



# INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

Using the Buddha's Teachings to Break the Cycle of Incarceration



## Introducing the Engaged Buddhist Alliance

Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.  
A registered 501(3)(c) nonprofit located in Southern California.

We are a group of current and former University students who joined together around the idea that Buddhist informed education can help incarcerated individuals and society break the cycle of incarceration.

*Prison has always been a breeding ground for violence, and I believe it's due to ignorance and fear. We fear what we don't know or understand and instead of educating ourselves*

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Avalokiteshvara by Nhut Vo



## FRIENDS IN THE DESERT

by Margaret Meloni

Founding member of the Engaged Buddhist Alliance

“Good-bye”

“Thank you for coming.”

“Drive Safely.”

These are just some of the words our hosts say to us as we leave them. It sounds like the end of any other get together with friends, or perhaps a meditation group or sangha parting ways. As we walk away, I feel in awe of the hospitality and gratitude with which my colleague Venerable De Hong and I are received. When our hosts say thank you, and wish us well, I truly feel the sincerity of their good wishes.

The drive home is long and tedious. You see, our hosts are located in the middle of the desert. With just about nothing but scrub, and lizards, and the occasional coyote. Maybe a bird or two. They are involuntary Buddhist monks. Their monastery is a California State Prison. On that long drive, as we watch the heat waves bounce off the highway or chase the sunset, our discussion usually turns toward gratitude, and learning. We share the gratitude we feel for being allowed to share the dharma with our special desert sangha. With deep appreciation that each of the groups we met with, came with open minds, and open hearts. That they trust us with their questions, and their journeys. And each time we walk away with a new lesson. Perhaps, our group discussions have helped us develop a new understanding of the dharma. I know when I hear a member of our desert sangha share his interpretation of a teaching, many times I think, “Oh wow, I never even thought of that.” And definitely I begin to understand better ways to express the Buddha’s teachings.

We are drop-ins. When everything falls into place, we have a monthly visit. And in-between, in their different ways, each group works to support one another in the dharma. It might be that they have regular meditation and dharma talks on their own; or it might be peer-to-peer support. One man turning to another when he recognizes anger or anxiety rising within his mind. They have definitely latched onto the importance of developing like-minded friends, and the value of keeping company with others on the path.

As he was sitting there, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, “This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie.”

“Don’t say that Ananda. Don’t say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions, & comrades, he can be expected to develop & pursue the noble Eightfold Path.” -SN 45.2

It is good to have friends in the desert.



## INSIGHTS IN THE TIME OF A PANDEMIC

This June marks my two years since I made it out for prison after 25 years. I am still in shock to say the least. Every day I find myself in amazement with everything I am doing! It could be as simple as using my own keys to open my front door, taking a shower anytime I want with hot water, just having a meal with a sense of comfort and safety, being able to walk on the sidewalk to the beach. This may sound crazy but waiting in line anywhere or stuck in traffic! I enjoy all of it. A friend of mine who served 27 years said, “the amazement never goes away.”

A few months ago, I met up with this friend of mine who I haven't seen in 12 years since he was released from prison and now lives in the east coast. One of the first things he asked me was, if I am still doing my spiritual practice of meditation and Dharma studies? My answer to that question was yes because my practice keeps me grounded and leads me down the right path in life.

He was happy to hear that, and he advised me to continue with my practice no matter how difficult the challenges I will face out here. I knew and I understood what he meant because our own spiritual practice is what kept our sanity and a sense of balance in the chaos of life in prison.

After 2 years I still look at the world as an outsider in prison. When the pandemic started, and everything was shut down a lot of people out here could not accept that reality. Some people were losing it. People resisted, rebelled and the vile of humanity was and still is being highlighted. I understand where they're coming from, after all they were put on “lockdown” not by choice.

There comes a point where we must set aside what we have lost or taken away from us whether by choice or not. We must face what is in front of us in the present moment, which is the reality of life. Part of that reality is that as living beings we all go through suffering in our own lives. And as living beings we are all connected to each other.

There was a time when I have lost all faith and hope in humanity. But at times like these when we are all going through the same suffering there are still people who are willing to help others sincerely from their heart. The reality of life is the practice of being mindful not just for ourselves but also being mindful of all living beings.

May you all find peace and happiness in your heart. Om Mani Padme Hum. ~ IRV





## MEDITATION - PRACTICE TO CLARITY

As I have shared with you in the past, many are going stir-crazy with this whole pandemic. I myself have turned the negative into a positive and as a result my meditation practices have been stellar. I have been able to grow and see the impermanence, impersonal, and how all conditioned phenomena are what feed the attachment, aversion, and delusion that stunts my spiritual growth and inhibits my ability to achieve liberation or enlightenment.

I thank you for your intellect and patience in giving me this gift. It has improved my program of recovery as well. When I meet or deal with pain or suffering, I greet it with loving-kindness and compassion which is huge. It may seem basic to some, for me it's been "super spiritual", and I enjoy the growth and awareness. That is the real fruit. ~ C.A.



Metta is becoming a conditioned response for me, and I like it. It makes my life so much easier. Yesterday, I was having a rough day. It was one of those days when I feel tired, fed up, and I want things to change. I am learning to take it easy on days like that and be kind to myself instead of trying to go full throttle on an empty tank. Today is much better even though the conditions are roughly the same. Sometimes, I find myself wanting to change everything around me as if it will make things better, when I know the best thing to do is mindful and practice the brahmaviharas. ~ **Ajita**



Something happened to me a couple nights ago. I woke up from a deep sleep because I felt something on the left side of my body. Upon jumping up I noticed that my left hand was completely out of usage as if it were broken.

After five minutes, my left hand began to feel normal. It was functional. I then realized that I have a habit of sleeping on my hands and it cut off all circulation. I learn not to sleep on my hands.

Most importantly, I realized that by placing my life in a certain situation that could cause circulation to stop. I would suffer greatly. The idea that I suffered because of my position led me to a new insight: the need to change. I learned to change my position so that I don't have to suffer. Just as figuring not to sleep on my hands, my hands wouldn't become numb. ~ **Christopher**



De, I have to say it's by the grace of mindfulness for me to have had the ability to maintain my sanity to cope with all that I've endured. I must state also that I've successfully and fully completed almost every rehabilitative self-help group/course that the prison system has to offer inmates including participating in college. ~ **Michael**



## MEDITATION: FROM CLARITY TO PERSPECTIVE

I would like to share with you a “tiny” progress in my dharma practice. Even though I have a deep conviction in the teaching of non-self, I have never observed within my mind how this self arises. Recently, during meditation, when a thought “I” arose, I fixed my attention on it to see where it comes from. I “saw,” though fleetingly and vaguely, that it always arose dependently from the five aggregates. I also noticed that the more my mind identifies with it, the stronger my emotions become. I make it into my daily practice to loosen up this self-grasping when experiencing overpowering emotions. ~ **D.T.**



Because of meditation I am now more aware of all that goes around me. Aware of also what others and their intentions are. Noticing that we all have choices and those choices to be appropriate or not. Being in total awareness of my actions and others. My feelings of calmness that it's not always about me. Mindfulness in others.

It has helped me out tremendously this past year. I let others' hurtful words just roll off of me and to respond compassionately. I know if I respond in the ways I used to, all hell would break loose. I also helped my dad to get past the pain I have put the family into by having a calm and respectful empathic talk. Connecting to the person I am talking to through my mindfulness.

I now understand for those that was hurt through my words or action through meditation and mindfulness. Now being awake I won't make those same mistakes again. To give and to show love and respect to all living things. Wishing all to be well and happy as I would want someone towards me. ~ **H.T.**



I've been reading the book you sent on reconciliation and committed to meditating on the Five Remembrance for the whole month. I am enjoying the book so far and have highlighted parts that have offered me understanding and clarity. Especially about the generational trauma. I also enjoyed the quote “A closed fist is never free”. This is so true to me in all aspect of life. My insecurity will always be alive with me until I stop chasing this thing, I call security. This for me is time to contemplate death and what are some things in life that I am still holding on to. ~ **T.N.**



My court date is this Friday and usually I will feel anxious but right now I'm calm and relax. I believe through meditation and continuously reading materials on Buddhism has provided a deeper sense of being present. Thank you for guiding me down this path. ~ **C.D.**



## WISDOM: FROM STUDYING THE DHARMA

We all have been seeing on the recent news and ongoing crimes against the Asian community. I will not lie De Hong, seeing the elderly being beat, pushed and hurt truly angers me. Ignorance and hate is truly ugly and stupid. I do judge these people, but I too caused pain and hurt, not out of hate of race, but out of ignorance and hate, among other things. No matter what, it is horrible to see. At one point in our lives, I believe we all were victim to discrimination. ~ **Anonymous**



The Dharma has changed my life, the people I have met at the Sangha have only encourage me to succeed and go beyond the limitations that I may have set for myself.

Honestly, I have not been meditating as often, however I remain mindful in my everyday activities and the Dharma is something that I will never abandon. ~ **J.A.**



I can't thank you enough for your support and correspondence courses. Mindfulness is a big part of my relapse prevention plans, and when I had my Psyche evaluation 3 weeks ago the psychologist wanted me to elaborate on mindfulness. I did an excellent job at explaining what mindfulness meant to me. The Psychologist was happy with my response, and there is no way I would have been able to get to that place without you and the Engaged Buddhist Alliance's support. ~ **Daniel**



In learning Buddhism, I learned the truth in how things are, shattering the illusion of this false reality that I believe to be the truth.

Meditation has been a profound experience that is teaching me how to correct my mind, in having the right understanding and staying on the right path. ~ **Jose**



Lately I've been trying to not identify with thoughts and feelings so much, especially if they are unpleasant. Sometimes I can be overwhelmed by what I am thinking and how it is making me feel. And as much as I like to practice the Brahmaviharas, in moments like that what I want most is to let go. So instead, I've been asking myself who is thinking and who is feeling? The simple act of questioning has become liberating. I am begging to see how all thoughts and feelings are impermanent, whether pleasant or unpleasant. I am understanding how grasping impermanent things leads to suffering and how much all this is caused by a sense of self. The whole experience reminds me of how existence is characterized by anicca, dukkha and anatta. ~ **Ajita**



I am still meditating daily and finding peace in oneness, only extracting the positive out of this life. I have really come to understand that I am in control of my thought, feelings and how I apply them. ~ **K.S.**



**Avalokiteshvara**  
by Nhut Vo

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