



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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

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INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

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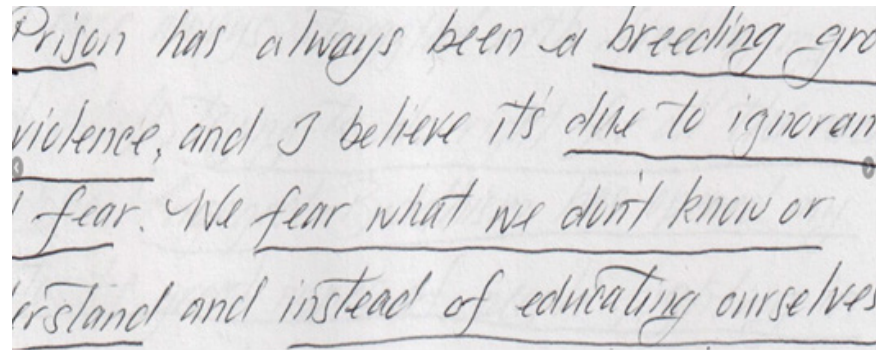
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We are a group of current and former university students who joined together around the idea that Buddhist-informed education can help incarcerated individuals and society break the cycle of incarceration.

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!



OLD HABITS

by Irv Relova

I recently just got over this cold and cough virus that lasted for three weeks. It was no surprise to me how I caught this virus. I was visiting my mentee in a lock up facility. Four days after I visited him, I had a full blown cold and everything else that came with it. At first, I thought I was just having my usual allergy with sneezing and runny nose, so I took some allergy meds. Also, I went about my usual daily routine and not thinking much else about it. A day later, that's when it really hit me. The sneezing, runny nose, and congestion was something I've never experienced before, it lasted more than three days. After that, the weakness in my body also lasted for almost a whole week. The cough lasted for about two weeks.

Throughout this whole ordeal, every day I still kept trying to do my daily routine and not fully resting as I should. At first, I kept wondering why this virus was lasting this long. It even crossed my mind that I might have COVID, but I knew the symptoms were not that at all. With mindfulness, then I realized a few things. First, I wasn't resting. 2nd, I'm not in my 20s and 30s anymore. Lastly, I'm not locked up anymore either.

Initially when I first thought it was my allergies, I figured the meds will kick in eventually. Then I started noticing that it was getting worse, and I was feeling weak and drained than usual. So, I started to really take it easy and get fully rested. When I was resting that's when I reminded myself that I'm not in my 20s and 30s. For someone who is going to hit 50 in a couple of months, I have to remind myself that my body takes a lot longer to recover now. Although I'm still quite healthy and fit and still able to do my workout like I did for decades in prison it is my body that reminds me that I'm not that quite young anymore. This is often the case for those of us that spent decades in prison. Out of habit, we tend to push ourselves to keep working and do our daily routine. At some point, we unconsciously push ourselves to catch up and make up for the time we lost while in prison. It's not until we hit a wall that we realize that we are eventually hurting ourselves physically and mentally.

Fortunately for me, it is through my daily meditation and mindfulness practice that I am able to catch myself and balance my life physically, mentally, and spiritually. To be fully in the present moment.



RECOGNIZING SUFFERING: ABUSE, ADDICTION, AND ABANDONMENT

by Margaret Meloni

As a teenager, I could not wait to pass the driving test and earn my driver's license. The ability to drive places without one of my parents made me feel grown up and independent. Along with that shiny new driver's license came another card. The AAA or "Triple A" card. AAA or the American Automobile Association. My father gifted me this card because AAA provided roadside assistance. If you had a flat tire or your car broke down by the side of the road, you called AAA. They would send a tow truck with someone to help you. And because they were associated with the AAA, you felt safer than if some random stranger pulled up alongside you.

Visiting one of our California state prisons, I learned about another form of the three A's. These were passed down to teenagers and young children. Perhaps a father, mother, or other family member or guardian introduced them. And nothing about these three A's led to a feeling of safety.

Abuse, addiction, and abandonment are the three A's that many men and women inherited from their families. And the result is devastating. When the people you depend on harm you, when they are unable to think clearly, and when they disappear – in death, incarceration, or just move on; you have to fend for yourself. And it's not easy to make wise decisions when young, afraid, and hungry. Perhaps you find another type of family unit to adopt you. This gang has your back; they will help you. They will also use abuse, addiction, and threats of abandonment to control you. It's a story that I have read about or heard about too many times.

I'm not saying that every incarcerated individual experienced abuse, addiction, and abandonment. I'm not

saying that every person who experiences abuse, addiction, and abandonment will end up incarcerated. I am saying, pay attention, to the pattern. There is a cycle, a family tradition, acknowledge these damaging behaviors. We learn from the people around us. If we are not careful, we repeat the pattern. Now, I am not offering any of this as an excuse. What I am suggesting is that to know the root cause is to begin to find a way to a new pattern.

In Buddhism, we discuss the Four Noble Truths. The truth of suffering, the reason we suffer, the fact that there is a way out, and the Noble Eightfold Path as a way out of suffering. Often, three causes are named: greed, hatred, and delusion. You can see how one high leads to the desire for more (greed), and the crimes committed or the thoughts that surface while chasing that high can be forms of hatred and delusion. This is a very casual observation. There is much more depth to it than that. These causes of suffering are also called the unskillful roots. And to break the cycle of suffering, you need to pull out those roots. Like you would do with weeds or unwanted invasive plants.

Some roots can be removed easily. Others take more time and effort and research. And your Buddhist practice will help you to identify your roots. A specific Buddhist teaching or a meditation practice (ideally both) is your tool to help you remove those unskillful roots. And we all have unskillful roots. Maybe from the three A's, or some other conditioning, but we all have work to do. Consistency is key. What happens if you pull weeds from a garden but then neglect that garden? The weeds return. Keep tending your inner garden. This is the way out of suffering.



DHARMA STUDY

by Carl

I have studied the Four Noble Truth many times. It's good to review the basics, especially the most central teaching of Buddhism. Plus, each teacher has their own unique way of presenting this, and new twist that can lead me to deeper insight.

For me, the most beneficial idea was found in the chapter on the Second Noble Truth. I had thought simply that desire is a cause of suffering. But Ajahn Sumedho teaches that it's the clinging to the desire that causes suffering, not desire itself.

Using the example of desire for some yummy food, it's natural that when I smell someone grilling a cinnamon

honeybun, I instinctively want some. The important idea is to not let myself get caught up in the thoughts and emotions of craving this. That would cause me suffering from not having one for myself. Instead, I can mindfully enjoy the sweet smell while otherwise keeping my mind quiet and peaceful, and thereby avoid the expense, calories, and resulting tummy ache.

I look forward to continuing my Buddhist studies with your classes and will mindfully await my next course packet.

PRACTICE

by Edwin

This past week, I feel like I've made some stride in my mindfulness practice when I meditate in the mornings! I recognized how while meditating sometimes in the morning, I allow my mind and attention to wander aimlessly rather than returning to my breath and it's like I am stuck in my thinking mind, not even intentional with practicing mindfulness (I hope I articulated my experience in a clear way that's not confusing). So now I remind myself to gently return to my breath, I get a brief moment of presence. This week has taught me that mindfulness requires PRACTICE, a lot of INTENTIONAL practice.

Also, I have known for a while now that being an only child and experiencing that constant state of loneliness has taken a toll on me. On some days, I have become too dependent on external validation and outside sources of attention for me to feel a fleeting moment of happiness. My goal now is to cultivate a sense of joy within myself while feeling confident that I can be independent. I truly believe that one day I will experience the love that I long for, but it won't be true nor genuine until I can sincerely cultivate that sense of happiness and love within me on my own.



THE HOLIDAYS

by Ajita

The holidays can present more difficulty to the already difficult times of life in prison. This season marks not only the end of another year of life spent away from my family but also the beginning of the new year that I'll spend separated from them. It is a lot to deal to with, transitioning from one year to the next for the twenty first time and counting. But it is also a time to be grateful for my practice. I am grateful that I have the dharma to lean on during the difficult moments of my life. It helps me shift my perspective and practice metta as I wish the best for everyone during the holidays days. I can experience appreciate joy knowing there lots of people having a wonderful time celebrating

with their loved ones. I can also practice compassion for myself and my family for the suffering of our separation. Focusing on this, I also think about the family of the young man I murdered around this time of year twenty one years ago. I practice compassion for them as I reflect on the pain they must feel from his absence. I am then reminded of how interconnected we all are and why I decided to take refuge in a life that does not cause harm. Having the dharma in my life helps me turn life's difficult moments into opportunities to grow in my practice all year round and more so during the holidays.



EBA'S SECOND ANNUAL REUNION

Dec. 31, 2025. A group of some fifteen formerly incarcerated individuals came, as a sangha, to celebrate the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025. All have been busy working and taking care of their families since their release. Everyone was able to catch up with one another since most didn't have time to meet during the year. This was a chance for everyone to reconnect and support each other in the free world. Here are a couple pictures of the free 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