



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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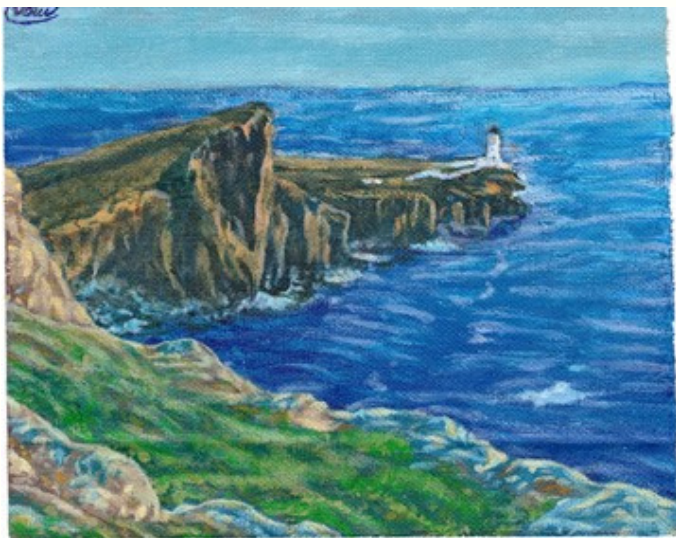
The realities of life in prison and practicing the Dharma



INSIGHTS FROM OUR STAFF & VOLUNTEERS

“People who hear me say that I learn so much from my visits to prisons, want to know what I learn and why it takes place in such an unlikely location. As a professor, shouldn't my greatest moments of acquiring knowledge happen in libraries or in lecture halls? My reply is that inmates have much to teach us about what it is like when you have been stripped of your freedom, your self-respect, your family and friends, your money, your phone, your computer, your clothes, your livelihood. When all the filters that we use to protect ourselves and to control our environment are gone, what is left? Over the years, I have observed that: those who began to meditate and started to focus with some clarity on their unfiltered existence, have the potential for direct experience and insight that is often denied to those of us who live busy lives filled with distractions. As millions have found themselves isolated by the pandemic which has stripped away normal life and human contact, they become restive and determined to resume living as they did in the past. Perhaps, there can be more compassion for those who spend decades in an even more restricted space. Perhaps, there can be more interest in listening to those who survive the extreme conditions of prison and yet can live and learn and find comfort in the focus that they can generate through Buddhist teaching and practice.”

-- **Dr. Lewis Lancaster, Founder of the EBA**



Artwork by V.B.

“Each breath that we let go is a life that passes by. The past is gone, and we can't live in the past, but we can always learn from it. The future, no one knows what the future holds. The future is not promised. We live in the here and now, at this present moment. To accept and live with the realities of my life and deal with what's in front of me was the only way for me to find peace within my heart and move on with my life. Through the practice of daily meditation, I was able to put my life into perspective while I was expecting to die in prison. After 25yrs, I made it out of prison from a sentence of Life Without the Possibility of Parole.” -- **Irv Relova**



PERSPECTIVE LIFE IN PRISON DURING A PANDEMIC

“Prison is a place reflecting all the lost, confusion and ugliness of human nature. It is also the most effective school I have learned from about human relation and myself. I’ve read a lot of self-help books, but I found out that many of the Buddhist principles I’ve learned so far are the bedrock of human wisdom. This pandemic has also changed me quite a bit. I used to be an action-based person. But the lockdown transformed me. It forced me to do more reflection, soul-searching and internalization. I became more mindful and peaceful, and less agitated and emotional. Isolation is no longer boring or dreadful. It is a perfect time to ponder.” -- **L.Y.**

“During times like these I can go to my practice and apply what I’ve learned. Simple breathing exercises help me relax. I still practice meditation and it helps give me peace. That is the biggest change or benefit I’ve gained from meditation. I accept myself as I am, and I am content with the direction my life is taking.” -- **G.P.**

“Appreciative joy is something everyone can experience with right effort and concentration. I have been focused on the sublime state of appreciative joy for the last few months. I have given it great attention during my sitting practice, consequently allowing a lightness of my heart and chest. Appreciative joy has allowed me to be more engaged in everyday conversations. However, I have struggled to put forth the right effort due to my heightened level of stress during this pandemic. I don’t want to make any excuses for the lack of effort, and this allows me to tap into self-compassion. Self-compassion has allowed me stay grounded in the present. Self-compassion abridges my self-acceptance of the appreciative joy of others. The joy I have witnessed of other inmates receiving the COVID relief funds have been genuine, as I did not qualify for the funds myself.” -- **D.H.**



FINDING OPPORTUNITIES DURING A PANDEMIC ISOLATION

“I will say up front I am fine, I’m currently in a Covid isolation cell because I tested positive thirteen days ago. Ironically it was the day after I received my 2nd Pfizer vaccination. I’ve been in isolation a week and a half without symptoms, so I don’t anticipate having any.

One of the hospital wards at this facility is set up for Acute Care Psych. patients-no electricity, platform bed in the middle of a large observation room. Basically a 'Rubber Room.' Because of the pandemic it has been converted to Covid isolation cells with Doctors and Nurses fluttering around checking our vitals and monitoring guy’s symptoms. Of course, no showers, no phones, no movement. My only social interaction is when a Nurse comes by to check on me.

But here's the thing, I'm loving it! I'm treating this as a spiritual retreat. Tons of Meditation time without distractions, hours of Yoga and exercise, and plenty of quiet time to read Dharma related books. The difference for me as a Covid patient, is that I was permitted to bring whatever property I wanted. I brought blankets, an extra mattress, a box of food, materials for the project I'm working on and lots of books, etc. As you know well, the incarcerated are surrounded by the people we'd prefer to avoid. This temporary isolation is a blessing I'd pay to do every six-months. The opportunity to spend so much time on my favorite guided meditations and have no limit on the time I can spend on Dharma Contemplation has really centered me. It is productive time.” -- **C.R.**



DOING LIFE - DOING PRACTICE

“Leading up to my court date I felt anxious and optimistic but when my attorney told me it was rescheduled, I felt disappointed. I know it's my desire to be home, so I took a note of it, recognized it, and let it go. Thanks to the teaching of Buddhism, when I came back from court instead of feeling depressed, I continued with my regular program. I exercised, read, nap, and now I'm writing to you. Like you said 'patience', it's something I remind myself each day. Also, through the practice of Buddhism, I am more present. Meditation continues to help me.” -- **C.D.**

“Meditation for me is a life raft when the tides of life threaten to drown me. No matter where I find myself, or what I might be experiencing, the ability to stop and watch have seen me through times no external source could have. As I watch the breath, I relax any tension in the body. Letting any thoughts or perceptions come and go until they calm as well. And I get a brief reprieve from the external world. For these moments of peace, I am grateful for the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.” -- **Citta**

“I have been trying to be mindful. For example, allowing situations, things people say, or things that I have no control of to bother me. When negative emotions arise, I will investigate, and begin to ask myself questions in search of the research that triggered negative emotions in me. A lot of times I come to realize it has to do with the way I have conditioned my mind to think. As I analyze these things, I eventually come to the conclusion that the things that cause me to stress, worry, or hold on to have no significant value. Therefore, I can let it go. And in doing so, I am able to be more at peace and suffer less.” -- **Ed**

“We are dealing with an outbreak here, I'm actually in quarantine right now. I am staying safe and healthy. Fortunately, I haven't tested positive or felt sick at all...I really do hope you and your whole family are staying safe. These hate crimes against Asians are very scary and horrifying. My Mom was robbed right in front of her house last month. Thankfully she wasn't hurt, they just took her purse and ran. I was so angry when I found out. They took away her sense of security and now she and my family hardly feel safe in their own home. I had to put real effort into my practice to let go and have compassion for myself and everyone involved. It's a good thing I have the practice because I doubt, I would have handled things so well without it. Still, seeing all these other attacks on the news bothers me. I really hope everyone stays safe out there.” -- **Vessavana**

“Unfortunately, the past year has been filled with loss and tragedy. We have all been experiencing moments of difficulty since the beginning of the pandemic. Now that it seems to finally be coming to an end, I'm thankful all this will be over soon. I'm grateful for all the people doing their part to mitigate the harm caused by the virus. I'm also grateful for the Buddha's teachings, my teacher, and my practice. Without them in my life, I don't know how I would cope.

“A lot has happened since I first heard about the Corona Virus. I've lost neighbors, classmates, and friends to the illness. From the beginning my practice helped me remain mindful of what went on both internally and externally. At first, I used my practice to be accepting of my own feelings and emotions, but overtime I began to accept the feelings and emotions of others as well. I'm learning to deal with the difficult feelings within myself and within those around me. I also learned to appreciate moments of joy, and calm in myself and others. I found connection which has never been easy for me to do in prison.

“When my friend Mario passed away, I was able to accept the pain of his loss. I found myself shedding tears for the first time in a long time and I was able to grieve, fully mourning his death. I am grateful because my practice allows me to process his passing and honor his memory. In the past I might have become angry or simply detached afraid to feel the hurt. Now, I'm seeing things differently as I'm looking towards the future with acceptance and optimism one moment at a time.” -- **Ajita**



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The Engaged Buddhist Alliance is a 501(c)3 registered nonprofit. All staff and volunteers are unpaid. If you would like to join us to help break the cycle of incarceration, please contact us. All donations are tax deductible. Please visit our website for more details.

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