

PRISON AS MONASTERY, PRISON AS CHARNEL GROUND

By
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There's a spiritual idea that prison can be used as a monastic experience because it's already monastery-like: there's a rigid schedule you just follow; you're given a place to sleep, food to eat, work to do so that you don't have to struggle with these issues; there's a single gender housed together, which implies celibacy; everyone dresses the same; there's a minimization of activities that undercuts sensory entertainment and encourages simplicity. One is cut off from the elaborate complications and seductions of the world at large, encouraging a bare existence focused on introspection.

In fact, this was the original intention of the modern prison developed by the Quakers who sought to relieve criminals of corporal punishment and instead put them into a context where they could examine their actions, come to understand what they had done wrong, and repent or become penitent—hence the name “penitentiary.” The Quakers saw doing time in a positive, spiritual light, as a way to stop and examine one's life in an atmosphere free of the usual distractions, to purify one's sins, and to come into harmony with the Holy Spirit.

The Buddhist teachers who have come to this country, when questioned about prisons, often echo this kind of idea. They emphasize the value in using this kind of time to turn inward, to develop a sitting meditation practice, to spend time studying the teachings, and focusing on transforming one's conduct into something that's disciplined and compassionate. The lack of luxury and the support of having one's basic needs taken care of leaves a lot of mental room for working with one's mind. You can renounce all those things that have held people so tightly in their thrall: wanting lots of money, hot sex partners, fancy cars and houses, fame, respect, on & on. Free of such things, one can focus exclusively on spiritual development.

But it doesn't take too much time in an American prison to recognize how much of it in no way resembles a monastery: there aren't the sounds of religious practice but 24 hour noise; the people occupying the prison aren't interested in spiritual development for the most part, but are very involved in whatever sensual

entertainments they can eke out with sex, drugs, gambling, or whatever else can be scrounged up for distraction; there isn't an atmosphere of gentle discipline but of aggression, mind-games, and power trips; there might be some self-examination going on, but it's drowned out by constant complaints and bitter blame aimed at the world; and in a lot of situations, there's the very real threat of violence and death.

This then bears little resemblance to the average monastery. What it does resemble is another place of Buddhist practice: the charnel ground.

Charnel grounds in ancient India were places where corpses were brought to be cremated (for rich people who could afford the wood) or, more often, left to rot and be consumed by wild animals. They were off beyond the edge of town where otherwise no one went. Places of horrific smells, crumbling body parts, vultures, hyenas, and ghosts, they were frequented only by outlaws who could hide there or yogis who came to contemplate the impermanence of all phenomena.

The beauty of the charnel ground, from the yogi's point of view, was that it faced one with the facts of life. All birth ended here, all material gain, all sensual enjoyment, all fame, and all pleasure had its final result in the charnel ground. The charnel ground showed how these things were mere illusions that would inevitably decay pungently into nothing. For the tantric Buddhist yogis, the charnel ground offered something further than just the contemplation of impermanence. It was an open gateway into realizing the empty, vivid nature of appearances. Monasteries were too tame to make progress quickly. In a charnel ground, you could practice meditation like your life depended on it. There was nothing there to cling to—no sensual distractions—but also an extremely direct relationship with the physical world could be made. It wasn't a place that supported pretense or facade or hollow philosophizing.

Gazing directly upon the transitory, ungraspable nature of phenomena encouraged the yogi to see his or her own mind in the same light. Recognizing the nature of mind liberated the yogi from the cycle of birth and death. Far from avoiding the ugly truth of the world, the yogi went to sit in the midst of it and right there on that spot discovered the unconditional at the heart of the transitory.

In the vajrayana Buddhist tradition, the charnel ground came to have a symbolic meaning as the nature of life on its most raw, basic, existential terms; that is to say, it's the fundamental ground we live on whether we're in prison or in the suburbs. But there are daily situations we could be thrust into that suddenly reveal this reality to us

nakedly. Judith Simmer-Brown, in *Dakini's Warm Breath*, discusses this:

In contemporary Western society, the charnel ground might be a prison, a homeless shelter, the welfare roll, or a factory assembly line. The key to its successful support of practice is its desperate, hopeless, or terrifying quality. For that matter, there are environments that appear prosperous and privileged to others but are charnel grounds for their inhabitants—Hollywood, Madison Avenue, Wall Street, Washington, D.C. These are worlds in which extreme competitiveness, speed, and power rule, and the actors in their dramas experience intense emotion, ambition, and fear. The intensity of their dynamics makes all of these situations ripe for the Vajrayana practice of the charnel ground.