



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

USING THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS TO BREAK THE CYCLE OF INCARCERATION



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INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

A quarterly publication of
Engaged Buddhist Alliance

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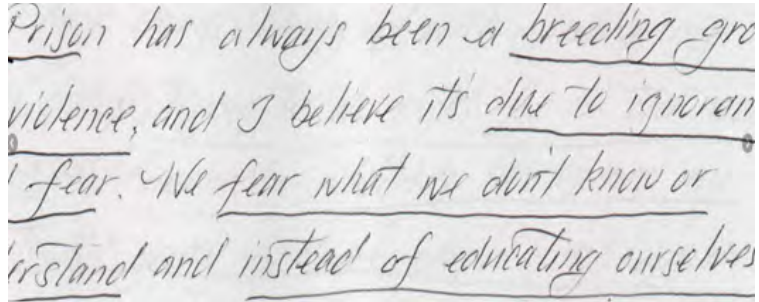
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COVER IMAGE

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Reflection
MR. VALENZUELA
 John Brown

A number of years ago I met the adult children of Jose Guadalupe Valenzuela, a federal prisoner who is serving a life sentence for a non-violent drug offense. When he was arrested in 1977, he was 26 years old; last November, he turned 71. Jose has spent the intervening 45 years in some of the harshest penitentiaries in the federal system, even though he has not incurred a disciplinary infraction in decades.

In the past year and a half, corrections officers from the Federal prison where he is housed in Northern California have written in support of Jose's release. One described him as "a prime example of a model inmate," adding "that if there were more inmates like Mr. Valenzuela, our prison system would become extremely less violent...reducing the amount of injuries and stress for staff and inmates." Another officer wrote, "I believe Mr. Valenzuela is a perfect example of an inmate who has been rehabilitated and can function with society from everything he has learned..." Among federal prisoners, he is warmly regarded. Decades ago, Jose taught himself an extensive fitness routine that required almost three hours a day and strengthened every muscle group, using only the floor, the wall, and the weight of his own body. He was generous in teaching these exercises to newly arrived prisoners -- who understandably were distressed over the prison terms they were facing -- along with advice on how to cope and get through a bleak time in their lives.

Jose has managed to maintain close ties with his family, consisting of six adult children in their mid-40's to early 50's and numerous grandchildren, who express gratitude for his mentoring and inspiration. One child has taught special education; another is a gardener and volunteer Little League coach; a grandson is a firefighter; a granddaughter received a scholarship to the University of California and has given back as an educator. Despite having been separated by hundreds if not thousands of miles in remote and unfriendly prisons, he and his family have been able to preserve their bonds.

On January 1, 2019, Congress passed and the President signed into law the First Step Act, allowing U.S. District Court judges to grant compassionate release for aged or physically ailing prisoners who no longer pose a

threat to public safety. It offers a reprieve to all federal prisoners whose crimes occurred on or after November 1, 1987. Since the COVID pandemic began two years ago, hundreds of elderly prisoners -- some of whom, like Jose, were serving life in prison -- have qualified for compassionate release and returned home to spend their remaining years with family.

Due to an oversight in that legislation oversight, however, a prisoner whose offense occurred pre-1987, such as Jose Valenzuela, was offered no avenue for relief. Although Jose filed a request for compassionate release, the Court found it has no jurisdiction to rule because his crime pre-dates 1987. Simply put, the law as currently constructed prevents the oldest and longest-serving prisoners -- the ones who have been behind bars the longest and been punished the most -- from being considered for the merciful treatment that their more youthful fellow inmates can seek. It makes no sense, and H.R. 3669 along with S. 312 would correct that.

These bills (H.R. 3669 in the House of Representatives and its counterpart S. 312 in the Senate, known as "The COVID-19 Safer Detention Act of 2021") are pending in the current legislative session but have not yet been brought to a vote. If enacted, the bills would expand existing compassionate release provisions to elderly prisoners who currently don't qualify because of this glitch in Federal law.

Due to the age and declining health of Jose and similarly situated prisoners, we are hoping this legislation can be enacted in the current session. In both the Senate and House of Representatives, the bills have bi-partisan support and little opposition. Yet due to the hyperpartisan nature and gridlock of our current political environment, it is uncertain whether they will be brought for a vote. It would be helpful for Congressmembers to hear from their constituents in favor of this legislation.

In the last couple of years, Jose has experienced memory loss and began to display the early signs of dementia. There is a history of Alzheimer's Disease in his family; three of his older siblings have died of it. Jose's children and grandchildren, who live mostly in Southern California,



are hoping that he can come home to them while he still has the acuity and mental clarity to recognize loved ones and enjoy his years that remain.

To see a video that describe Jose Valenzuela's situation in greater detail, you can click on the following link:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/7g1siywdty4m41l/Jose%20Valenzuela%20Video%20Supplement%20.mp4?dl=0>





Reflection
FINDING PEACE FROM WITHIN
Irv Relova

I recently celebrated my birthday; just so happened this was also the day I was arrested 28 years ago. It was only in these last six years that my birthday felt special and that's because of my wife. Since that day I was arrested and every birthday from that time on, I relive the memories of that fateful day as if it was just yesterday. Not only was it a traumatic experience for my friends and their families but also for my whole family.

For me to relive the events of that day became normal every time my birthday came around. I can vividly remember the sheriff deputies banging the door at 5:30 in the morning. The sights, the sounds, and the sense of adrenaline from those around me was palpable. For over two decades whenever this day comes at 5:30am, every sense in my body gets jolted. I guess I can say "my body keeps the score." My mind knows that it happened in 1994, but my body will always remind me that it will always be part of me.

From the time I hit the front gate of Old Folsom on my way to New Folsom, I made my peace with all the realities of my life. I accepted the fact that with an LWOP sentence I wasn't going to make it out of prison. As the years went on, the more I let go of all the things I realized were

creating my attachment and suffering, the more peaceful I felt. I let go so I could find peace from within.

I came to a point in my life that I thought nothing surprises me anymore because disappointment, pain, suffering, and grief became a part of everyday life. It was normal and it became the only thing I've ever known for most of my life. Then I realized I needed to let go; just like the practice of mindfulness meditation, I let go, I moved on and I found peace from within.

As I went on about my day for my birthday, it wasn't until later that night that I realized that I woke up that morning without reliving that trauma all over again from almost three decades ago. Looking back at where and how I started my meditation practice, it took a lot of patience, effort, and the right intention. My practice has become my way of life, and it has given me peace from within my heart. I realized that night my body finally caught up with my mind. To let go, move on, and find peace.





Study and Practice **PEACE OF MIND**

When I have used all my so-called fortune, I deal with cause and effect by the will and the work I put in, nothing can bring me peace but myself. The information I obtain from these studies of Buddhism helps me understand my own mind and the realization that there is suffering, this is dukkha. This comes in the form of mental anguish or physical pain. Without this understanding and the life forms meditation I use, breathing practices, in sitting, standing, laying, and working out. I would be incapable of dealing with the need to be satisfied or not be able to bear or withstand anything.

I do not want to fool anyone. My meditation practices are not perfect. I hardly ever sit with my legs crossed meditating. However, I do use breathing techniques often and concentration techniques while working and working out for disciplining my mind. my goal is to maintain a peace of mind on a daily basis. I find these techniques work and the information I obtain from Buddhist studies.
~ **S.H.**

I see meditation in motion in everyday life. It is when I don't respond and react to thoughts, that I could physically put into action and speak reason.

I understand that there is treasure in suffering or difficulties because it has led me to understanding it and by this, maybe my awareness has chipped away at the wall of illusion.

"The most important moment in meditation is the instant I leave the cushion." Carrying meditation into events of daily life, it is a constant way of life. ~ **S.H.**

I have realized that suffering is not there to break me, but to make me. By following the Eightfold Path has helped me gain this insight. ~ **J.A.**

I realized that I was getting tired of being tired and something needed to change. I could no longer stay with my suffering as I felt very drained at the end of every day. I learned that suffering is what I allow myself to absorb, whether suffering originated from outside myself, or from

within myself, I should (I say should because I don't catch it fast enough sometimes) let it go. It's part of life, but I don't have to subscribe to it. ~ **Arvin**

The most challenging and difficult aspects in dealing with dogs for me was training and changing their behaviors. This is where I have gained a great amount of patience. The reason was that some of the dogs were traumatized, therefore they became stubborn and reactive toward other dogs and people. It was a challenge training them and changing their behaviors, especially on the days that I was tired. It felt like I was taken to the limit. But through the practice of mindfulness meditation, I was able to calm my mind, relax, and understand that dogs are just being dogs. ~ **Dat**

I have studied the Eightfold Path several times and each time I get more out of it. I like to write letters to my loved ones right after I study or read the Eightfold Path because it brings awareness to the words I'm about to write. ~ **C.B.**

These days with the pandemic, my stress has been elevated. I have noticed my own levels of stress rise. I have now developed a sense of being mindful of my emotional states. Before I didn't know how to monitor my stress and it would rise and manifest in many ways. I would experience mood swings ranging from anger, anxiety, to depression.

Through the practice of mindful meditation, I am able to decrease my stress. I take time from my day to evaluate my emotional state and how to bring it back down. I do this through breathing meditation and slowing my thoughts down, and helping me relax. I also use other methods such as exercise and walking meditation.

We all suffer in this life, it's unavoidable. But it is how we deal with suffering that can free us from it. It is up to us to be vigilant of our own thoughts and actions. When times are tough, we don't necessarily have to become tougher, we just have to be accepting the now for what it is, a moment in time. ~ **F.G.**

*Reflections***REMEMBERING THE LATE THICH NHAT HANH**

Today I learned one of the persons I admire the most and who has had an influence on my life dramatically has come to pass, Thich Nhat Hanh. My life and view of it would not be the same if I didn't come across his words or learn of the selfless compassion loving person he was. At first, I cried and felt the sorrow, but I know it would defeat his message of impermanence and the second of the three doors of liberation because in reality, through us and the countless ways he has shaped our world he remains alive. I'm filled with so much gratitude and hopeful for a better life and future otherwise not able to fulfill the way I now can without the teachings of such a wonderful person. ~ **Luis**



I recently had a birthday, my last one before I turn forty. Naturally, it got me thinking about aging and dying. Death was already on my mind because of the passing of Thich Nhat Hanh. I began thinking about not wasting time and doing the things I enjoy. Thinking like that filled me with a sense of urgency and fear motivating me to be more critical and selective about how I spend my time. Luckily, I came across Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching about how we are constantly undergoing birth and death in every moment. His words are comforting and helping to ease my grief and a sense of despair, but I still felt an urge to make the most of my time. Then as I read, and I learned how to best enjoy the moment and create happiness. Thanks to Thich Nhat Hanh's words, I'm beginning to understand how there is no birth and death, and how mindful energy can help me enjoy whatever it is I'm doing. ~ **Ajita**



Arts
ALMS BOWL
by V.B.





INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.



"Perspective," Brandon Hein

For more information about Engaged Buddhist Alliance, access resources, and view past newsletters, please visit www.engagedbuddhistalliance.org.

BACK COVER IMAGE

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WHAT WE DO

The Engaged Buddhist Alliance (EBA) provides college-level classes on Buddhism to incarcerated individuals in eight southern California state prisons. We employ a contemplative pedagogy that includes critical as well as experiential learning. The EBA serves as a hub to coordinate the efforts of member organizations working in California prisons and jails. We are working towards college accreditation for the classes we offer and are exploring with our member organizations how to offer reentry services. We do offer occasional reentry guidance to some of our students.



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