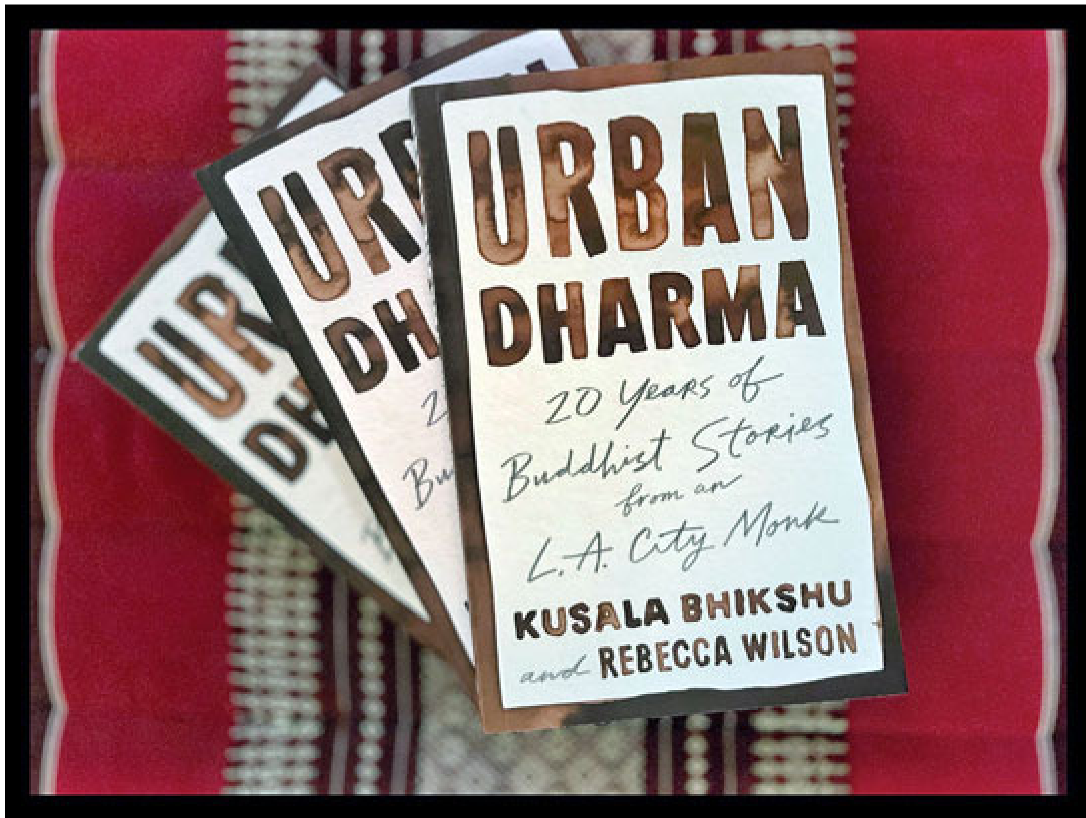

“Urban Dharma: 20 Years of Buddhist Stories from an L.A. City Monk” by Kusala Bhikshu and Rebecca Wilson / Black Boat Media © 2024

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Excerpt from Chapter 2… Lockdown, Contraband, and Springtime: The Prison Year – 1995

I took a few steps back to stay out of the way; never did I think I’d find myself there. The prison waiting room had an old beige linoleum floor, which met the old beige plaster walls without camaraderie. Five inmates dragged their mops about with practiced indifference; their tangerine jumpsuits jeered loudly against the drab walls. Every so often, our eyes would meet; I’d give a little nod or smile, and they’d just stare right through me like I was a windshield. A guard stood right outside the door.

It was my first time in prison, and although I was in a special waiting area reserved for volunteers, it didn’t feel so special. I’d been there seven minutes, and I checked the clock habitually.

The room was hot and growing more humid with every dunk of the mops. Maybe if I'd been the kind of monk who sat reading long, dry scriptures or practiced daylong meditations, I wouldn't be here right now.

I thought how fast life could change with a single phone call.

The day the phone rang, I'd been at my computer nursing a coffee and updating UrbanDharma.org

"I'm calling for Kusala Bhikshu," a voice said.

"This is he," I said between sips.

"I'm Deacon Samanski from the Men's California State Correctional Facility. I saw that L.A. Times article about you and thought you might be able to help us. We could really use someone like you up here."

"Where?"

"In the prison," he said.

A clink rang through the phone as I set down the coffee cup.

"We've got some Buddhist prisoners in here, and I'd really like to get someone who could work with them."

"How many Buddhists do you have in there?" I asked
.
"I'm not sure, but we've got some in each yard. Yard four has the most, I think."

I paused, wondering how so many Buddhists ended up in prison. Last I checked, there was nothing illegal about the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path.

"If you could commit to maybe once a week? Just come up, give a talk or whatever you'd like, maybe some meditation?"

"Are you downtown?" I asked.

"No, Lancaster," he said.

My inner Rolodex spooled.

"It's about an hour and a half north of L.A.," he said.

"That may be a bit of a challenge. I don't have a car."

"Oh, right. The article said you ride a motorcycle. You'll probably get here even faster, and it's a nice drive through the desert, lots of open space."

And just like that, so began a year-long commitment within the beige walls of the men's prison.

What Deacon Samanski hadn't said was it would be high desert motorcycle riding, so the cold was freezing, the hot was scorching, and the wind never stopped blowing.

Once I saw a rolling torrent of wind gust across a field and knock a goat down to its little knees. The bike would often get hit the same way, and I'd find the bike switching lanes without warning. I wouldn't term it a "relaxing ride," though later I became grateful for the distance. It gave me time to decompress, and it kept the prison experience far from home, which turned out to be good.

The trek up to Lancaster was incredibly hot, and even though the robes of a monk provide a special kind of protection, that protection has no crossover value when it comes to motorcycle riding. So the robes traveled in my side bags, and I wore an old leather bomber jacket and blue jeans.

During the summer, I baked on the ride, and every so often, the thought of spending the night in prison seemed more appealing than riding back down in the heat. If it weren't for the bodhisattva vows I'd taken, I'd have backed out of the whole thing, but vows are vows, and they inspire a level of dedication that only the taker of the vows understands.

I'd always wished my karma would have directed me toward the path of an arahant rather than a bodhisattva. The arahant path is streamlined and

begins with self-discovery of the dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) followed by mastery and zap!—the ultimate truth of reality is realized.

This realization is sometimes defined as the complete and total cessation of suffering, karma, and all future rebirths. An arahant never returns for another rebirth, and some days, especially on the hot ones riding toward the men's prison, I'd have been more than happy if this were my last lifetime. But as it goes, my path sifted out to be that of the bodhisattva.

The vows we take state our commitment to return lifetime after lifetime to help all beings find their way out of suffering. And although it's a clear-cut case of the infinitely impossible, it somehow gives life purpose, which feels more meaningful than just "go to work, pay the bills, go to bed, and repeat till death do us part."

The bodhisattva vows are recited and renewed daily, which challenges a person to expand their limits of compassion, plus it keeps the mundane aspects of life—news, weather, sports—at bay.

For seven years, my only form of transportation was a motorcycle.

I'd had a car up until the late 80s, but it broke down, and my insurance was about to expire. I tried to pull enough money together for a used car but had no luck. So one day on the bus, I looked out the window and saw someone riding a motorcycle. The sun was shining and the temperature was pleasant. I thought, why not? As a teenager, I'd had a 50 cc Honda scooter; I loved tooling around Phoenix.

I checked around and found that Mariner Suzuki was offering new and used motorcycles, some for less than $1,000. I had some credit left on my charge card, so I headed over. It was a whole new world. They had everything: scooters, mopeds, and small, medium, and large motorcycles. Some had exposed engines, and some had so much chrome it was blinding.

I explained my situation to a salesperson; she was sympathetic and suggested a few lower end bikes, but none of them really spoke to me. She motioned to me to follow her outside, where they had some used bikes. As we walked around, I spotted the bike I wanted: a used Kawasaki Eliminator

250 cc, liquid cooled, 33 horsepower, and a 6-speed transmission. I pulled out my charge card, and $1,500 later, I was the owner.

The dealership took two photos of me sitting on the bike, one for the dealership wall and one for me. I made my way off the lot and rode to the first gas station I could find to fill her up. It took 2.9 gallons. The next chore was to get a motorcycle license. The dealership gave me a temporary license, which allowed me to ride in daylight hours, plus a booklet on motorcycle rules of the road.

A few months later, I took my riding and written tests and passed with flying colors. I was now an official motorcycle guy. It took a while to feel comfortable in L.A. traffic. Everyone else was sitting inside a metal cage behind glass, and I felt like exposed soft serve, like a target. But as the miles added up, so did my confidence.

Eventually I felt safe getting from point A to point B, and on occasion, I'd even split lanes but didn't do that often. One wrong move and you're toast. After the first 250 cc motorcycle, I moved up to a 550 cc Suzuki and then to an 800 cc Suzuki. I'm glad I started small; it was a slow process to build skill and confidence, but after seven years of riding in all weather conditions in L.A., and after doing my five-thousand mile trip to Wisconsin and back to visit the parents, I'd was seasoned rider.

"Kusala Bhikshu?" a baritone voice called out. A uniformed guard appeared in the doorway and came toward me, clipboard in hand.

"You the monk?"

I was the only one in the room and also dressed in robes.

"Yes," I said.

"I need your ID and keys, but that stuff"—he motioned to my motorcycle jacket, backpack, and helmet—"can't come in."

"Is there a locker or a desk I could—"

"Nope."

And then he just stood there, waiting for me to figure it out. I looked around the waiting room as if someone were going to give me an answer, but the five men only mopped in silence.

“Put it in your car,” he said. “I ride a motorcycle.”

“Put it in there then.”

“In where?” We stared at each other.

“It doesn’t have a trunk,” I said.

“Sorry, but that stuff can’t come in.”

The wind was relentless in the parking lot, and the bike now had a dusty brown finish. Flying dirt sandblasted my head as I strapped the helmet and bag to the handlebars with a bungee cord. The load dangled awkwardly, banging against the gas tank in the wind.

I began to whisper the bodhisattva vow. “Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them all. Deluding passions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all. Dharma gates are limitless; I vow to study them all. Buddha’s way is supreme; I vow to attain it.”

Sometimes the recitation helped redirect my thinking away from old-fashioned complaining. On the way back in, I asked the Buddha and bodhisattvas to protect the belongings; after all, it was the visitor’s parking lot of a prison.

Deacon Samanski was waiting for me inside.

“It’s pretty windy out there, huh?”

“Yeah, it messed up my hair,” I joked.

He chuckled and went on to say how grateful he was that I’d come. After he told me a little about what to expect, we started into the prison, following a guard down a long hallway toward a massive wall of black steel bars. Midway, we stopped at a checkpoint where a female guard sat behind a

pane of glass. It reminded me of a late-night gas station. She pushed a plastic bowl through a slit in the window.

“Keys, wallet, and change, please.”

I emptied my pocket, and our trio continued on. The guard walked directly in front of us, and I couldn’t help but watch his large wad of keys jangle like some Barney Fife prop. As we neared the wall of bars, a buzzer sounded, and the gate hinges creaked awake, slowly pulling to one side. Deacon Samanski extended his hand.

“Well, Kusala, I’m off to a meeting, but we’re sure grateful. I know it’s a heck of a trek.”

“Always a pleasure to help,” I said.

The guard and I continued. As I stepped over the track of the lockdown gate, it felt like a precipice. The loud clank of the bars behind us sent a ripple of uneasiness through my gut. It was a bit like the movies, and the air felt stale and cooler. The guard and I walked onward toward a big steel door at the end of the hallway.

“So, what kind of monk are ya?” he said, giving my brown robes the once over.

“Buddhist,” I said, with a tinge of pride.

“Geez, next they’ll let astrologers start coming, too.” I laughed, and finally he did too.

“Did Deacon Samanski go over the rules with you?” I nodded but he reiterated them anyhow.

“Never have any items with you. Nothing. Nothing in pockets, socks, or underwear, and no food, pens, toothpicks, keys, pets, or identification. You can pick up your stuff at the same window on the way out.”

With a loud racket of keys and a big shove, he opened the door to the outdoor courtyard. It was the size of a baseball field. The noontime sun

blazed, and a sea of glimmering razor wire looped around the top of the chain-link fence. We walked at a fast clip as he began the tour.

“This is yard one and houses the least violent prisoners. Over there is yard four; it’s maximum security. Yards two and three are everything in between. You’re due in yard four, right?”

“That’s what the deacon said,” I gulped.

Each yard was similar in design, and between yards three and four stood a large Native American teepee and sweat lodge. It looked completely out of place, as if an installation from the Natural History Museum had fallen into the prison yard.

“Them Native Americans do their religion in there,” the guard said.

As we walked on toward yard four, I could feel the eyes in the watchtowers tracking us. Between each yard, they’d buzz us in and out of the double gates.

“Pretty tight operation,” I said.

“We’re paid to keep it that way.”

He pointed at a tan shoebox-shaped building.

“That’s the chapel.”

We stopped at the yard sergeant’s station to sign me in, and he radioed to have the Buddhist prisoners brought down.

“You’re in the room over there.”

The guard motioned to a nondescript meeting room that could have been in any small business park in America. Then he pulled a small plastic box with a button from his belt and clipped it to my robe; it looked like a garage door opener.

“If anything goes left, just hit this and we’ll be alerted, but under no circumstances try and retrieve it by force if an inmate takes it from you.”

“Okay,” I said, without really thinking about what I’d just agreed to.

“And if there’s a lockdown, just sit tight. You’re safer where are you than anywhere else. They don’t usually last too long, maybe a half hour or so. I’ll be back in about ten minutes. I think there’s eighteen who signed up.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

Inside the building were three meeting rooms and a chapel. The Buddhists had the smallest room, the Muslims met across the hall, and the Christians met in the chapel. The chapel was the only room that felt at all like a church, but like the teepee in yard three, it also had the feel of a museum installation.

It was haunting. Nothing hung from the walls, and nothing loose lay about. There were no pictures of Jesus or Mary or any of the usual iconography, and aside from a few rows of mini pews and a heavy wooden pulpit, all it offered was a menial bookshelf in the far corner, filled with a litany of discourse, most of it Christian.

The light in our classroom was soft; the entire wall was lined with large banks of windows that overlooked the outdoor yards. I took in the scene. A few men ran circles on a dirt track; a few others were lifting weights while a small group sat on a grassy patch off to the side in handcuffs. Most of the men stood with their backs to the perimeter fence, surveying the yard, watching the comings and goings from a distance. I’m sure they knew I was watching, and I’d soon understand that most of the time, they knew everything about the unimportant. It was all they had; it was all they were allowed to have.

I was standing in our room, looking out the window, when the prisoners filed in silently. Nobody spoke, nobody made loud footsteps; there was just the quiet scuff of slipper shoes trodding the short pile carpet. They sat in the classroom chairs, but not without careful consideration of neighboring seatmates. It was my first introduction to the rudiments of prison culture, and I would come to learn that there was an unspoken hierarchy and etiquette that took into account “male wives” and warring factions.

It was astounding that a group of humans with so little personal freedom could form a social structure so similar to that of the outside world. As for the prisoners, I had no desire to know what they were in for. In fact, I tried to avoid learning anything, for neutrality's sake. I also tried not to ask "How's it going?" because the answer was pretty obvious.

I had no expectations of them or of myself. I was there to talk dharma, and if I transmitted one tiny thing that helped even one of them to suffer less, it was a good day at the office. But what I didn't count on was that these beings, these maximum-security beings, embodied some of the most profound ties to human suffering I'd yet to encounter. And to spend time in a room with that suffering gave me a completely new understanding of compassion.

I sat down in the single chair at the front and started with a short introduction about myself.

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California State Prison, Los Angeles County in Lancaster, CA