



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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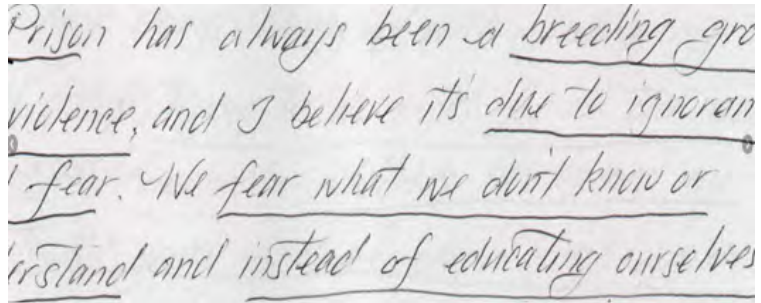
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FRONT & BACK COVER IMAGES

By Fong Sam



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Reflections
GUN VIOLENCE
by Irving Relova

Since 1840 and until this recent elementary school mass shooting in Uvalde Texas, there have been hundreds of school shootings in American history. The first school shooting I remember was called the **Stockton Schoolyard Shooting** that happened on January 17, 1989. What stood out in my memory was that all the victims were Asian kids under the age of 10. The oldest victim was 9 years old and the youngest was 6. At that time, I was 13, I wasn't much older than those kids. Even back then and now, I still can't wrap my mind around it! From Stockton to Sandy Hook and now Uvalde Texas, I still ask the same question, why? Why, they were just innocent kids?

Over the years I noticed that at some point people become indifferent and they tend to forget about these tragic incidents until it happens again and again. As someone who grew up seeing, experiencing violence and childhood trauma, all of these are not lost to me. I admit there was a time in my life where I became indifferent and numb to all the violence around me, but I never lost the awareness that kids are **never** to be harmed no matter what the circumstances are.

As someone who practices the Dharma, I am well aware of how the law of karma applies to all living beings. Let's set aside karma for a moment. There is still no reason to harm innocent kids no matter what! That's one of the reasons why

so many people are locked up, whether it's physical, mental, or emotional harm. At some point in our childhood, we were harmed in one form or another which became ingrained in us and normalized thus contributing to us being locked up. It is unfortunate and heartbreaking that all those kids are gone. On the surface we are all still here but if you really think about it, we have lost and never really had a childhood. Violence and childhood trauma took away our innocence.

I remember the **Columbine High School Massacre** on April 20, 1999. I was already in prison by then doing LWOP and even though I was numb and indifferent to so much violence, there was a part of me that felt a moral responsibility for those two shooters. When I was in high school, I used to carry a gun or a knife. I felt my actions contributed to those kids to be emboldened to shoot and kill their fellow school mates.

The next question that comes to mind is, what? What will it take for all of this to change? What will it take for all of this to stop happening to innocent kids, let alone to everyone? The sad reality is that if someone intends on harming others, it's going to happen. It's also sad that law makers have the power to **at least** prevent these tragic incidents from happening all over again. But the reality of it is that they're not going to act upon it until it personally happens to them. Unfortunately, time and time and again, we always learn the hard way.



Reflections
WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION
by L.M.

The shooting in Uvalde was something I've tried to avoid hearing or speaking about. This is a reason why I avoid watching any news channel on TV. Mass shootings have become so common that is an embarrassment to our nation, especially when nobody in Washington has been able to do anything to attempt to bring about change on this terrible issue.

It's unfathomable hearing once again we have another situation like Sandy Hook where so many innocent children have left us when they just started living their lives. When I saw images of these children, I saw myself in them, considering we share common ancestry, and also the many shootings I witnessed as a child growing up in a neighborhood where rival gangs shot at each other for the little senseless reasons like writing on a street claimed by another or looking at someone the wrong way. I also thought about Thich Nhat Hanh, and wondered what would have been his reaction, especially knowing how much he treasured children. The sound of gunfire is traumatic, and no one should be exposed to it, especially not a child.

Feelings of shame, guilt, remorse, and sorrow also surfaced upon hearing of this shootings. I reflected back to my teenage

years when carrying weapons and joining a gang that sparked terror in my community and many of them were children like those kids in that elementary school. I know how powerful or feeling like having control over others can feel by holding a gun or rifle when you're on a kid, because I was once that kid, and kid handling a deadly weapon is a serious threat to others including himself. My brother who at the time was 15 years old came close to shooting me in the face when he wrongly believed there wasn't any bullets in a revolver chamber...There are countless other reasons why we, for the good of humanity need to change our perspective on how we address our gun problems. People use the rhetoric; "Guns don't kill people, people do". Well, we need to stop facilitating people from doing just that when we make it so easy for the wrong person to carry a gun.

We need to start digging at the root of the problem and implement gun safety laws. Gun lobbyists need to get it registered in their heads that morally doing the right thing for the majority is what's in our best interest and theirs. The lives of our future generation depends on us to finally get it right.



HEALING DHARMA

The Trauma of Everyday Life, by Mark Epstein, M.D., is an empowering book because it speaks the truth of everyday life being an element of trauma, based on our experiences and interpretations of our experiences and mental and physical sensations. Depending on how we take in things and how we care for our emotions and feelings, our experiences can become painful or peaceful.

When we take in a bad experience our ego acts as a defense mechanism to protect us, so we don't become hurt and experience those dreadful unwanted feelings. We tend to disconnect ourselves (dissociate) from every form of its memory, experience, feelings, and sensations, in order to feel or bring-up that experience. However, when we dissociate ourselves from our trauma or painful experience, it will always be there, bottled up, bothering us internally.

Learning to embrace our traumas (and all of our painful experiences) becomes the key to parenting our emotions. I love the fact how Mark Epstein points out self-examination

as being the key to caring for our traumas. Mindfulness is a powerful self-governing process that breaks down subjective experiences, allowing room for self-infused meditative therapeutic experiences and self-care. Recognizing our own experiences place the four foundations of mindfulness into our lives. Mindfulness becomes the true antidote in helping us bring our experiences in tune with our "self" (in the present), as opposed to pushing them away. Discussing our ego defense mechanism, giving us a huge positive experience, allowing us room to accept, grow, practice self-care, embracement, and peace; and happiness becomes our result.

Today, I can say that I am in tune with myself, and truly open to parenting all my traumas and experiences. It feels good to know that I can join together with all my pains in everyday life, especially with my childhood traumas of being verbally, physically abused by my parents. I know I still need a lot of work, but I am really glad that I am accepting my pains and finding self-examination through meditative practice, which becomes a powerful aspect of my life. ~ Pannahetu



I have been learning to deal with my past childhood traumas. The book, The Trauma of Everyday Life, has been very helpful. I have also quoted it for some of my assignments in school. Buddhism has helped tremendously in processing many of my childhood traumas. As Dr. Epstein states, "The attitude towards trauma is at the heart of the Buddhas teachings." We tend to overlook our traumas when we focus on serenity. With

Buddhism, the tools are at our disposal anytime we want. We just have to be open minded and approach it with a forgiving compassionate heart. Sometimes we don't like to face our past troubles, but it's the only way to move forward. I've come a long way, but with courage and hope for a better future for myself and those around me that I might impact, I gladly will continue to be better. ~ Luis



PRACTICE INSIGHTS

Ed was a professional and held a Ph. D. in Chemical Engineer. He has joined EBA's online sangha starting in July 2020 after the Pandemic began. As he shared in the essay below, Ed was not religious and never meditated before. Once he started meditating, he noticed the changes in his mind and the efficacy of the practice.

I am 61 years old. I spent 10 years in college and 32 years working at an aerospace company doing engineering, problem solving, and analysis. In short, for most of my waking hours my mind was working and filled with problem solving and analysis. My health declined significantly in the last 10 years, and during that period, my employer decided I was too old, over-educated and overpaid. Benefits were cut, raises disappeared and management actively hinted my work was neither necessary nor important. After two major surgeries (removing pre-cancerous organs), several long emergency room/hospital stays and a continuous stream of medication with severe side effects, I ended up with a compromised immune system, osteoporosis in my lower back, and a severe weeks-long allergic reaction to an antibiotic (Steven Johnson's syndrome) that is more appropriate for a horror movie than real life. My mind was filled non-stop with thoughts like "why me", "I can't work much longer", "what good is money if I'm dead", and "if I quit my job, what about healthcare?"

In the spring of 2020, I took a voluntary lay-off just as Covid-19 made its way through the US. Of course, with a compromised immune system, I was told by my doctors that I was on the

"very bad outcome list" if I were to get Covid-19.

I began meditating in July of 2020. Meditation did not give me back missing organs, didn't pay my bills now that I was unemployed, and it didn't cure my osteoporosis. What meditation did and has continued to do is help me retrain my mind. After 40+ years of using my mind to analyze, engineer and fix, I lost the ability to turn off the non-stop mental churn that kept me up at night and made my stomach turn all day. Meditation has helped clear my mind, focus on the present and the things that I can change. Meditation has helped me to understand that "why me?" is a pointless question -- ask it once, label it pointless, then move on. It has helped me to realize that I could neither reason with or change the people who said hurtful things like: "If I went to church or prayed, God might not have punished me this way." I realized that when bad things happen, blaming myself is less than useless--It's counterproductive and demoralizing. There is nothing wrong with wishing myself health and happiness, free from stress and danger...Meditation has taught me that my past is something I can reflect on fondly at will, rather than something that is an anchor that haunts me with mistakes, arguments, and feelings of guilt. Lastly, meditation has helped me to recognize that the pain I feel from health complications only gets worse the more that I think about it. Instead, I can diminish the pain by not wasting time thinking and obsessing. I'm an amateur at meditation. I have seen enough benefit that I will continue as much as I can. ~ Ed



I entered into this meditation practice with a more serious, explicit intent and attitude-a more direct focus to understand deeper things. And I was blessed with greater opportunity of study of meditation and the Four Noble Truths. To grasp a better understanding of suffering and of origin, of acceptance and of letting go. Of many other correlations and

acknowledgements, the essays took me. So, thank you for the opportunity of study, of insight into more awareness and of self. I have practiced deeply because I have determined to. And because I acted on this determination, because I chose this pathway, I will not deviate from either this decision or this course. ~ L. R.



Lately, I have been dealing with a lot of anger, whether it is from an achy body or having to stay late at work. I am aware of the irritation as my mind makes contact with the unpleasant feelings or thoughts. Instead of reacting negatively as I would have in the past, I examine what's going on. And find that

the irritation stems from the desire to get as far from those things I view as disagreeable as possible. So rather than keep pushing them away, I accept them. Because no matter how much I fight and struggle, contentment comes from within. ~ Citta



Why do I take refuge in the triple gem before each meditation? Because I want to be a good Buddhist and do so in blind faith? Or do I rather trust everything handed to me regardless of who offered it. I take refuge in the Buddha because there once was a man who set out to attain the deathless--to put an end to his suffering. He found that thirst or craving was the cause of suffering. And the path leading to its cessation

was the noble Eightfold Path. I take refuge in the Buddha's teachings and practice. Practicing the Dharma, I can begin to feel the unraveling of my needless stress that I cause myself. I take refuge in his community of noble disciples, the sangha, because not only did he attain enlightenment, his teachings have led so many to attain liberation as well, generation after generation for the last 2,600 years. ~ Citta



During my meditation, gratitude and joy rose in me as thoughts of all the opportunities I have had and the ones yet to come. With each breath I can feel an energy of excitement course through the body. A few more breaths and suddenly I feel sorrow, guilt, and pain creep its way up. My thoughts have shifted to the man who I have deprived of such opportunities. With gratitude, this has been happening frequently. When I linger on the thoughts and feeling of gratitude, sorrow is close by. I begin to think about Mr. Bangalan and how he'll never smile again and how he'll never feel again as I do. All because of my choices and actions. How his family and friends still

suffer day by day. It is easy to be overwhelmed and sit back and tell myself to give up. There is a part of my mind that wants to protect me and says to do it. That I don't have to deal with such unpleasantness. I acknowledge its intention and thank it for its effort, and I let it know that it is okay. This is what I want. This is living a balanced life for me now. That joy and gratitude can coexist alongside with sorrow, guilt, and pain. It is when they all come together that I am in the moment. To experience life as it is rather than what I wish for it to be. This drawing is a representation of what arose in my mind. ~ T. N.



Learning About Buddhism: Initial Thoughts by U. B.

When I was young and ignorant to Buddhism, it was portrayed to me like many other religions, especially in the US where it was often shown on TV as mysterious and superstitious. It bore a lot of similar characteristics to other religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to name a few. I was not expecting to learn something different. Instead of blind faith and responsive obedient or damnation, with Buddhism, I find a new way of living built on wellbeing that is not dependent on a higher deity but instead on oneself.

It was not until I discovered a meditation book by Matthew Sockolov that I began to open up and want to investigate meditation and Buddhism. As my interest grew, I received an address to the Engaged Buddhist Alliance. I received a couple of courses and quickly learned that Buddhism is completely different from any other religion. Although I have just started learning, I have gained a deeper understanding of Buddhism and my practice of mindfulness. I am also looking forward to learning more. But the little that I have learned so far has helped me out a lot in dealing with the many over traumatic stressors this prison has to offer.



Poem
PICKING UP THE PIECES
by T.N.

In the spirit of Victim Awareness Week

Those hurting are still picking up the pieces
A reflection of the impact of my actions
Shattered lives of those who love
And the one who loved
Each piece cuts razor deep
A reminder of what is no longer present
Sorrow, pain, and loneliness
Enough to cripple any human being
Tears that flow openly
And the ones cried in secret
[Pause for moment of reflection]
Imagine the loss of such a gift
A gift that brought about smiles, laughter, and most of all love
Feel the pain of the one who no longer can call
Feel the sorrow at the one who is no longer able to hold your hand in comfort
Feel the loneliness in a house that seems so empty
Grieve for the precious life that was abruptly taken
A father, brother, son, friend, teacher, lover
Who now only exist in photos, videos, and memory
Shared with the next generation to come
Who will never truly know what was lost
[As you stand with me, I invite you to close your hands]
Hold this suffering with compassion
As each day presents itself with opportunities
To become the gift that is no longer with us
[Now open your hand and let the compassion spread]
Let's take this moment to help pick up the pieces
And with that can we have a moment of silence for those who are no longer with us and for those who are still hurting.



CELEBRATING VESAK 2022 AT CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN EBA



Each year, the month of May is when Buddhists around the world celebrate Vesak, Buddha's Birthday, in the monasteries. It is no exception in the US where many monasteries from different Buddhist traditions hold celebrations to honor the Buddha.

This year, we were approved to hold Vesak at California Institution for Women on May 28, 2022 from 8:00-15:30 (after more than two years of absence due to the Pandemic). Our volunteer, venerable De along with three guests, Venerable NgocThanh, Jessica, and Fong arrived at the institution on time by 8am. They also brought along food and beverage, approved in advance, which included vegan sandwiches, individual potato chips, dark chocolate candy bars, Envoy apples, Aussie Bites, and individual beverage bottles.

At the chapel, 32 ladies were waiting and helping to set up

a circle with chairs. There was a small altar with the baby Buddha, see picture below. The ladies took turns to decorate the small plastic bowl, filled with water, with rose petals.

We started with the practice, Sacred Goodness, in which everyone was encouraged to name their good qualities, followed by sitting meditation sessions, with tai chi taught by Fong in between, and venerable NgocThanh sharing her experience as a bhikkhuni. We broke for lunch at 11:30-12:30 where everyone enjoyed the fresh food, desert, and beverage. The ladies took turns to bathe the baby Buddha after making vows to work on their unhealthy mind states. We ended by having everyone sharing their experience and some Q&As. Taichi was the highlight of the day because the movements helped release the tension in the body. All in all, the day was filled with gratitude and joy by everyone involved.



CELEBRATING VESAK 2022 AT CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN

Continued

Here are some feedback from our sangha members:

"With much gratitude and appreciation for all those who contributed on my behalf in the spirit of celebration, community and coming together to both serve and to be served-I give humble thanks.

I am honored, and I am grown to have learned and been inspired by the guests who so graciously give of their talents, and their time. This gift always awes me-an incarcerated.

The sharing of bread, and the sacrifices others make on my behalf and for my comfort, greater enjoyment, and advancement does not go unnoticed, or unrelated with others myself.

The day for me was spiritual, restful, and inspiring; the meditation practices calming and grounding.

I am privileged to have experienced interaction with the students and to learn the precepts on a brief level of a Buddhist nun, for our lives to have interjected for a time and the overlapping to remind me just how similar all people truly are.

Again, thank you for the wonderful donations and all the time and effort put forth for the annual celebration. With happiness and joy." by L. R.

"Thank you so much for creating this great opportunity to help me and others learn, overtime, to heal from our traumas.

I learned so much today and in the weekly group. Through meditation I have learned to clear my mind and become more aware of my thoughts. I can exercise my mind to become healthier. The walking meditation practice and the tai chi movements kept my physical body fit.

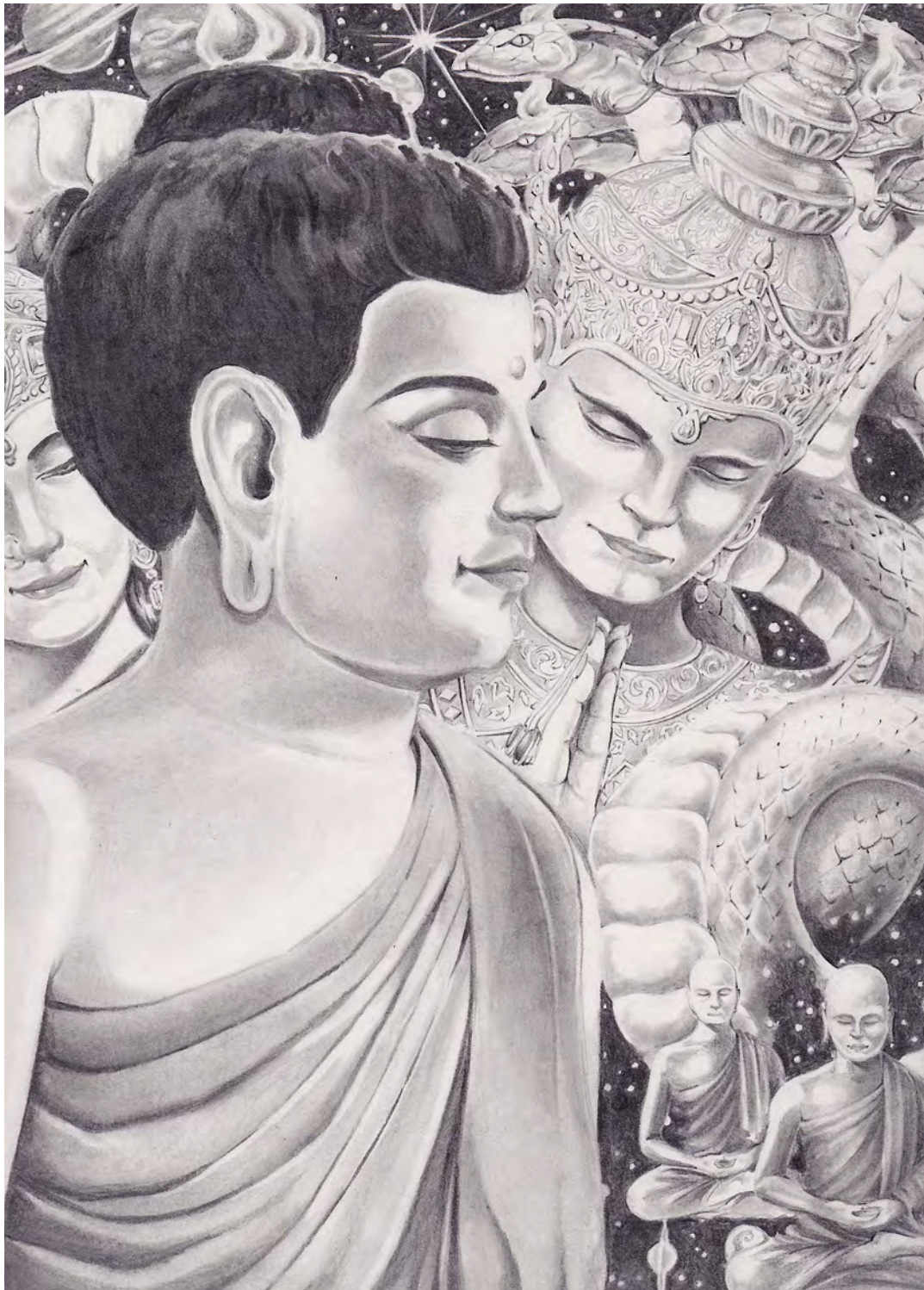
I was reminded that suffering is a part of life and that by learning to let go of my anger and pain, I will lessen my own suffering.

Thank you to all of you for such a restorative experience. all of you have shown that there is still kindness and goodness in this world." by T. L.



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.



Artwork by
Colin Gray

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