



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

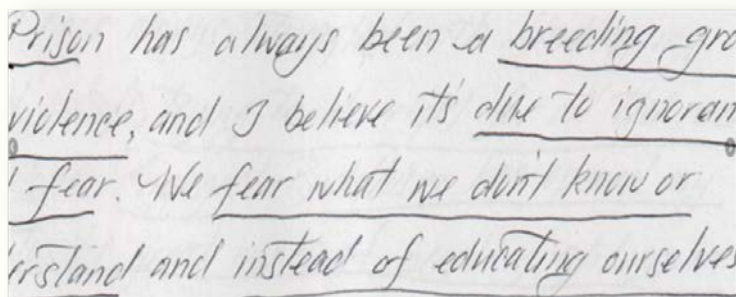
Using the Buddha's Teachings to Break the Cycle of Incarceration



Introducing the Engaged Buddhist Alliance

Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.
A registered 501(c)(3) 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.



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REFLECTIONS

Working with Incarcerated Individuals

by Mark Scott

For the past 37 years, I have worked with people who have a substance abuse problem. Most have been incarcerated for various lengths of time - anywhere from a few months to 40 years. I was in county jail for 9 months and in a federal halfway house of 6 months. Two years ago, I worked in an outpatient program in which all the clients were recently released from prison with sentences of 2 to 40 years. I learned more about what Terence Gorski called the Post Incarceration Syndrome.

Some of the symptoms of Post Incarceration Syndrome (PICS) include: difficulty in developing a plan for community reentry, intense immobilizing fear, anger and rage, severe isolation to avoid the triggers of violence, nightmares, sleep impairments, and impulse control problems, flashbacks, and impulse violence upon slight provocation.

When I got out of jail and the halfway house, I noticed that I would flinch when I saw a police car and would feel a sense of helplessness when I saw the County Jail bus. Others I worked with reported feeling a sense of fear or intense discomfort around crowds, confusion and feelings of overwhelmingness with the new technological changes, sadness and grief over lost family members or a disconnection from family especially their children, and frustration with demands placed on them by after care parole or probation system. Many felt the stigma of being a former prisoner and felt that strangers knew their status just by looking at them. This was compounded at times by a difficulty finding a job that would hire ex-felons.

But on a positive side, many expressed the joy at having choices, multiple food items, freedom of movement, ability to see the sky, trees, flowers, and other things of nature. Some had some very solid work skills that they found useful in becoming employed. Others had developed very good insight into the factors that contributed to their criminality. I saw people with strong leadership skills willing and able to help their peers as needed.

The most successful of the group with whom I worked were those who were honest with themselves about their strengths and limitations. They were open to input, suggestions, ideas from others. They were willing to try new things even if it felt uncomfortable. And finally, they stayed connected to a support group of people who understood what they had been through.

I've greatly enjoyed working with people these past years. I have heard many interesting life stories. I have seen many successes – people who turned their lives around to the extent that others who did not know them would never think that they came from a background of criminality and substance abuse. I have taught many and have been taught by many. To paraphrase one of the four vows: Learning is unlimited, I vow to learn them all.



Leaving Something Behind

by Irv Relova

Decades ago, I read somewhere that in every face-to-face encounter we leave something behind. Since this was in the midst of a pandemic, it was actually a Zoom face-to-face encounter. When I first met Bill Alderson, I remember him saying "I'm just happy to be outside"! In every sense of the word, I knew exactly what he meant; happy to be outside of prison, happy to be outside with nature.

The day I found out that our Sangha brother passed away I found myself that afternoon doing some gardening. I usually listen to some music while I'm outside but that day I just kept hearing Bill's voice saying those words "I'm just happy to be outside"!

I could never imagine the pain and agony Bill was going through with his battle with cancer. But every Sunday for our Zoom meditation group, no matter how much pain he was in I could sense that he was really happy to be with us. He is a good reminder that no matter what we are going through in life, all we have is that fleeting moment. To live, breathe and be in the present moment!

Thank you Bill for being in our presence in those fleeting moments. You have my wholehearted gratitude. I'll see you again in the next life my Sangha brother. May you always find peace and happiness in your heart. Om Mani Padme Hum



Bill Alderson, with Gucci
(Photo courtesy of Vincent Nguyen)



MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Insights: Look and Listen Within Our Hearts

I've been dealing with headaches the past one and a half years. It's like a dense ball of tension between my eyebrows. As I meditate, I've tried to work around it or alleviate it. I don't know how many times I've tried focusing on the breath to find myself succumbing to irritation because I'm trying to avoid it. Thinking that if I focus hard enough or distract myself with a pleasure sensation somewhere else in the body it won't bother me. But it nags and eats away until my aversion arises. I've finally just made it the object of meditation. Bringing awareness to this unpleasant feeling and watch as it changes. It may intensify or relax a bit. As I give it my full attention, I notice how it doesn't impact the mind as securely. As I let go of my desire or discontent towards it. And this has led me to begin to understand my addiction. How avoiding past cravings made them worst and drove me to seek out pleasant experiences to cope. How the change distracted me but somewhere in the back of my mind I still know this could never lead to happiness. Today I know the Dharma can lead to that happiness from my own personal experience. ~ **Ajita**

"I am at the point in my life that I realize "the more that I learn, the more that I realize that I know nothing at all." Through Buddhism I have gained a deeper understanding of life and the way reality is. The Four Noble Truths, Mindfulness in Plain English, and Unlocking Your Potential books are all great books that confirm how I see things in life. The teachings of those books help to organize the thoughts, perceptions, that I have in life. I am an analytical person, so I like to read and break down what I am learning until I get a firm understanding of the teachings." ~ **Michael S.**

"Buddhism is a concept hard to understand for beginners. It is also hard to grasp the technique of meditation. Since last week, I've been glued to a book called, "The Buddhist on Death Row." It talks about how a violent, lost young man on death row at San Quentin State Prison got into Buddhism and how meditation helps him through the ordeals he encounters. It is an amazing story! But what helps me most is the explanations, procedures, progress and stages the young man went through when he meditated. It enhances my understanding of the effects of meditation. Many of its concepts humble and lighten my heart. I will talk a lot of those ideas during my board hearing. As now, I have felt so strongly about Buddhism and meditation. It's amazing.

This book really helps me forgetting about my ego and seeing others suffer too. anyway, this book has quite some impact on me. It is such inspirational!" ~ **L.Y.**

"When I take time to practice mindfulness meditation, I notice that it is easier for me to remove the flurry of thoughts and other types of clutter that invades my mind. I notice that in the moments that follow, I retain that calmness. I can find inner peace and a sense of freedom even while in prison. With this calmness, I make decisions with clarity and regard the people around me with kindness and compassion. This is why I continue to practice mindfulness meditation. ~ **P.T.**



Just a brief update. I haven't received a parole date yet. As for now in the morning, my meditation and study time is going strong. I am learning still how not to allow others in close proximity to affect my inner strength when our personality and characters are so different. Oddly enough, this individual I have noticed about five years ago when I was still in general population has not yet changed. We live in the same building. I am a much different person now. I am strong and stronger for my ability to change and not look back. ~ **Christopher**



It is refreshing to experience the mindfulness practice with the help of the beads you gave me since they are tangible and simply anchoring my attention. The beads' presence on the table next to my bed serves as a good reminder before and after bedtime. I hope I can maintain the sense of shoshin (beginner's mind) and this renewed state of beginner's mind the beads evoke. ~ **I.E.**



While I'm walking in meditation I do focus on my breath. What helps me to keep my mind focus is that I remember that all phenomena/dharmas are all impermanent and interconnected changes. "Every breath has a beginning, middle, and end. Every inhalation goes through a process of birth, growth and death and every exhalation does the same." ~ **C.J.**



I try to be a model of compassionate awareness by making small personal choices that make a difference towards a positive future. My self-indulgence was replaced by a respect for humanity. The events in my life made no sense at the time, in retrospect, I realize its gift prepared me for being more present and available for alter events in the world.

Until I slowed down, looked inward, and really gave myself patient attention toward my wounded child within; there will always be an unconscious compulsion to keep repeating the same behavior that made life unimaginable in the past.

As I begin to free myself from the grief of traumatic experiences, such as, my abandonment issues, a fear that I struggle to manage so it does not over run me. The benefit of meditation has helped to transform my world; I notice I am more discerning of my thoughts, and it is a way for me to gauge my own inner feelings. There is something special in this stillness of the heart and the connectedness to the interior life, which is enriching. ~ **S.W.**



REALIZATIONS

Aging is suffering?

I never thought of hurting myself by playing when I was young. Because of that, since I have aged and I now suffer. As a kid, I would jump off roofs of houses, out of trees and from tall brick walls. Then when I became a little older, I had experienced many car crashes not realizing through all these experiences I was hurting my body. The body is a vehicle that can possibly carry us through the passage of time and into old age. As I aged, I could feel the physical punishment that happened to the body from them younger times. Through this process of time, I believe my energy level has somewhat diminished. I am looking for guidance to overcome that aging is suffering and the experiences that come from life. I would like to find my particular path and understanding. ~ **Steve**



I have learned so much reading the material. I have said it before, I believe all humans needs this Eightfold Path in their lives and face reality that, yes this is Buddhist! Instead of taking parts of Buddhism and calling it their own.

I have been in prison for 22 years and have not seen other teachings like this one. Great life experience details. And I'll be sure to use my internal as well as my external because that is what it's about. ~ **John**



I'm doing my best to be mindful and aware of intention. It's getting easier to find or see the space between intention and action. I also try to question what my intention is before an action, or when I find myself in automatic mode. I did something for the first time last night. I usually push through the evening because I know it will be bedtime soon, but last night I was more mindful and aware of my intention to keep on pushing myself. I really couldn't find a healthy reason as to why I was driving myself beyond exhaustion, so I found the intention to care for myself. I stopped everything I was doing and meditated for about fifteen minutes practicing Metta and Karuna. I'm finding more occasions to practice and be kind to my mind and body, rather than seeing them as impediments to my growth and awareness. I guess I'm becoming aware of the hidden internal resentment towards myself seeing how much I try to push my mind and body sometimes as if they are an enemy. ~ **Ajita**



POEMS

Insight

by M.N.

Everyone wants to condescend a higher level of life.
 We often live our lives in a dream like vision.
 Illusions cloud our mind from reality.
 From birth, we start to learn good conducts.
 Pick up bad behaviors as we gradually grow.
 Emotionally attached to our habits,
 We refuse to accept our ignorance.
 The mind has molded our emotions to a particular way.
 A bodily state only works when conditioned to do so.
 Meditation helps heal the soul.
 To gain enlightenment, we must,
 First have insights into what made us lose control.



Winds of Change

by TCT

As the winds of time passes by
 The mountain tops begin to crumble
 All begins to fade away
 An everlasting change
 What was once there is renewed
 The snow cover melts away
 Rays of shining light glimmers
 Upon a shimmering surface
 Exposing what has always been there
 A transparency reflecting upon itself
 Its wonders shared with the world
 Bare and naked
 Ready to gift all within its presence
 Momentarily a magnificent sight to behold
 As the winds of time passes by
 Layers once again return
 Fabricating a new existence
 Sheltering once again a valued treasure
 Another season to change
 To reveal once again What has always been there



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