

WEBSITE UPDATE EXCERPT: Today marks one year since the passing of celebrated Tibetan monk and human rights advocate Venerable Palden Gyatso. The Jarvis Journal is featuring a reflective piece Jarvis wrote last year upon hearing the news of Palden Gyatso's departure. A political prisoner who was tortured in Tibet for 33 years, Palden Gyatso escaped into exile in 1992 and traveled the world bearing witness and championing Tibetan freedom. His extraordinary story of suffering and endurance is captured in his autobiography and a documentary, both titled "Fire Under the Snow." As Jarvis undergoes his current hunger strike, he pays homage to those who have inspired him. -11/30/19

**ENDURING by Jarvis Masters
(New Reflection, written December 2018)**

It was in the *New York Times* that I had just read the obituary of Venerable Palden Gyatso, a beloved Tibetan Buddhist monk who had passed at 85. A political prisoner for over three decades, I read the story of his suffering and what he endured by the lash and whip and electric batons of the Chinese Communist guards and wondered how he was able to meditate in those moments of unimaginable torture.

It caused me to look at my life with a great sense of blessing and even more appreciation that I had never gone through what he had suffered in those many years in Tibet.

The featured photographs of Palden Gyatso in the article is of a fearless old man. Once defiant, I imagine how at the end this precious monk was holding up what energy he had left at the core of his body. Still, how was Palden Gyatso, this giant of a figure, able to be the practitioner that he was?

The question brought up my own strengths and weaknesses. Among countless others in this "sea of suffering"--a common expression used by many Buddhists--I have been able to endure on San Quentin's death row for 30 years. I am still able to love and be loved, hurt and feel pain, laugh, cry, and argue. I am complete, whole, human, and undeniably flawed.

It just seems to me that I shouldn't be any of this, that I ought to be like a mad dog chewing on both sides of my tongue, that I don't believe I can die any more than I am already dead. A maniac. But whether I live out of laughter or tears, anger or feeling misunderstood, there is this freedom that allows me to experience whatever comes up for me. I feel very plain, ordinary, fortunate.

I don't think I've met anybody who hasn't asked me, "How do you do it? I wouldn't be able to make it through a day in San Quentin, in a place like that--and to live your life as a Buddhist!?"

Before I had ever heard this question though, I was 12 or 13, locked behind a quiet cell door in juvenile hall so that no one heard me shouting and yelling. Often I became too loud in my body. But at other times, with my feet on the opposite wall in front of me, I would stare right at my silence, waiting for someone to say "His time is up!" I would sit there and start playing with all

the spots on the wall paint. If I had taken my eyes off a dot on the wall, I would lose it like a rain drop. In that way there was always something to lose again and again.

In my mind, I would hold that picture-perfect focus on the dot for what felt like 10 or 15 minutes, but it always longer than that. I could tell by the sound of activities going on outside--the playing of ping-pong, or shower time or chow time--when the bell would ring. I would always give myself a pat on the back knowing I could stay frozen and concentrated. I never purposely cheated. I would try not to doze off or pretend I heard authorities saying "His time is up. Let him out. He done his quiet time like a man!" Those cells in those juvenile halls were so empty, too empty for anyone to care about anyone else. It might have been that we were all fine with this, too.

This is how I learned to spend a day in a jail cell. It was only a short time ago that I realized it was not in San Quentin that I learned how to survive incarceration, but sadly, in juvenile halls at 11 or 12 years old. I figured it's like the difference between being circumcised as an infant, and being circumcised as an adult. In infancy, it's tolerable but in adulthood, absolutely unthinkable.

So it was in San Quentin, before I had ever taken empowerment vows, those first steps in Vajrayana Buddhism 20 years ago, that I was seated with the same dot beside me.

Nowadays, in front I visualize my root teacher Ven. Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche and make prayers to Red Tara, the female Buddha and embodiment of divine wisdom. Beside me I visualize Ani Pema Chodron, who is like a mother to me. I visualize Palden Gyatso and what he endured, his friends put to death by public execution, and their executioners. I see friends whose deaths were caused by acts of cruelty, others who have lost their minds, their families in pain. I take refuge in my own mind--aware of my neighbors in their cells, the staff who work here, the doctors and nurses, the guards and their families and friends and friends of friends.

In the center of my being I visualize the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, who keep me grounded to find an abundance of peace and love necessary so that every day I will treat every outcome the same.