

February 28, 2011

Dear Ken and Visakha,

Greetings. I am sending you many deep bows along with a hope that all is well with you. I was just informed by the chaplain that you contacted him and that you are sending Strive on with Diligence. Great! I hope we will get a chance to see it soon. Here's the story . . . .

In early January, a lot of work went into planning for Buddhist activities for the coming year. The sangha seemed to be developing well with new members and lots of enthusiasm. In mid-January I was asked by the prison chaplain to submit suggestions for changes to the statewide prison religious policies. I was humbled to be asked especially considering the fact that I am a prisoner. It took all of January but I finished the project which would help to allow minority religions in Washington prisons to have equal standing and fewer obstacles to practice their particular faith. It looked like 2011 was off to a positive start.

Then at the end of the month, tragedy struck. You may have heard that a prisoner killed a guard in the Religious Activity Center. We were all put on lockdown. No work, no exercise, no school, no sangha practice. Nothing. As of this date we are still on lockdown and patience is wearing thin throughout the prison. Two weeks after the lockdown started, another prisoner attacked another staff member. This worsened the situation. Not knowing how long this would or will last, I decided to go on a modified retreat. A lot of meditation, a lot of prostrations, mindful meal consumption, and so on. I also included the study of the anthology of discourses from the Pali Canon in lieu of mindless TV.

As it sometimes happens in life, more bad news arrived. My friends Louise Tenenbaum-David Eifler, (who live in Iowa and are childhood friends), sent me an email to let me know that my mother had suffered a stroke and was in the hospital. Just weeks before, my mother had mentioned that it was too difficult to help me with my occasional banking needs. So I arranged for her to close our mutual bank account and send the balance to Louise who agreed to do this for me. It was only a few hundred dollars which I utilized for emergencies and various supplies. But my big worry was my mother's condition and related situation. After many calls and emails, we all managed to get her some help and have her basic needs taken care of. Friends assisted with food, and contacting social workers. It was determined that an assisted living situation would be best. Unfortunately, there is a six month waiting list for that. Meanwhile, my mother received medical care and with help is back at

home. She cannot drive right now, but friends are taking care of transportation needs.

Louise recently emailed me to let me know that her bank said that my mother's account had been closed. Upon further investigation by friends and the social worker, it appears as though people were charging my mother for services that were never provided and that both her and our mutual accounts had been drained.

I am relating all this to you for a reason. In my past, had I been exposed to this combination of stressful experiences, I would have exploded on some hapless person who accidentally came along and picked that time to irritate me. With tensions in the prison very high right now, finding that irritation is not hard. The ongoing lockdown, my mother's health, the swindle, and the inherent frustration that makes doing prison time hard for most, came together to confirm to me the value of my practice. Each time I was subjected to another setback, I could feel my pulse increase. I would breathe deeply and make an effort to be in this moment. I would feel my anger, my helplessness, and frustration, but it was not all consuming. Every time I received another bit of bad news, I calmly would go to work to try and minimize the damage and thereby not be the source of more suffering.

While most of the problems are still present in some form or other, I am happy to say that my mother's health has stabilized and she is getting a little help with her living situation. The social worker is initiating an investigation regarding her finances and friends are checking on her now and again. This is all positive and a real relief. But the big gain for me is my realization that it was my Buddhist practice that became my rock to be able to go through this entire experience with calm abiding. I feel a strange sense of serenity that is so opposite to how I used to respond to crises prior to my introduction to Buddhism. I am indebted to you and all the many teachers who by example and with great compassion helped me get to this point.

I am humbled once again and find myself in tears with this realization. All I can do, right now, to repay you for all you've done, is to continue to help others who are suffering much more than I. Thank you for listening. I hope you are well and happy.

Palm to Palm,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Colvin".