



FREEDOM ENGAGEMENTS

Success and Challenges for Some Formerly Incarcerated Individuals



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INTRODUCTION AND REFLECTION

Rachel Goodrich-Wejpanich

Entering this New Year, we reflect on new beginnings: inwardly and outwardly, implicitly and explicitly. Highlighted here are the experiences of five individuals who survived periods of incarceration and have been recently liberated. They were part of the inside sanghas with our volunteers at various institutions. We look to them for inspiration in the opportunity of new life, new growth, and, above all, new possibility. We are also reminded of the everyday freedoms that are taken for granted and find hope in the reminder to reconnect with the here and now. We can find encouragement in these examples of human resilience and optimistically take heed in moving forward in this new year with the same principles of living: mindfulness, non-judgement, compassion for self and, therefore, compassion for others.

Recognized in these interviews are these unique individuals' divergent experiences, but also the similarities in their stories. All have different life experiences of course and yet they all share a commonality in their experiences with Buddhism and how it has helped them better cope with institutional life, how it has helped free them from such life, and how it has helped them contend with life outside of prison. Some of those that I have interviewed are ensconced in their practices and others have their practices kind of playing in the background. No matter what the depth of the experience in practice seems to be, it is clear that even just a small amount of contact with Buddhist practice has made a difference in the lives of the people that are highlighted here in these interviews.

Through these individuals experiences we learn that recovery is not linear, not elementary, and not painless. To some this may seem obvious, however it is exemplified in the lives lived by these individuals. What is also exemplified is human resilience and the power that does exist when it is excavated from that place of unknowingness; sometimes called spirit, psyche, etc. Let's some take time and reflect on these stories of life affirmation.

Following are the stories from Cristina, Kendrick, Oscar, Nhut, and Irving since they earned their freedom and most have been discharged from parole.





THE POWER OF HUMAN RESILIENCE

Cristina

Cristina was born in San Francisco, California, but spent most her life in Orange County, California. Speaking with Cristina it's hard to miss her warm demeanor. Cristina exudes the personality of someone who cares about other humans as well as animals; in fact, acquiring her own companion dog is currently in the mix. Though Cristina spent most of her life in Orange County, when she was released from the Correctional Institute for Women (CIW) in Corona, California, after being incarcerated for almost five years and released on New Year's Eve 2019, she went back to San Francisco. San Francisco has proven to be a positive place for her to live, though, as with most places, there are opportunities to use drugs and alcohol around every corner. In fact, she was asked how much she wanted (of drugs) multiple times and often walking down the street near her home. This is an all too tempting situation for someone who used drugs for a long period of her life and went to prison because of a crime that she committed while she was using.

Inevitably day to day life triggers many difficult to navigate situations and emotions. Thankfully, however, there is a bright side: San Francisco is the home to many organizations that are dedicated to people in similar circumstances to that of Cristina's. When she was released, she was enrolled in the Female Offenders Treatment Program (FOTP) and given a place to live for free; she said that it was "a good start up." When Cristina left the housing that the FOTP had initially offered, she connected with another organization call Rapid Rehousing. Rapid Rehousing was able to help Cristina get into a subsidized apartment that she could afford on her \$17.05 an hour wages working as a dishwasher at Project Open Hand. Project Open Hand began as an organization dedicated to supplying nutritious meals to those diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, and later grew to include all sick and vulnerable individuals.

When Cristina was thinking about where she'd like to work, Project Open Hand came to mind because they had once served her as a client and she appreciated the organization. Cristina said about Project Open Hand that she

is "down for [the] cause because they've done so much for me when I was sick and needed it." She was diagnosed with HIV in her early twenties and moved to San Francisco for a brief period. San Francisco is historically a central location to many resources for HIV positive people and people with AIDS; she believed that it would be a healthier place for her to be as a person with HIV. Unfortunately, she found herself back in Orange County and eventually in Prison. That was why she decided to return to San Francisco once again rather than, as she's said, return to her "old stomping grounds." Though there are still everyday challenges and hurdles to overcome, Cristina is doing well in the place of her birth. She has maintained a steady job, her first real job since her twenties, been able to save money and therefore pay back her debts, and preserve sobriety and a home.

There have been roadblocks for Cristina in getting her life back on track after addiction and incarceration, and these blocks have proven to be emotionally difficult and discouraging at times. She is a true example of the power of human resilience. Her hard work is proving to be fruitful though life can inevitably be arduous and fraught with temptation to undermine all of the progress that has been made. Fortunately, she is resilient and courageous and though there are temptations she has been able to abstain from falling into old traps, patterns, and habits and move forward with her life. She is happy in her apartment and thankful for the efficiency of the public transportation offered in the Bay Area; also a plus because she doesn't have to take on the cost of owning a car. She also enjoys walking to the farmers market near her apartment and the general mindset of San Franciscans. Cristina is grateful for her job and says that she "like[s] being a worker among workers."





A BLESSED LIFE

Kendrick

Kendrick spent 28 years in prison and was released three and a half years ago. He stayed at a transitional housing upon release. He spent more than half of his life institutionalized. He says nothing but good things of his life now and that he is “truly blessed.” He is a man of few words, but what he does say is aphoristic: Kendrick loves his family, he’s grateful and blessed, and that he owes it to his wife.

While living in a transitional housing, Kendrick connected with an organization called Second Chance. At Second Chance, he was taught skills in which to find a job, such as writing a resume and going on interviews. His first job was in construction. Currently, he works as a machine operator. He has been at this current position for 11 months and works four consecutive 12 hour shifts and subsequently has four consecutive days off. He has since received a promotion since working as a machine operator. He says that his schedule is conducive to his lifestyle and gives him a chance to recharge in-between the long days of work. This schedule also allows him time to spend with his family.

Kendrick recently celebrated his one-year anniversary with his wife. After his release, Kendrick reached out to his then friend from his younger days, now his wife, via Facebook. She didn’t initially respond so he reached out to her daughter and her daughter relayed the message, eventually leading to the pair’s connection. Kendrick and his then friend went out and hit it off and started dating. Thirteen months ago, his son was born. He says of being a father that it is “exciting, caring, and loving;” it has made his life “fuller,” and makes life “worth doing.”

About his experience with his son and his wife, he says that he has a “fabulous life” and that, again, he is “blessed.” Talking with Kendrick, it is clear that his number one focus is his family.

When asked about the challenges of being released after his long period of incarceration Kendrick cites the difficulties of working within a marital relationship; some of the difficulties being sharing space, creating time for the other, and “not being selfish.” He admits that he “needs [his] space.” He, however, not only understands the immense importance of being with his family, but wants to spend time with them saying: “[he] refuse[s] to come home and not spend time with [them].”

Subsequently, Kendrick was asked about the successes he has experienced since his release and the biggest one is his relationship with his wife. He says that his wife is the biggest contributor to his success and that she has “stood by [him].” He attributes what he now has to the love of his wife. Today he has a job that he is thankful for, a beautiful son, and has recently been approved for a home loan. Kendrick is very clear that he is “blessed.”

Asked about his practice, Kendrick stated that he has maintained a regular mindfulness meditation practice since coming home. Further, his wife has also taken on the practice as well.





SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT - BUDDHISM

Oscar

Oscar has a lot to say and what he has to say is meaningful. He is clearly a person that feels deeply and with his heart. He is also a person who notices what he feels. Speaking with Oscar it was a time of impending loss for him. His father was in the hospital with terminal cancer. He wanted to be fully present with his father during his passing. Regarding to his father's loss, Oscar explained that he was at a place where he understood the importance of talking about his grief, but he also knew not to attach himself to those feelings.

Oscar has also been mindful of being with his family. He said that "coming home [he] realized that their lives did continue" while he was away. Initially, while living in a transitional housing, when he got his weekend passes to go home and spend time with his family, it was as if his family was a jar of marbles and that he was another marble that needed to be made space for. He felt the effects of taking up space in others' lives. After six months in the transitional housing, Oscar moved in with his family. He was so grateful for their love and care but saw the effects of his presence in their homes and the sacrifices that they were making to accommodate him. He determined to work hard to move out to live on his own.

Released from prison on December 24th, 2019, Oscar says that he "[felt] like he just landed from outer space." He "didn't think that [he] was going to experience all that [he] experienced." Oscar had not been around cars on the street since 1995 and felt that just walking around would be cause for a car to hit him. During Christmas he went back to Los Angeles, there were kids shooting off fireworks everywhere. Due to his past experience with gang violence as a kid, he thought that the fireworks were actually not fireworks, but shooting.

When Oscar was first released, he was reliant on the public bus system. It was daunting to even think about navigating the routes. He was worried that if he went out and got lost that he might not make it back in time for his 10 pm curfew at his transitional home. He likened his experience to his parents, who didn't understand technology. Luckily, a friend at the transitional housing helped him navigate the bus system.

Just as learning to navigate the Los Angeles

bus system can be a profound experience, so too can working with dogs. Oscar used to work with dogs while incarcerated and has continued since coming home. He has been extremely thankful for the friends he's made in this work and looks forward to learning more about the dog psychology. He said: "...what I'm looking to acquire is the experience to better help."

Oscar likens his experience with dog training to his Buddhist practice, emphasis on practice. "Similar to learning about dog training," Buddhist practice involves observing and accessing what is being communicated, and what is going on inside oneself. In both dog training and Buddhism, he is constantly being reminded to "check [his] energy" and when he does, he is surprised that he was feeling a particular way. There are important things that he has become aware of when he practices paying attention.

Buddhism came to Oscar after his desire for something different, some kind of looming, imperative change showed itself. After some adverse behavior that landed him in segregation for 24 months, he said that "after a while I started noticing that I wasn't a good guy for myself." He described his behavior as "masculinity on steroids" and realized that it was dangerous. He noticed that there were other guys who had been in segregation far longer than he had been alive and didn't want to be like them. He thought "if I don't figure this out that's going to be me." He concluded that "[he was] not the best person to be leading [him]." Oscar explained of being incarcerated that he could do the right thing according to the other people in prison and risk hurting the people he loved (and also himself), but instead he realized that it wasn't working and started searching for an alternative.

Oscar didn't know what he was looking for, but he "needed something." He looked to spirituality, examining religions such as Islam and Christianity. He noticed that the religions he examined all practiced prayer/ meditation/ contemplation. He also found that the natives of Mexico practiced meditation. He noticed too that Buddhism continually came up. He said "up until that point I had never heard of Buddhism." The more he discovered about Buddhism the more he liked. The message to him was: "keep doing what you're doing and if you need help, we'll



Searching for Something Different - Buddhism (continued)

help you.” He recalled that the Buddha said to question what He had taught.

Oscar liked how different Buddhism was to what he had been taught by religion in the past and thought to himself “hey, try it out.” In 2009, he was transferred to a prison that had Buddhist services. He signed up right away to attend the services. He was interested in talking with the other people who were a part of the sangha and took notes. He realized that there were some foreign concepts that he had decided to “wait on.” But as his understanding began to develop, he started to do the things that he had been unsure about. As he continued his practice, he admitted to himself that “maybe there is something to this.”

As his practice continued, the “more gradually changes started to come” for him and the more the faith in what he was doing grew. He was surprised at the changes that were happening and realized that he had to change the “circle” that he was hanging out with or be alone altogether, and “that was a little scary.” Not only was practicing Buddhism a new challenge in Oscar’s life, but it was also surprising to him that he was nervous to speak about his newfound appreciation for Buddhism socially. He, however, was able to take some of the Buddhist teachings and applied to his experience and noticed his feelings making him more understanding of them, and less nervous about his practice. He said that “I became more confident in my practice.” He noticed that he would get better reactions from people.

Part of Oscar’s transformation included what he describes as “breaking up with” himself and mourning the person that he was, which involved sadness and physical symptoms such as headaches. His practice became to “let go” which was very difficult. Many of the times during this process it was necessary to examine why he was doing it and find the strength to recommit to what he was doing. He said that “to me it was the best thing that I have ever done so far.”

Later Oscar was up for parole and he attributed the board voting to let him out to the process of breaking up with himself. He is grateful for the work that he had done on himself while incarcerated, but had an acute understanding for the continuation of this work “because...I need to keep myself out here.” The practice of keeping himself out of prison involves paying attention to his own needs “under [the] new conditions” of being out of prison. It is a “constant

practice” like “mining with a spoon,” but that “all this work is starting to reveal things” that need to change or be gotten rid of, “giving [him] an overall better experience.”

On the day of his release, Oscar walked out to the van where his family was and hugged his sisters. He said that “to [him] it was something people refer to as having a religious experience...[he] could not believe it.” Oscar expressed of being out in the world that “at first [he] felt a little claustrophobic.” His sisters took him to a huge store with tons of colors and signs, and 30 to 50 feet high shelves filled with merchandise, and “people almost stepping on you.” It felt like he was “drowning in information.” Oscar felt that everything was strange and different, “almost like watching [an] angel hatch from an egg.”

When asked what his struggles have been since being released, Oscar refers to the difficulty of learning to get around the city and learning how to use technology. He felt a “nervousness developing around everything that was so unfamiliar.” He thought: “If I don’t do something this is going to develop into an anxiety.” So he decided to go for a jog. The Staples Center wasn’t far from the transitional housing where he was living in (in fact it was closer than his usual jogs in prison) so he decided that it would be his destination. He googled the route and was told to be careful by the transitional housing counselor. When he got there he took a selfie with the Oscar De La Hoya statue. He wanted to see if it would help him and “when [he] got there he knew that it was what [he] needed.”

Oscar’s challenge was also his success. Because of his anxiety in being outside of prison he has been able to meet these challenges and experience success in overcoming them. He said that “trial and error” has been helping him and that he’s learning to “change, adapt, and grow.” He relies on his inner resources that he continues to develop and has developed. He’s noticed his inner experiences affecting his outside experiences and attributes this to his Buddhist practice. Today he has worked hard to live on his own. He continues to work with dogs and volunteer his time. He maintains a daily practice and stays connected with his sangha. Oscar carries on spending time with his family and persists in loving and appreciating them.





BUDDHIST PRACTICES, DOGS, AND MURAL PAINTINGS

Nhut

Incarcerated for 20 years, Nhut was released in July 2020. During his incarceration, he applied for a program called Pawsitive Change, partnered incarcerated individuals and dogs with the intent of rehabilitating humans and animals simultaneously. He was accepted and worked with dogs for a year. Because of his experience, upon release, he has connected with other organizations and continued to work with dogs.

Nhut's passions include working with dogs and painting murals. One of the first places that he worked for after getting out of prison was LA Canine and later Humble Canine. Dog training was "a big part of who he is" and has made him more self-aware. Engaging with dogs has taught him how to regulate himself because the dogs intuitively know when the human is not self-regulated. The animals have taught him to bring himself back to the present moment and that it is a "good practice [to] get in touch with [himself]." He has been commissioned to paint many murals, his latest being a mural for an organization called Markey's Mutts Animal Rescue in Tehachapi, California. Markey's Mutts is the organization that created Pawsitive Change, the dog and human rehabilitation program that he was a part of during his incarceration.

Not only have dogs and painting helped him in his recovery from being incarcerated for almost half of his life, but Buddhism also played a big role in Nhut's journey. While incarcerated and working for Pawsitive Change, he actively involved in creating and building Buddhist groups wherever he was housed. He says that Buddhism has taught him "compassion and receptiveness of the people

[he] encounters" and that compassion for others starts with compassion for the self. Buddhism has also taught him gratitude, empathy, connection, and to slow down and enjoy life.

He says that one of challenges that he has faced is feeling like he has to "catch up." Meaning that he feels that he has to catch up on life and all of the things that he is "supposed" to have done. Nhut realizes though that "it's okay to go at the pace that [he's] going." Buddhism again is helpful in that aspect, reminding him not to pass judgement on himself and to also be compassionate to himself; realizing that judgement is self-imposed.

Nhut says of his successes that he feels that he is equipped and has the skills to be a viable citizen. He has been able to maintain relationships with his family and become employed in organizations that he enjoys and that have meaning to him. He is enthusiastic about the endeavors he has taken on.

He was recently married in October of last year and is currently working on renovating a house, that he and his wife own, to rent out. Nhut also works for the Boundless Freedom Project. He says of his prevailing undertakings that they are time consuming and demanding (especially the renovation of the house and getting it ready to rent out), but worthwhile.





BREATHE THE BUDDHA DHARMA

Irving

Having been incarcerated for 25 years, Irving went home in June 2019. He was arrested on his 19th birthday after committing his crime a year earlier. He spent two years in Los Angeles County Jail until he was tried, convicted, sentenced to life without the possibility of parole (LWOP), and transferred to Folsom State Prison, a maximum-security prison, at the age of 21. Though he was 18 when he committed his crime, he was tried as an adult because he was considered an adult within our current justice system.

Irving was born in the Philippines. After his father's passing and a shocking family secret came to light, he immigrated to the US when he was 13 years old. Because of his father's passing, Irving's mother angrily announced to him that in fact he had been adopted and that his biological mother was actually his father's cousin. He learned that his biological mother had planned to abort him and the man that he knew as his father had convinced her to let him raise Irving as his child. It goes without saying that this would be a traumatizing blow for any child to bare witness to.

After receiving his LWOP sentence, Irving was resigned to the fact that he would be in prison until he died. He spent three years at Folsom State Prison and was transferred to Lancaster State Prison; during this time, he had "set [his] mind" and said to himself "this is it...this is going to be me for the rest of my life," and "made my peace."

While incarcerated at Lancaster, Buddhism and his wife found Irving. Talking with Irving there is a real sense that the Buddha's teachings are deep rooted in his life and continue to grow. He seems to eat, sleep, and breathe the Buddha Dharma. While incarcerated, he thought "there has to be more to life than just doing life in prison" and that he "just felt it." First, he joined the youth diversion program because he "had to do something." During this time, he began to put in requests for books that might help explain his new thinking and what came to him were books about meditation and the Dharma. Irving decided to "[keep] an open mind" and read the books; subsequently he began meditating in his cell. Eventually he came across and read *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* written by Sogyal

Rinpoche. Reading this book validated everything that Irving had learned on his own. He realized that "this [was] the path for [him] in [his] life [he would] follow"; he said that "[he] never questioned it."

Irving had the opportunity to join a Buddhist group led by two volunteers, a husband and wife. Here he learned more of the Buddha's teachings in depth and was able to be part of a sangha. This is where he also met his future wife, although he did not yet know it. The group continued for years until the couple was compelled to take a break from volunteering due to the drive time. Later the husband suffered an illness that would take his life. He passed and their volunteer work for the Buddhist group permanently ceased, but Irving and the wife kept in contact and a year later she began to make visits. In 2016 they were married.

The marriage thing came as a surprise to Irving because he truly believed that he'd never be married. He believed this not only because he was incarcerated but because he didn't think that he had it in him. Irving saw how the other guys, who were married, suffered because they couldn't be with their spouses when they needed them. There was a saying in prison: "When you do the time, your family does the time with you." He did not want to put anyone through that. Also, and understandably, he had some anxiety around getting attached to a person. Fortunately, he changed his mind and has been happily married for nearly six years, citing the Dharma as a foundation for he and his wife's marriage.

After his release, Irving said that it was "surreal" mostly because he spent the majority of his life believing that it was impossible. One of the very first people to have his prison sentence commuted under Governor Jerry Brown was a friend of Irving, Ken Hartman. Hartman spent 36 years in prison at Lancaster, was also sentenced to life without parole. Irving thought: "it's happening" but "wait, he's an exception...he wrote a book, wrote articles ..." Regardless, "more guys started filing for commutation." Irving decided that he would do the same...at some point. Irving's best friend, who committed his crime with him, had been released in 2014 after serving 20 years out of a 15 years-to-life sentence; it wasn't until his best friend pushed Irving's wife to push him to fill out the paperwork.



Breathe the Buddha Dharma (continued)

Though Irving did the commutation paperwork he continued to be ambivalent, still believing that he deserved to be in prison. People kept saying to him that he had “paid his debt to society.” He felt that “it [could] never be paid because you cannot take back a life.” He said that he “put [his paperwork] in not really expecting to be interviewed.” Irving was called in to be interviewed after all, but was still not expecting anything to come from it. There were guys that had been interviewed but never had a follow-up interview.

On August 18th, 2018, Irving was called into the captain’s office and the warden was there. When a guy is called into the captain’s office, it’s usually because there is a death in the family. Irving braced himself, thinking that he’d be told that something had happened to his wife. In the captain’s office, the warden called Governor Jerry Brown’s office and the person on the other end of the line said that his sentence had been commuted. Though those words were said in plain English the reality of the situation “...still wasn’t registering” for Irving. He said that he “never expected that at all.”

Though Irving has been out of prison for over two years, making it out on June 21st, 2019, he still finds it surreal. He’s in awe of everyday occurrences, such as putting the keys in his front door and being with his wife; things that those who have not been incarcerated take for granted. Irving is also in loose contact with his extended family, but feels their judgement toward him. He expressed a need to let go of his hope to be close with them. His family visited him in prison six times in the first 10 years of his sentence, but had no contact with them for the last 15 years; therefore, they knew nothing of him.

Irving said his biggest struggle has been the ability to forgive himself. In speaking of his battle with forgiveness he paraphrases the Buddha: “To have compassion for

other is to have compassion for yourself.” He said: “It took me years to see the person that I killed as a human being” and when referring to forgiving himself he said that he’s “still working on it” and that he will “just keep trying.” Irving reflected on his reasoning to persevere in the pursuit of kindness, compassion, self-preservation, and the compulsion to give back to society saying that “in honor of [his] father,” because Irving’s father gave him a chance at life, he continues to “try to help as much as [he] can.”

When asked of his successes Irving believes one of the biggest ones is “finding peace.” He said that “for [him] freedom is from within” and that “my heart was free because I didn’t hold onto hate.” He’d found a way to let go of the hate that he was harboring and a part of that involved forgiving his family. He’d said of forgiving his family: “One of the hardest things for me to do was to let go of that notion of having a family” and that when he let his family go, he “found freedom within.” Another important success for Irving is that he is free from within and he attributes his success to the Dharma. When asked about the association of the Dharma and his success, he believes: “Everything has to do with Buddhism; with the practice.” Irving and his wife meditate daily.

Today Irving works for various organizations, the Engaged Buddhist Alliance being one of them. He soon will be mentoring kids who have a higher chance of being incarcerated one day. His work allows him to fulfill his feeling of responsibility to give back by contributing to society in a positive way. Briefly speaking of the COVID pandemic Irving reflected on the irony of getting out of prison and possibly dying of COVID saying: “Man I want to live!”





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