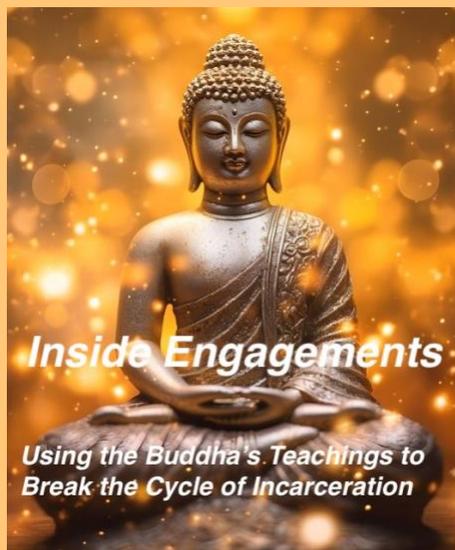


# Engaged Buddhist Alliance



Visiting California State Prisons since 2013.



A quarterly publication of the Engaged Buddhist Alliance.

**In this edition, two of our community members share the challenges that come when the world around us forgets compassion. One other member reminds us of a helpful practice.**

# Political Trauma

By Irv Relova

I was born in the Philippines in the midst of martial law from 1972 - 1981, under the administration of a dictatorship. Some of my earliest memories were of military and police checkpoints. The blatant corruption and violence were rampant. If you get pulled over for any “traffic violations” by the police, just pay them some cash and they’ll let you go. The same goes for the military; if you’re traveling from one province/state to another, you have to have a travel permit/pass. If not, you just give them some cash, and they’ll let you through. Intimidation, extortion, kidnappings, and bribery were common practice. Political violence permeated throughout the whole country, whether it’s torture, assassinations, and executions.

The worst times were during elections; it didn’t matter whether it was local, state, or national. The political violence escalated significantly. We lived in the outskirts of the city where it was mostly an isolated rural area. Loud sounds would echo in the distance for miles. I remember a time when the political violence was so rife that I could hear gunshots just about every night. Then the next day we would find out from the newspaper that someone was executed not far from where we lived. Even though martial law was officially lifted in 1981, the country was still being run like it were still martial law.

I left the Philippines 37 years ago, but all those memories are still in my consciousness. The **distrust** for the government, the police, and those *with* power was and still is normal to this day. Growing up in a country like that was normal. After living here in the U.S. all these years, I realize this is not normal. Those days may have been long gone, but much like my 25 years in prison, they will always be a part of who I am. A memory that will never be forgotten.

At the beginning of this year, I had the opportunity to visit the Philippines after almost four decades. However, when this new administration came to office, my plans changed. From my experience of living in a country under martial law, my instincts instantly kicked in. For me, all the indications were telling me that things were about to get bad, and it's going to be worse. It was no surprise to see the National Guard deployed in a major city. ICE agents were conducting checkpoints around the city and going into residential areas and taking people from their homes or places of employment.

When all of this started, without hesitation and in a calm and collected way, my survival instincts immediately kicked in. From my childhood experience I immediately started thinking of what to do if things got worse and we would have to just lay low and stay home. If everything were to shut down, we would have to make sure that there would be enough essentials in the house to last us at least 30 to 90 days, including food, water, and medicine. Whenever I leave the house to drive out, I check a map to see which cities would possibly have checkpoints. Now, whenever I leave the house, I always carry my passport and a copy of my certificate of citizenship.

I keep in touch with a number of formerly incarcerated US citizens. The fact that ICE is blatantly profiling people that are Hispanics, Asians, and those that "do not speak English" really well are getting picked up. I advised them to carry their passports every time they would head out. At first, they couldn't believe what I was saying; they thought I was overreacting.

I reminded them that even though they are US citizens, just the fact that they were formally incarcerated, their whole record will show up in a federal database. That's all it takes for them to put us in custody under "suspicious circumstances". To meet their quota, an "arrest" is an arrest whether you're citizen or not. And that process could take at least two weeks to 30 days for someone to be cleared and released.

Let me get one thing clear, I'm not taking any political sides. I do not like politics, and I do not like politicians. They're all full of s#!t. Before this administration came into office, numerous people that lived, witnessed, and survived dictators in their own country gave the warning to Americans to be cautious, vigilant, and defend their oath to the US Constitution.

Unfortunately, a lot of people chose to ignore these warnings and have that notion of "it could never happen here". For some, they ignored it because it does not affect them. The fact that the bad news is already here, indicates that it is only a matter of time for things to get worse and it's only a matter of time when it will affect those who thought that it wouldn't affect them.

## Mental Noting

By Citta

*While at work at the optical shop, I notice irritation growing in my mind as I try and hurry. As I hurry, I make mistakes that further increase the irritation.*

*So I stop, take a deep breath, bringing mindfulness back to the body. I start my work again, but at a slower pace.*

*Mentally noting my body movements as I go. Soon the irritating thoughts and sensations in my body begin to subside. And I can begin to smile again. And the next time the impulse to hurry arises, I note it, and carry on noting my movements.*

*Work has been far less stressful.*

## **An Excerpt from Honoring Obon**

*A time of memory, lament, and rededication*

*This article first appeared on Blayne Higa's blog, "[Hearing the Light: Thoughts on Dharma and Life.](#)"*

**Rev. Blayne Higa** is the resident minister at Hawaii's Kona Hongwanji Buddhist Temple.

Each summer, we celebrate Obon as a time to remember our ancestors and offer gratitude for the lives they have given us. The enduring lessons they shared with us are the values by which we strive to live every day. During Obon, I recall my grandparents, Yasuo and Hatsuyo Higa, who were sugar cane farmers in Hilo, and how they instilled in me the values of family, hard work, and kindness. These values ground my life and inform the way I care for and treat others with dignity, compassion, and respect.

These are relatively common values that we all share as human beings, but recent events in our country have given me pause to question how our actions align with our values. Parents and educators alike recognize that modeling appropriate behavior is the most effective way to instruct children. This places immense responsibility on parental figures and those in authority to lead by example. Obon reminds us that we are links between the past and the future, ever responsible for creating a meaningful world for future generations. Of how we are becoming good ancestors through all that we think, say, and do.

Over the past several months, we have witnessed the forced separation of migrant families through incarceration and deportation without due process, the activation of our military against American citizens, the deliberate targeting and harming of our hungry, our poor, our sick, our elderly, our disabled, our queer youth, and our most vulnerable in society, and the physical, verbal, and spiritual violence being wrought on those we disagree

with; we need to deeply reflect on our values and the example we are setting for the next generation.

Authentic leadership is not about power but about the responsibility we have to act with integrity and consideration, guided by our shared humanity and values.

I recently heard of how some young people today think it is amusing to give the Nazi salute because they see it being done by those with influence and power. This kind of modeling is the exact opposite of what our ancestors would want for us. It diminishes our painful and dark history and disrespect the suffering of those who experienced genocide at the hands of an authoritarian regime. Becoming a good ancestor also means learning from our past mistakes so that history does not repeat itself. We have a responsibility to right past wrongs and to heal past traumas so we can build more humane and just world for all who come after us.

Kuleana is a beautiful Hawaiian word that describes our deep sense of responsibility, our privilege, and our contribution to the community in which we live. It signifies a powerful and sacred relationship with the land and with one another, emphasizing our profound interconnectedness. It reminds us that authentic leadership is not about power but about the responsibility we have to act with integrity and consideration, guided by our shared humanity and values.

Sadly, many leaders today have forgotten the importance of shared responsibility and human decency that underlie proper behavior. From trivializing political violence to engaging in questionable personal dealings and showing a callous disregard for the suffering and harm caused by unmerciful policy changes, this lack of empathy and ethical conduct weakens our values and character as a nation.

In a teaching on the responsibilities of a leader from the Anguttara Nikaya, Shakyamuni Buddha offers the following wisdom:

*When cattle are crossing a ford,  
if the chief bull goes crookedly,  
all the others go crookedly  
because their leader has gone crookedly.  
So too, among human beings,  
when the one considered the chief  
behaves unrighteously,  
other people do so as well.  
The entire kingdom is dejected  
if the king is unrighteous.  
When cattle are crossing a ford,  
if the chief bull goes straight across,  
all the others go straight across  
because their leader has gone straight.  
So too, among human beings,  
when the one considered the chief  
conducts himself righteously,  
other people do so as well.  
The entire kingdom rejoices  
if the king is righteous.*

As our spiritual ancestor, the Buddha taught us to turn our minds away from violence and hatred, to refrain from harmful talk, to use our words wisely, and to ensure our deeds are rooted in peace and goodwill. This timeless and universal wisdom about how we should live and treat others is part of the noble eightfold path, which we strive to follow wholeheartedly. Our leaders have a responsibility to model these core human values for the benefit of everyone. How would we assess the actions of our current leaders in light of the Buddha's sage advice?

Obon is a time for honoring our ancestors by reflecting on the values they passed down to us. I celebrate my grandparents by sincerely living and

giving voice to the values they taught me. How are we honoring our family and our nation's ancestors through the cruel and unjust ways we are acting today?

During this Obon season, may the lanterns of memory and lament illuminate our journey of self-reflection and rededication to living and sharing the values of our ancestors, so that we may fulfill our responsibility to leave this world a little better than we found it. May this celebration of joyful memory remind us of what good leadership is and who we can be if we hold true to our values. Namo Amida Butsu.



Thank you for your donation.

### **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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