



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

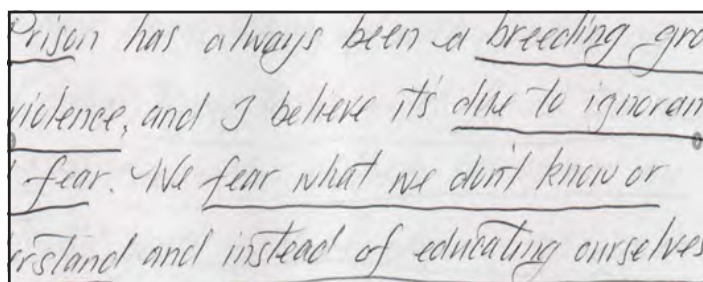
Using the Buddha's Teachings to Break the Cycle of Incarceration



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.



IN THIS ISSUE

PAGE 2 -4

REFLECTIONS

Billy Taing
IrvRelova

PAGE 5 - 6

MEDITATION

Dealing with the Holidays

PAGE 7

POEMS

Insights & Winds of Change



REFLECTIONS

Holiday Reflection

by Billy Taing

I spent this past Thanksgiving with the people I love. As I reflect back, I am very fortunate and blessed to be able to have dinner with the special people in my life. It wasn't always like this for 21 years of my life...I remember some very gloomy moments when the holidays were dreaded times and I wished that there were no such things as "celebrations and giving thanks". During those dark and lonely times, holidays were full of sadness and heartaches. Behind the prison walls, my hope was that one day I would reunite with my family again. While the rest of the outside world celebrated with family, loved ones, and friends we were lucky if we could get one 15-minute phone call to our family or loved ones.

Although those days are a thing of the past for me, I often look back and wonder how I got through those days. In there, we made the best with what we had. The homies, we would celebrate by throwing "spreads" prison potluck style. I remember my first spread in LA County Jail. We would save whatever meat and vegetables from dinner and later would combine them with the commissary food (cup o'noodles, Slim Jim sticks, trail mix, and chicharones a.k.a. pork skin). We did our best to make sure everyone ate good that evening, even though it was never enough. When I got to a state prison, throwing spread was a whole lot better. In those days, our family was allowed to send us quarterly packages from the "street," the outside. I would get Chinese sausages, canned fish, bamboo shoots, and a bunch of Asian food that they didn't sell in the prison canteen. We would cook our food in the cell with a stinger (an apparatus to cook hot water) or find a way to warm our food. However, sometimes there would be a lockdown during the holidays and it would just be me and my cellie cooking and eating together.

My first holiday season in prison was hard, as the holidays approached, I could only think about what my friends and family were doing and how I missed the times when I was free. As an immigrant, my family never really celebrated the American holidays, but I would still get together with my friends and hang out. I felt very alone during my first year in prison. My only hope was that I would win my appeals and that eventually I would be set free and wouldn't have to do multiple life sentences. As time passed and each holiday approached, I had to pretend in my mind that it was just another regular day. Throwing spreads in the yard was cool and was our way to imitate a celebration, but deep down inside I felt alone and missed my family dearly.

I know what it's like to feel forgotten and alone. The letters, birthday cards, and greetings cards become less frequent in the mail. After a while, I didn't even expect them anymore. However, now that I'm out, I can understand why. People are just busy with work, family, dating, school, chasing successes and everything else in between. Sometimes, there are obstacles and challenges to overcome. It's not that they don't care or forget about their family and friends behind the wall, it's just that time passes by so fast. I'm guilty of that also. Ever since I got out, I have been so busy trying to keep up with the speed of events.



I have my share of obstacles and challenges that I have had to navigate through. I have friends that I haven't written to in quite some time. If any of you happen to read this article, know that I haven't forgotten about you guys. I have been so busy and trying to keep up with the crazy fast paced outside world. However, I will continue to advocate and fight for changes in both the criminal justice system and the immigration justice system.

It's been 5 years, 6 months, and 28 days since my initial release. As I reflect back to my days behind the wall, I feel very fortunate to be here. There were times in there that I felt like all hope was lost. I thought about the possibilities that changes would happen. I hung on to the hope that one day I could be out with my family and friends again. I hung on to the possibility of driving the car of my dreams along the road outside the wall. I held on to the thought of eating the food of my choice and not eating the nasty food on the chow hall menu. Mainly, what got me through all those years was holding on to the hope that one day I will be able to live a normal life of a free person with my family and friends. Also, what got me through some tough times was some of the close friendships I established on some of the yards during my 21 years behind the wall. Later towards the end of my incarceration, I started to cultivate my spiritual path. Through meditation, I was able to gain a better understanding of my karma.

When I first got out over 5 ½ years ago, my first holidays with family and friends were surreal. I had imagined what my first holiday with my family and friends would be like but to have it actually happening was beyond any words I can describe. Today, I am a free person living a normal life. The life that I was meant to live. I work as a union electrician for the Local 11 full time and volunteer for several nonprofit organizations as a social justice advocate. I am grateful for every opportunity that appeared in front of me. Every event that happened in my past has prepared me for this present moment. My message to you brothers and sisters behind the wall is to be hopeful that one day you will be able to celebrate your holidays as a free person with your family and/or friends. Embrace the possibility that the next change could be your freedom.



Gratitude

by Irv Relova

I was recently interviewed and the last question I was asked was, “Who are you now as a person?” Looking back at my life and all the despair I’ve been through with pain, suffering and heartache it would be easy for me to put the blame on others or ask the question, why me? I can honestly say I never asked myself that question. It was always, what’s next or what else do I have to go through? When you’re drowning in a bottomless pit hopelessness and you can barely get your head above water, you can’t help to look beyond what’s in front of you because all you have is that present moment. There was a point where I loathed my life, I was just sick and tired of being sick and tired! And being dead looked more like a peaceful choice. With everything that happened in my life and after doing 25 years in prison on an LWOP (Life Without Parole) sentence, I often ask myself, how did I get through all of that and how did I survive it? Who am I now as a person? I have a deep appreciation and gratitude for life. Because life is a gift, a gift of an opportunity. Looking back now, even in the midst of drowning in hopelessness, I was grateful to learn from it and move on. It was difficult and painful, but the least thing I could do was just try. Try to do the right things in a life full of grief and hopelessness. Try to live a life in a world behind concrete walls and bared wired fence. Try to find and have peace within my heart. Try to appreciate the lessons learned from a life filled with grief and sorrow. It takes practice to live life, and I am grateful that I kept on trying and held on to life.



DEALING WITH THE HOLIDAYS

I've never really had a problem emotionally during the holidays since I've been incarcerated. But when I called home my family was often stressed out or depressed, and I would often give them words of encouragement believing I would have the opportunity to spend the holiday with them when I would be released. Unfortunately, two of my loved ones have passed recently and I reflect back on those phone calls and past holidays when we spent time together. Even though it makes sad I am so very grateful for those memories, and their love. And that's their legacy that lifts me up and motivates me now. So, during the holidays even though they are no longer here I remember what they did and who they were when I am mindful of feelings of frustration and depression. Using Right Effort to replace unskillful mental states with skillful ones. So that way their love lives on in me. And I can be that for someone else during this time. ~ Citta

As a person living in prison, I've learned to practice gratitude during the holidays. I make sure to focus on the ways I can observe during the holiday season. Because the holidays season are at the end of the year, I take time to appreciate the good moments of the previous year. I also do my best to be in the moment and take inventory of where I'm at in my practice. At the end of the holidays is the New Year, which is also a time to be grateful for the opportunity to start over. For me, the holidays are a time to reflect, be present, and look to the future with confidence and optimism. ~ Ajita

...Mindful of my offense anniversary is in the holidays; I include honoring my victim and his family - those affected by the impact of my crime - reflection and intention to the awareness my actions continue to have on others. I incorporate walking meditation into a safe space where I retreat into reflection. Offering gratitude, humility, and remorse. It is only from this sacred space of victims' awareness and my role in this, I can move on into semblance of holiday spirit and celebration...I affirm the good. Speak on loving-kindness. Promote peace. Give gratitude. I love my neighbor despite all things. I see the suffering and it is in the suffering I try to make a difference. This is what my days are about. This is my holidays. Only made grander when others take notice too. ~ L.R.



This holiday season will mark my 26th year behind bars and away from family. Until recently the holiday seasons were a time of self-pity, sadness, and anger. I would withdraw from friends and family, and isolate myself in my cell, as I tried to deny and avoid the pain of loss. As an alcoholic/addict I relied on my addictions for any sense of comfort. Under the influence of drugs and alcohol I would obsess on my mistakes, how I had ruined my life, and how I always seemed to let down and hurt the people I loved most. I thought the world would be a better place without me. I had thoughts of suicide, but I didn't want to pass on more of my pain to others. I was in bondage too, and a victim of my own ignorant thoughts. Slowly I woke up and realized I didn't have to stay defined by my past. I changed my focus from what was lost, or what I couldn't do with what I didn't have, to what I did have and what I could do with. This year I'll approach the holidays with an attitude of gratitude. Sure, I'll still be a little sad because I'll be away from family. But I'm going to invest some time to send them cards and letters reminding that their love and thoughts are much appreciated. I'll thank them for all their prayers and not giving up on me even when I had lost all hope and given up on myself. Also, you will not find me in my cell self-loathing this year. I'll be out and about, enjoying the fellowship I share with my brothers here on the yard. I'm sure we'll pitch in and make a meal to share with each other and those who have less. I'll do something to make someone else feel special and loved. The point will be to focus on and highlight the blessing in life, to live and enjoy life while having a positive impact on others. My circumstance may not be ideal, but I no longer let them define my life. This holiday season I will be full of gratitude and free on the inside. ~ Justin





POEM

Lady Bug

by P.C.

Sharing my thoughts as I drink from a cup full of your thoughts
Feelings and emotions, could it be a love potion, probably not
Funny clock just keeps on ticking
Are you thinking what I am thinking?
The stars from afar keeps me hoping
A sparkle from the sun, moon, and your eyes keep me smiling in those dark places
Have you seen a ladybug?
They say they are good luck
Just a thought as I sip from my cup
Today I seen a ladybug
Mindfulness in the moment
Never a but





"Medicine Buddha"
by Nhut Vo

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Margaret Meloni
Venerable De Hong
Mark Scott
John Brown
Bill Taing

STAFF & VOLUNTEERS

Christopher Johnson
Chun Fai Hau (tim)
Irving Relova
Rachel Goodrich

CONTACT

Engaged Buddhist Alliance
1409 Walnut Grove Ave.
Rosemead, CA 91770
(877) 990-7455

JOIN US

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.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT!