



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

Using the Buddha's Teachings to
Break the Cycle of Incarceration

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INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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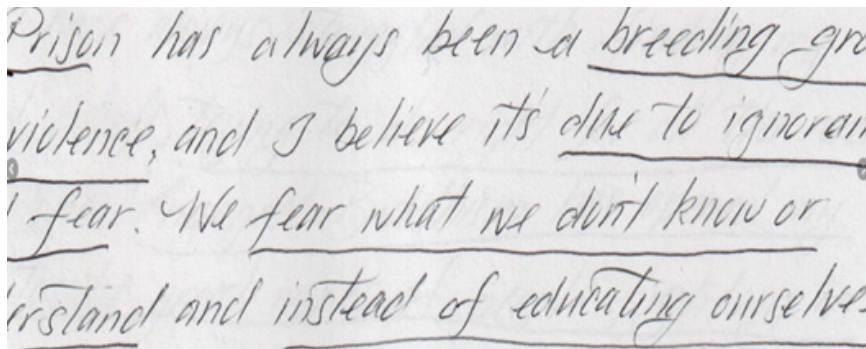
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Reflections

HOLDING SACRED SPACE INSIDE THE CHAPELS

by De Hong

August 2023 marks ten years since EBA (The Engaged Buddhist Alliance) has been founded and that's how long it has been since I start volunteering in California's correctional institutions.

Initially, our original plan was to teach college-level courses in Buddhism. We (Margaret, John, I and others) even designed our first course. Personally, I had no idea what I was doing. I thought I just was giving back and teaching Buddhism. Once I got inside the institution (Chuckawalla Valley State Prison CVSP), we faced a lot of challenges: participants leaving the institutions and new ones joining our visits, variations in their education (college, high school, or GED), the length of time to get a course approved, and the high cost of printing course materials or buying books.

After a year, to reduce some of our challenges, we decided to change our teaching format by offering a short dharma talk on a particular Buddhist topic, mindfulness meditation (due to requests), and followed by Q&A or sharing insights in each visit. We usually have 90 minutes to two hours depending on the institution.

Since then, I have followed the same format in all institutions that I have visited. Over the years, from my interactions with the incarcerated individuals (both men and women), I have learned that the majority of them suffered from trauma such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) consisting of physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect or abandonment. Further, many of them were bullied in junior or high school.

There was a break during the COVID19 Pandemic from Mar. 2020 to Jun. 2021 in which no volunteers were allowed to visit the institutions. Upon resuming my visits beginning July 2021, I decided to introduce discussions of trauma and the concept of window of tolerance, a term coined by Dr. Dan Siegel to describe and understand a traumatized individual's reactions when being triggered. In other words, when triggered by a certain stimulus thru their senses, they can react angrily (getting into the hyper-arousal

zone) or freeze/shutdown (falling into the hypo-arousal zone). Understanding window of tolerance can prevent traumatized individuals from being re-traumatized during meditation. Further, it can build up their ability to tolerate triggers and strengthen their resilience.

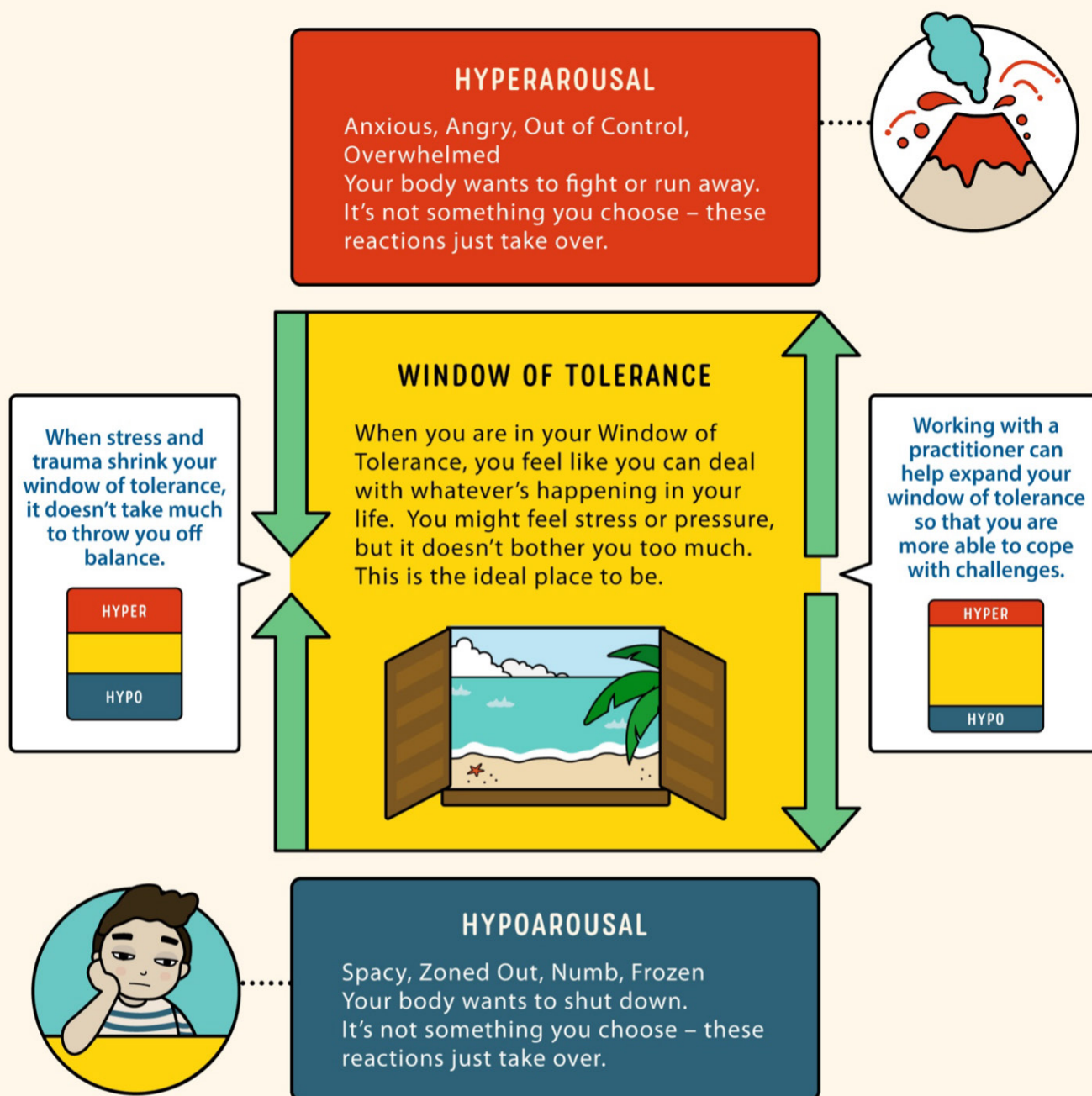
I also emphasize the importance of understanding Perception and Feeling in the Five Aggregates; so they don't identify with their thoughts and feelings. This is helpful during their meditation and mindfulness practices on a daily basis in dealing with stress, negative thoughts, and feelings and emotions. As several incarcerated individuals have told me, "I can be triggered but I don't have to feel overwhelmed." This makes the Buddha's teachings trauma informed. It means that when traumatized individuals know how to apply the Buddha's teachings and stay within their window of tolerance, they will not be easily re-traumatized. Further, they may be able to process their traumatic experiences, one at a time, which will widen their window of tolerance.

I am grateful to be able to bring the teachings of the Buddha inside the chapels and meditate with the incarcerated sanghas. They are actually my teachers. Personally, I experienced several types of trauma during childhood and teen years. I have been able to relate to their past and current trauma, and their daily stress. Despite everything that they have experienced, most remain hopeful and become more resilient—thanks to their Dharma study and practice.

This is a very rewarding and gratifying work. I encourage those of you who have studied the Dharma with meditation experience to get involved. I will end with a quote by our dharma brother, James, who just went home on Oct. 3 after 15 years of incarceration: "Please stay safe and never stop doing what you do. The effect you have on people's lives is so much more than you know, and it's so important. I appreciate you and all that you do. NEVER STOP WORKING!"



How Trauma Can Affect Your Window Of Tolerance





Reflections

LIVING IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

by Irv Relova

I recently met up with three good friends who were also former LWOP. We all had our sentence commuted, in total we served 104 years of doing life. Just so happens, the day before we met it was the birthday of one of them, so we decide to have brunch at a local restaurant close to the beach.

As we were sitting there catching up and having a conversation, it dawned on me that at one time or another the four of us were in prison sitting in the chow hall together. When I brought that up, everyone just stopped and stared at each other. No words had to be said but we knew everyone was thinking about the same things. We didn't have to wait in line to go to a table, we could pick our own table and sit anywhere we want, we sat outside at a patio close to the beach, we could have any kind of food we want, the food was freshly cooked, and our food was served to us. And we could have more food if we wanted! We didn't have to worry about someone getting jumped or stabbed while we were eating and the correctional officers shooting in the chow hall. To simply put it, we could enjoy each other's company and have a meal in peace. This is one of the many simple everyday things out here that people take for granted. While having our meal and a conversation, we kept saying to each other that we still couldn't believe that we made it out because we never expected to get out of prison.

After we had our meal, we decided to walk to the pier and down to the beach. While we were walking, we couldn't help but thinking that all those years in prison we never thought we would see, feel, and touch the ocean again. Let alone just make it out of prison! We talked about the number of lifers that made it out and the ones we know that are still in there. For some of us that formed bonds of brotherhood, we will never forget those that are still in

there locked up doing life. Someone mentioned that a former lifer who served over 30 years, that we all knew, who made it out four years ago just passed away from a heart attack. After enduring decades of heartache, pain, suffering and misery, we are all still grateful to be alive.

As we were heading home and driving on the freeway, someone made a comment "this is crazy we're driving on the freeway, I never thought I would ever even be driving a car again". As I dropped them off and drove home, I couldn't help but reflect on our time together both inside and outside the prison. When the years turned into decades, we couldn't help but think of our lives before we went to prison, it felt like another life - another person. As those memories faded into our personal histories, our conversations focused on our experiences and all the people we came across from different prisons. Our lives were focused in surviving and living in prison. At those moments, that's where we were and that's all we had. What struck me was when someone said, "it felt like a dream, like we were never in prison."

When I look back at my life; from childhood, to before, during and after prison, it does feel like a dream at times. I realize that if my memory is triggered or if in a conversation and the topic is brought up that is the only time I feel and think about ever being in prison.

Life is a fleeting moment. Each breath that we let go is a piece of our lives that passes by. Our past is a history that we cannot live in it but yet so much to learn from it. The future, no one knows what the future holds, and it is not promised. Having this awareness, is living in the present moment. All we really have is this present moment.



INSIGHTS FROM MEDITATION

The Dharma help me identify how I became to be this person to be capable of creating so many victims. There's numerous factors in Buddhism that allowed me to begin to heal from my past traumas. One of those is understanding as a child much of my life was out of my control, I was dependent. When I was picked on in school, it was other people's traumas affecting me (hurt people – hurt people). I realize my parents (and a lot of humans), don't know how to process, and liberate themselves from the bondage of past traumas and negative habits that continue a negative cycle that creates harm.

By gaining insight into human afflictions, it allowed me to better understand we all have more similarities than differences. We all deal with mental/physical suffering in this life, and it is the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) that develop the concept to the nature of mind and deal with suffering in a way that breaks the cycle of harm.

To not attach a fabricated story to a situation or assume/speculate. To want what I like and having aversion towards what I don't like. To allow a negative emotion to fester and manifest to a thought, to manifest into a negative speech or behavior which creates more harm than I was dealing with in the first place. There is so much in the teachings that shed light into a more meaningful, purposeful, beneficial existence in this life and by default through all my thoughts, speech, and actions. I am more compassionate, loving, kind, forgiving, and patient to those around me.

It was the Buddhist teachings and a genuine effort to learn and practice that continues to change my life. I'm more at peace, I'm not constantly irritated or in conflict in my mind like I used to be. I'm more conscious of my blessings and grateful for what I have. I know through the teachings that if I think, speak or behave negatively the likely result at some point will be negative. I know this from experience. And the same is true if I think, speak, behave positively the likely result will be positive. It's so simple but it's the unraveling of decades of conditioning that is the difficult part. ~Andrew G.



...I got startled and began to walk away from the horrendous scene. Finally, an eerie silence throughout the prison yard as the population was witnessing this stabbing. My heart was beating rapidly and my hands, armpits, and back were sweating profusely. It was a ridiculous 105°, scorching hot. When out of nowhere the obnoxious emergency alarm went off, which meant we must sit on the ground while medical and the C.O.'s attend to his needs. As I sat on the hot ground, I felt what my spiritual advisor, Ven. De, taught me about the "Hyper arousal" I was feeling, overwhelmed, and as my body wanted to fight or run. This traumatic experience was affecting my window of tolerance, I became mindful that this internal battle was going on. Sitting on the simmering ground, I positioned myself and started to meditate to relieve myself from the anxiety, fear, and trauma. I began by blocking all the commotion out of my ears and heart in my mind. Slowly focusing on my breathing, I had a self-monologue, "I'm in control, relax, I got this". Suddenly my heart was beating at a normal rate. I began reciting the five aggregates that Ven. De previously talked about: 1. Form (physical body) 2. Feeling (raw physical and emotional data arising between that around me) 3. Perception (mental processes resulting sensation and thoughts) 4. Volition/Mental formation (when perception formed within the mind meets volition) 5. Consciousness (self-awareness). two hours and 15 minutes passed while sitting on the hot ground waiting for the C.O.'s to finish the grid search. I was hot, thirsty, and had to use the restroom, but being a student of Ven De and a constant reminder of practicing meditation allowed me to be relaxed, focus, but above all in control. ~Brian Q.



Awareness of Intention

Using mindfulness, I can be aware of an intention in the present moment, instead of just acting on it. Consideration of the Dhamma allows for discernment if the intention/action would be skillful or unskillful if it aligns with recovery and rehabilitation or the path that led me to prison. Through time and repetition, we can replace defects in our personality with the spiritual principles provided by the Buddha. ~Citta



DHARMA STUDY

The course provided was meaningful for many different reasons. I am grateful for a free correspondence course to further my spiritual wisdom. The Four Noble Truths by Ajahn Sumedho was written with simple understanding to reflect on. The three aspects of each truth was very easy to realize. I enjoyed the questions which allowed me to reflect on my own personal experiences. I felt the course had a nice balance of reading, writing, and questions. The essay was the most meaningful part of the course because I had to write from my experiences and understanding of the topics. I felt challenged which made it meaningful for me to have written. Overall, I felt the entire course was meaningful to have done. Thank you for the opportunity. May you all be happy. May you be healthy. May you be safe. ~Kenton



I am grateful for my meditation practice because of so many successes it has given me. My sitting meditation has allowed me to connect with my emotions and thoughts. It sparks my awareness, so I am living in a non-forgetful life. I can sit down and meditate for 30 minutes with ease. I know how to use my breath if I'm sitting with a thought too long. I practice with an open mind and non-judgment of whatever arises. I'm able to have empathy and compassion because of my practice. My meditation has cultivated joy and love into my heart. It has been a huge tool on thinking about my thinking which helps with my criminal thinking. My experience has been very helpful and to have a sangha to practice with once a week is why my meditation practice has been such a success. I started with a sangha and now I continue to meditate alone so I can observe my life, thoughts, and actions. Lastly, I feel my mind being purified when I practice as well. ~Kenton

I was able to relate with everything in what I am stuck in. Always want the world to look at certain situations my way or in how when emotions are strong, I feel that I must do something about it instead of just letting it be. I understand how I feed into the emotions that I create into this delusion of solidness. My suffering was everyone's fault but mine.

So, the biggest take here is taking accountability and responsibility for my action. Also, to correct my thinking to detachment be. Also, I learned that is not going to disappear by a few practical moments. This is something to put to practice daily by being mindful of the Buddha's teachings.

Furthermore, I was so attached to the gang lifestyle that hurting people emotionally or physically was the normal in this culture. From indulging to drugs and producing violence wherever I was.

In brief, I want to state how meaningful this course has/is been for me. Because I have divorced myself from the criminal and gang lifestyle since 2018. But to realize in how the teaching makes me see all the positive things in life. Having gone from a criminal mindset to having a successful, positive, productive, and healthier mindset taught me that nothing is promised. That I can be much more, and nothing remains constant including myself. I know that it takes work (practice) and commitment to keep improving. ~Frank A.



Transformation

THESE ARE THE REASONS

by Kwamin

Innocence was stolen. How does a child deal with abandonment, neglect, physical, emotional or sexual abuse? When the ones who are supposed to protect you, are the ones who are committing these acts against you? some wished for death, others picked at their flesh, trying to numb the hurt, embarrassment, shame and pain. When that didn't seem to work, we tried to escape by poisoning ourselves through alcohol, drugs or both.

We are taught to protect the household with a code of silence, acting out was a plead for help. When none came, some joined gangs, some committed violence.

An image was created to survive, only to safeguard that child inside. Then we realized, violence came in a different form on the outside. Discrimination, profiling, stereotyping for kinky hair and lower caste caused hypervigilance, terror and more anger. You learn to run fast or fight back.

Levers were pulled that triggered rage. There was no equanimity, concentration or stop and think, just justification, impulsivity, blaming, denial and shame.

We became another statistics locked away to die. There was no evaluation. We had to discover our own peace, tranquility, nirvana in order to control our minds, channel our energies to be able to get one of these seats. Others started to take notice we are Appropriately Making Extraordinarily Needed Difference in Society, no longer projecting, making excuses. We donate, take responsibility, dismantle our ego and pride. We are rehabilitated enough to be trained to help guide others to change, but are not rehabilitated enough to be unchained. We remain in the belly of the beast. We have grown tremendously in this dark place. Where we stand today is light, building paths that lead to open doors that individuals will be proud to walk through, with coping skills and healthy tools, and with an abundance of love that we share here today with each and everyone of you.



Art



Untitled
by Quoc

INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.

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.