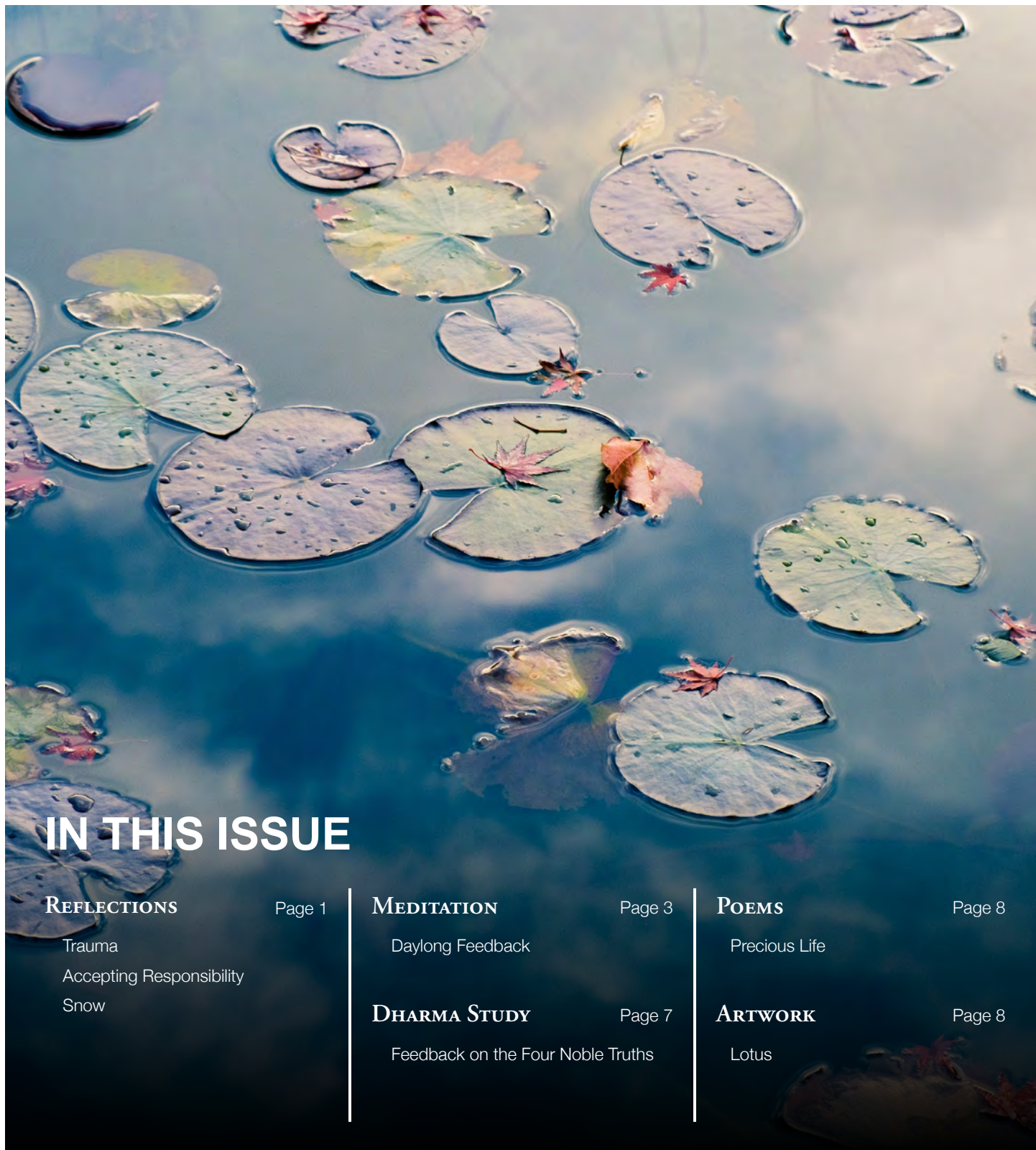




INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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



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INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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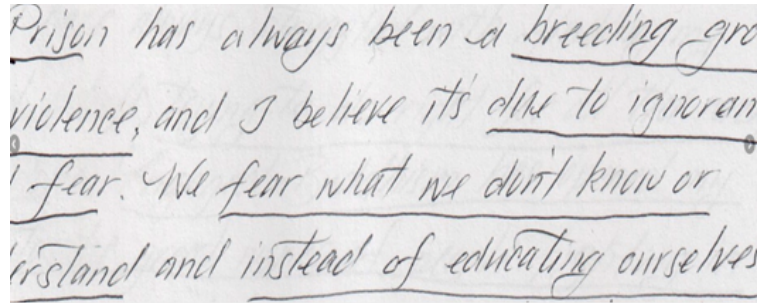
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THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT!



Reflections
TRAUMA
by Irving Relova

I was recently interviewed by UCLA's ethnic studies research center, and it was about Archiving in the Age of Mass Incarceration. AAMI will also support UCLA's ethnic studies research centers to host digital collections focused on racial justice. These oral history interviews offer invaluable first-person reflections on the daily traumas of the carceral state as well as the evidence of how so many residents forged full lives for themselves against the constant backdrop of racial profiling, arrest, imprisonment, deportation, probation, parole, and detention. These collected testimonies are essential for showing the larger impact of mass incarceration, capturing loss and struggle, joy, and triumph in the shadow of the largest jail system in the United States.

At the beginning of the interview in some ways I couldn't help feeling like I was in front of BPH all over again. The interviewer asked me to start with my earliest childhood memories, what led me to prison, my time in prison, after I made it out of prison and all the way to the present moment.

Throughout the interview whenever I would talk about my traumatic experiences, I would take a step back and having the awareness to look at myself, I could sense all the emotions, sensations, and feelings in my body as if I was right there at that very moment in those traumatic events. Over the years even though it's easier for me to talk about my past traumas, I feel the emotions come right back as if I was there all over again. In my mind, there is a part of me that is fully aware of those traumas are part of my past. However, I am fully aware that my past will always be a part of who I am now, and those traumatic events might be gone but those emotions will always be there to remind me to live in this present moment. It also reminds me that it's a lifelong process and I must constantly work through those traumatic events to leave them in my past.

I have to say that my meditation practice over the decades has helped me move through those traumatic experiences. Meditation has helped me to process and make sense of those traumatic events. It has given me the clarity into my life. It has helped me to stay grounded and remind myself that everything in life passes through and nothing is permanent.



Reflections
ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY
 by Andrew

What I have come to learn about being accountable and responsible is, in the past, due to my conditioning I had developed distorted core beliefs, which gave rise to all kinds of character defects. One of which was blaming others or deflecting responsibility, but even this there has yet another defect in that when it was something good, I wanted to be responsible. When it was something bad, I didn't want to be responsible. I've learned in my Buddhist studies that all these afflictions are common and an error in the conditioned human mind.

I've learned it's important to understand what's in my control and what's out of my control. Once this is determined I know I can control my thoughts, speech, and actions. I know just because external circumstances or situations may make me feel powerfully negative emotions, I'm not obligated to react but rather contemplate why I feel this. These things played a role in my past as an impulsive person, in the realm of decision making I've learned I'm accountable and responsible for my thoughts, speech and actions. These are in my control.

Everything I think, say, and do plays into causes and conditions meaning how I think, speak, behave is the cause and the effect is the result of such.

Buddhism breaks it down to the most basic level of karmic patterning. If I think, speak, behave negatively the likely result will be harmful to myself and others. And if I think, speak, behave positively the likely result will be beneficial to myself and others, to me this is a profound lesson in accountability and responsibility this concept is so basic and simple and obviously true but it's our conditioning that forms narratives in our mind to rationalize/justify negative thoughts, speech, and behavior.

I must accept and welcome the results of my thoughts, speech, and actions. I'm grateful to have become conscious of this stuff. However, it is a daily practice to remain mindful and center myself when I sense feelings and have all sorts of chatter in my head.

I can be helpful or harmful to myself and others and it begins in my mind!

Reflections
SNOW
 by Citta

I've struggled with depression since childhood due to the traumas of my experiences. Lately I have found it hard to motivate myself to do anything. But since getting into the dog program at V.S.P. I've found that taking care of another being has helped me see past my own suffering. Witnessing her growth and progress has given me a sense of fulfillment. When the Buddha taught mindfulness of feelings (Vedana), he listed an unworldly pleasant feeling as being obtained not through sensual gratification. This appears to be how I feel. So, I am very grateful to this dog whose name is Snow. By helping her, she has helped me. And together we now share a better quality of life.



MEDITATION

Daylong Feedback from Lancaster State Prison (LAC) A Yard Sangha

- I learned to focus on my breathing, to acknowledge thoughts that come to mind, label them, then let them go. Once my body and mind reached a state of calmness, it was easier for me to concentrate on my breath. My mind gained clarity and understanding.
- The thoughts that I experienced (came to the surface) were all over the place: my childhood, college days, the birth of my children, jobs, people in the past, prison issues and the future. The three-hour sessions (before going back to our cells for count) were fantastic; each one got better; they piggy-banked on each other.
- The retreat reaffirmed what I already knew in that my triggers will always be with me, but I can minimize their impacts with self-awareness.
- I realized that my intentions are well, that my goals are attainable, and that I can find harmony if I really want it. My sense of the possible has been affirmed.
- I have learned to lessen my wants and craving of things. I have also learned to have compassion for all sentient beings.
- I learned that this beautiful mind of mine is very interesting, complex, and divine. I like just being as I am during the meditation because I locate my inner self, the higher divine self, and I receive clarity from within of how I am perceiving myself and others. I also remind myself to really love myself, be kind to myself, and be compassionate toward myself.
- I determine to accept, and care for the difficult and undesirable traits of my personality.
- I learned that I am compassionate. I am more kind to myself. I am more at peace, and I don't see the world as a threat anymore. I see peace, unity, and potential for greater advancement in the world.
- I am sticking to my learnings where in the past I would slack off. I am showing more compassion and kindness. I am very mindful of that.



Daylong Feedback from Ironwood State Prison (ISP) D Yard Sangha

D yard at ISP was approved for a daylong meditation from 09:00-15:00 on Oct. 14, 2022. Eleven sangha members attended. For most, it was their first time. Below are some feedbacks from several members.

When I first started meditating, I recall struggling with it as I usually felt my body tense up during meditation, having difficulties finding my center of peace. After some time, I felt myself getting better at my meditations, being able to feel much more relaxed during meditation, recognizing when my mind would wander and when certain thoughts would cause some tensions in my body and being able to let go of those thoughts sooner than before. Also, being able to attain what is called meditative concentration which I would associate with periods of total relaxation and my center of peace.

I constantly find myself very busy with vocational classes, self-help classes, and college courses. This can make me feel a bit overwhelmed at times and create stress in my life. Meditation and mindfulness help me find a healthy balance within such a packed schedule, relieving some of that stress and serving as a coping mechanism when I find some of life's difficulties. This has allowed me to deal with difficult situations in a healthy manner rather than reverting into my old habits and character defects. In addition, meditation has also helped me gain new insights in my life.

During our meditation a memory arose, a memory in which I recall my younger brother being antagonized by another boy when I was much younger. I remember being afraid, as I was very young at the time, and froze as I felt helpless and hopeless. Although the situation caused no great harm to my brother, I felt a realization that experiences as such are what fueled my impulsivity, aggressiveness, and violence in situations that I or my loved ones, even remotely felt antagonized. Insights as such ultimately help me better understand myself and help me on my journey toward personal growth. This is what meditation has done for me. ~Janavasabha



Thanks to meditation, I was mindful of the Dukkha around this subculture. Dukkha is a human and happiness living in a state of chronic unhappy and angry distress. As Buddhism helps me become more aware that my life is constantly flooded with Dukkha which makes me vulnerable to sorrow and loss, we fear our fears, especially during the holiday season in the prison system.

Meditation has allowed me to concentrate more of the good, pure, and tender things within me. We meditated for approximately 2 hours, and during our meditation I felt optimistic and confident.

Every time I meditate, I'm self-aware of the things that I tend to hold on, for example anger, resentment, and anxiety. When our hearts close, we operate with neither flow nor self-awareness. Anger shuts off any meaningful contact with the core of the self, that part of "me" that in the Buddhist teaching is called your Buddha nature. The two hours of meditation allowed me to nurture and cultivate my Buddha nature with gratitude, hope, and peace. This was an amazing experience that I am always going to treasure. ~Brian



I allowed myself to detach from the prison environment, being guided in the meditation sessions, and letting my breathing being the object of my concentration. I felt good about myself.

Understanding my breath to be the object of my concentration, I was able to let go of the thoughts that came to mind. I was able to maintain my focus for long periods of time.

After our meditation we spoke about looking into our positive qualities, being able to humanize each other, regardless of the reality that we are in prison where a lot of negative energies could thrive, unless we are mindful and accepting.

After the retreat was over, I came back to my cell, for a few seconds I became overwhelmed and slightly irritated that not only that I had to finish one midterm test but two. Thankfully, I was able to tap into my calm, loving kindness meditation and I was able to finish both tests by 11:30 PM.

In conclusion, after my meditation retreat, I was able to sit still, focus, and concentrate for seven hours and 30 minutes working on my test. ~Marco



After our retreat in October, I'm able to feel a sense of peace, relaxation, and tranquility these feelings I carry for days after I meditated for a long period of time. I try to be mindful of my thoughts and actions to always do things with a positive attitude. But when someone experiences traumatic events, I can't help but get filled with anxiety. I can only say that since I've spent time meditating my life has become more peaceful and richer. ~Carlos



So, when I started meditating, the first 10 to 20 minutes, my mind was filled with negative thoughts and tried to push them aside and recognized my thoughts for what they are. I was mindful of them and was aware they are there. After that, I found my inner strength to ignore them and respect that my thoughts of negativity exist. Afterwards I had more control of my thinking and chains of thoughts. Right then and there, I've gained a sense of peace and relief. I had become calm and less tense from where I first started. The meditation took me to a place where I was calm and positive thoughts and positive energy started to fulfill my atmosphere and in my mind throughout my body. It helped me to redirect my bad thoughts and bad energy elsewhere. After hours long of meditation I felt great. I felt more relaxed, calm, and stilled with my thoughts and mind. I felt a better person inside me. More positive and productive, I felt happy.

The meditation helped to revert me back to balancing myself. Without the meditation I wouldn't be able to do just that. By meditating I've gained healing and less suffering from life and help me to persevere through what I'm going through. The meditation gives me clear understanding and point of view. It gives me a better perspective of the things in our universal life. It gives me universal healing. I thank you so much for helping me with the meditation. I truly appreciate you for your service with Buddhist practices. It truly helped me to evolve in life to become a better person to myself, to the community around me, my environment and to my fellow peers and to my society. ~Dom



At the start of the retreat, I was asked to name a good quality about myself. At first, I had trouble saying something positive about myself, "as crazy as it sounds." But I had to remind myself that I have been working on myself since 2020 and change my gang lifestyle, criminal thinking, negative influences, and my belief. I have been open to a new way of living. So to answer the question, I said "I am mindful." I became more understanding without judgment, more compassionate. I can listen to other's opinions around me and am willing to listen to advise. In the past, I was closed-minded and had trust issues. I thought people were out to get me or play me. now, I am more aware of my feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I live in the moment and am more conscious of everything and everyone. ~Antonio



Dharma Study
FEEDBACK ON THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS
by Amritraj

I gained a lot of understanding from reflecting on each noble truth and how it applies to my life. The fact that each essay question made me think deeply into the things I didn't deal with in the past.

Each essay question forced me to dig deep into times in my past that I previously did my best to disregard. I truly had to dig deep into my past to really understand how each noble truth applies to my life. It was beneficial that each essay question made me reflect on a different aspect of my struggles.

I'm very thankful that I have had the opportunity to take this course, it has been very enlightening and empowering to reflect on the noble truth and apply them to my life. Sometimes when we don't know how to put in words what we are experiencing or why we feel the way that we do, it helps to read insightful texts such as the Four Noble Truths. When we read how desire or attachment causes so much pain and suffering, it is like a light switches on in our heads and we gain a sense of clarity that we never had before. This course was very meaningful to me, and I am thankful for the impact it has made in my life.



Poem
PRECIOUS LIFE
by Coung

Precious life, is this the value? People don't change, that's the theory.
Lock 'em up, throw away the key. More lives ruined, conscious at ease.
Hooray! Perpetual motion. The product of society.
Precious life, is this the value? Restrained in the lavatory.
Behold! This humanoid species. There's glass slits, enjoy the display.
Deserve to be dehumanized. Lives no different from a toilet.
Precious life, is this the value?
Remain within the boundaries, seeing, and seeing, it's clear as day.
Oppression caused by religions, step out of line, and there goes life,
Darwin's theory, they be faulty.
Precious life, is this the value? Callousness more than encourage.
Zombies craving for emotions. Caskets filled with relationships.
Urging distractions, eluding, the grief of love and salvation.
Oh precious life... Oh precious life.



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.



Lotus by
Jose (Guan Ping)

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.