

Research Article

Journal of Global Buddhism 6 (2005): 46 - 65



*Stop! A Buddhist is here!' Bodhisattva Masculinity
on Death Row in Jarvis Masters' Finding Freedom*

By

H. Cunnell

hcunnell@gmail.com

Copyright Notes: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

ISSN 1527-6457

Research Article

*Stop! A Buddhist is here!' Bodhisattva Masculinity on Death Row
in Jarvis Masters' Finding Freedom*

by

H. Cunnell

hcunnell@gmail.com

"In the Western reception of Buddhism...Buddhist practice has commonly been interpreted as primarily inner, private, and subjective, organized around the individual quest for realization...A socially engaged Buddhism can be understood as (offering)...potentially non-regressive ways to integrate spheres typically split off in a fragmented way from each other...in other words, a new kind of world...is implicitly invoked when there are attempts to link inner and outer work, the private and public spheres, means and ends, meditation and social practice, or compassion and social systems."⁽¹⁾

"Am I the only Buddhist out here? Does this mean that I, the Lone Buddhist Ranger, am expected to try and stop this madness by myself? I imagined raising my hand and yelling, 'Stop! A Buddhist is here!'"⁽²⁾

Finding Freedom

In 1997, The African-American writer, Buddhist, and Death Row prisoner Jarvis Masters published a book of personal essays and stories indicting the squalor, torture, masculine rage and

unaccountability of authority in San Quentin prison, stories that are inscriptions of the multiple strategies of physical and spiritual renewal and resilience practised by men condemned to lifelong imprisonment and the threat of execution. The book was published under the title *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row*. Masters' writing is strongly informed by his discovery and practice while in prison of Tibetan Buddhism, and *Finding Freedom* is most obviously a text closely concerned with self-reflective discourse and spiritual practices designed, as Masters writes, to "take me out of prison even as I remain here."⁽³⁾ It is then, only when he appears finally condemned, entombed, and discarded that Masters begins the processes that will lead him to a renunciation of the discourses and action of violent masculinity, those 'patriarchal notions of cool,' by which bell hooks argues young black men in particular are seduced; the "politics of being a gangsta... (the) invitation to embrace death as the only logic of black male existence, and towards a newly positive identity embracing reflection, selflessness, and compassion."⁽⁴⁾

Masters' Buddhist Practice

This paper argues that Masters' increasingly sophisticated engagement with and commitment to Buddhist spiritual practice lead him away from an initial and generically conventional monasticism in which Masters first seeks to take refuge in meditation as a means perhaps to deny, or to contemplate from a position of remove, his own imprisonment. I will argue that *Finding Freedom* illuminates and maps a yet more daring and instructive strategy by which Masters self-rehabilitates, reconfiguring and re-imagining his own masculine identity via the vehicle of his practice while by skilful and courageous interventions he helps other condemned men begin an escape from their own imprisoning gender discourses. The text is then one which records and reflects on those processes by which Masters, barely literate when he entered prison in 1981, raging, reactively violent, and subsequently sentenced to death, and after a lifetime of institutionalisation in which he takes

'painful refuge' from the physical and mental abuse and damage he suffered as a child, seeks to become 'a peace activist in the rough neighbourhood of my prison tier.'⁽⁵⁾

Finding Freedom is a narrative, informed by and resonating with Buddhist values, that might be said to use those values as analytic resources with which to engage with the problem of destructive patterns of masculinity and which, consequently, insists upon the reality and records the discourses of men who have come or who may come to non-patriarchal, diverse, and progressive understandings of masculinity. In startling ways, *Finding Freedom* challenges many of the adhesive, accustomed, and despairing motifs prevailing not only in prison literature by men but also in wider cultural discourses concerned with men and masculinities.

The paper will conclude by linking Masters' bodhisattva practice with an emergent project of activism identified as socially engaged Buddhism.

Jarvis Masters

Jarvis Masters was born in 1962. Both his parents abused and were addicted to heroin. In the story fragment "Me and My Sisters", Masters inscribes a childhood marked by chaos, violence, and trauma; a nameless yelling man who may or may not be Masters' father beats his mother until she looks like "a monster crawling into the room."⁽⁶⁾

Masters was separated from his brothers and sisters and sent to a succession of foster homes, becoming a ward of the court at the age of twelve. At the age of seventeen Masters was released from the California Youth Authority and immediately carried out a succession of armed robberies until, at age nineteen, he was sent to San Quentin in 1981, where he fell in with a prison gang. In 1985, a prison guard named Sergeant Howell D. Burchfield was stabbed and killed on the second tier of a cellblock while Masters was locked in his cell on the fourth tier. Three men were tried for the murder.

Andre Johnson was accused of killing Burchfield, Lawrence Woodard of planning the murder with other gang members and ordering the killing, while Masters was accused of planning the murder with Woodard and Johnson and of sharpening and passing along the weapon used in the killing. All three were convicted. The jury recommended that Johnson receive the death penalty but the trial judge reduced the sentence to life without parole because of Johnson's youth (he was twenty-one), and because of his minor criminal record. Woodard was also given life without parole after the jury were unable to reach a verdict. Masters, because of his criminal history and violent background, and although he was just two years older than Johnson, was sentenced to die in the gas chamber, and he was sent to Death Row, where he remains.

Masters and his supporters are hoping that his conviction will eventually be overturned and that he will be awarded a new trial. The process in which a succession of appeals and answering replies are filed in courts of successively higher authority has taken many years, and may take many more. For twenty years, Masters has remained imprisoned in San Quentin's 'hole,' the Security Housing Unit on Death Row called the Adjustment Center. Unlike other prisoners on Death Row, Masters cannot have contact visits from his friends or family. He is 'locked down' for all but a few hours each week; in those hours he is allowed to exercise in a fenced cage. While they wait for his long appeal process to run its course, Masters and his supporters are trying to have him reclassified and transferred to the East Block Death Row. Life in East Block allows access to telephones, typewriters, books and paper, and an atmosphere with some possibility for human interaction compared to the complete isolation of prisoners in the Adjustment Center.

Visions of San Quentin

Jarvis Masters' description of first entering his cell in the winter of 1981 in the story "Sanctuary" that opens *Finding Freedom*, inscribes a San Quentin where the faces of prisoners watching him from the

cells and landings are 'old and accustomed to their fates.' Masters' cell, 'this tiny space,' is dark; turning on the light he is 'beyond shock,' watching 'the swarms of cockroaches' scatter into 'tiny holes and cracks.' He writes that for 'hours' he cannot accommodate himself to his physical surroundings, 'the roaches, the filth plastered on the walls, the dirt balls collecting on the floor, and the awful smell of urine left in the toilet for God knows how long.'⁽⁷⁾

Relocated to the subterranean 'crazy tier,' or Security Housing Unit, the 'worst place in San Quentin,' after he has been condemned to death for his contested part in the murder of Sergeant Burchfield, Masters discovers that only 'by standing on the concrete slab that was my bed could I see whether it was day or night.'⁽⁸⁾ The 'berserk' noise of the tier, of crazed and angry men yelling back and forth and barking like dogs, suggests to Masters the 'roar of a football stadium.'⁽⁹⁾ Agents of the prison's pharmacological pacification programme materialise outside Masters' cell offering 'delicious treats' of 'multicolored syringes' and handfuls of Mellaril, Cogentin, Sinequan and Prolixin.⁽¹⁰⁾ A prisoner who throws a cup of his own body waste in the faces of two guards is beaten by a dozen armed guards in 'full armoured gear,' and shot with a Tazer; Masters smells the beaten man's flesh burning, and hears his broken teeth sounding like dice 'being thrown against a wooden ledge.'⁽¹¹⁾ Another prisoner repeatedly sets his sound proof windowless cell alight because, Masters writes, his 'heart (was) on fire.'⁽¹²⁾

Skilful Means

As the narrative progresses Masters records how he becomes interested in Buddhism, and the reader apprehends that what s/he is reading is a carefully constructed and arranged series of instructive parables in which Masters may first be said to be in flight from his own rage, and during which he finds 'the basic goodness of his own true nature,' and acts on his intention to help others.⁽¹³⁾ At first glance, the meditation practices Masters embarks upon may be thought to connote an evasive response to an experience otherwise

unendurable. Yet while it is clear that Masters' text seeks via its status as a testimonial of unlikely and startling renewal, to inscribe and thus return his erased, entombed, and condemned self to existence, Masters' narrative(s) nonetheless continually prioritise the lived experiences of a community of men above those of a starlit individual.

The text is broadly divisible into sections or transitional stages in which, as I have suggested, Masters first holds to Buddhism as a resource for self-realisation and healing, and subsequently embraces monasticism before joining his meditation practice to an engaged activism. Further the text includes, in addition to stories rendered in plain type, a series of short, reflective, italicised passages. For the writer, teacher, and Buddhist prison activist K. Limakatso Kendall, 'the plain type is a series of stories or parables, a great thumping, lively rhythm that moves the book forward through action. The italicised type is Masters' melodic line, his reflection, which gives meaning and resonance to the action.'⁽¹⁴⁾ The reader then navigates, with Masters, the mapping of an uncharted course, one of real jeopardy, fear and self-doubt, which he takes towards a public commitment to Buddhist practice after ten years imprisonment in the key story "The Empowerment Ceremony." Masters' account of receiving an empowerment from his lama H. E. Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche is the pivotal story in the text. The key moment comes when Rinpoche asks Masters to repeat the bodhisattva vow, the vow to live selflessly:

I wanted to make sure I fully understood. 'Helping others could cost me my life in here. Can I qualify my vow by common sense? Can I use my intelligence not to cause my own death? If you help one person today and it costs your life, there is benefit, but only to one person,' Rinpoche replied. 'But if you train your mind to help in the best way, you'll help many-a hundred, a thousand, countless beings.'⁽¹⁵⁾

Healing Masculinity

While Masters' text boldly investigates his own history of rage and violence, those patterns of behaviour configured and learnt in response to child abuse and the crippling expectations of patriarchal culture, it is through listening to other men's stories that he comes to see his lived experience as representative, and begins to name the connections and correlates between child abuse, poverty, racism, the toxic discourses and actions of patriarchal authority and expectation, gendered crime, and prisons full of damaged men who 'secretly...like it here. This place welcomes a man who is full of rage and violence...Prison life is an extension of his inner life.'⁽¹⁶⁾

The stories of childhood abuse Masters hears from his friends John, David, and Pete in the story "Scars" 'said much about how all of us had come to be in one of the worst prisons in the country.' The histories of all of us in San Quentin, he writes, 'were so similar it was if we had the same parents.'⁽¹⁷⁾ While the men in *Finding Freedom* are most often maimed and decentred they are also reflective, and it is via the community of such men, and via intimate discourses in which men may be said to learn about and support one another, that Masters offers a model of healing masculinity.

Specifically, Masters' text(s) insist on the restoration of humanity to those men who are presumptively believed to have forfeited it. In great part, that the text proceeds through a succession of stories or parables that are not always, in a conventional sense, 'about' Masters, also signifies Masters' commitment to the skilful transmission of and instruction in the dharma, or Buddhist teachings, as we might also say Masters' progression from monasticism to activism is prescribed by his increasingly sophisticated apprehension of the dharma. In effect then, and in as much as this paper is concerned with the ways in which Masters' Buddhism impacts on his progressive reconfiguration of his gendered identity, it is suggestive that while the stories are not always about Masters, they are always about men, always, to

paraphrase Michael Kimmel, hidden meditations on manhood.(18) Moreover, and as K. Limakatso Kendall writes, because in the text "the resonance is 'Buddhist' in that it's informed by Buddhist teachings on impermanence, suffering, compassion, and love," Masters, by instructively foregrounding narratives of masculine intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional openness, motifs most often absent from dominant cultural representations of masculinity, articulates the evident existence and possibilities of non-patriarchal and progressive masculinities among men presumptively mythologised, as I have said, as terminally raging, violent, and hypermasculine.

Buddhism in American Prisons

Buddhism is not unknown in American prisons, its presence perhaps indicative of what has been called its increasingly 'normative status' in American religion.(19) For example, John Daido Looi-Roshi, the abbot of New York's Zen Mountain Monastery, has written an account of helping establish a Zen Buddhist practice group in Greenhaven Correctional Facility, New York.(20) Fleet Maull, then a federal prisoner serving fourteen years on drugs charges, founded the Prison Dharma Network, which 'supports prisoners in the practice and study of Buddhist teachings and promotes the path of wakefulness and non-aggression as an ideal means of self-rehabilitation and transformation,' in 1987. Maull also established a hospice for prisoners with terminal illnesses, and in 1991 founded the National Prison Hospice Association.(21) How though, and why, does Masters come to Buddhism and in what way does its status as 'Buddhist' inform our understanding of his text as one offering a practical expression of progressive and counter-hegemonic masculinity?

What we might say first, and notwithstanding the adhesive idea that, as Masters writes, in prison, 'no one believes that conversion to religion is real. Most prisoners think that anyone who suddenly catches religion is playing a game or trying to con their way out of

the system,' is that an experience of long confinement and isolation clearly lends itself to religious and philosophical reflection and introspection.(22) How much more so on Death Row? In 1988 Jan Arriens visited twelve condemned men in Georgia and Mississippi. He writes, 'as the meetings progressed, I began to have a strange sense that a series of monks were being produced from their cells.'(23) Stan Runnels, an Episcopalian priest and prisoner counsellor, told Arriens that the men on Death Row lived a monastic existence, and that this had caused many of the men to

discover what the monastics have known...you change your perspective...they are confronted by their own mortality in a very profound way, knowing that the conclusion of this journey they are on is expected to be death, but a death that they can anticipate...they live year in and year out with the state attempting to set a date for that. And because of that they have to face the issue of life and death in a very profound way. For some of them it has moved them to a very deep understanding of the human condition.(24)

When Masters writes, 'for a long time I had been my own stranger, but everything I went through in learning how to accept myself brought me to the doorsteps of dharma...Through meditation I learned...not to run from the pain, but to sit with it, confront it, give it the companion it had never had,' he infers a connection between Buddhism and Western psychotherapy, one that Imamura, citing Fromm, Suzuki, and Martino's *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis* (1960) amongst others, identifies both as comparatively long standing within the context of America's interaction with Buddhism and, in as much as psychotherapy may be said to rely on loaded and 'coercive' normal/abnormal dichotomies, as problematic and limited.(25) In "When I First Got Charged," Masters writes that it was not until he was on trial for his life and, 'as other people started to do their job' of finding a way to save it, that he 'joined the

crusade...I was determined to find out what was going on with me.'[\(26\)](#) Masters then might be said to first approach Buddhism necessarily as a remedial and therapeutic analytic resource.

In general terms we might say, for example, that Masters is informed and supported by the Buddhist concept of impermanence, writing that, in prison, 'understanding impermanence, that things are here today and gone tomorrow, really helps. No matter how bad something is, you can remind yourself, Damn, this won't last long...What goes around, comes around, and what comes around doesn't last...My only hope is to stay in my center.'[\(27\)](#)

In time, and via a process of self-examination facilitated by learnt meditation techniques, Masters names the connections between his past and present circumstances and the nexus of societal and internal influences previously identified not to 'justify the things I had done,' or to 'save my own skin,' but to understand and take responsibility for his lived experiences and, critically, to recognise them as representative.[\(28\)](#) In as much as Buddhist practice is in great part, as Lopez writes, 'centred around performing virtuous deeds and avoiding non-virtue,' Buddhism then might be said to allow Masters to locate within himself the source of his rage and suffering, but also to offer a practical remedy for their cessation. Selflessness, in other words, becomes a practical response to suffering. As Masters' lama H. E. Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche writes, 'people don't realize that only thinking of themselves works against them, resulting in bad karma. That's why we also promise to always think of others.'[\(29\)](#)

Bodhisattva Masculinity

Masters' subsequent movement away from a monastic practice principally followed as a resource for self-healing, towards an activism within prison walls informed by the principles of selflessness and compassion, is in effect illustrative of a familiar and

central doctrinal distinction between the main Buddhist schools, those two distinguishing motivations suggested by His Holiness The Dalai Lama's summation of the essence of Buddhist practice as 'if you can't help others, at least don't hurt them.'⁽³⁰⁾ In early Buddhist tradition the *śravaka* (listener), or disciple, lived a monastic lifestyle, studying the dharma in order to become an arhat, or one who is enlightened, and who passes into nirvana. The bodhisattva, in contrast, is one on the path to enlightenment (one whose being, or *sattva*, is *bodhi*, or enlightened), whose task is to practice kindness and compassion to others while developing his/her own spiritual practice.

For Dayal, the 'bodhisattva ideal can be understood only against this background of a saintly and serene, but inactive and indolent monastic order.'⁽³¹⁾ For Humphreys, concisely, to take the Bodhisattva vow is to 'work for humanity and to sacrifice all gain for self,' while Suzuki writes that the essence of bodhisattva doctrine 'is an unequivocal affirmation of the social, altruistic nature of humankind.'⁽³²⁾ In stories like "Mourning Exercise," "Peace Activist," and "Scars," in which Masters begins an investigation into the connections between his and his friends projection of a 'hard' masculinity made visible by muscularity and tattoos, and the violent abuse, signified by the scars of the story's title, all of them suffered as children, Masters privileges narratives of compassion, selflessness, and gendered solidarity rather than gendered competition. When Masters writes that he finds it 'difficult to integrate my meditation practice with all the suffering here,' and begins to extend the principles of love and compassion to others, it is to be understood that he is privileging the bodhisattva path.⁽³³⁾

In "The Empowerment Ceremony," Masters takes two vows. In the first, he takes refuge in the "Three Jewels" of the Buddha, the dharma or teachings, and the sangha, the community of Buddhist teachers, and repeats Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche's instruction not to hurt anyone with 'my body, speech, or mind... (this) provides for

your safety; just as if you don't drink poison, you won't get sick.'⁽³⁴⁾ This is the vow of refuge, customarily taken by those who wish to publicly self-define as Buddhist. By the second vow, he commits himself to developing his practice so that he can be of 'ceaseless benefit to others...every day, even if it costs my life.'⁽³⁵⁾ It is the bodhisattva vow that then marks the end of Masters' monasticism and the beginning of selfless activism. 'I used to feel that I could hide inside my practice,' Masters writes, 'that I could simply sit and contemplate the raging anger of a place like this, seeking inner peace through prayers of compassion. But now I believe that love and compassion are things to extend to others.'⁽³⁶⁾

It is in the final two stories in the text, "Fourth of July" and "Stop! A Buddhist is Here!" that Masters most consciously foregrounds themes of bodhisattva selflessness and compassion, and the skilful transmission of the dharma. Placed immediately before these two stories or parables is a final emphatic passage in italicised type in which Masters establishes the difficult terrain on which he has chosen to stand. In it Masters bluntly rejects monasticism or 'hiding behind' silence and argues, acknowledging that such a stand represents a dangerous adventure in San Quentin, that 'love and compassion' are to be shared, that 'we become better people if we can touch a hardened soul, bring joy into someone's life, or just be an example to others.'⁽³⁷⁾ The two stories that follow are grounded in the concrete and oppressive reality of San Quentin and are then intended to illustrate and problematise both the jeopardy and the subversive reverberating effects of such a project.

In "Fourth of July" 'two unfamiliar guards with no name tags' abuse, incite, and antagonise Masters and his fellow prisoners, passing through what had been a calm tier with the unaccountable authority of a rough, short storm. The guards, working overtime and tired and angry after a sixteen hour shift, refuse the men spoons to eat with and toilet paper, and by crude and gendered abuse seek to deny the men's humanity. After the guards leave, the 'cold, deadly stillness' of

the men on the tier tells Masters that each prisoner is planning to murder the two guards on their return.(38) By skilful means, and after a momentary hesitation during which Masters tries to convince himself 'that whatever happened to these two jerks was no business of mine,' Masters convinces the prisoners to 'channel their murderous rage' into flooding the tier and keeping the guards 'here all night: the guards had been idiots, but nothing they had said or done would ever justify their murder.'(39) The deadly stillness of the tier is then replaced by laughter, 'cheerfulness,' and 'loud joking,' and as water from the men's blocked toilets roars over the cellblock Masters writes that 'joy flooded the tier.'(40) Masters is placed in a punishment cell for incitement. 'I smiled at the guards standing at my cell,' he writes. 'Being thrown in the Hole was worth the pleasure of seeing them still alive.'(41)

If in "Fourth of July" Masters, informed by his promise or vow to help others, is able to creatively initiate a collective non-violent protest, simultaneously transmitting the Buddhist values of compassion and selflessness, then in the story "Stop! A Buddhist is Here!" he finds himself dangerously isolated by his practice. In "Looking like a woman," an effeminate gay man is brought into the death row prisoners' exercise yard.(42) From experience Masters knows that the man is on the yard because someone has made a mistake, or 'as a dirty ploy by the prison administration to get someone killed.'(43) Masters writes that the death row prisoners fear and hatred of gay men means that the newcomer is a 'walking dead man.'(44) While many death row prisoners, imprisoned for the most part since the 1980s, have been 'taken in' by reports that HIV/AIDS was solely a 'homosexual disease,' others 'hated them just for hate's sake.'(45) The invasive fragility and vulnerability of the man 'with tiny breasts...(and) Vaseline on his lips,' then disturbs and antagonises the exclusively homosocial and hypermasculine site of the death row prisoners' yard.(46) The public cultural expulsion of homosexual men from the sphere of masculine legitimacy achieved or mediated most often through homophobic and misogynist

discourse is then exaggerated and heightened to concentrated murderous intent. As men around Masters begin to pull out 'prison-made shanks,' armed guards 'hovering over the yard...(have) their semiautomatic rifles hanging over the gun rail...they knew what everyone else did.'[\(47\)](#) Masters is 'crossed up,' his self-defined status as selfless bodhisattva in profound collision with his status as condemned prisoner, versed since childhood in the prevailing gendered code and customs of homosocial institutions and 'schooled' in the ways of San Quentin as a nineteen year old by the prison's 'older statesmen...with their gray hair and beards, drinking cold coffee like vintage wine.'[\(48\)](#) 'According to the laws of prison life,' Masters writes, 'none of this was supposed to be any business of mine. But it was. This time it had to be.'[\(49\)](#)

In as much as I have said that Masters' text is carefully and instructively arranged and that the stories operate in great part as parables, we might also say that Masters intentionally places last the story in which not only his newly positive identity but his life is placed most clearly in jeopardy. In plain sight on the prison yard, Masters is far removed from the refuge of his transformed cell described in "Sanctuary." The prison code demands that Masters does 'not get involved and (does) not say anything.'[\(50\)](#) To say anything, to 'snitch,' might be fatal. While Masters' text, like the testimony of other Death Row prisoners, insists upon the possibility and reality of change, and spiritual renewal, among condemned men, *Finding Freedom* is also a text alive to how difficult and dangerous the practice of helping others in San Quentin can be. 'What would all those people outside these walls who call themselves Buddhist tell me to do?' Masters writes, "would they say, 'Let's all be Buddhists and just put away our knives and smile?'"[\(51\)](#) Socialised in the prison culture, Masters reflexive instinct is to surrender once more, to deny his practice and to look away and say or do nothing; 'I could not summon up the courage to become a snitch,' Masters writes, 'and risk my own life to warn him off this yard,' and asks, 'Why were things like this happening more

often since I had taken my vows?'(52) Masters writes that there are stabbings everyday in San Quentin; 'I can't stop it,' he writes. 'It isn't stopping.'(53)

That Masters then acts, kneeling next to the gay man in a mute act of counter-hegemonic alliance that stops dead the murderous approach of Masters' friend Crazy Dan, 'gripping the long shank,' reverberates. Masters nearly chokes on his own fear when he realises what he has done, and wonders if he is crazy, or just plain stupid. Perhaps, Masters reflects, Crazy Dan remembered 'the time I'd stood by him when he too had been marked for death.'(54)

Masters too of course, and like all of the men whose stories he tells, is condemned and marked for death; what liberates him and guides his action is the realisation that 'what really matters isn't where we are or what's going on around us, but what's in our hearts while it's happening.'(55)

Each of these stories may then be said to offer difficult but possible strategies by which men might interrupt the desperate, standard and reactive cycle of prison violence, the book's effect, in sum, is to offer an alternate vision of masculinity. We might, for example, identify the holiday that goes 'unnoticed,' in "Fourth of July," and which is restored or declared by the men when 'knives and zip guns had been replaced by something as simple as water,' as precisely a holiday from, or a brief cessation of, that internalised mandate of hardness and violence demanded not just by prison culture and which is most often represented in prison literature, but by patriarchal cultures of all kinds.(56) The condemned men on the tier then reclaim joy and playfulness and wonder, returning them to a place before, as bell hooks writes, they were 'shut down' by patriarchy.(57) Hard masks are replaced by smiles.

Socially Engaged Buddhism

To conclude, it is suggestive that in "Peace Activist," in which Masters helps the raging young prisoner Bosshog develop the

means, or practice, to deal with his anger by sending him tobacco wrapped in Buddhist texts in exchange for Bosshog's promise to "stay cool and not go disturbing the peace on the tier again," the text Masters wraps tobacco in to send to Bosshog is *Being Peace*, written by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh.(58) The mantra Masters teaches Bosshog is also taken from *Being Peace*.(59) When he is finally released, Bosshog, whose first shouted words in the story are "I kill you...I kill you all," stands in front of Masters' cell and together they recite the mantra Bosshog has learnt to say whenever he was 'about to blow his top...' "If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile, and everyone in our family, our entire society will benefit from our peace."(60)

Being Peace is a series of lectures in which Hanh teaches the dharma and addresses the question of Buddhism's reception and future in America. In it Hanh sets out the principles of what has become known as socially engaged Buddhism, a key tenet of which is that Buddhists are to take action in the present to resolve societal problems. Hanh began reflecting on the means by which Buddhist advocacy might effect political change as a result of his response to the American war in Vietnam. A principle of engaged Buddhism 'is that the long-term vision of social action and transformation is that of reaching reconciliation rather than defeating an opponent. Violence, for example, is not so much to be addressed by banishing those who are most outwardly violent from the society, but rather in healing and transforming the roots of violence, helping to bring those who are violent back into the society.'(61) In arguing for links with other liberation theology movements and the need for larger scale 'strategies of transformation' necessary to engage with the structural problems of American society, Donald Rothberg explicitly links his advocacy of engaged Buddhism with the figure of the bodhisattva, arguing that the coalition building work needed to end the suffering of America is immense, 'no doubt as that which is required of the traditional bodhisattva, who would save all sentient beings.'(62)

In addition to identifying those systems of domination that profit from keeping men in prison, recognising and naming the connections between child abuse, poverty, racism, the gulf between men's lived experience and the hegemonic masculine ideal, and juvenile and adult gendered crime, is to acknowledge just how formidably difficult any attempt at changing men's learned and destructive patterns of behaviour is. Moreover, the compulsively masculine and toxic discourse of social policy makers calling for revenge and ever-harsher punishment further hampers any such attempts. Notwithstanding these difficulties however, conscious prisoners and a growing prison activists movement on the outside have, in addition to challenging systems of domination and campaigning against prison conditions and racially, politically, and socially partial sentencing in sum, identified men's (self) destructive behaviour while in prison as precisely an additional obstacle 'that must be overcome.'⁽⁶³⁾ Masters' Buddhist practice and advocacy is then necessarily engaged, and political. Thich Nat Hanh's mantra that Masters and Bosshog chant is a distillation of the principles of socially engaged Buddhist advocacy. Masters' bodhisattva masculinity, the practice of an engaged, non-violent, and non-patriarchal masculinity frankly informed by the values of selflessness, love, and compassion counters destructive masculinity precisely because its practice becomes an alternate and conscious learned pattern of behaviour, reinforced, in Masters' case, by mindful practice, which is to say meditation and the daily repetition of vows, towards practicing kindness and helping oneself and others that interrogates and disarms the discourses, actions, and disastrous imprisoning consequences of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity.

Notes

1. Donald Rothberg, "Responding to the Cries of the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in North America," in Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (eds), *The Faces of Buddhism in*

- America*. Berkeley. California UP 1998: 281-282. [Return to Text](#)
2. Jarvis Jay Masters, *Finding Freedom; Writings from Death Row*. California. Padma 1997: 173. [Return to Text](#)
3. 113. [Return to Text](#)
- 4 bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York. Routledge 2004: 156. [Return to Text](#)
5. *Freedom*, 70, 151. [Return to Text](#)
6. *Freedom*, 74. [Return to Text](#)
7. 3-4. [Return to Text](#)
8. 37. [Return to Text](#)
9. 36-38. [Return to Text](#)
10. 39. [Return to Text](#)
11. 42-43. [Return to Text](#)
12. 47. [Return to Text](#)
13. H. E. Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, "Afterword," *Freedom*, 178. [Return to Text](#)
14. In an email to the author, 9 September 2004. [Return to Text](#)
15. *Freedom*, 126. [Return to Text](#)
16. 71. [Return to Text](#)
17. 70, 78. [Return to Text](#)
18. Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," in Stephen M. Whitehead and Frank J. Barrett (eds), *The Masculinities Reader*. Cambridge. Polity Press 2001: 267. [Return to Text](#)
19. See Prebish and Kanaka (eds), 2. [Return to Text](#)
20. John Daido Looi-Sensei, "Lotus in the Fire: Prison, Practice, and Freedom," in Don Morreale (ed), *Buddhist America: Centers, Retreats, Practices*. Santa Fe. John Muir 1988: 304-314. [Return to Text](#)
21. <http://www.prisonharmanetwork.org> Accessed 16 September 2004. [Return to Text](#)
22. *Freedom*, 124. [Return to Text](#)
23. Jan Arriens (ed), *Welcome to Hell: Letters and Writings from Death Row*. Boston. Northeastern UP 1997: 217. [Return to Text](#)

24. Welcome, 218.[Return to Text](#)
25. *Freedom*, 111; Ryo Imamura, "Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies: An Asian American Perspective," in Prebish and Kanaka (eds), 228-237.[Return to Text](#)
26. *Freedom*, 65.[Return to Text](#)
27. 131.[Return to Text](#)
28. 65.[Return to Text](#)
29. Rinpoche, "Afterword," 125-126.[Return to Text](#)
30. Dalai Lama, *The Transformed Mind*, London. Hodder 2000: xviii.[Return to Text](#)
31. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*. Delhi. Banarsidass 1932: 17.[Return to Text](#)
32. Christmas Humphreys, *A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism*. London. Curzon 1984: 214; Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *The Lankavatara Sutra: A Mahayana Text*. London. Routledge 1932: xiv.[Return to Text](#)
33. *Freedom*, 121.[Return to Text](#)
34. 125.[Return to Text](#)
35. 126.[Return to Text](#)
36. 158.[Return to Text](#)
37. 158.[Return to Text](#)
38. 163.[Return to Text](#)
39. 163.[Return to Text](#)
40. 164-165.[Return to Text](#)
41. 167.[Return to Text](#)
42. 169.[Return to Text](#)
43. 169.[Return to Text](#)
44. 170.[Return to Text](#)
45. 169.[Return to Text](#)
46. 170.[Return to Text](#)
47. 170.[Return to Text](#)
48. 170, 9.[Return to Text](#)
49. 170.[Return to Text](#)
50. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London, "Gender and

- the Politics of Punishment," in Sabo, Kupers, and London (eds), *Prison Masculinities*. Philadelphia. Temple UP 2001: 10.[Return to Text](#)
51. *Freedom*, 171.[Return to Text](#)
52. 170, 171.[Return to Text](#)
53. 173.[Return to Text](#)
54. 172. [Return to Text](#)
55. 158.[Return to Text](#)
56. 166.[Return to Text](#)
57. *We Real Cool*, 159.[Return to Text](#)
58. *Freedom*, 154.[Return to Text](#)
59. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace*. Berkeley. Parallax 1987: xi.[Return to Text](#)
60. *Freedom*, 154, 156.[Return to Text](#)
61. Rothberg, "Responding to the Cries of the World," 279.[Return to Text](#)
62. "Responding", 284.[Return to Text](#)
63. See Terry A. Kupers, "Rape and the Prison Code," in Sabo, Kupers, and London (eds), 115.[Return to Text](#)