



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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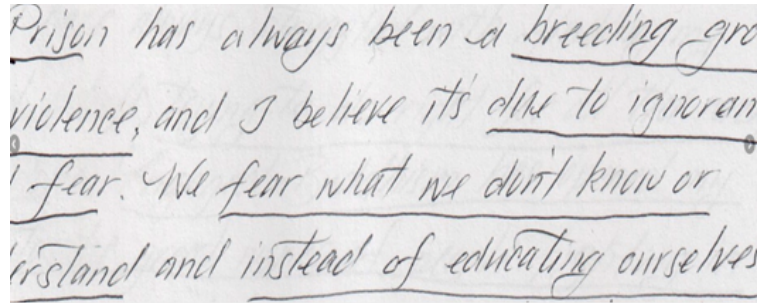
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THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT!

*Reflections***HOPE**

by Irving Relova

I recently had the opportunity to travel out of state for the first time since I made it out. And this was also the first time I've been on a plane since I left the Philippines 34 years ago. I have to say it brought back a lot of memories of before and during prison. I went through the process of going through an airport metal detector. Of course, I took my shoes off and put most of my personal belongings in the tray. However, I did not take everything out of my pockets, so I had to get patted down. It kind of made me laugh because it wasn't like a pat down in prison, the TSA officer was very cautious and courteous. I almost told him that wasn't a pat down at all if you only knew where I was for 25 years! As we flew North, headed to Washington State, I could see the landscape getting greener and it brought back memories of how I used to love traveling and being in a plane as a kid. So now my wife and I are talking about planning on going back to the Philippines. That is going to be a long flight, 16 hours!

During our visit my wife and I were having a discussion with her daughter and in the middle of our conversation, I realize that there was still a part of me that longs to reconnect with my family. A part of me still hopes to reconnect with my family. Because for the last 15 years of the 25 years I was locked up

I didn't have any contact with my family. They basically cut me loose and left me for dead. It wasn't until after I made it out that I heard anything from my family. All those years I let them go and moved on with my life never thinking that I would make it out of prison. It's amazing how having a conversation could spark longing and hope. But the reality is, I still really don't hear anything from them.

Lost hope is a very dangerous thing. If you let go of hope it could send you into a bottomless pit of hopelessness. I had been there, drowning in that bottomless pit of hopelessness and I could barely get my head above that water. In times of suffering, despair, and heartache, if you hold on, hope can give you courage, fortitude, and optimism

Unfortunately, I have once again had to let go of my family. And I still continue to hold on and pray that they may always find peace and happiness in their hearts. But I have to say, I am holding on to the family I have now. This is all I have now, this present moment.

Om Mani Padme Hum



Reflections
WHO WOULD HAVE THUNK IT
 by Michael A.

Becoming a member of a street gang came with a lot of rules. One was you must lose all humanity in the ability to view others as human beings. Anyone who grew up in a different part of town, claimed to be a part of a different game, was automatically dehumanized, demonized, and looked down upon. Out in the community, my friend and sangha brother Antonio and I were mortal enemies. The first chance that we got, we would automatically fight and/or kill one another because that was what was expected of us, how we proved our loyalty, toughness and place in our gangs. Not ever giving one thought of my friend being a son, a brother, a father or a living being.

Fate is a strange thing because my friend and I read into one another throughout our journeys in prison. Both of us arriving at CSP-LAC brought us together and closer. Engaging in small talks here and there, beginning to see each other as humans, being handball teammates and enrolling in a lot of the same self-help classes helped me see a different side of Antonio. At first I was very skeptical and standoffish. I felt a little weird of being buddy buddy with Antonio because of the clinging I still had of the gang mentality, but that all changed through my practice in the sangha. Our

meditations, discussions and fellowships compelled me to invite Antonio to the group after we spoke about the practice and why I have practiced mindfulness meditation. As the saying goes the rest is history.

Antonio and I have become good friends. We have supported each other emotionally, financially here and there and become each other's teacher. Now that my friend has been released from prison, I have to say I do miss his company, views, and friendship. Putting ourselves into the fire of our own traumas and supporting one another made me realize how great a person Antonio was and still is. He was not my enemy or a notch on my belt. He is a person like me who got lost along the way, only finding ourselves as adults through the guidance of Ven. De Hong. Even as I write this, I cannot believe that I have had a very good friend not far away from me out in the community and fate continued to put us in the same situations. Finally, we were able to realize the reason. I am very grateful for Antonio helping me to accept him and realizing his friendship. I am also very grateful for the practice of compassion, mindfulness, love, and acceptance that is my guiding light to living a righteous life.



Reflections **SPENDING TIME**

by Luis

Recently our mentor and friend, Ven. De, asked if we were interested in writing about the misconception that prisoners have too much free time which was ironic considering I was having problems finding time to write this.

The facility we are housed in has the title “Progressive Programming Facility” or PPF which provides programs such as CalState LA Bachelor Degree in Communication and Paws For Life (PFL) dog training program. Months after arriving here, I was accepted into CalState LA cohort 3, Paws for Life with the help of my friends Mike and Sonny, and Healthcare Facilities Maintenance working as a custodian for the central clinic. So I work from the morning to the afternoon Monday thru Friday controlling the spread of infectious diseases, maintaining floors and general areas of the clinic clean, return to my building to eat and shower then go to school and sit for 3 to 4 hours, three days out of the week minimum to hear lectures from awesome teachers with Ph. D.’s from CalState LA, and as soon as that’s over, I dedicate the rest of my day from 5pm to 8pm training and caring for dogs I get assigned to everyday of the week. I do get to go to Buddhist services from 12:30pm-2pm on Tuesdays.

This doesn’t include the mandatory weekly training meetings for PFL and workshops with my classmates. From 9pm-11pm, I study and take care of my assignments from school. Many times, I push myself to the limit not just with my schoolwork staying up past 11pm, but also at work and while training dogs. No longer do I have the energy I once had. I have to say many days, I find myself dragging my feet while training a dog at night, tempted to go rest, but then I

remind myself of the responsibilities as a dog trainer, worker, and student that entail what I signed up for.

So I keep striving forward regardless of the difficulty in every step. Sometimes, I wonder if this type of work ethic makes me a workaholic. This type of habit can be toxic for our mental and physical health. It is also compulsive and takes us away from living life while being in the moment, a fundamental principle in Buddhist practices. I remain in denial and justify my habit by living with a purpose, enjoying what I do, setting myself up for future opportunities all the while holding an attachment to this feeling.

Another justification is the fact that in prison maintaining a relationship with our loved ones is difficult, especially considering we only have one 15-minute phone call each day, and if they are lucky to schedule a visit during available visiting days, twice a week for a few hours. I think of the relationship with a woman I avoid in here, in fear of losing focus on my goals by investing time with her; time that I don’t have.

It’s funny some days I wish I had more time in my hands in order to complete the tasks at hand; when in the past, I would wish the days would be quickly over, wanting one less day incarcerated to be over. Like many people in the free world, we also struggle to be present with being concerned with what we deem “priority.” So I challenge all of you reading this to ask yourself, “What are your priorities? And if they are really worth the sacrifice.” Maybe you can be stronger than me by making the proper choices and not overwhelming yourself.



Reflections
SHINING LIGHT ON STRESSFUL SITUATIONS
 by Pannahetu

Over the years [while incarcerated], I devoted my time wisely, learning how to cope with stressful situations. I have taught my new “self” how to utilize a powerful tool in connecting with my breath. I came across this rich and golden technique in Buddhism and through my progress in mindful meditative training.

When my buttons become pushed, I find myself overwhelmed with daily and life pressure: worrying about if I will ever get out and see my child again, receiving bad news from home (both parents passed away in the span of three months), and/or becoming challenged in my face by an incarcerated individual or a correctional officer. I have learned to become aware and ground myself, setting the stage for a healthy mindful response.

As soon as I sense a stressful trigger arising, I immediately become kind and caring toward myself. I stop. I take a deep breath, take a mental note, and tell myself, “It’s time to tune in to my breath and center myself.” I then place focus on my breathing.

I start to take several deep and slow breathes for about ten seconds (or longer if needed). Following every sensation of air coming and going through my nostrils and in and out of my belly. Nevertheless, this moment gives me the energy to sympathize with my experience in the moment, as opposed to being taken by the experience of stress, outside the moment.

Focusing my attention on my breathing has become a wonderful and peaceful experience. It has given me a friendly attitude to deal with the situation, filled with complete clarity and a sense of relaxation. I gain true stability to help abandon the pressure at hand and all of my self-limited views-which I see as simply here without feeding into the stressful experience. Additionally, I gain the privilege to finally stay in control and respond in a healthy mindful way, without letting the stress take me for a ride or ruin my day.

Eliminating stress through breathing has never looked and felt better!



MEDITATION

Insight from The Trauma of Everyday Life

Kwamin

In the Trauma of Everyday Life, when the Buddha was sitting under the rose apple tree, memories, being triggered, gave him a profound sense of purification. The evaluation of self takes us to tremendous places to get answers. And once we can discern our own thoughts, I believe, that's where enlightenment evolves from. The Buddha's journey began during that time under the tree and that's my indication of no matter where we are, light will still flood the mind if we open it.

I also like how the Buddha was able to make fear an object of inquiry instead of something he needed to run from. And by accepting his internal feelings, he opened himself to the unknown parts of himself. He was also able to lead Patavara

(one of the well-known bhikkhunis during the Buddha's time) out of the state of grief by being her shelter and refuge; that was powerful.

The Trauma of Everyday Life has many, many jewels that I can go to in times of need to heal, and I can help others with this knowledge. I have met two incredible individuals since I arrived here at this institution and have shared these stories with them. They are in line to read the book. They have their own beliefs, yet they are willing to incorporate lessons and teachings by the Buddha. I also shared with my entire cohort what I have learned and how it's important to practice non-attachment.



My Parole Hearing Experience

Gino

My emotional state was heightened to a point of moderate anxiety. I was practicing breathing meditation and staying focused on what I was going to say. At the same time, I was walking into that room with no expectations to save my own internal emotions. I had been going over with myself and how I was about to articulate my truth to these strangers (the three commissioners).

The hearing began with introductions and information being read into the record. My focus was my breathing and my victim.

As I answered questions from the commissioners, I felt myself speaking a little too quickly and began to steady my breathing and to take a moment in between questions to pause and reflect on my answers. Then I was asked if I wanted to take a short recess to stretch (I have right shoulder and lower back pains). The deputy commissioner intensified her questions about my self-help and anger management plans as well as my substance abuse relapse prevention plan. I was calm, centered, and patient as she drilled home the importance of my responsibility to maintain my plans and to seek out help when needed.

After sufficiently answering the many questions from the

two commissioners and the deputy District Attorney from Sacramento, I was able to explain my process thoroughly over the previous 18 months since my initial board hearing. I explained that I internalized my crime. The pain and suffering I have caused—that I finally allowed myself to feel what I had done to my victim and their family. The ripple effects of my actions are still being felt today by so many people, including my family. Because I allowed myself to feel, I am able [today] to completely place myself in front of the horrible violence and my victim.

At closing, my thoughts and emotions were centered on my victim, their sorrow and pain and suffering. I remembered my breathing and having no expectations of being found suitable. No matter how difficult and painful this process has been for me, it was nothing compared to what my victim went through.

After the deliberation, I was read the decision by a commissioner that I was found suitable for parole. Immediately after hearing this, I removed my eyeglasses and wept uncontrollably. Not for the happiness of receiving a date—but for the anguish I have caused my victim, their family, and my family. The memory of my victim and being able to finally forgive myself and feel worthy of another chance in life outside with my family and friends.



Do I Deserve to be Happy?

James

I had a substantial breakthrough after your visit. I realized I had been treating myself badly because I didn't feel I deserved to be happy. I couldn't tell you what happiness looked like in my life or would look like if I had it. I realized it would look like me treating myself and others with respect, kindness, and compassion. It would look like me being understanding of myself and, by extension, of others. There's a saying, "Man didn't weave the web of life, he's merely a strand in it. whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

It means when I treat others poorly or unkindly, I also treat myself poorly or unkindly. When I treat myself with anger and

impatience, by extension, I treat others similarly. I am reflecting and projecting those feelings onto others. I have been able to be a kinder person. I am now discovering a path to kindness. I thought it would take my whole life to find kindness. I feel better about myself. I realize happiness isn't an object to possess, a place I could find and occupy or a person to be with. But it's right here in me. Happiness and joy have always been within me. I just have to keep digging the offal out of the hole to be able to find it. This new realization gives me a sense of direction in my life to find out who I am and who I want to be. Thank you so much. I have so much to learn still (lol). It's okay though; it's a process.



Adopting the Eightfold Path into My Life

José

Looking back five or more years ago, my thought process and pattern of behavior was not in-line with the Eightfold Path. I was stubborn, self-centered, and close-minded. I now understand that I was frightened of change and being wrong. I grew up learning and believing that lying, stealing, using and selling drugs, being violent, and everything else that came with it was the right path.

The Eightfold Path that I have adopted to my life is not easy, being that there will be many obstacles, challenges, and fears to overcome. However, I will try to follow this path to the best of my ability.

The reason why I have chosen the Eightfold Path is because I didn't have a moral compass in the past. I lived a reckless life full of destruction, carelessness, and self-centeredness, and acting on impulses that only caused suffering to myself and others. By having penetrative insights into reality, I will be able to see things the way they are, not how I would like it to be. I

will stay aware of my thoughts arising in my interactions with others. I will cultivate loving and non-violent thoughts even towards those who do me harm.

I will conduct myself in moral, peaceful, and honorable ways no matter how challenging the circumstances and situations will be.

My plan includes living a life that does not create suffering to my community, society, and the world. Living a life that is honorable which is in no way harmful to all living beings. A life, based on the Four Noble Truths, worth living, making my loved ones proud of who I am.

By adopting the Eightfold Path, I have succeeded in ways that I never imagine and in a place with all odds against me. Without the Dharma, in particular the Eightfold Path, I wouldn't be the person I am today. And I hope one day I will earn my freedom with my own merits.



How I Was Traumatized as a Kid

Q.N.

In my family, my father hated cry babies. Crying was forbidden, a sign of weakness, and I remember how much it angered my father when I cried while he beat me and my brother. One time my father cocked his hand back and sent a wooden stick down on my older brother's legs. I wanted to run, but my entire body froze with trepidation. Just like many other times, my brother let out a yelp, but managed to hold back his wimp. Watching him taking the pain made me admire his bravery, but at the same time hated myself for being soft and weak. Father wacked the stick down hard at my brother's bottom, but he did not cry. Instead, I did.

"Shut your dog mouth" my father shouted at me, as he turned his attention towards me. "I haven't even hit you yet, and you already crying. Shut your dog mouth." He shouted once more, in despise, and sent the wooden stick down on my thigh. The smack came down hard.

I don't think my father realize that I was only six years old when he beat me. Nor did it change the fact that the more he hit me the more I screamed, yelled, and cried. The excruciating pain from his hit caused me to turn my body from side to side to dodge from getting hit in the same place.

"Father, please stop. Please stop hitting me." I begged through my crying and exhausting voice.

But he continued. I jumped onto the bed and push myself

against the wall to duck from his raining attacks, until I began to choke on my own tears. My father saw that I could no longer endure another hit, it was then he tossed the stick to the ground. He was too disappointed to even look my way, but instead he turned and walked out the door in disgust.

"This one is hopeless. Why doesn't he die already?" My father managed to steam out before he left.

I don't think my father meant that, but those words cut sharper than the edges of the wooden stick against the flesh of my skin. Of all the straws that broke the camel's back, feeling unloved and defected broke mine.

I wish I had lots of kind memories with my belated father, like many kids do. I regretted that I didn't have a good relationship with him. Even on his deathbed, I did not shed a tear, but for the tears that did pour were alligators. My heart was numbed with anger and resentments towards him. I was 18 when my father passed, and it took another 18 years until I could find the humanity, through maturity, to forgive him. Through forgiving my father, I also learned to forgive myself.

I stopped blaming my father for everything that went wrong in my life, but sometimes I still wonder what my life could have turned out like, if I had a kind, supportive, gentle, and loving father, who could have taught me empathy and compassion instead of with sticks, switches, and belts.



Gratitude
EXPRESSING GRATITUDE
by Ruben

Dear EBA

My name is Ruben. I was found suitable this past month (July 2022). I have been practicing Mindfulness Meditation for around seven years. The practice has helped me a lot, especially when my board hearing was getting closer. Without the practice, I believe I would not have done well during the hearing. I say this because I get very nervous and anxious when it comes to dealing with authority. I meditated before I went into the hearing. I even used the breathing and concentration when I got stuck on a question.

Meditation has helped me overcome and let go of shame and anger that I had endured and suppressed for so many years. A pivotal moment that led me to believe meditation has worked for me was my father's passing. I was in pain and grieving. I meditated and became aware of my tears overflowing and dampening my face. I allowed myself to become fully vulnerable and noticed that I have had so much pain, hurt, and anger. And in that powerful moment of meditation, I was able to feel love and compassion towards my father and myself.

I will start a new journey in the free society, and I do not want to stop meditating. I know it is easy to forget prison life once I am on the street. I do not want to fall victim to complacency and being unaware of my deficiencies. I would like to express my gratitude to all the volunteers who have helped me to become who I am today.



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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