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Editorial Note: This article was written several years ago - donations for the individual KC writes about are NOT currently needed.

## A Christmas Story

**By KC Walpole**  
**Senior Dharma Teacher**

Every once in a while we think how bad can our situation get and then it gets worse and worse and we wonder when the down hill slide will ever end. In all the time we are locked into our suffering, we never see the goodness that we have in life. That is until we see someone that has it much worse than we do. Today, I saw such a case. This morning I drove up to a state prison work camp called River Junction which is on the grounds of the State Psychiatric Facility called Chattahoochee in the Panhandle of Florida to give precepts to an inmate prior to his release this Friday the 22nd of December. He has been in prison for over ten years. Make no mistake about it, he has made some bad choices in life and did his time. My guess is that he will continue doing time and burning karma for the rest of his life.

The state gives him \$100 and a bus ticket to Gainesville, Florida. The state will take back \$40 to \$60 for a set of civilian clothes. He will arrive at the Salvation army facility that afternoon without a job, possibly a place to live (if the salvation army facility is not overflowing because of the cold), one set of clothes which he has on and part of a shaving kit. This is how he will start a new life at 55+ years of age. By the time a person has been in prison over 10 years, they really don't have many friends left if any at all. Their socialization skills are about zero.

Why is the state giving him a ticket to Gainesville? Because he asked to be paroled here. He said he had no other place to go and wanted to be near the Gateless Gate to find sangha and continue his practice. Mind you, we do not have a post release program and never promised nor mentioned one to him. His thought was that at least he would have a place to practice. He as well as anyone else will always be welcomed to practice. He is not the first inmate to practice or visit here.

It is over a three hour drive from here to there, and that is a lot of time to think. I was wondering, what would I do under those circumstances. Knowing that first I would have to find a job--and even if I got it right away--it would take a couple of weeks to get my first pay check. My sense is that I would do what ever it took to stay alive and hope that if I had to cross a few lines I would not get caught.

I first met this man over two years ago in another prison. At the time he was a peer counselor helping other inmates with the this and that. He never missed a meeting, always showed up on time and brought in other inmates so that at least they could be exposed to Buddhism. His letters showed sincerity and dedication. His questions reflected serious attempts at establishing a practice. His practice appears strong and includes a daily 108 full prostrations.

There were a few minutes at the end of the ceremony while we were waiting for clearance so he could go back into the yard and I could go to the gate and start the drive home. This was a scared man. He said that as bad as things are and as bad as they may get, the one thing I got is my breath and in the end that is all I need.

This man is lucky in a weird way. A vipassana monk has shared some of his clothes, including shoes. A man with a practice of over 10 years stepped up to the plate to sponsor and provide living space in town. Someone else donated a computer so that he could develop the computer skills he learned in prison. Someone else has offered a job that will hold him over until he can get a computer job or decides to learn a new trade. Another couple has offered him a place to socialize and practice teaching computer skills. Someone donated the fee for him to sit a five day retreat. It is truly a wonderful thing to see that the Sangha is not parochial in the narrow sense but includes elements from most of the groups in Gainesville. However,

this is not about Buddhism but about helping someone so that he can help himself. This is the situation today, don't know what tomorrow will bring.

Make no mistake, this man still needs some help. I am not talking about luxuries but the basics of survival. Enough so that he can get started. He will need such basics as a razor, soap, food, clothes that fit to go to work in, and a bike to get around town. Please contact me if you want to make a contribution. You can make it out to the Gateless Gate and it will not only be tax deductible but there will be a full accounting of all money spent and open to any inspection with receipts. Neither I nor the Gateless Gate has the resources to do anything more than has already been done.

So this man is lucky. He got this help because he was willing to just sit and breath. He is happy to have his breath. This Christmas is a good time to be thankful for what we have instead of what we don't have.

My sense is that for every man that gets out as our man does, there are a hundred that can only hope for a bed and meal in the salvation army shelter this Christmas or at any other time, that is if the shelter is not overflowing from the cold weather. So, let me ask you: what are you thankful for this Christmas?

Yours in the Dharma,

KC