those particular examples was of people in danger of drowning. Nam said that he had prepared himself to die. He said that suddenly the motor came back to life and they were able to reach Malaysia.

I wanted to locate any miracles that S'akyamuni himself was supposed to have caused. There are very few incidents mentioned. Once when I was in India back in 1987 or thereabouts, we came across a sign at S'ravasti, which proclaimed, "Buddha's miracle happened here." Rev. Ayya Khema turned to me and asked "What miracle does that refer to? I didn't think he performed any." I told her, "I've never heard of any either." But I think I now know what miracle was supposed to have happened there. I am afraid that I do not have many pleasant memories of S'ravasti because I think that that is where I contracted amoebic dysentery. Although since I was the only person in a group of 30-40 of us, it may be a miracle that I was the only one to have contracted it.

There are several "miracles" that occurred, associated with the Buddha. Many of these are not thought of by the general Buddhist populace as being miracles, or they have been

amplified upon so much that their historical authenticity must be questioned. The first is of Queen Maya's dream that a white elephant entered her right side and impregnated her. It is reminiscent of the story of Jesus, isn't it, particularly when you realize that Ganesha, the prince with the elephant head is a Hindu god. The next would be the prophecy of the sage Asita who said that the new born babe would become a great religious teacher who would attain enlightenment and thus begin the teachings that would liberate many people

Then, we have S'akyamuni meditating just before his enlightenment. Having vowed to remain in meditation until he penetrated the mysteries of existence, he was visited by Mara, a demon associated with all the veils and distractions of mundane existence. Mara's menacing soldiers flank the temple's spire, hurling weapons and making threatening gestures. The Buddha remained unmoved by these assaults and by all the subsequent distractions, both pleasant and unpleasant, with which Mara sought to deflect him from his goal. He even sent his lovely daughters to entice him. When the Buddha did not respond, Mara's final assault consisted of an attempt to undermine the bodhisattva's sense of worthiness: by what entitlement did he seek the lofty goal of spiritual enlightenment and freedom from rebirth? Aided by spirits who reminded him of the countless compassionate efforts he had made on behalf of sentient beings throughout his many animal and human incarnations, S'akyamuni recognized that it was his destiny to be poised on the threshold of enlightenment. In response to Mara's query, S'akyamuni moved his right hand from his lap to touch the ground, stating, "The earth is my witness." This act of unwavering resolve caused Mara and his army of demons and temptresses to disperse, and Shakyamuni then experienced his great enlightenment. Most Buddhists believe that Mara and his supporters are actually a metaphor for the Buddha's own fights that went on in his mind.

After his enlightenment he remained in meditation for seven full days; he was protected from the hot sun and violent storms by the serpent king Muchalinda, a giant seven headed cobra, who wrapped himself around the Buddha to form a canopy over the Buddha's head. Having emerged from his meditation, the Buddha was then persuaded by the gods Indra and Brahma that others would benefit from learning of his experience.

During S'akyamuni's long ministry his disciples reported many miracles, a few of which were incorporated into an established iconography. The first of these is the Miracle of S'ravasti, also known as the Miracle of the Twins. This episode involved several miraculous events, including the Buddha's creation of a double who acted as interlocutor, posing questions that the Teacher answered before a vast assembly. Soon after the miracle at S'ravasti, the Buddha ascended to Trayatrimsha Heaven to preach to his mother and the gods, descending months later by a bejeweled ladder. Other miracles include the gift of

honey from a monkey and S'akyamuni's taming of the elephant Nalagiri, made mad by alcohol, sent by his jealous cousin, Devadatta, to kill him.

In one sutra in the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha was asked to perform miracles so that "those who do not believe will believe, and those who already believe will have more faith". The Buddha's answer was something like this: "The Enlightened One can perform such miracles: He can read minds, He can float in the air, He can pass thru solid objects, etc., etc., etc. However, the Greatest miracle is the Miracle of the Dharma, the Teaching that destroys all sufferings. Thus, this is the only miracle I will perform here".

Also, it's note-worthy that in the Vinaya, monks are specifically banned from levitating in public. This was after an incident where a monk showed off his levitation skills in public and was scolded by the Buddha for being like a "prostitute".

The Enlightened One knows that the greatest miracle of all is the destruction of sufferings (ie the Dharma) and He does not have to resort to showing off his magical powers to teach, spread and share his Dharma. He is confident that the power of the Dharma alone can change lives and bring about faith, peace and happiness. If a teacher has to resort to showing off miracles to spread his Dharma, something must be very wrong.

A disciple once asked Buddha, "Is not Amitabha, the Infinite Light of Revelation, the Source of innumerable miracles?" The Blessed One replied, "Amitabha, the Unbounded Light is the Source of Wisdom, of Virtue, of Buddhahood. The deeds of sorcerers and miracle mongers are frauds, but what is more wondrous, more mysterious, more miraculous than Amitabha?"

The Buddha further stated: "A true follower of the Tathagata does not found his trust upon austerities or rituals but, giving up the idea of self, relies with his whole heart upon Amitabha, which is the unbounded light of Truth."

The Buddha taught people not to run to mountains, forests, sacred trees or shrines, but to seek refuge in the Buddha, the Law and the Order and the four noble truths. The Dhammapada specifies, "Not nakedness, not matted hair, not dirt, not fasting, not lying on the ground, not rubbing with ashes, not sitting motionless will purify a man who is not free from doubt." The Buddha states a man is not an elder simply because his hair is grey. An elder is a person in whom dwell truth, virtue, non-violence, and restraint. He is wise and free from impurity.

Buddha issued strict injunctions against fortune telling, charm selling and mediumistic feats. He said, "I forbid you, O bikkhus, to employ any spells or supplications, for they are

useless, since the Law of Karma governs all things. He who attempts to perform miracles has not understood the doctrine of the Tathagata."

The Kevaddha Sutra (DN 11) is the one in which learning, understanding and applying the Dharma is said by Buddha to be superior to the attainment of any siddhi or magical power. Kevatta or Kevaddha, a householder, suggests that more people would join up if the Master would cause his monks to perform miracles.

Buddha S'akyamuni replies that there are 3 skills that he, himself, has perfected:

- 1 magical power
- 2 telepathy
- 3 instruction in Dharma

1. Magical power is the ability, before an audience, to multiply one's form and then become just one again, or to travel to the various realms and then to return.

The thing is, says the Buddha, people tend to say to a witness of this sort of thing, that the miraculous abilities are due to "the Gandharan [Hellenic-Persian, ie. Greek] charm". (We might say, "It's a Secret of the Mysterious East", or an example of the powers of "Himalayan Masters.")

2. If some monk were to demonstrate the ability to read the minds of others, again some skeptic would disparage this ability, too, saying "Anyone who has the Manika charm can do the same."

3. But with the miracle of instruction, the monk says what to do, how to do it and explains the result that will be obtained.

Anyone who follows the method, gets the same result. "That," said the Buddha, "is a true miracle!"

The sutra goes on however, after listing all the types of fortune-telling or prognostication that it is not suitable for a follower to do, to speak of abilities that can be achieved by those who discipline themselves according to the Buddha's instruction. Having learned mindfulness and non-attachment, the person can go on to the four jñanas [Skt: dhyanas] or wisdoms - stages of meditative accomplishment that begin in bliss and culminate with insight into the nature of mind.

Then, the practitioner having attained imperturbability and the cessation of

"fermentation" in which thoughts breed more thoughts that breed consequences, and so on - then he or she can fly, or appear and disappear, view past lives, perceive the thoughts of others, achieve the mind-created body and, understanding that even the elements have no inherent existence, can converse with beings of other realms. And this is achieved through the only miracle performed by a Buddha - the miracle of instruction!

Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra: When the Buddha is asked why Amitabha inhabits a beautiful Pureland, but he (S'akyamuni) has only this poor, miserable, ordinary world, the Buddha puts his toe to the ground. Then the disciples see the whole world transformed with splendid jewels, sparkling lights of all colours, and the melodious hum of mantras. He exclaims: "This is how I see the world!"

Then he lifts his toe, and we are back to what we call mundane reality. The Master explains: "The ordinary world that you see is due to your habitual mental obscurations!"

Mystery of the smiling Buddha, from Catherine Philp in Meyyurkuppam, Tamil Nadu

Rock carvings and parts of buildings have been uncovered by the tsunami, while a buddha has emerged from the sea This gigantic carved rock was uncovered at Mahabalipuram when the tsunami removed tons of sand. A little Buddhist sage sits underneath the tree only yards from the sea from which he was plucked, a whimsical smile upon his face. Villagers gather before him with offerings of incense and food.

"We must look after him," Gajendram, a fisherman, said as he knelt to light a candle. "He was sent 1,000 miles across the sea to protect us and he will stay with us for ever."

A few miles up the coast at Mahabalipuram, a group of daytrippers marvel at the weathered carvings on a huge rock sitting in the middle of the beach. To one side lie the ruins of a temple in the sand. "We used to come here many times but we never saw these before," Vinod Kumar, a student, said. "It is a gift of the tsunami."

When the giant wave crashed into coastlines across the Indian Ocean, it took thousands of lives with it, erasing villages, destroying bridges, roads and fishing fleets.

But on this little stretch of the Tamil Nadu coast, it brought treasures too, unearthing ancient ruins and sending unfamiliar statues into the arms of the faithful.

At Mahabalipuram, when the tsunami fell back from the shore it took with it tons of sand from the beach, laying bare the forgotten ruins of a 7th-century temple and a rock covered with beautiful carvings of tigers, elephants and horses.

Archaeologists say that the new find indicates a "giant superstructure" that once stood on the beach, dating from the Pallava period from which Mahabalipuram's other temples also date.

While important, however, they are causing nothing like the fuss of the other tantalising glimpse into the past that villagers here believe the tsunami showed them.

As the waters of the sea receded 500 metres from Mahabalipuram's beachfront temple, mesmerised observers say that they saw very clearly on the ocean floor a series of pagoda-like temples apparently swallowed up by the sea in the past few hundred years.

"I saw them there as clearly as I see you here now," Krishnan, a shell vendor, said. "We stared in awe and then we ran for our lives." Archaeologists believe that the ruins could be part of the mythical city of Mahabalipuram, which legend says was so beautiful that the gods sent a flood that engulfed six of its seven temples.

The myth was first written down by J. Goldingham, a British traveller who heard the story when he visited in 1798.

Experts have long been divided between those who believe in the ancient city and those who think it is a myth. But the sightings, claimed by scores of witnesses, have led to a treasure hunt. Underwater photographs show stone structures covered in algae and barnacles, lending credence to the story. Those who say they saw it, however, have no need for science.

"After seeing it I thought God is doing something wonderful to save our lives," Krishnan said. "I knew then we would survive." But no one is more convinced of the hand of God at work than the villagers of the tiny fishing village of Meyyurkappam where the little Buddhist idol arrived so unexpectedly ten days after the tsunami struck.

Actually there are also miracle stories similar to the Catholic ones. At a temple in Thailand, one of the images periodically cries small pearls. The Abbot there has taken one of them to be examined to see what they are made off. In another temple in Thailand, rays of different colors spread out from a temple. Its abbot, who is believed to be enlightened, also frequently exhibits colored rays shooting out of his head.

Finding Your Heart - by Rev Tam Xa and Ronald Nicholas Benson, 12/18/05

I had a front page story published today in The News Tribune the largest newspaper in

Tacoma, Washington (they have a publication run of 150,000 on Sundays). The story is an expose about the biggest bird breeder in the state who has been keeping 800 parrots, including many endangered species, in a concentration-camp like situation for decades. This is not an isolated incident, this is the tip of an iceberg.

She previously said in a court deposition how much she loves her animals. And I believe her. She loves their beauty and their unusual personalities and behavior. But her love is limited: It lacks empathy and heart, what we in Buddhism call compassion. You can not have compassion except in relation to another being, whether it's a human, an animal, or a flower. This bird breeder never in 30 years of being surrounded by hundreds of birds, connected with them. To her they are objects. Ronald Benson, whose writing I will be reading shortly as part of this talk, sent me a letter yesterday and he talked about compassion. In it he said, "selective compassion is not an option. Boy does that hit heavy. But it brings simplicity and responsibility too."

Until 60 years ago an alcoholic was relegated to hospitals, institutions, or death. There was very little compassion or empathy from outsiders to their plight. Even those who strove to help them felt they had made the choice to drink. It is now known that alcoholism is a disease, and one that will kill people faster than most. In the 1930s there was found a solution for active alcoholism. It is: acceptance, humility empathy and compassion. A spiritual solution for a very concrete problem, a way to open your mind and heart. They say that even though there are 12 steps to take, the most important distance is for the program to go 1 foot, from your head to your heart.

The entire fellowship of the 12 Step program Alcoholics Anonymous is based on identification. One alcoholic helping another - not by offering money, or a place to live (though that sometimes happens) but by sharing their emotions: their "war story" of how they lived drunk, their hope -- how they found and integrated spiritual principles into their lives, and how their life has changed as a result. A truism of the program is "our stories are all different but our feelings are the same."

I was watching a documentary on school kids in Whitewell, Tennessee, who had collected paper clips from people around the world, one each for every Jew killed by the Nazi's. It began as a lesson on prejudice but the endeavor turned these kids' lives around. The project got publicity and the famous and otherwise, sent paper clips from all over the world. Finally they had so many, and these impersonal paper clips, these metal things over the process, came to represent people they never met but for whom they had developed deep compassion. Many were sent to the students with letters from survivors, or family members who had lost relatives. They came with emotion. The students no longer wanted to keep the paperclips in boxes hidden away. They wanted a fitting place to display them

and needed a place to house them. A couple, who were European journalists, got involved helping the kids. They went to Germany and secured a cattle car, one of the actual cars that transported Jews to Auschwitz. They had it brought to Whitehall Tennessee. It is the only one of its kind in the U.S. The students do tours of their exhibit, the letters and other things sent to them by paper clip donators. They take school groups inside the car and feel for themselves how terrible that cattle car is, dark and claustrophobic. They imagine being in there for days, no room to move, no food, no water and unbearable heat or cold. When I saw this I imagine how terrible it still is for all the cattle that are now being transported that way, packed in, unable to breath or move, with feces piling up, terrified. 25 members of my mother's family were killed in concentration camps. It seems to me that Jews should be on the forefront of fighting for animal rights, as should African Americans because both groups know what it means to be enslaved, to be treated like cattle. People say there's no comparison. Any distinction between animals and humans is ours alone; it is speciesism. Seeing this to be true requires connecting to them on a heart to !

If we see nothing else in common with them, see that they share suffering. Cattle have different stories than us, but their feelings are the same too. Is your heart open enough to see this?

You might say 'even if the answer is yes, even if I connect with the cattle, what can I do about their plight? I am one person. I already have my own problems and little extra time.' You don't have to take on factory farming. If you eat chicken or meat, or eggs, or cheese, make sure that whatever produced what you eat was humanely treated. Eat free range chickens, and eggs produced by free range hens, give up a little of your money for their happiness. Do that. Be responsible for what goes into your mouth, into your supermarket bag. And if you can, don't eat them. That is your responsibility. It takes work, awareness, compassion, but that is why we are here, here in this temple, isn't it? To find our heart and live with it open to have compassion for all living beings, not just in words but in deeds. Buddhism is called a path with a heart, but it's no point to say it; we must live it for it to change us.

AA and Buddhism have similar goals: How do we expand on our limited personal universes and really care for others. How do we get over our ego selves (and get into Buddha self). It's a choice to see or not to see, to feel or not to feel. To go the extra spiritual mile...

It's human nature to do the absolute minimum to maintain our relationships with others, with society so we don't get shunned or land ourselves in jail, and maybe a little beyond that so we can have access to the things others have that we want. But what separates, as Bill W, the founder of AA put it, "The men from the boys," the immature from the mature,

is the willingness to change our behavior to give up our character defects, especially our self centeredness. Then we enter the "sunlight of the spirit" then we open our hearts and have real compassion, infinite compassion for all beings.

But that process is all about change, as they say in the program: face it, trace it, erase it, and replace it. Change in attitude affects change in behavior, but if you change the behavior the attitude will follow.

Sometimes just uncovering your heart can be hard.

I'd like to read you the writing of someone that has gone the extra mile, had some profound changes and has found his heart in the most difficult of situations, under the most difficult circumstances. His name is Ronne, and he has done it where the minimum in good behavior to not be shunned or cause societal offense would suffice. He practices the principles Buddhism and other spiritual paths and he has transformed spiritually, and I've had the privilege of watching and observing it and being a part of it through our correspondence. By way of a short introduction before I read his letter, I'll read you something I've written about him for my book on parrots. Because, as you'd have to figure with anyone corresponding with me, birds have become part of his transformation.

"I correspond with a prisoner, named Ronnie, who is serving a life sentence in a Massachusetts correctional facility. Rev. Karuna Dharma, the abbess at my Buddhist temple, passed his first letter on to me. She has delegated the inmates (as many as she can) who write to the temple interested in Buddhism to a number of us who belong to it. Even though all I could think was "I have enough writing to do already," it was inappropriate to refuse. She is my teacher and even though she had a stroke some years ago she still manages to answer 40 inmate letters a week, and put out the temple's Monthly Guide.

I wasn't so sure Ronnie and I were a good match at first. He is gay and in prison, and I'm out here trying to live the spiritual path of a monk, running around with a perpetual focus on birds.

For sure he got more information on birds than any initial interest would warrant when I started writing him. Though as coincidence (karma?) would have it, he and his lover (his companion of decades), once had three birds in their cell.

With birds (and Buddhism) as a medium, an interesting dialogue about freedom, inside and out, has developed in our ongoing exchange. I never know what he'll say, what's going on in his life. Things can change rapidly with his emotions, state-of-mind, or circumstances; the

latter can be harrowing for him and mostly beyond his control.

What I have found in each letter is a deep desire to move forward spiritually, to see the world in a larger context, though his physical freedom is limited. What I have learned is that even though he has been incarcerated for more than 25 years, imprisonment is not something any sentient being ever gets used to.

I don't ask for a response to my chatter about birds. I just offer him what I'm doing, about life with Mango, and what I learn.

In one letter he wrote me, "There is much in my little world to suffer but only if I see it as a cause of suffering. What I endure pales against the suffering of a parrot locked in a cage, pulling out its feathers from being so alone. So I don't have it so bad."

Since the year was coming to an end I asked Ronnie to write about what his path had been like, what Buddhism had given him and how he felt his spiritual path had changed him.

Ronnie's Letter:

"My name is Ronnie and I'm serving life for murder. I'm very guilty and have never denied my actions. What I've not once denied either is having been a monster for much of my life.

I grew up fortunate compared to my peers in places like this. Yet, I lacked some pretty basic stuff inside. My faith in the god of my family left me condemned to spend eternity burning in hell after a lifetime of hating myself. Accepting the words of men who said they spoke for God left me as a gay child doomed because I couldn't make myself normal.

I got real good at dishonesty, abuse, violence, manipulation, delusion and materialism. I mastered the art of denial and most people played along with me.

As I deserved to be alone, suffering and proving I was a monster, I sabotaged every possible chance for love, friendship, kindness and healing provided to me. I used cruelty, sex, money, people, sex, alcohol, drugs and more to manage my suffering and pain. I took my suffering and dumped it on others.

No matter what poor attempt I put to use with words I know what hell is like. I built it within myself one coal at a time and fanned the flames every day. I poured alcohol in to fuel the fire and sacrificed others' feelings to make sure I got what I deserved.

Despite all I did to make sure I became my worst nightmare, again, I was given a chance to

arise from the ashes like that mystical bird!

Another man here saw more to me than what I knew existed. He refused to abandon me no matter what I did, usually to myself and to him. We became family, friends and more. I offered him lots of stuff, he refused. Finally, he asked if we could buy a bird one of the other men had. As a pet, a bird? I thought him a bit odd on this but I went along.

One bird came from an abused situation, a tiny guy cockatiel who whistled non-stop if not getting our full attention 24/7. He loved to share our food and drink, preferably by sitting in it. He needed more attention than we could give, so we sent him out to family for a loving home where he fit in perfectly.

Next, another needy, damaged white cockatiel called Sammy. A beautiful white creature who took not to my partner, but to me despite my opinion of "it's just a bird." It loved Coke, not Pepsi. Spent hours on my shoulder grooming me to then crawl down and sleep on my chest. Of course Sammy was fond of tomato sauce. Loved the taste and feel as he'd sit in it and play. I'd lay or sit frozen to not disturb that beautiful creature. It would wake up, look at me and go back to sleep safe.

Then one day Sammy let us know he was a she by laying an egg. Then another and another and trouble began. Twice we sent her out to a vet, they tried all they could. She died in my hands. I was destroyed by the loss. I cried in prison over a bird and felt very human.

My partner said another bird was in need of a new owner but I resisted. At least until he said "please." A huge green parrot which scared me to death, cost a fortune to buy, but we did.

Misty wanted attention and demanded it. She knew when we got back at noon for lunch and would yell until she was with us. She pulled feathers before we got her and quickly stopped. She was not a pet, but a member of the family who refused to be left alone when we weren't around. She got her special nuts, fancy cage, perch, toys, tea cup, baby spoon to hold awaiting me to share my tea.

She'd spend hours with us, sharing our food, like we had a choice. She'd walk up to me and take it from my hand or mouth.

Time and policy changed: no pets. A friend got Misty a happy home with non-stop love. She got a parole.

Okay, so those birds let me know how I was part human and that they were much more

than noisy, pretty, objects. Fast forward a lot of years...

I'm struggling in AA with the God concept. My past & present experiences is corrupted with judgments and hatred. I tried returning to church here, tried to discuss my problems. What I got was the same old intolerance, hatred, judgment, and pain. Except this time I refused to hate who I was because men said so. For some time I reached out by mail to others and found lots of excuses and interpretations of religions.

Then I was given a book by Thich Nhat Hanh. The words of love, compassion, kindness, and hope felt written for me and many who felt such pain in our souls.

Well, one of the things I did next was write letters asking for help to learn about Buddhism. The material flooded in. I shared it with others and got one really good friend who helps me find who lies beneath the stuff I did that I tell myself was me.

One of the places that answered me was I BMC and right away I felt welcome. No "do this," "think that," "here are the rules." Just lots of ideas to consider, try out and use what I like.

Well, I read, wrote and found I had way too much prosperity (even in here: needy and greedy). So I gave lots away and work daily to get less.

I also read an article about the Twelve Steps & Buddhism which struck a note of connection. So a letter to I BMC started my life as a student of Rev. Tam Xa as well. She is much more than a mere teacher but a friend who can help me with being a little odd, even in my opinion.

Her love for birds blew me away and refreshed my relationships with birds, past, present and future.

I've read so much from her (even her book). Every article and effort of hers on behalf of birds (and more) has taken me out of my suffering to care for animals and people who lack a voice! We chat about her companion Mango, a bird and then some. We chat about life, addiction issues, addictions to silly things like paper, pens, cards.

I watch PBS about animals and connect easily to their plights. I see Rev. Tam Xa in every soul caring for suffering animals. I hear her voice in the narrators who give voice to parrots sold into cages for profit. Odd as it sounds, I'm now a tree hugger, well an interesting version at least. Each card I get from Maitri Dasi, Tam Xa, now is a joy as she let's me know I'm remembered her in my cage.

Daily I see birds outside who fly over the barbed wire, sit atop the fence or just hop through the holes. I see them free no matter where they land. They want a little food and to fly. They are each individuals who remain part of a group. No politics, elections, taxes, welfare, or the net of our insanity. They are part of life. They bring me to see freedom, to see the world simply as they eat and enjoy a few crumbs put out for them.

As a bird flies away I know there is more to life than a big mansion, lots of money, sex, alcohol, and stress to this existence. My practice is basic. I read what I get from people who share kindness, compassion, and love. I care more as I read about the path.

I sit and try to get my frantic mind to just take a break. I've ceased swearing and developed annoying ethics which tell me to knock off looking out for myself as job #1. Being honest is not easy. I haven't had lots of practice. But it's the way to help, help us all.

I'm no hero or sterling example of humanity. However, I'm a good example of change as I'm not the monster I once was, nor am I the monster I thought I'd be forever. My plans for Christmas is a special treat. I'm sending a few dollars to a place that takes in and cares for sick, unwanted, or homeless birds. Never would I have guessed that the best gift I could get would be to give."

Ronnie has really transformed and the proof is the change: internal awareness - compassion. Neither of us ever thought about birds more than anyone else, I didn't even like them to begin with. But compassion in both of us was awakened by them. What could it be in your life? What living thing in your life, that you take for granted, could be a source of awakening if you were open to viewing it with new eyes and an open heart? And now that a new year has begun what ways can you change, that you can act compassionately towards the world? Think of a way, something you can personally do, that will make the world better even a little bit. It's the beginning of a new year, let's make it the beginning of a new world.

Prison Dharma - a column devoted to the letters and writing of prisoners around the country

Prison - A Lesson on Impermanence by Ricky

As human beings we often make assumptions that things are always going to be a particular way. We assume our family will always be there for us. We take for granted that the job we have will provide a steady paycheck until we retire. We also assume the person we married will always be faithful and we'll grow old together. Unfortunately,

reality doesn't always live up to our expectations. Everything changes. Nothing is permanent.

Things in prison are no different. As a matter of fact, prison is a crash course in impermanence. When I arrived on the Beto One Unit in 1996, I thought I was there for a long time. I knew I had a lot of time to do and assumed I would do it all right there. Guys there had lots of time to do and had done lots of time. Parole wasn't even a topic of discussion. I formed friendships and found a cellie that I could get along with, became involved with religious activities and got a job that gave me a lot of freedom to move around the unit. I settled in to "do time." I had things going my way as far as prison life is concerned.

Seven years passed and one day an officer showed up at my cell door and said, "Pack your stuff. You're on the chain." I was literally shocked. "There must be a mistake. I'm not going anywhere." I soon found out that it wasn't a mistake, and yes, like it or not, I was going somewhere.

When I arrived at my current unit, I found things to be much different than Beto. It's a totally different way of doing time. Most guys here have small sentences and most have done very little on them. The main topic is parole and people go home or to a rehab program almost daily. The turnover here, among inmates and guards, is very high. I'm not sure why they moved me here, but I know one thing. It has taught me some valuable lessons.

The main lesson I've learned in prison is that you should never take for granted that things will always be as they are. All those friendships I formed are over. All the promises to write and keep in touch didn't last very long; even my family has distanced themselves. But every cloud has a silver lining. The obnoxious loudmouth, who was always yelling in the dayroom, he's gone too. The officer who kept trying to steal my cool every time he saw me no longer works here. The cellie I had who would not clean up after himself went home. The stupid rule they were trying to enforce last month doesn't seem to be an issue this month. The good things change and so do the bad. Nothing stays the same.

As I look at the things going on around me, I see how very true the Buddha's teaching on impermanence is. I know that when I'm in a particularly trying ordeal, it will pass. When I'm in a bad mood, just wait, it will get better. Never react quickly or speak harshly in any situation because it's only temporary. Lighten up and don't take things so seriously, because given a little time, it won't even matter any more.

Life is a great teacher. We just have to learn to listen to the lessons.

Ricky.

Hello,

You do not know me, but I have been touched by your words and your work. I wanted to send you my thanks and joy. I work at Wrightsville Unit Prison in Arkansas. There is a man there that receives your newsletters and he shared them with me. I work in the infirmary as a caregiver, that is what they pay me for in any case. I am also a Universalist minister. I never preach to people, but I do my best to help them physically, mentally and spiritually. Sometimes simple respect, love, compassion or a kind word is all they need. I have seen a lot of horrors, anger, griefs unspeakable. I have seen those that are thrown away, or never seemed to have a chance to be other than what they turned out to be. I have held their hands as they wept, unable to attend their own murdered child's funeral. I have gone home and wept for them and lit prayer candles endlessly for them. They have given me such a gift of learning compassion for everyone. True love of everyone, dissolution of the illusion of separation. I have seen uncuffed and paroled. I am there with them day in and day out, and I have learned a deeper love for everyone because of it. I thank you for your work and encourage you to continue it, it really is helping so many.

In Love, Rev. Mother Nighthawk

Dear Venerable Karuna Dharma:

Hello. I hope the moment of your reading this finds you contented. Thank you very much for sending me the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch and for allowing me to continue these studies under your guidance. I find the words of Hui Neng inspirational in my mind, reminding me constantly of the goal, of seeing this obvious mind behind the busy senses.

I have given much thought to the Refuge Ceremony which you sent me nearly a year ago. It seems to me that if I were to give myself the ceremony, it would only be for the ability to "officially" call myself a lay practitioner and receive a Buddhist name. This tastes like a trap of self-image of which I am wary. Having embraced the refuges in my heart, I need no other recognition. Abstaining from wrong action, I apply the primary precepts in all activities. Right here, right now, reciting this ceremony would be an unlovely puppet show.

However, I can see what a beautiful experience this would be for me in the embrace of a caring sangha, chanting together in the clarity of mind born of one-pointedness. How wonderful to give voice to the internal vows, and forge an even more stalwart heart in the warmth of public symbolism. There would be a feeling in that type of ceremony, whereas here in my cell it would be mere formality devoid of symbolic meaning, as it is common to dedicate myself in one breath to Refuge in the Buddha, Refuge in the Dharma taught within every experience, Refuge in the Sangha of our One lovely heart.

Yours in the Dharma, I an

Dear Venerable Dr. Karuna Dharma:

Buddhism has become a critical part of all of my life and is showing up as a true wonder in my treatment. As I try to follow backwards my life, there are lots of lost experiences. Or some of which my perceptions are significantly distorted. However, by stepping a little back from judgments I've gotten to see connections between feelings and behaviors not available before. My fast judgements of self and others is often preventing me from my chance to sit and wonder. Ethics, like honesty starting with myself, are growing as I read, write, think, and try to experience the present moment. Also, as I more often see the suffering of others, I find compassion, understanding a more habitual response, a gift.

The latest connection I got help to see is how desperate all my life I have been for internal and simple peace. A way to let go of the pain, suffering and cruelty I and others provided.

Using sex, drugs, alcohol, possessions, abuse of self and others to include extreme violence, I sought that skill to step away from my mind's insanity. Only this week in group did I hear it put so simply and clearly what I was doing and why.

Now I wish to continue my studies with some additional focus on clearing my mind and life of clutter and distraction (unhealthy). I also need to ask your assistance in finding a way to study Zen to get past all my problems with theistic issues and I've got lots. Even writing this has me near tears as this is such a big hang up for me.

I do so enjoy writing Maitri Dasi. We have a unique relationship and she teaches me so much without effort. Her compassion is really the wind beneath my wings. Her examples have demonstrated how to help myself feel better by easing (or trying to) the suffering of others. A whole lot of suffering is lessened directly in my life because of her and in others around me by what she has taught me. Every time I get a card or letter from her, Scott smiles too, just seeing the envelope as he knows what freedom, compassion, kindness and sharing it contains.

Regretfully, I cannot write to Jon, but would you be so kind to tell him I admire his courage to be there for others in such a place as he is. So easy is it to be a predator rather than a person of compassion and kindness. Thank him for me for doing the work to ease suffering we all need to do.

Your Grateful Student, Ronnie

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Your Grateful Student, Ronnie

## February Events

### Sunday Talks

2/5 - Refuge - 11am - Rev. Hanasi, Thich Tam-Hy

2/12 - Who Are You; Who Am I ? - 11am - Ven. Dr. Karuna, Thich An-Tu

2/19 Stories of the Buddha - 11am - Ven. Havanpola Shanti

2/26 More Karma - 11am - Rev. Vajra, Thich Tam-Thi

### Classes at IBMC

Mon Lam Rim (Tibetan) Meditation - 7pm - Rev. Kelsang Chitta

Tues Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sutra - 7 - pm Ven. Karuna Dharma

Wed Every Day Buddhism - 7 pm - Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna

Thurs Writing Class - 7 pm - Rev. Hanasi , Thich Tam-Hy

Fri Beginning Buddhism - 7 pm - Rev. Hanasi, Thich Tam-Hy

Sun Women's Chat Group - 7 pm - Rev. Hanasi , Thich Tam-Hy

### Special Events

2/5 Dana Ceremony for the Monks, 10:30 am

2/17-19 Weekend Retreat

2/18 108 Bows Ceremony, 10 am

### Meditation

Weekday mornings: 6-7 am - led by Rev. Hanasi Karuna, call Rev. Hanasi at 385-5292 to be sure it is meeting on a particular day.

Mondays, 7 pm, Lam Rim Meditation led by Rev. Kelsang Chitta Karuna

Wednesdays, 7-9 pm led by Rev. Kusala , Thich Tam-Thien  
Fridays, 7:30-9 pm, led by Rev. Kusala Ratna Karuna

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Web pages and email addresses  
I BMC Web page: [www.I BMC.info](http://www.IBMC.info)

I BMC email

[IBMC@myway.com](mailto:IBMC@myway.com)

Ven.Karuna's email: [Karunadh@comcast.net](mailto:Karunadh@comcast.net)

Rev. Kusala's web page: [www.UrbanDharma.org](http://www.UrbanDharma.org)

Rev. Chitta's web page: [KChitta.tripod.com](http://KChitta.tripod.com)

I BMC teachers' email addresses

Ven. Shanti's email: [Hshanti1@yahoo.com](mailto:Hshanti1@yahoo.com)

Rev. Kusala's email: [Kusala@kusala.org](mailto:Kusala@kusala.org)

Rev. Chitta: [Kchitta@yahoo.com](mailto:Kchitta@yahoo.com)

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Rev. Jñana: [Lsipe@usc.edu](mailto:Lsipe@usc.edu)

Rev. MaitriDasi: [Mira@Miramarmango.com](mailto:Mira@Miramarmango.com)

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Sr. Chandana: [Sandechan@yahoo.com](mailto:Sandechan@yahoo.com)

