

To Protect and Serve

A Conversation with a Buddhist in the Army National Guard

Jason Gassman has spent over 10 years of his life in the military. After a tumultuous childhood in Ohio, Montana, and Wyoming, he joined the navy when he was 20 years old. Currently, Jason is serving in the California Army National Guard. For the past year, he's also been practicing at the San Francisco Zen Center. Maia Duerr, associate editor of *Turning Wheel*, spoke with Jason in October.

Maia: Why did you originally enlist in the military?

Jason: I got in a lot of trouble as a youngster. At one point, I was given an option that I could get out of going to prison if I joined the military, and so I did. That was in 1988.

I was in the navy during the Gulf War and spent nine months floating around the Persian Gulf. I didn't see combat myself, but we did see the jet streams from the cruise missiles. I got out of the navy in 1993 and rejoined the National Guard in 1997.

Maia: How often do you report for guard duty?

Jason: I go one weekend a month, two weeks in the summer, and occasionally to special trainings. And I can be activated at any time for state emergency duty or active duty.

Maia: What do you think the chances are of that happening?

Jason: I think it's half-and-half. If I got called up, I'd get 72 hours' notice and they'd send me to Fort Irwin in Southern California to do a one- or two-month training. Then I'd be in for however long I was needed. It could be a week, a year. There's technically no limit to how long they can keep you—I'm basically government property.

Maia: What has been positive for you about being in the military?

Jason: The discipline and the camaraderie have done me a lot of good. When I first got out of the navy, I missed that camaraderie. I joined back up to seek that again. There's something about training in the army that can be really nourishing. It's given me a purpose for a long time. I don't know if I need that anymore, but it's certainly something that was a part of who I was.

Military service gives a lot of young people their first introduction to discipline and teamwork and what it means to stand up for something, for freedom. I firmly believe that we're the freest country in the world.

I'm a believer that we need a military that can do what it does. And at the same time, I also support the peace movement. I live in a country that's never had anybody take our soil, and I'm thankful for that. It's partly because we are the best army in the world, and we train that way.

Maia: How did you first get involved with Buddhism?

Jason: I had a drug and alcohol problem for a long time. After getting in a lot of trouble in both civilian and military life, I chose to go into rehab. About a year ago, I met Paul Haller [a dharma teacher from San Francisco Zen Center], who came once a week to offer a class at the rehab. That was my first introduction to Buddhism.

Maia: What impressed you about Paul?

Jason: I think it was his calmness. His class began with stretches, and then we sat for five minutes. After that, we talked about our week and ended with the Serenity Prayer. The first couple of times, I had a feeling of dropping down into my body for a few brief moments. I've been chasing that feeling ever since. It's not always achievable, but there's something about the idea of just sitting with the self—something happens for me. But it's nothing like I thought it would be. It's quite painful sometimes.

The rehab center was only six blocks from San Francisco Zen Center, so I made my way over there for the Saturday morning public program. Eventually, I went to morning zazen and got more involved. I've been living at Zen Center for three months now, and I worked in the kitchen there all summer before I moved in.

Maia: The camaraderie and the discipline you described in the navy sounds a lot like Zen Center.

Jason: Yes, I think that's what attracted me about Zen training—the discipline of it. At times I can provide discipline for myself, but it's been institutions that have helped me find my way.

I've had to take discipline deeper within myself. I'm used to following orders, to doing what I'm told and doing it to the best of my ability. With Zen training, the difference is being aware of everything going on and looking deeper than the surface. In what's happening now, what the hijackers did was a terrible thing, but looking below the surface, I'd have to say that our foreign policy hasn't helped matters, and has probably made things worse.

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Jason Gassman in the Buddha Hall at San Francisco Zen Center. Photo by Luke Iwabuchi.

Maia: Have you received negative comments from other Buddhist practitioners about your involvement in the military?

Jason: I've only gotten grief one time. When I first started going to Zen Center, I came to the morning program and I had to go to guard training right afterwards. So I came in my fatigues. I went in the Buddha Hall for service, and the only place to stand was up front with the priest. So I bowed in my fatigues. A guest student didn't appreciate me doing that. But otherwise, everyone at the Zen Center has been very supportive. They've made it known that they don't agree with

what the military is doing, but they're supportive of *me*. That has been a real big attraction for me about the Zen Center. They let me be who I am, which has been very powerful for me.

Maia: Tell me about practicing the precepts in your life, especially the precept about non-harming. How do you see that fitting in with being in the military?

Jason: I haven't formally taken the precepts yet, but I think I have an idea of what they're about. I would say that there are karmic implications about what I'm doing now, what I could be doing, what I might be asked to do. I am in conflict with that. I'm part patriot, and I would get a lot of pressure from my superiors and associates if I were to put my weapon down. I'm in conflict. I'm not sure where I'm at yet. I don't know how else to put it. If somebody was trying to kill me, I think I'd probably have it within me to kill them, but I don't support what's going on now.

Maia: How much room is there for dissent in the National Guard?

Jason: I'm careful about what I say. Technically, during a war, you can be executed for dissent or desertion, though they haven't done that since World War II. If I spoke out about this, I'd definitely get a lot of verbal pressure. There is a way you can be a conscientious objector, but that process can take a year to go through. I'm considering that, but I'm also torn. I reenlisted with

the guard before I went to rehab, and they could have kicked me out because of my drug problem but they didn't. So I feel this weird sense of loyalty about it. There's a part of me that doesn't want to go back on my word, but I'm torn between that and doing something that's more in line with this new way of life that I'm living. I ask myself, what do I stand for now?

Maia: Are you "out" as a Buddhist in that setting? Does anybody know that you practice?

Jason: My supervisor does. He actually supports my involvement with Buddhism. I've brought him to San Francisco Zen Center a couple of times. He's very conservative in his beliefs, and at the same time, he supports anything religious that seems to be giving people direction. But he firmly believes in retaliation and putting a stop to the Taliban. He's my mentor, so it would be uncomfortable to tell him if I figure out I want to be a conscientious objector.

Maia: What are your thoughts about how to deal with the terrorism of this current crisis?

Jason: We need to send a clear message that no one can come here and attack us, but I don't agree that bombing Afghanistan is the answer. I think we need to take a stance. And we need to do everything we can to diffuse what's going on between Israel and Palestine right now. I think we'd give a much stronger message by stopping the bombing and pulling out of the Middle East as much as we can. We need to seriously look at our own foreign policy, and keep all our troops here to protect us.

Maia: You're in a very interesting place—you're in two worlds, and you have a lot of respect for both of them. I get the sense that you're being pulled more toward the Buddhist life.

Jason: I am. But it's difficult, because the military is so intoxicating. Every time I go away to guard training, I have to readjust when I return. I tried to sit *zazen* a little bit when I was doing my training last summer, but it was hard.

Maia: Was any particular Buddhist teaching pivotal in bringing you to look at things differently?

Jason: The idea of sitting with suffering and opening up to it instead of running away from it. Before, I related to suffering by pushing it away.

Maia: A year and a half ago, before you got involved in Zen, would you have thought you'd have questions about being in the military?

Jason: No, not at all—I wanted to get more training. I'm not sure I want to do that anymore. There's a big change in the way I'm looking at a lot of things. ❖