



Kiley Jon Clark had drunk himself out of a job, a marriage, and the trust of his children when he happened upon a Buddhist book that changed his life. Now he's bringing the dharma to others who have fallen on hard times.

Welcoming the Homeless

The chapel was empty except for me and the Buddha. It was Saturday night, and the Homeless Meditation Practitioners group had already finished meeting, but Tami had seen our makeshift shrine from outside and wanted to take a closer look.

She ran a hand gently across the Buddha's face and then explored the softness of the saffron cloth. She smelled the flower arrangement, and rang the Tibetan bells. She put the elephant incense holder in the palm of her hand and held it close to her face, seemingly lost in the detail.

Although she was only thirty-five, she could tell you about enough heartache to fill many lifetimes. She began talking about her childhood, which consisted of foster homes, abuse, and neglect. She spoke of a teenage daughter, but cried when adding, "We haven't spoken in a long time. My sister says she's not ready yet."

Alcoholism, depression, and suicidal thoughts were Tami's constant companions. "See, all you gotta do," she said, "is

stand in front of a bar and say to every guy walking in, 'You want a girlfriend for the night? I'm real fun, especially after a few drinks.' "

And inevitably, one of the men would take her up on the offer.

Behind her eyes, I saw enough pain to make anybody climb into a whisky bottle and never come out. As I was looking at her like this, she abruptly stopped talking. Her face hardened, and she said in a low voice, "You should have told me to shut the fuck up a long time ago."

And in an instant, she was somebody else, somewhere else, making her way to the door. "Don't listen to me, I'm nuts!" she said, "Look man, they're handing out sleeping mats now, so I gotta go."

At this point, I would like to tell you that I stopped Tami. That we sat back down and I told her all about my crooked life, about me finding a Buddhist teacher and crawling out of the grave I had dug for myself. But the truth is, that was the first and last time I saw her. I have no idea where Tami is tonight.



(Opposite, top) Kiley Jon Clark recites Om Mani Padme Hum before going out on the streets for a day of random street dharma (opposite bottom and above left) (Center) Lama Tulku Tsori Rinpoche ordains Clark into the Ngakpa tantric tradition and (right) talks with a man at a homeless shelter in San Antonio.

PHOTOS (FACING PAGE TOP-BOTTOM): © ENRIQUE LOPETEGUI/SAN ANTONIO CURRENT; DIANE MEIER (ABOVE L-R): DIANE MEIER; MICHEAL HATELY; DIANE MEIER

KILEY JON CLARK leads meditation groups for the homeless in San Antonio, Texas, through his organization, Homeless Meditation Practitioners Street Dharma.

Some people would say that for a short time Tami's burden was lighter because she was sharing it with someone. I don't know about that. But I do know one thing: I can't imagine not being in that chapel that night. I am so grateful that these moments have become a normal part of my human experience.

HMP STREET DHARMA (HMP stands for Homeless Meditation Practitioners) came about after I turned a corner in my own life.

It all started on May 10, 2006, which was a banner day for me. That was the day that I woke up hung-over for hopefully the last time. I had drunk myself out of a job, a marriage, the trust of my children, and my own self-respect. And for the first time, I was absolutely alone. I had to look myself square in the eye and admit what a wreck I had made of everything. It was terribly hard to stop drinking and face this mess, but even harder to keep going the way I was.

Slowly and painfully, the heartache I had caused myself and others became clear to me. I began to wade through the guilt, shame, and other feelings that the alcohol had been hiding.

At the time, I was living in a dingy little apartment just outside of San Antonio, Texas, which I could barely afford. One Saturday, I knew I had to get out or I was going to go crazy, drink, or both. So, I drove into the city and wandered into a bookstore, where I spent hours on the floor, surrounded by spiritual and self-help books.

Finally, I grabbed the only book I could afford—it was \$1.20 and I had \$1.50. The book was *Selling Water by the River: A Manual of Zen Training*, by Jiyu Kennet. It was nothing that a redneck from Texas, like me, would be even remotely interested in. I laughed at the hard-hitting questions it tackled in chapters like, "How junior priests must behave in the presence of senior priests," "Mealtime Regulations," "Trainees' Hall Rules," and last but not least, "Instructions to the Chief Cook." But the strange thing was, I read the entire book in one sitting, enraptured. I saw great beauty in the type of self-control, discipline, and attention to detail that Dogen had written about. It was so clearly lacking in my own life.

When I turned the last page, I discovered that the previous owner had placed a sticker with his name and address printed on it. Without much thought, I got out a piece of paper and wrote him a letter, telling him how much I enjoyed the book.

Within days, I received a letter back. He said that if I wanted to learn more about Buddhism and meditation, I should meet up with him at the Shambhala Meditation Center in San Antonio. So I started going, but he was never there.

To this day, I have never met the man who owned that book.

But I did become a permanent fixture at the meditation center, and spent the rest of the year attending teachings, meditating, and reading books about Buddhism.

One day, I was reading about the four noble truths, and



although I knew *what* it said, I wanted to know *where* the Buddha said it and *to whom*. Taking a closer look, I learned that the Buddha had walked more than two hundred miles to deliver this sermon to five homeless men. He and these five ascetics had once been homeless meditation practitioners together.

I wondered why the Buddha walked so far to share his experience with these homeless men. The answer, I think, is that he knew he would find them literally starving for the truth.

After that I began searching for a way to reach out to the homeless community in my area. I started by going under Commerce Bridge, where the homeless in San Antonio hang out, and doing my own meditation practice there. I figured if somebody wanted to join me, that would be fine.

I would sit cross-legged and place a few shrine objects on a yellow meditation cloth in front of me. It took a long time before people started approaching me for meditation instruction, but sometimes when I would open my eyes I would find money, buttons, sandwiches, and other stuff that people had left on the prayer cloth. Someone once gave me a groovy psychedelic hat and a five-dollar bill.

Eventually the street meditation thing took off, and our group under the bridge started getting bigger. Around this time I'd been hearing about a thirty-seven-acre facility that was being built for the homeless of San Antonio. It was looking to transform the lives of homeless people by addressing the root causes of the problem through education, job training, and other services. There would be dorms to accommodate 940 men, women, and children, and a large outdoor courtyard for those who didn't want to come into the facility but wanted access to clean bathrooms, showers, free meals, and a safe, security-patrolled place to sleep for the night.

So I went to their website to look for job opportunities. There was a position open for a "custodial trainer." At this



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point, I was so tired of filling out applications that I just emailed them, saying, "I've never done custodial work before, but I can damn sure do it!"

I started my new job on March 16 last year. Now, in addition to the street dharma, HMP holds meditation gatherings three times a week at this new facility for the homeless, and we have full access to its two beautiful interfaith chapels. Since we offer the homeless community one of the few alternatives to Christian services, we attract all types. We get Wiccans, pagans, new-agers, agnostics, shamans, Hindus, Muslims, and atheists. We even have a Satanist in our group. This is exactly the type of dynamic we thrive on. Faith is so precious, personal and delicate; it's beautiful to hear the homeless men and women speak openly about their faith and beliefs and to know that we're providing a place where they feel safe enough to do that.

The people who attend HMP have been living invisibly in society for years. When they have been seen, they have been ignored, beat up, beat down, pushed aside, or given some handout like a stray dog. Very rarely does someone look them in the eye and say anything, much less listen to their thoughts on religion, philosophy, life, meditation, or anything else they choose to talk about. If you happen to run into a person who came to group once and call them by their first name, greeting them like an old friend, their whole being lights up.

Although HMP never seeks to change another's religion, we do optimistically spread the Buddha's teachings. After all, it was

my lama, Tulku Tsori Rinpoche, and the buddhadharma that saved my life. A defining moment in the life of HMP happened last July when my teacher performed the sacred Tibetan Black Hat Dance for the staff and residents at the facility.

Another memorable moment for me happened the other day with one of the residents at the facility. I guess he is in his late twenties. And although he is completely blind, he always finds his way to the meditation group. On this particular day he called me over and said in an excited voice, "You want to see my meditation rocks?" Of course, I said that I did. So he reached into his pocket and pulled out these three ordinary looking stones.

"Here, hold this one" he said proudly. "It's a petrified shark's fin. And here, look at this one, it's an unpolished diamond. This last one here, it's an Indian rock. You use it to find water when you're thirsty."

I looked them over and handed them back, thanking him for letting me see them. Then his face lit up again, and he said, "You know what? I got something for you!" He pulled something out of his shirt pocket.

He said, "I want you to have this, Kiley. It's extremely rare." He placed it in my hand and whispered, "It's a wish-fulfilling jewel."

Folks, it was just a normal, everyday peach pit. He must have found it on the ground and knew that it was quite

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different from all the other rocks.

There is a spiritual lesson here. It has to do with looking out at this peach pit world and seeing something wonderful.

I'm reminded of a story about a monk who walked up to the Buddha in the middle of a busy market and rudely demanded to see the Tusita heaven. Suddenly, in a flash, he found himself standing beside the Buddha in a jeweled kingdom of light. It was almost too beautiful to look at; he started to weep. He saw jeweled trees, jeweled grass, and even a jeweled sky. The land was filled with the most incredible beings, each completely whole and contented, perfectly emanating the light of divinity.

But all too soon, the monk was back in the smelly, crowded marketplace. Still weeping from the experience, he screamed, "Why did you bring me back!" Gently, the Buddha put his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "I assure you, monk. We never left this place."

BUDDHISM TEACHES that the difference between heaven and hell has to do with our perception of things. Throughout my years of being a drunk, getting arrested, causing my wife to leave with the kids, and all the other damn fool mistakes that I've made, I felt like I was struggling in hell.

I never expected to fall in love again or dreamed that the relationship with my children would be repaired and they would come to live with me. I never thought that I would be the student of a great humanitarian and teacher like Lama Tulku Tsori Rinpoche and receive ordination in the Ngakpa tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism.

I never imagined that my life would be dedicated to working in the homeless community. And I certainly never thought that I would be asked to go to India to speak before the Dalai Lama about homelessness in America. But interestingly enough, all of this actually happened.

And I assure you, monks, I never left this place. **BD**