



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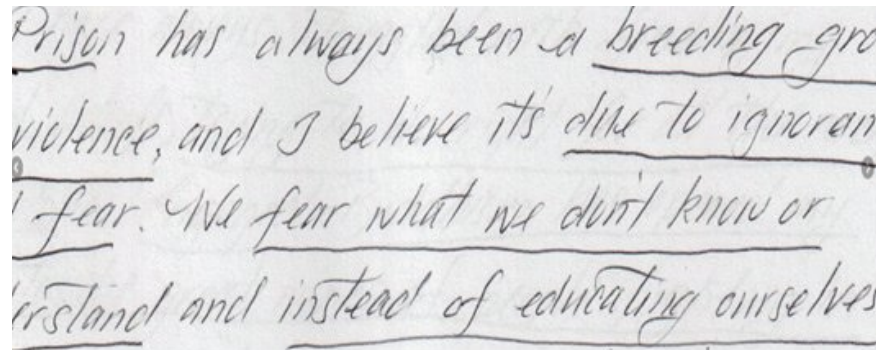
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We are a group of current and former university students who joined together around the idea that Buddhist-informed education can help incarcerated individuals and society break the cycle of incarceration.

### 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.

To learn how you can support Engaged Buddhist Alliance, please visit [www.engagedbuddhistalliance.org](http://www.engagedbuddhistalliance.org).

**Thank you for your continued support!**



## *Insights*

# PATIENCE

by Irv Relova

After doing 25 years out of a LWOP, my wife often reminds me that being in prison for decades prepared me in so many ways for the world out here. Recently, my wife had a whole knee replacement surgery. Months before the surgery there were all kinds of preparations, appointments, and interviews with nurses and physician's assistants. And no actual interview with the orthopedic surgeon! One of the main concerns for my wife was having enough pain medication that will last until the next refill. She voiced this concern three different times months before the surgery. First, it was with an interview with a nurse over the phone. The second was also an interview over the phone with a physician's assistant. The third time was an actual in person interview with a different physician's assistant. In all three interviews they all assured her that her pain medication refills will be filled in time before she runs out. Since her pain medication will only last about a week, the physician's assistant gave her instructions to call the pharmacy 72 hours before the next refill due date.

About a week after her surgery, it was time to call in the refill, but the pharmacy denied it because it wasn't approved by the physician's assistant. Since it was a three day holiday weekend, and also the physician's assistant does not work on the weekends to approve the refill. My wife had to make four different phone calls between the pharmacy and the orthopedic nurses. Another scenario was the pharmacy would deny the refill because it was too early to calling it in, but they know it is the weekend. This has been going on for

three weeks now and she has another three more weeks to go with the pain medication.

This may sound crazy but in some ways all of this reminds me of how medical care is in prison. I understand how so many things have changed with policy and procedures being implemented since this opioid crisis began with all the pain meds and fentanyl. But I couldn't help but notice the similarities when "policy and procedures" are in place and followed, much like in prison common sense goes out the door!

Medical care in prison is worst! I personally know a few people who died in prison from being misdiagnosed. That's why for 25 years I always tried avoiding going to medical. Beneath the surface of implementing and following policy and procedures, everyone has to endure their pain and agony because common sense goes out the door. All of this is also compounded with fear and anxiety which makes physical and mental pain worst.

For me, to go through this in prison and then to see people out here go through the same thing is very frustrating. There were times I felt like saying to the medical staff, are you f@\*king \$#!ting me I feel like I'm in prison again! Fortunately, I catch myself and take a step back, and breathe, and be patient. Like everything else in life, it passes by. Breathe, let go, and be patient.



*Reflections***DUKKHA**

by Jose A.

In this [Saha] world we are confined to suffering. No matter who your parents may be, how little or how much money they have, the place in which one is born, the ethnicity, and gender. Sentient beings in this world will endure many sufferings that stem from the three poisons of greed, anger, and delusion as well as desires.

The Buddha compared sentient beings chasing after the fleeting pleasures of this world to a child licking honey off a sharp knife. There is no way they can avoid hurting themselves. Personally, reflecting into my life, I have experienced suffering in one form or another. Many times, I created the situation that caused not just me but others as well to suffer. Due to my childhood trauma, I was seeking for acceptance from all the wrong people. I came to believe in all the wrong things. I lived in a world of illusion created by the three poisons, clinging, and unable to let go. To the point that I took someone's life, causing extreme suffering that can resemble as being in a hell realm.

Suffering cannot be something one can become accustomed to, one can understand suffering, but overall, we are sentient beings that are driven by emotions. Suffering is part of the human condition and not until we eradicate suffering, we will continue to endure suffering in one form or another.





*Reflections*  
**HIGHER EDUCATION**  
by Ajita

I don't know if I'd be able to succeed in Graduate School without my meditation practice, and I don't care to find out if it is possible. This past year has been a struggle. Since the beginning of the first semester, I struggled to find the motivation to study material I was interested in, in order to earn a degree I didn't want while in prison as part of a program I had not intended to join.

Needless to say, I was full of aversion. I wanted to quit, tempted by the desire of being free and earning a degree out there, a degree I wanted. But thanks to my practice I knew that giving in to aversion and craving would only cause more suffering. I reminded myself of the path I'm on, and that I could rely on the Dharma for guidance. I found the Dharma in my moments of struggle, and rediscovered self-compassion.

Meditation and self-compassion help succeed in ways that giving up would have never provided. Staying focused on my practice as guidance to meet my needs help me deal with the stress and challenges of grad school while incarcerated. Maybe I could have not given up and still succeed by pushing myself using anger and self-hatred as fuel to get things done, but that success would have been a spiritual failure.

Without my practice I'd probably be harming myself for the sake of accomplishment. It is because of my practice that I can now use self-compassion to succeed both spiritually and academically. May you hold yourself and compassion.

\*Ajita (his dharma name) is a grad student at California State University, Dominguez Hills' Master of Arts in Humanities, in partner with CDCR (California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation), which began in the Fall 2023. He has graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication from California State University, Los Angeles' PGI (Prison Graduation Initiative) in the summer 2021.



*Reflections***INTENTION**

by Edwin Le

I've changed my meditation practice in the mornings. I used to sit in a half lotus position with the intent of practicing mindfulness, but I started to recognize how it turned into more of an intellectual exercise for me rather than a practice that cultivates a relationship with my emotions, I was pretty much in my head. I would ruminate on thoughts rather than experience whatever it was I would be experiencing. Instead, I've been going outside in the mornings on the patio in front of the building to get some fresh air, I allow myself to rest in my senses and enjoy the peace of the morning and it's been much more beneficial for me. Not your conventional meditation practice, but it definitely puts me in a balanced place.

So, my personal practice and intention I've set for myself is to become aware of my personal insecurities. A lot of them come up in my intimate relationships and it's like I've had this delusional smokescreen in my consciousness that's been keeping me blinded from them. Thankfully, I have a friend in here who I trust and can find in that I can openly talk to these things about without worrying that he's judging me. He knows me and I trust him with many different parts of my life.





*Reflections*  
**COMING HOME**  
by Micah Harris

Welcome to your mindfulness, I was found suitable for parole in September 2023. It was the most exhilarating, fearful, daunting task I ever had to experience in my life. I was denied parole before my last parole board hearing four different times. On my 5th hearing I gave everything I had like a ballplayer who left everything out on the field the championship finals. In order to be found suitable I had to be mindful, and I had to be aware of everything my past, my present, my future, my fears, my hopes, my dreams, everything collided on that day. I attested my Buddhist practice of mindfulness and meditation to me being found suitable for parole. When the commissioners said that I no longer pose an unreasonable risk to public safety, all the air, all the breathing, all came out of me when they granted my parole for release. And that was just the beginning.

I still had to wait an additional six months of incarceration before I was able to actually walk out the gates. Those last six months were harder than 18 years, talk about being mindful. In those last moments or months, you experience all the emotions, you're tested by your peers. Circumstances where are you gonna stay, where are you gonna live, what kind of restrictions are you going to have, all of those things are running together at the same time but when I focus on my practice of mindfulness, I was able to center myself and get back to the basics every time I felt anxious, overwhelmed, or stressed. Mindfulness is just that, getting back to a balance focusing on the breath, mindful breath.

What happens is that when life is happening, we can get carried away in the minutia of the day-to-day like mindfulness, like breathing, it's reminding yourself not to get carried away. March 11th 2024, I walked out of state prison after having completed 18 years. I didn't complain about one day, I stayed focused, and meditated, I remained mindful, I knew how hard it was going to be and so I made it my effort.

In Buddhism, we talk about Right Concentration, Right Mindfulness, and Right Effort. So in those last six months, it was Right Mindfulness that got me through while waiting! I'm free, of course I have some restrictions. However, if I remain mindful, I'll be able to be successful while I'm on parole. So today I'm grateful I get to go to the grocery store, I get to pick my own food, I get to walk outside when I want, I get to call who I want when I want. I can go to bed when I want and nobody's telling me to do any of those things, it's beautiful out here. Life is what you make it and if you're sitting inside and you hear my words and you think about your future and how daunting it may look, I have found so much peace and solace in my practice that I was able to endure 18 years of incarceration and now I'm out here free doing the same things. How you do anything is how you do everything. And if you don't do anything, nothing's gonna happen. May you be happy, may you be at peace. With Metta.





## VESAK AT CIW

by De Hong



This year, we had been approved to celebrate Vesak at CIW (California Institution for Women) on April 27, 2024 from 8am to 3:30pm.

Invited guests: Ven. Ngocthanh, Silvia Lee, Danny Park, and I (see picture). We took a selfie in our vehicle since we weren't allowed to take any pictures on prison ground.

There were 33 ladies coming to the chapel to participate in the event. We meditated for three hours in four sessions with breaks in between. During breaks, Danny led a walking meditation and Silvia demonstrated some qigong movements.

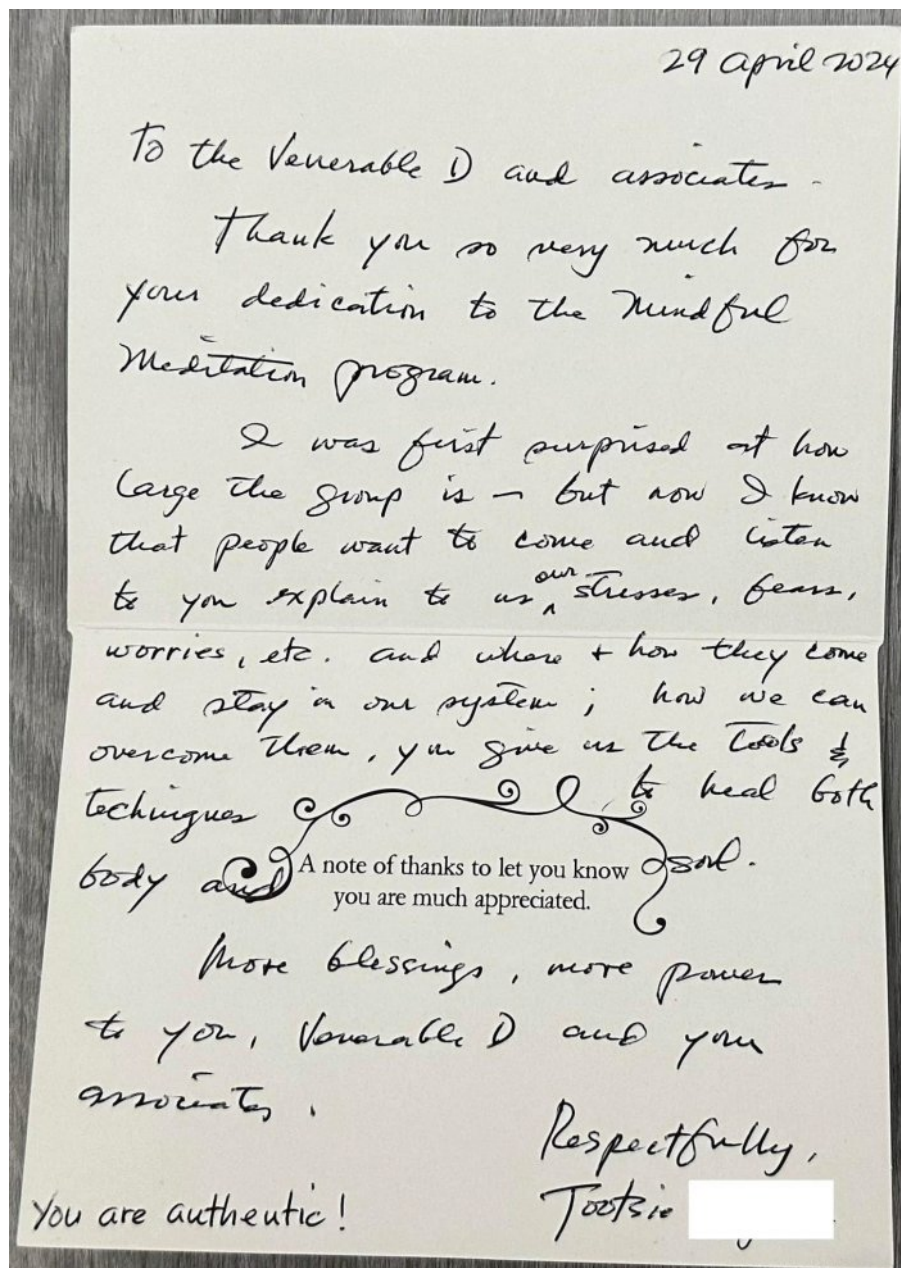




We broke for lunch at noon consisting of vegan sandwiches (from Mr. Baguette), Pringles potato chips, ICE zero beverage, honey crisp apples, and brownies (all from Costco), approved by the institution. All the food items were donated by some of our sponsors.

Ven. Ngocthanh gave a dharma talk on the life of Angulimala. There was a Q&A session and we ended the day with the ladies sharing their experiences. All were grateful to take part in the celebration.

One of the ladies sent us a thank you card, see the picture below, expressing her gratitude.





## VESAK AT CSP-LAC

by De Hong

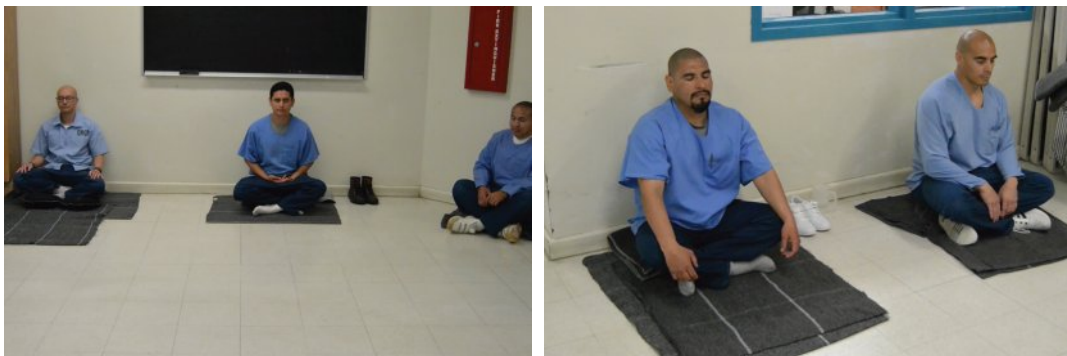
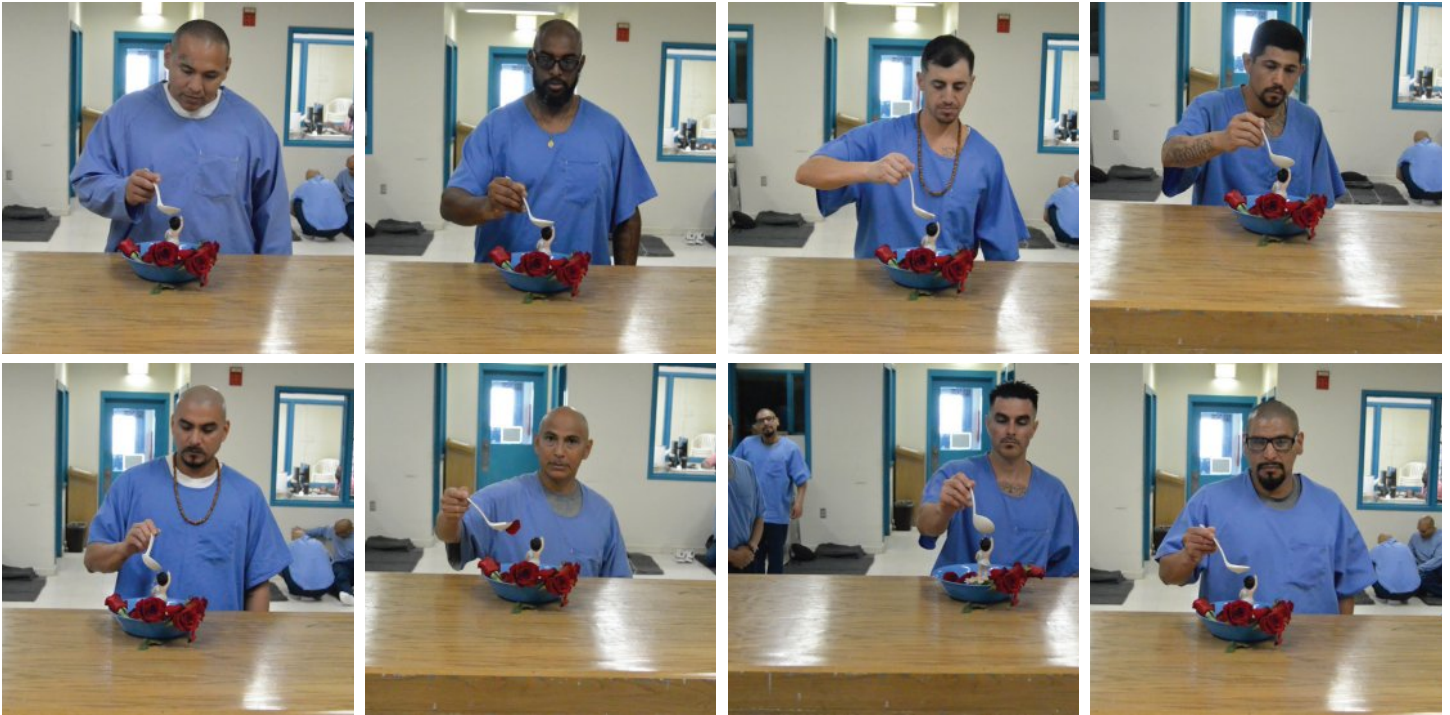


Vesak at CSP-LAC (California State Prison, Los Angeles County) was scheduled on May 7, 2024 (9am-noon) for B yard (level 4 security). Ten men came to join the celebrate the event by 10am. I asked the men to reflect on their purpose in life. We meditated for 25 minutes. I explained the meaning of Vesak and Ritual of Bathing the Baby Buddha. We had lunch at 11am. Lunch was provided by the institution. No staff was available to take pictures.

In A yard (level 3 security), Vesak was scheduled on May 14, 2024 (9am-2pm) with eleven gentlemen participating. I also asked the men the share the prompt: “What’s your purpose in life?” We meditated for approximately two hours in three sessions with breaks in between for stretching and walking meditation.

Lunch was provided by the institution at noon.

After lunch, I gave a dharma talk on the implication of water [as a form of purification] in Bathing the Baby Buddha Ritual. I asked the men to reflect on their mind states and decide what they want to work on such as anger, hatred, compassion, patience, etc. And make a vow before performing the ritual. Here are some pictures of the event.





## VESAK AT ISP

by De Hong



At ISP (Ironwood State Prison), we held a Vesak celebration in D yard (level 3 security) on May 17, 2024 (9am-3:30pm). Eleven gentlemen came to the chapel and shared the prompt “What’s your purpose in life?” to start the day. For nine of the men, it was their first time participating in the daylong.

We then meditated for almost three hours in four sessions with breaks in between. I explained the meaning of the Ritual of Bathing the Baby Buddha. Similarly, I suggested that they reflect on what they would like to work on (for example: anger, hatred, compassion, patience, etc.) and make a vow prior to performing the ritual.

At 2:30pm, we walked to the chow hall and had dinner which provided by the institution. See pictures below of our sangha.



# 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](http://www.engagedbuddhistalliance.org)

