



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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

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INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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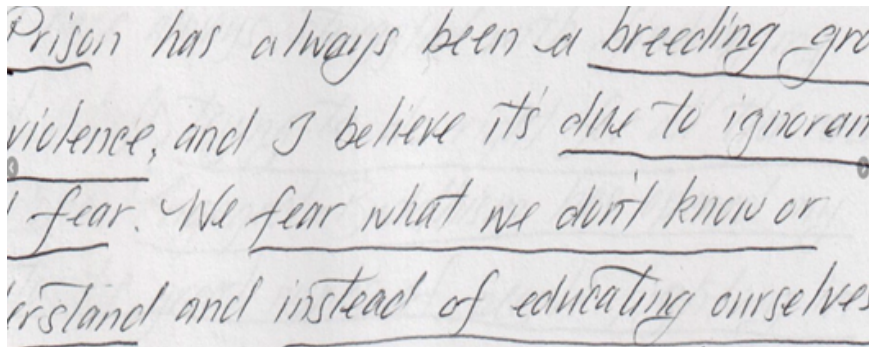
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INTRODUCING THE ENGAGED BUDDHIST ALLIANCE

We are a group of current and former university students who joined together around the idea that Buddhist-informed education can help incarcerated individuals and society break the cycle of incarceration.

JOIN US

The Engaged Buddhist Alliance is a 501(c)(3) registered nonprofit. If you would like to join us to help break the cycle of incarceration, please contact us. All donations are tax deductible.

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Thank you for your continued support!



RESPONSIBILITY

by Irv Relova



This picture was taken New Year's Eve December 31st, 2023. This was a gathering of some of Venerable De Hong's Sangha students who made it out after doing life in prison. Some have been out for four years or more and most of them have been discharged from parole. One of them has been out for about three weeks, the other one was recently released 11 days ago. Less than a minute after we took this picture, there was a very loud firework that went off across the street. For a brief moment everyone stopped moving and they were looking around their surroundings. In that brief

moment I knew what everyone was thinking and feeling, we were in prison again. So, to break the ice I yelled out "yard down"! And everyone just started laughing.

The men in this picture at one time were either former juvenile lifers, term to life, or LWOP. The average time the majority of these men served was 20 years or more; that's about **240 years of doing life in prison**. Everyone here has done time from Pelican Bay to Donovan and every other prison in between. We've



all been through months and months of lockdowns and for some, months, or years of doing SHU terms. This was the first time that Venerable De Hong was able to get some of his students together in one place. Everyone is busy starting their lives all over again after decades in prison. But as I said to one of the sangha brothers, at least we're busy doing the right things in life rather than doing the dumb \$#!+ that would get us back in prison.

Doing life in prison, at some point in our lives we all lost hope and had gone through heartaches, pain, suffering, misery, and grief, whether from the loss of a loved one or from friends and family forgetting or just completely abandoning us. But then again, as the saying goes, "time waits for no one." Also, at some point in our lives we've come to take responsibility for all the wrong choices we made in life. We've learned to accept the consequences of those wrong decisions. We have learned from all of it and moved on with our lives as best we can under the circumstances.

As a lifer, accepting the realities of life, we could only dream to be given a second chance at life. But for some of us, it was hopeless and unthinkable. To have a second chance and go before the parole board, this is where the real personal work will be proven. We have to recount the earliest memories of our childhood all the way to the point where we committed our life crime. Then, we also have to recount everything we did and are doing while in prison. For most of us, this is a very difficult process to go through, as we have to relive all the traumas we experienced all over again. The childhood trauma that got us in prison and the traumas we experienced while in prison. We have to recount these traumatic experiences and explain how it affected us, from our thinking/mindset and through our decisions in life. We also have to explain how we made sense

and understand and process all of these traumas. And we also have to explain what we are doing now to heal and move on from these traumas if we ever come across those same situations again and how to overcome them.

A few days before this picture was taken, I received a message from a friend of mine who is doing life and has been down for over 30 years. He wanted to let me know that someone we all knew who was serving 2-LWOP, was commuted by the governor in 2019, was released around 2021 after doing over 40 years, came back to prison in April 2023 having committed a new crime without ever discharging parole. Now, he's doing 10 years with 85%. It seems obvious that he did not take advantage of his decades in prison. This is the consequence.

Although this could be seen as a setback for lifers, for the vast majority of us, earning the freedom at a second chance at life, is a responsibility. For those of us that formed bonds of brotherhood, and the few that made it out after decades in prison, we will never forget those that are still locked up doing life. In an interview I was asked if I had mentors while I was in prison. I couldn't really name one person because I learned from everyone, especially from the old timers that came before me. They paved the way for those of us former lifers that made it out. There's a saying, "a wise man learns from his mistakes, a wiser man learns from another man's mistakes". I feel that it is part of my responsibility to pave the way for all the lifers that we left behind and make the right choices in life to give them the opportunity to earn the freedom at a second chance in life.



REFLECTION

by Tuong

To succeed and to blend in, in a country that's far from yours is an immigrant dream regardless of what country you are originally from. The goals and aspirations will be the same. So, in retrospect let's put a scenario where you are better off leaving a place where you call home for resources that in your reality would be a fantasy. This scenario in reality for millions of people and my parents is no exception. After the Socialist Party (North Vietnam) won the war in 1975, South Vietnamese people's lives went from harder to miserable. My parents seeking opportunities fled Vietnam to the Philippines and eventually entered the free world with four kids and one more on the way. Luckily for me I was an infant so I didn't have to deal with the trauma of events, my older sister might not be as lucky.

People thought that our lives magically became better upon arriving the United States. The journey to the US was a demon we had to face, now living here was a whole new beast we had to deal with. Society is never kind to outsiders, and my story starts here.

By 1995 (I was 5 years old), my parents had their last kid, their 7th kid. We were crammed in a two-room apartment. My parents' juggling work and raising seven kids seemed like an impossible task. My dad was always angry. I didn't realize it then, but he was miserable. He was in a foreign land and making a pittance at the sweatshop, had to take care of seven kids all under the age of 13, and on top of that my mom was a gambleholic. He would get physically abusive, he was so miserable that any little wrong we did he would beat us, a displacement that wasn't fair to us.

By 2012 we had moved six times. From 1st to 6th grade, I went to six different elementary schools because we were always moving.

I remember hating that feeling of finally settling in somewhere and making friends, and only to be told by the end of the school year that I would be moving. This happened six times for six years straight and more later on. I always felt that we had less than most people, at least in the material aspect. My clothes were old, and in school I was made fun of because I was dusty. That resulted me to stealing. I was a super thief. I stole anything and everything that had value. The wanting to be normal and fit in so I had to accumulate the things by myself.

By the time I hit high school I became a gang member, for reasons I believe today to fit and blend in. I started to dip in drugs and alcohol. With little to no supervision, it was much easier to do bad. Parents were still arguing every day, by that time it became normal to us. My dad stopped putting hands on us the year before. He went to jail for domestic violence; one of the neighbors heard the commotion and reported it. I can say from firsthand experience, jail will change you. My dad used to say, "I was in jail in Vietnam, Philippines, and now America all because of your mom." Just thinking of him saying that now made me kinda laugh.

I caught my case in 2012 I was going in and out of jail as an adult for frivolous crimes, mostly because of drugs. But in 2012 I caught a 19-year sentence and have about five years left. And just happy for the most part and appreciate everything that I have. Today my family is doing well. My siblings have great jobs and beautiful families. Parents are divorced but they live with each other. They are always a team. My love go to them because they did their best with the little tools they were equipped with. My story ends here.



RETREAT FEEDBACK

Ninh

I am writing to express my appreciation for the day long mini retreat at Chuckawalla Valley State Prison on Dec. 18, 2023 in honor of the Buddha's Enlightenment.

Under your leadership, over 60 men from diverse backgrounds and beliefs came together to meditate for a total of three hours and shared their thoughts about the retreat afterward. For some, the retreat was their first experience and a few have never meditated before. Overall, everyone had an amazing and positive experience. Many expressed they will practice meditation after the retreat and will attend again. For me, the retreat gave me the opportunity to take a break from the everyday routine of life to slow down my mind and reset my perspective. After the retreat, I felt refresh and less reactive.

Thank you for your time, dedication, and compassion in bringing the retreat to this institution.

Huy

Greetings. I wish you well and full of spirit in the New Year. I have been to three huge Buddhist meditation retreats at Chuckawalla Valley State Prison and gained much from those sessions. I have seen the change in me. I am a lot calmer, more focus, and smile a little more often. I have also seen the difference from other incarcerated individuals who attended the retreats. They are more polite and friendlier. Your teaching was great.

Only one thing I would recommend is that you should have some assistants to help out. Because with 60 or 70 participants gathering for the meditation was a big task for you as one person. Other than that, I would say I love and need to meditate more.



DOING LIFE DOING PRACTICE

Frank

My parole board process was a high stress event. In the past, stress and anxiety were a trigger for me to react in negative ways. The state of mind and breathing techniques are learned through the process of mindfulness helped me maintain my composure throughout the proceedings. I have been meditating through the mindfulness process since 2017. The practice and principles I learned were essential in my preparation for the pearl board hearing.

The insight, I garnered through hours of meditation, and dealing with my past trauma and healing from my issues, help me tremendously. I was able to think clearly, breathe, calm myself down and answer the questions asked without difficulty.

The culmination of all the preparation for the hearing wade heavy on me. All the stress and anxiety I felt in the holding tank minutes before walking into the boardroom. But I held steadfast, I did not break. I bended with the pressure but maintained with strength and will of mind.

I am grateful for the mindfulness practice because it helped me deal with much more stress than I was ever able to deal with in the past. Like a weightlifter practice to lift heavier loads, so has the practice help me deal with high amount of stress. In the holding tank, I was able to sit down and breathe in and out and calm my state of mind alleviating the strain on myself. I am where I am today thanks to the practice. I was found suitable for parole that day.

Of all the self-help classes I have taken, the practice of mindfulness meditation every Tuesday has helped me the most. The introspection achieved through meditation has helped me achieve a balance in my life I have never known.

An update from Frank: He's been home since Dec. 15, 2023.

Nik

I wanted to share an experience I had recently. It was interesting to me, as I'm always curious as to how far I've come in my "change".

So, the other day I was attacked. Not for anything I had done. It was simply a means to an end. I also happened to be the only means in the immediate vicinity, as I was working out by myself

on the yard at the time. I was fully aware of this individual's intentions. However, I was not aware that he had chosen me to be his target. So, he came running at me - more like jogging actually -and before he threw his first punch he actually apologized and briefly explained - in about 7 words - that he had to do it. Now, then in and of itself was interesting, almost comical actually. But the part that was the most interesting for me, was that my mind remained calm. Moreover, I felt no fear or anger or aggression. Surprisingly, not only was I at peace, but I actually felt compassion for him. That was definitely a first for me. So, when he attacked, instead of fighting back, I just blocked all his punches.

After the incident, I had guys coming up to me asking questions about it for over a week. It was encouraging to hear so many of them tell me that I did the right thing. Mainly they were saying that because my actions kept me from getting a 115 (code number for discipline) ... I did have a couple of guys tell me - after explaining what happened exactly the way I am to you - that they want to learn how to be like me. That was quite the compliment. I definitely was not expecting that response. I also have a new nickname, apparently. I discovered that among some of the population that I am referred to as, "The Buff Buddha"... I considered that to be quite an honor.

Kenton

Ultimately, my vision is to live with equanimity. I want to have the mindfulness to deal with the pain and pleasures of everyday life.

Mindfulness has been so helpful in my life in so many ways. I use it during meditation, so I am not attached to any moment or feelings that arises. I observe and accept whatever comes up during practice. Mindfulness is so beneficial because I use it each day to make a daily personal inventory. I live fully aware, fully aware of the Noble Eightfold path. I use my mindfulness to practice right speech, right action, right livelihood, right mindfulness, right concentration, right diligence, right view, and right thinking. This practice of mindfulness gives me the awareness to live a life I am truly aware of.



HOW I DEAL WITH THE HOLIDAYS

by Jose

Today I find that I treat the holidays like a regular day of the week. This apparently works for me, in that I do not experience the Blues or “seasonal depression” that seems so prevalent during this time of year. Upon reflection, however, I realize that this is a defense mechanism I develop long ago.

There was a time, before my incarceration where I very much looked forward to the holidays. Independence Day, Memorial Day. It meant camping or BBQ with extended family; Thanksgiving and Christmas were like mini - family reunions at our home. I have very fond memories of those past holidays. Indeed, it is because of those memories that I have felt the need to “protect” myself by seizing to invest in holidays after my incarceration. Looking back, I see clearly how much it hurts. It hurts that I was not able to be with family during those precious moments, but also it hurts that my absence forever impacted the way my family experienced and viewed holidays thereafter. Holidays became for them less about joy, and more about the stinging reminder of my plight.

I came to be deeply ashamed that my poor decision ruined what is supposed to be happy and heartwarming times. I was neither equipped with the tools to cope nor strong enough to endure that shame, and so responded by devising in the idea of “the holidays”. In fact, this is a theme of my incarceration. In order to condition myself, I found it easier to accept that I was going to die in prison. Removing hope was how I decided I would avoid disappointment moving forward. So much so that after 20 years I lost awareness of my mental contraption. I allowed myself to think that I developed the skills of being stoic, but really, I simply disassociated from painful realities.

Practicing mindfulness has helped me in seeing things clearly. I am aware that I have to address these notions about the holidays, that I must have compassion for myself, and that I must hearten myself to be gracefully present in the moment. This is my intent.

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

