



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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

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INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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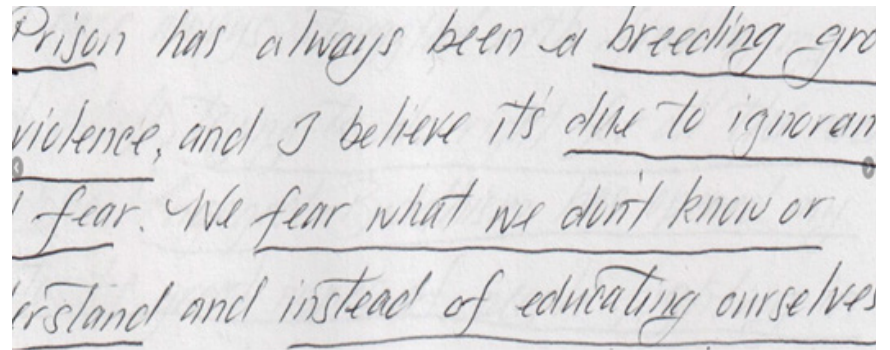
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ABOUT THE ENGAGED BUDDHIST ALLIANCE

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!



A THREAT TO THE COMMUNITY

by Irv Relova

This goes out to everyone that made it out, but most of all for those of you that are still locked up and hoping to make it out of prison. More or less 10 years ago, before the laws started changing and Prison Reforms, and those fortunate enough to go before the BPH, were often told that you need to work on yourself. However, for those of us who were locked up over 30 years ago and were sentenced To Life or LWOP (Life Without Parole), we didn't have the privilege of participating in self-help classes for our own personal growth and development. We often had to learn the hard way, take it upon ourselves to try to make our lives better, or find some kind of peace of mind before we would die in prison.

It is often difficult and painful to relive, process, and make sense of all the traumas we experienced during our childhood, which led to our crime and being imprisoned for life. Is it possible to process and make sense of these traumas? Yes. Is it also difficult and painful to relive those traumas? The answer is, very much so. The real question is, in order for you to find some kind of Peace of Mind in your life, are you willing to be really honest with yourself to try to do the work? Only you can answer that question. If you are honest with yourself and willing to do the work; well, the work continues for the rest of your life.

From my own experience of being an LWOP for 25 years, I came to a point in my life where I realized that there was more to life than just sitting there and waiting to die in prison. I had so many thoughts going through my mind that I couldn't stop and just think about one thing. At the same time, this was not beneficial in dealing with the chaos of doing life in prison. I needed to find some kind of relief to all of these exhausting and overwhelming thoughts. As everyone knows, you really can't openly talk to anyone about all your personal thoughts and feelings. Doing life in prison, not opening up to others is part of your safety and survival to protect yourself.

For me, I realize that writing down all my thoughts and feelings in a journal was very helpful. I was able to stop and take a step back and really analyze all my thoughts and actions that led me to prison. As time went on, from writing

a journal I also started my meditation practice. From my meditation practice I was able to process and make sense of all the traumas I experienced growing up which led me to commit my crime and resulting in doing life in prison. I also realized that after ending up in prison, the traumas that I experienced and lived through never really stopped. From one trauma to another. The pattern of trauma was on going, from childhood trauma - committing my crime - going to prison for life - to adulthood in prison.

As someone who grew up in a country ingrained in political corruption and violence, it was normal for me to be around and see all the police and military brutality. Much like for everyone who grew up in this country in marginalized neighborhoods surrounded by drugs, gang violence and police brutality. This was also a normal experience growing up. As someone once pointed it out to me, this is not normal for anyone to grow up normalizing these traumatic experiences.

As my meditation practice continued on for years, it turned into decades. Having a daily meditation practice brought clarity into my life to what otherwise would be chaos. The practice of mindfulness/awareness, awakened the true meaning and essence of empathy, compassion, kindness, and love in my heart. This practice gave me peace of mind — peace in my heart; and it gave me clarity into the realities of my own life, clarity into life itself.

From the time I came to prison sentence to LWOP; after my commutation, and even after I was found suitable for parole, I never expected to make it out, I expected to die in prison. I had spent more than half of my life locked up in prison. I accepted the realities of my life, and I made peace with that. I found peace in being honest with myself was the only way to really live some kind of life.

So now, after more than two decades of living with this notion of dying in prison, you go in front of the BPH who has the fate of your life in their hands. That's another traumatic experience you have to go through. You have to explain and relive all your experiences from your earliest childhood memories all the way up to the present moment



in front of the BPH. They will determine if you have done the work. You have to be able to explain to them in your own words your traumatic experiences – how that made you feel - how it affected your life – how it affected your reasoning/ frame of mind – how it affected your judgement/decision making – if and how you are rectifying all your past actions/ decisions – if and how you’re making amends for all of it. On top of that, a District Attorney will invalidate all the work you have done with no incentive of ever getting out.

After being in front of the BPH to what could be for more than 2 ½-3 hours, you’re sitting in a holding cell waiting for their decision. That in itself is another traumatic experience. You just relived over 40 years of your life in a span of hours, trying to process all of that and at the same time second guessing yourself. You are reminded of that notion of dying in prison. For some, the decision could come in less than an hour or it could take another day. When the decision comes; for the fortunate ones, you are given the words “ the BPH believes you are no longer a threat to the community”.

Herein lies the problem; even though you have worked on yourself and constantly still doing the work after you make

it out of prison, unbeknownst to you, the vast majority of people out here have never even done a fraction of the work you have done on yourself. You may no longer be a threat to the community. Please, keep this in mind, **THE COMMUNITY COULD BE A THREAT TO YOU!**

I personally know four former lifers who were in a situation where they were on the verge of going back to prison and getting their life term reinstated. Not entirely of their own doing, they were in a personal relationship where they overlooked the character flaws of their partners out of love and kindness. It is unfortunate, but the sad and painful truth is those that are the closest to you could be your downfall.

When I made it out of prison, I was asked for some advice by two of my relatives who weren’t even born when I got locked up. I simply told them not to take any bullshit from anyone, and I mean from anyone including your own family! So please heed my warning, if you make it out here be very careful of everyone you let into your life. After all the work you have done, always follow your own instincts, intuition.





MINDFULNESS

Kenton

My metta practice Has affected my mind to not be selfish. There were times when I felt irritated during practice. This made me have feelings of judgment towards others. It was a challenge early on with my practice as I was dealing with noise from others. I tend to feel anger and criticize others for being inconsiderate while I practice in the dorm.

Once I let my attachment go and concentrate on loving kindness I felt more at peace with practice. With each day of practice, I was able to send loving kindness to myself and family with ease. This in particular brought me joy. I felt connected to the words, and I believed the metta benefited those I was practicing for. I must admit there were days it was difficult to practice metta for the difficult person or those I had feelings of bitterness towards.

As weeks went on my mind was released of ill feelings and I enjoyed metta towards all. I noticed how free I was with metta practice towards myself and friends. It was when I sent metta towards those who live in my dorm who are difficult in dealing with that gave me more judgments. I was able to free myself of anger towards my dorm mates when I continue to send metta to them during my practice. There

were times I was angry at myself for allowing myself to be affected by my surroundings during practice.

My experience of metta practice allowed my mind to think of others needs in hopes of them receiving the love I was sending out. The insight I gained from this practice was, it was easy to give loving kindness towards myself and people I care about. I was challenged with the difficult people in my life. It felt as if I had to forgive myself and them in order to be free from anger. I felt peace and calm when my mind was forgiving. My heart felt kind with this practice. When my mind was in judgment of others, metta broke me free of it.

Throughout the month of practice, I felt my heart softened with love. My anger becoming just a thought rather than my actual feelings. During the entire month of practice, my thoughts became less harming and critical towards others. I was able to genuinely give loving kindness without expecting nothing in return. I did not have any thoughts of revenge during my entire practice. I gained a little more awareness in how I should care for others regardless of what they have done to me or how I would want them to be.



Pedro

Mindfulness, as a beginner to the logic, the word doesn't have a lot of impact. As I read through the chapters of the book, I came to realize that I already apply some of the state of mind to my life. The thing is, since I am astray just living life and have no foundation spiritually. I tend to forget

the ways I try to establish. Don't know what home is, I have always been in jail. Jailbird is how I come to develop my way of life. Being in an institutionalized upbringing is essential to safety of living, one wrong move and life itself can be taken from one's body.



So, mindfulness is key to my life, forced in an environment that is not ideal in everyday life. So, I've lacked and trying to remove all of my life's learned behavior and replaced with this new and improved way. Once I cleansed my mind from my problems, to begin meditation takes a while. Since everything I look at reminds me of all my life. Once I've achieved this stage of tranquility I tend to sit and relax next to my bunk and liberate my mind.

Thanks to my choices in life that not just hurting my own state of mind but that of my children. I just lost custody, to be out for adoption. Them, innocent of life have to endure the changes in their life. My recent and only marriage taking a turn to the worst and more and more of that own judgment. I made bad decisions in life, but I wish I could change the

course of my living ways. Nothing has been working, I don't know who I am, I don't know if I am even doing this right. All I know is that I will try to the hardest extent of my own life to try to get my life in a place where I can be content and bring some type of reality to it. I don't want to be a cell warrior anymore and to live a life of freedom not just to my physical form but to my mind.

As I've meditated, I've welcomed a different adjustment to my life. I need change and if I don't take charge in making or paving a new way of life before I parole there is no telling what will happen. One thing is for certain, no progress back to prison. I will better my life by giving my life to a higher power. This is all I have left.





GRATITUDE

Tottsie

I want to share with you how your teachings on mindfulness, particularly “coming back to the breath”, has so positively impacted the quality of my life and immensely improved the quality of my work at my job.

I am a sewing machine operator. Almost all of the time I would get frustrated, unable to control the speed of my machine, and have to always take down stitches. I was always holding my breath, and my shoulders, arms and leg muscles are constantly tense. I’d come back to the unit after work and have the hottest shower to relax my aches and pains. One day, though, at work I heard your voice in my head

with the words “come back to the breath.” I immediately let go of my held-up breath, inhaled and exhaled like normal, and all my muscles relax - mindfulness setting automatically and my mind-hands-feet-eyes coordination was in perfect rhythm. My sewing from then on was almost perfect. No repairs, even management noticed. I was amazed!

I am now a convert to the Buddhist tenet about the practice of mindfulness to keep calm, be less stressed, in being more focused to our thoughts and feelings of the present moment. And I have you to thank for this, De.





VESAK HELD IN C YARD ISP

by De Hong

At ISP (Ironwood State Prison), we held a Vesak celebration in C yard (level 2 security) on Jul. 19, 2024 (9am-3:30pm). Twelve gentlemen came to the chapel. We started with the prompt “What’s your purpose in life?”

We then meditated for two and a half hours in three 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 went to the chow hall and had dinner which provided by the institution. See attached pictures.







THE ONE WHO DIDN'T WALK AWAY

by Fong Sam



Ursula K. Le Guin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* is a classic—a work of philosophical fiction with profound power that sharply illuminates questions of morality and the responsibilities of a society's citizens. The story rightfully won the Hugo Award for Best Short Story in 1974. Fifty years later, in 2024, we are still grappling with the same dilemmas that Omelas explored.

In the story, the city of Omelas is a shining utopia where its citizens enjoy unparalleled happiness and abundance. But this prosperity hinges on the perpetual misery of a single child. No one knows why or how this arrangement came to be—only that it must remain so for the happiness of the city to continue. Most of the citizens quietly accept this tradeoff, choosing not to dwell on it. After all, you can't change it, so why worry? However, a few refuse to accept this condition for their well-being. They reject the paradigm. Powerless to alter the system, all they can do is leave. These are the ones who walk away from Omelas.

Omelas, of course, is a fantasy world, a caricature rather than a replica of our own. Yet, like all caricatures, it holds a mirror to truth. The metaphor of the suffering child could represent many things—name any societal ill, and you could likely make a case. What strikes me most, however, is the apathy of Omelas's majority. The futility of change causes some to resign themselves to inaction and others to simply leave.

This is where I most admire Venerable De Hong. For over a decade, he has confronted the systemic ills of mass incarceration, social injustice rooted in systemic bias, and the refusal to recognize Buddhism within the agreement between the State of California and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). As a Buddhist monk, De Hong fights these battles in the only way consistent with the Dharma: by doing the next right thing, day after day.

For him, this has meant persistently applying for access to California state prisons until it was granted; faithfully leading meditation groups for incarcerated individuals; offering refuge in the Buddha's teachings to anyone willing to listen; tirelessly seeking resources such as books, stamps, and volunteers; and doing all of this with unwavering generosity, compassion, and perseverance. His devotion to addressing one of society's greatest injustices began with a single day. Days became weeks, weeks became months, months became years—and now those years span a decade.

In Omelas, the conscientious could only walk away, faced with the impossibility of change. It can feel equally impossible to confront entrenched injustices in our world. Yet De Hong has refused to walk away. I deeply admire his efforts, and I hope more people come to recognize the magnitude of what he has done. That's why it's so exciting that a short documentary about De Hong's life and work exists. *On My Road to Dharma* debuted this past July at the World Culture Film Festival. This poignant film portrays De Hong's life through moving vignettes with incarcerated individuals, juxtaposed against the grim reality of imprisonment. At just twenty minutes long, it's a rare piece of art—provoking deep reflection in the briefest span of time.

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

