



INSIDE

ENGAGEMENTS

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



IN THIS ISSUE

Insights

**The Bittersweet of
Guilt and Gratitude**
by Irv Relova

Page 1

Doing Life, Doing Practice

Right Resolve
by Citta

Page 4

Growth
by Viet

Page 4

Meditation
by Dzung

Page 5

Perspective

Meditation
by Jose V.

Page 6



INSIDE ENGAGEMENTS

A quarterly publication of
Engaged Buddhist Alliance

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Venerable De Hong, Co-Founder
John Brown
Margaret Meloni, Co-Founder
Mark Scott
Bill Taing

STAFF & VOLUNTEERS

Christopher Johnson
Rachel Goodrich
Irving Relova
Eric Tran

CONTACT

Engaged Buddhist Alliance
1409 Walnut Grove Ave.
Rosemead, CA 91770
(877) 990-7455

DESIGN & LAYOUT

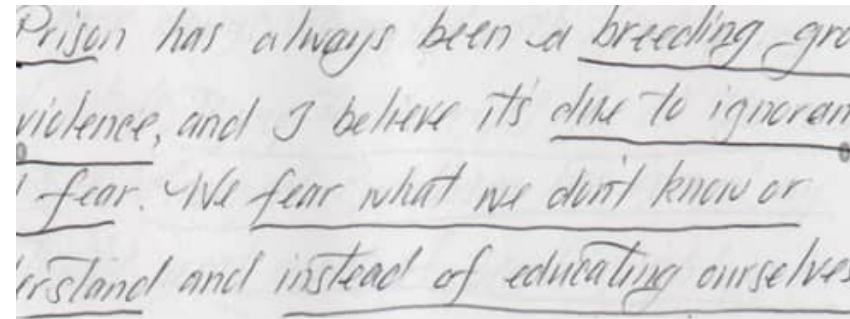
Fong Sam



Perspective

THE BITTERSWEET OF GUILT AND GRATITUDE

By Irv Relova



ABOUT 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.

To learn how you can support Engaged Buddhist Alliance, please visit www.engagedbuddhistalliance.org.

Thank you for your continued support!

Two weeks ago, I received a message from my boss asking me to call her when I got a minute. She said, "I need to talk to you". When I received this message, I was kind of concerned because normally all our work calls are scheduled so this was out of the ordinary. Also, my boss would not send me a message like this unless it was really important.

I called her and as soon as she answered, I knew something was wrong. She was crying. She proceeded to tell me that one of our coworkers was in a fatal head on collision the night before and she did not make it. At the time, she was with her closest cousin and her dog. They were on their way to Yosemite National Park to watch Horsetail Fall, the phenomenon is reminiscent of the human-caused Firefall that historically occurred from Glacier Point. Unfortunately, her cousin also did not make it. However, her dog survived.

I have to say, even though I have known this coworker only for a short time, her tragic and sudden death really hit me hard. Her warm beautiful smile was always welcoming to everyone she met. She was always kind, compassionate, and understanding especially with those of us who were formerly incarcerated lifers. When we were in meetings, she was always in awe and wide eyed and always paid close attention to all the knowledge, wisdom, and experience we shared with the group. At times, she would timidly say "I wasn't even born when you guys were in prison", which always gave us a good laugh. She was one week short from turning 23 years old. Her birthday was March 1st. Her funeral was March 8th. Rest in Peace Lynh. May you find Peace and Happiness in the next life. Om Mani Padme Hum.

This month also marks my birthday and whenever that day comes around, I always have mixed emotions.

I was arrested on my 19th birthday and for decades whenever that day came around, I can vividly remember the sheriff deputies banging the door at 5:30 in the morning. The sights, the sounds, and the sense of adrenaline from those around me was palpable.

From then on, my birthday became a bittersweet day full of guilt and gratitude. But it was not just because I got locked up on my birthday. Even after studying the Dharma and understanding the causes and effects of Karma, there is still a part of me that questions how and why I get to live longer than some people. A part of me feels that I do not deserve to live this long.

That feeling of guilt started for me when I turned 38 years old in prison. I felt undeserving and guilty of living longer than my father. My father passed away when he was 37. It was after he died that I found out that I was adopted. My biological mother was pregnant with me out of wedlock, and she was going to have an abortion. He stepped in to take another man's responsibility and raised me as his own son. He gave me the opportunity of life. I am eternally grateful for the gift he has given me.

Now that I turned 50, those same feelings of guilt are eating me up. My brother died when he was 49. For the last 15 years of the 25 years I did in prison, my whole family abandoned and forgot about me. My brother was the only one that kept in touch with me for more than two decades even though he was living in the Philippines. He even came to visit me twice. The last time we saw each other was three years before I got locked up, I was 16 years old, and he was 22. When he came to visit me in prison for the first time, I was 42 and he was 48. The second time he came to visit me it was eight months before I made it out of prison. That last time we saw each other, he died three



weeks after he came to visit me. One of the last things he told me was, “just come home I will be waiting for you.”

In over 20 years of studying, practicing, and meditating on the Dharma I can honestly say that I have sufficient grasp and understanding of the teachings. I understand that there is a balance in everything in life. With life, also comes death. Every living being at some point in time will die. From the time we are conceived, we are one step closer to death. Each breath that we let go is a piece of our life that passes by. The impermanence of it all is that eventually we are all going to die. At a very young age that is one of the realities of life that I have accepted.

From my own experience, what hurts the most about the reality of death is not being able to let the person you love know how grateful you are for them and how much they meant in your life. Not being able to let them know how much of a difference they made in your life is painful. Not being able to share significant milestones in your life. Not being able to hear the sound of their voice anymore. Not being able to feel their arms around you to comfort you. Not being able to let them know how much you love them every single day.

The pain, the grief, and the suffering of death is not something you move on from. It is a heartache that you learn to live with. They are physically gone but as long as you keep them in your heart they will always live on. From the time of my father’s death to my brother, to my friend Lynh, and everyone else in between, in my heart they will always live on.

It is bittersweet to live this long. I will never get a chance to experience more time with those loved ones. But I am very grateful for this life I have and for the brief time and memories I shared with them. I will honor my father for the life he has given me, the bond my brother shared with me, and the friendship my friends shared with me. I made a vow to try to live the rest of my life with love, kindness, and compassion for

all living beings, to enjoy and be grateful for the beauty of every single day of life, to just keep trying no matter how challenging and heartbreaking life is.

I am grateful to reunite with a few former LWOPs who made it out and with other former lifers whom I created bonds with through decades of adversity. For the friends that are still doing life in prison, they are not forgotten and alone. I will stand by them and wait until they all make it out.

For over two decades of doing LWOP, there were times I was drowning in grief and hopelessness. I was at the edge of my line, and at times it crossed my mind, and I contemplated checking out. For some reason I always found myself taking a deep breath, to hold on and move forward for another day. The last time I came to that point, my wife came into my life, and she gave me the reason to move forward and reminded me of the beauty that still remains, and that life is a gift. A gift of an opportunity.

I know at times it is difficult to see beyond the pain, the suffering, the grief, and the heartache when we are right in the middle of it and drowning in that bottomless pit of hopelessness. A good friend of mine once said, “Once in a while stop and look back at your life and see how far you have come. Give yourself some credit and appreciate what you have overcome.”

Life is full joy and happiness. But I admit, there are times it does feel overwhelmingly that the pain, the grief, and the heartache far outweighs the joy and happiness. Once we live through those challenging moments in life, we should look back and take comfort in what we have overcome. For those that have moved on to the next life, they will never get a chance to experience the gifts this life has to offer.

In this mystery of life, to fully live, we must experience the bittersweetness of guilt and gratitude with an awareness of this present moment. The past is gone, and we cannot live in it, but we can always learn from it. The future, no one knows what the future holds.



Tomorrow is not promised. All we have is this present moment.

It was a year ago the day after my birthday that our sweet boy Joey moved on to the next life. My heart still aches... I am grateful that he shared the rest of his life with us.





DOING LIFE, DOING PRACTICE

Right Resolve

by Citta

Lately, I find myself realizing why one of the Eightfold Path is called Right Resolve. Because those times when I felt depressed or anxious, replacing unskillful thoughts and perception takes more than intention and effort.

But a firm resolve to continue when life becomes unbearable. To continue until you replace one behavior with another, until a new behavior becomes a habit, and eventually a part of your personality.



Growth

by Viet

Your recognition of my growth is very encouraging, it keeps me motivated, inspired, and humbled. My growth has reached areas of my life that I wouldn't have expected like my educational curiosity. Once there were lots of fear and insecurity when it came to my education. There was this quiet belief I was not good enough. Now it is not the case; nor will I allow my fear to keep me still and silent. My fear is there but it doesn't dictate how I respond to the world. If anything, I embrace it.

One of my spiritual goals is to live peacefully where violence towards self and others are not an option. Your presence and other spiritual teachers who have come into my life invigorates and inspires me. At

sangha a few months back, one of our Buddhist volunteers asked who would like to do a Dharma talk. Any subject that centered around their spiritual practice.

I faced my fear and did it. I spoke about violence towards others and self. Today, violence doesn't necessarily have to be physical. I could use judgement, criticism, sarcasm or being short with someone. Those behaviors highlight how I used to be violent towards others. I also am well aware of how I have conversations with myself. I don't allow violence within my thoughts, and when it comes, I recognize it. To live peacefully from within is a choice I am cultivating daily.



Meditation

by Dzung

I would like to share with you a little progress of my meditation practice. After five years of continuous sitting, I can finally get a taste of brief stillness, allowing me to see that self is nothing but a mere thought. When the thought of the self, such as I, me, or my arises, the mind immediately grasps it and believes it is real. During meditation, concentration enables me to relax this self-grasping; however, during normal activities, this self-grasping is also instinctual, and it is difficult to not identify with it.

For example, I am deeply convinced that this body/mind has no owner; however, when something happens to the body, I am very self-conscious. I had an

infected tooth extracted two weeks ago. I feel embarrassed when I smile. I have also reconnected with several high school friends, who are very successful. A sense of inferiority and shame emerges when I interact with them, even though they reassure me they still have love and respect for me.

These adequate feelings contradict my conviction of not-self. Peeling many layers of this delusion will take many lifetimes of practice.





Perspective

MEDITATION

By Jose V.

I want to share and let everyone know the power and impact of meditation and how it affected me positively in my life! I'm inside my cell for 21 hours every day until one time per week, we get asked if we choose to go to rec for at least one hour and a half. As I did majority of my time in cell living, I wish I had this mentality I have at this moment as well as this life saving coping mechanisms and meditation! Doing my time here in the county jail sucks but I've done 10 years and to be honest I don't even know how I did it, but I did it! I've been meditating for about one and a half years now and I started by listening for once and got good outcome. I listen to my case manager (Ms. D), my mentors (Irv, Crystal, and Flaco) and I'm grateful and blessed for actively listening to my influencers and role models that are preaching positive deeds, not lies as I grew up following!

When I started, I was building my way up little by little doing 5 minutes at first and then working my way up to now 5-20 minutes daily. I do a variety of meditations not just typically one in particular, it all depends on how I'm feeling that exact day. I do Box-breathing, Body scan, and Standing meditation, and this one is my favorite so I can calm my nerves down. This is also referred to as Box-breathing because it consist of inhaling through the nose for 5 second count, then hold for 5 second count, then exhale through the mouth for 5 seconds and finally hold again for 5 second count and repeat same process at least 4-8 times. My favorite meditation, Box-breathing it calms me down and makes me aware of my now and fully energized to tackle any obstacle at hand.

Lately for about a week I've been dealing with lots of pain, struggle, and worries. Not just within my family or loved ones but with my friend I call my brother/son

(J.J.R.)! We became very close and call each other family and brothers because we were cellies before for at least 8 to 9 months. I know and understand some of you will be thinking that is not a lot of time but when you live and experience living together for that amount of time, as well as going through thick and thin like eating, laughing, starving, suffering, and knowing each other's childhood upbringing and trauma too, then you'll know where I'm coming from.

I'm thankful, blessed, and gifted to be kind hearted and have unlimited love, peace, and respect for my brother (J.J.R.) and being a part of his rehabilitation and positive new life and vision, as well working together to save and influence lives all over the world! I tend to feel guilty and ashamed of myself whenever my brother goes through dark times, and I've been fearing that for about a year and I finally faced it. I still remember that day I talked to my brother over the GTL phone, and he immediately sounded horrible and broken. But with a few minutes, I asked him to open up and he then told me the heartbreaking and painful news he received. He told me that he was very crushed and broken about what the actual story of how his father's death occurred, and he has been hearing other theories. I felt good, but after felt pain, useless and not being able to be with my brother during the hard times and uplift him as much as I can!

I then started to immediately meditate for about 10 minutes. I felt rested, rejuvenated and felt relieved and joyful that I was in the now and aware! I tend to have so much care, love, and respect for my brother that at times it sucks my joy and put me into depression but like I tell everyone, "Blessings comes from the burdens we encounter, all we got to do is find the purpose and not let go of the bigger picture!"



As for me, the blessings come with pain and stress but that had to happen in order for me and my brother (J.J.R.) can be united, support and realize that we are loyal to each other despite the good but the bad as well! That is true, unique, and loyal friendship!

Jose V. is incarcerated in the OC County Jail. He was arrested at 17 years old and is still awaiting trial for 10 years pending his juvenile hearing suitability.

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.



Engaged Buddhist Alliance
1409 Walnut Grove Ave.
Rosemead, CA 91770
(877) 990-7455

For more information about Engaged Buddhist Alliance, access resources, and view past newsletters, please visit www.engagedbuddhistalliance.org.