

In Their Own Words:

Reflections on Practice, Challenges and Aspirations, Part Two

**by inmates at Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP)
and Coffee Creek Correctional Facility (CCCF)
Compiled and presented by Randi Getsushin Brox**

Practice

While individual commitments vary, almost all the inmates who contributed to this article report that they have a practice of some kind. At first the commitment may be simply to attend group meetings. The next step is to start a sitting practice, first occasionally, then regularly. A woman at Coffee Creek writes: “I sit for fifteen to twenty-five minutes and just pay attention to movement in my body that is caused by the breath.”

Several people tell us that their commitment has gradually deepened over time: “My practice in the beginning was just to come to classes, and meditate when I could find a quiet moment in the noisy and chaotic atmosphere in here. As I progressed and saw that even the short meditations I did helped me to have more calmness, I became a regular attendant of our Meditation group. Since that time I have developed a daily practice that I can do no matter what is going on around me. The noise becomes like your thoughts, you just do not make a story around them, and you come back to your breath if distractions arise.”

A man at OSP describes his practice in the following way: “I have been involved in Buddhist practice for two years now. I sit in the morning for one hour; I take refuge and offer my day for the purpose of making others happy. In the evening I practice a simple Vajrasattva ritual and visualization. I sit for about thirty minutes, then dedicate merit. I also study for at least two hours throughout the day.” He adds that he would like to make a formal commitment soon.

A woman at CCCF tells us: “This practice is, I believe, the most important thing I’ve done in the six years I’ve been in prison. I went from meditating just once a week to meditating daily, and on some days I meditate several times. I do sitting meditation daily, I do metta meditation several times a week, and I also do a tonglen meditation sometimes. This practice allows me to deal with soul-crushing stress without any

meds. I took the precepts eighteen months ago, and I have genuinely lived adhering to those as much as I can.”

A man who has been in our OSP group since its inception in 1999 writes: “I sit, breathe, and daily work on living the Eightfold Noble Path.”

Benefits of Practice

In our groups we focus on transforming negative emotions (greed, anger and ignorance) that lead to suffering into positive ones (love, compassion, joy and equanimity). All the contributors acknowledge that the practice has been of benefit to them.

One of our members writes: “My practice gives me a method to achieve calm and a sense of safety.” Another comments: “My Buddhist meditation helps me calm both my mind, body, and anxiety.” And a Vietnam vet tells us: “Meditation made it easier for me to live with my PTSD and has made me a lot better person.”

Anger and reactivity are significant problems in prison communities, and learning to release the constant tension is transformative. A young man explains: “I used to be angry all the time. Now I go days and weeks without getting angry. I am very patient and tolerant. And I am happy most every day.”

A man on death row describes the impact meditation has had on his life in this way: “I struggle with the written word and strange terms, but I have found that with Buddhism, if you are exposed to it long enough it begins to seep into your pores — at least the important aspects seem to. When we first met I spent most of my time banging my head against the wall, arguing, yelling and carrying on like an idiot. As I learned to breathe, things greatly improved. Sitting, being present moment to moment, breathing, I have begun to release the noise and the conflicts that inhabit my head. I have to constantly practice this or it doesn’t work as well.”

A medium security woman confides: “I used to be so anxious and my mind did a lot of chattering. When I feel my mind doing this I can meditate and accept things as they are. I need not change a thing about what’s going on around me. All I can do is change how I react to events outside of me. I can be at peace with all types of people and events. I am learning how to recognize certain emotions, allow myself to feel them in my body, let them pass through, and not let them linger in my being. This has led to less stress, less anger, fewer conflicts. I’m less judgmental of others.”

Several of the writers reflect on the importance of staying in the present moment: “The changes I feel are more peace inside and clarity in my thoughts. I like being with

myself much more these days. It's helping me with acceptance and letting go, and with staying in the here and now."

"My meditation practice has helped me face each day. I used to be practically suicidally depressed. Now I have the ability to focus on just this day, which makes the long sentence tolerable. I'm far calmer, experience much less anxiety, and am more focused and connected."

"I have been using my practice to stay present. When my mind wants to go in a million different directions I can come back to my breath, this moment, and accept and appreciate my life right now."

One of the benefits of practice is self acceptance. The teachings on Buddha nature or "basic goodness" are extremely important for incarcerated people, who are constantly being told that they are "bad" or "unworthy". Practice is helping them to let go of self-hatred and has given them a new and more hopeful view of their own humanity.

One person writes: "Yes, my practice has definitely changed me, specifically the concept of 'basic goodness'. I think I always wanted to believe in 'basic goodness,' but was constantly told that people are 'bad' and must be 'fixed.' Becoming comfortable with this concept and applying it to my life has allowed me to forgive myself, acknowledge my wholeness and humanity, and value that summation of parts I call 'me.' It's from this place that I can deal most effectively and sanely with my life and the people I interact with." He continues: "The Dharma is more than teachings to me. It has brought the dim spark of my true nature out of its self-serving cocoon and helped me engage with wisdom my life moment by moment. It has helped me remove the chains of guilt over the past and anxiety about the future, and showed me how to live with joy for all of life's experiences, 'good' and 'bad.' It has given me the hope I had as a child to be there for others, to see life as it really is, and find compassion for all beings."

Another explains: "My practice has brought me the ability to look at whatever arises inside of me, find the source of it, and see what is really going on. All thoughts and emotions are generated due to karma, and having the ability to have compassion for myself, in the moment, frees me from the self-hatred and delusion which were the source of my self-perpetuated destruction. I know myself today and I accept myself — that is what my practice has brought me. Not perfection, but acceptance."

A young woman at CCCF succinctly sums up the transformation in the following words: "My practice has changed me in so many aspects. I am a much better listener, I recognize the patterns of my behaviors, I communicate better, and I share the energy

that I found within from my faithful practice. It has allowed me to look within and love myself and the people around me.”

Her appetite whetted by the impact of meditation on her life, one of our writers is looking forward to a future of continued practice. She tells us: “Meditation helps me to not over-react, and it is truly amazing to me how much calm comes to me from just sitting quietly. Spiritually I will never be the same, and I look forward to the changes to come. I recommend spiritual practice and meditation to everyone in the whole world! And, I actually suggest it to various people as the opportunity shows itself. I know it has made me a calmer, kinder and happier person, through the toughest of times. Which is not only good for me, but also very helpful to those around me, and those who are out there waiting for me. Buddhist practice can help anyone who honestly wants some tranquility to replace the chaos of daily life, and all it requires is a little time each day and a lot of dedication.”

Challenges

For most of the respondents, the greatest challenge is their life within the walls. To be locked into a tiny cell with an angry, difficult person would be a challenge for any of us. A young man expresses it in the following way: “My greatest challenge right now is my celly. He is pretty messed up. Without my practice there is no way I could deal.”

Many people are struggling with a sense of powerlessness and injustice. A man at OSP writes: “My greatest challenge right now is working on my appeal process because I did not commit a crime. I’m fighting my way out an innocent man. Not that anyone believes that. But that is my greatest challenge right now.”

And a woman explains: “The greatest challenges I face are dealing with the injustice of the situation, the loss of being directly in my children’s lives, the fear for my future. My teachers have helped me tremendously to face these challenges with courage and grace and wisdom which I could not have mustered on my own. I need their constant, firm reminders that my own goals are not to become bitter, but to nurture my Buddha-nature and become a better person.”

Several of our contributors report that their greatest challenge is to accept and forgive themselves. One of them writes: “I feel like I am making inroads in dealing with the tremendous amount of anger and hatred I feel for myself. I would say that this — my self-hatred and anger at the horrid mistakes I have made — is my greatest challenge.”

Another expresses it this way: “My greatest challenge is being here in prison, away from those I love, and forgiving myself for that. My practice is very helpful in

keeping me from going down a path of self-destructive depression, sadness, anger, hate and malcontent.”

Yet another tells us that her greatest challenge is to believe in her own potential: “My greatest challenge is believing in myself. My practice helps me believe that I’m a lovable, caring, courageous, loyal, open, honest young woman with her whole life ahead of her. If I didn’t have my practice I wouldn’t be aware that I first need to believe and trust myself.”

Some of the contributors are looking towards their release. A man at OSP writes: “My challenge is to get out and do well. To be a father and friend to my daughter. To be the best I can be.” For one of our “lifers,” on the other hand, the challenge is uncertainty. He explains: “My greatest challenge right now is getting out in 2008, but the practice has made it so it’s okay. If I do or don’t, I just live in each moment, and it’s wonderful!”

Several people write about being torn between withdrawal and involvement with others. For a woman with more than twenty years of incarceration ahead, withdrawal was the first option, but it didn’t work in the long run. She explains: “My greatest challenge at this time in my life is boredom. I feel like I need to reach out and help others more and can’t. So yes, coming to terms with my current situation is a direct result of my Buddhist practice.”

Another woman is torn between withdrawal and family involvement. She expresses the conflict in this way: “I think my greatest challenge at this point is that I ‘live’ outside a lot. I feel the need to call home a lot. I think I have some kind of ‘control’ over the outside life with my spouse and children. I have a hard time accepting the constant nagging I hear from home. Sometimes I want to just withdraw. Do I? Or is it another cop-out?”

And a man who had withdrawn into spiritual practice at the expense of involvement with others is starting to question his motivation: “The greatest challenge in my life is to stay engaged instead of pulling back from life’s moment by moment progression. I also struggle with my ego’s desires for finding the ‘perfect’ guru, book, teaching, etc. My practice is helping me with this because I am constantly aware of my pathetic attempts to coddle myself rather than do what would benefit others the most. At times I can see the spontaneous arising of unbiased compassion, so I know things are changing in my mindstream.”

Aspirations

All our contributors would like to heal from the wounds of the past, live happy lives, and use their potential in a constructive way. One person writes: “I want to be happy

— no matter where I am.” Another tells us: “My aspiration for the future is to carry my practice through each day of my life. All that I face does not overwhelm me when I simply take one breath at a time.” Yet another states: “My aspirations for the future are to try and live up to my potential and use the gifts God gave me, because if I don’t, I won’t get them again.”

Many express an aspiration to reach out to others: “I hope, through continued study, introspection and practice, to become a spiritually and emotionally healthy being. I hope to be able to help others who are in pain or suffering in some way. I hope to be able to set a good example for my children, and possibly be a force for good in their lives. I hope to one day be free from the hatred and anger I feel towards myself.”

Some have concrete plans for the future: “I would like to create a recovery center for domestic violence victims to truly heal. I would like to change the laws about domestic violence. I want to continue to nurture the good relationships I have with my friends and family. I would like to help contribute to restorative justice, and I really aspire to surf warm, clean waves.”

Others are more tentative: “In ten, fifteen years I’d like to be involved in some project to help people recover from life’s difficulties and suffering. I kinda want to work outside the country because it would be great to see the world and bring help instead of bringing war.”

Some aspire to live a peaceful, loving life with their family: “I want that peace that surpasses all understanding. Then I would love to help others reach this also. I want joy in my life as well as in the lives of my children, husband, and all humanity.”

“My aspiration for the future is to live my life through my practice. I want to have a loving life with a family of my own, that’s secure and stable in every moment of every day.”

A person with many years of incarceration ahead wants to reach out to people inside the prison walls: “My aspiration for the future is to be of support and a positive example to all those I come into contact with inside these prison walls, to be of help to at least one other life force in need.”

Finally, one person aspires “to represent the Buddhist practice in the way that I am instructed, as I hope to be of benefit.” Another would like to “become a Bodhisattva, to work to help all beings be free of samsara even if it means that I have to continue the cycles of birth and death to do it. I truly wish all beings happiness and the causes of happiness!”

Gratitude

Gratitude is an important part of Buddhist practice, and many of the contributors include statements of gratitude both for the practice and for the volunteers who are making it available to them.

“I am so thankful for my practice. It has changed my life.”

“Thank you for being here and sharing your time and great wisdom with all of us.”

“If I had only one thing to share it would be that I am grateful for being accepted into this practice, and for the people who volunteer their time so we may practice Buddhism.”

“Our volunteers are some of the only people in the community we see and connect with, and knowing that there are at least a few people who have compassion towards us helps me quell some of my fear of facing society. They are the examples of calm, compassionate, wise people to model — and I strive to become as benevolent and effective.”

“I want to express my deep appreciation for our Buddhist Meditation group and my humble gratitude to our teachers.”

“The last thing I would like to say is: I would not be the woman I am today without the classes and teachings I have been exposed to in our Meditation group. Whenever I was at a place I just could not deal with, the Dharma talks helped me to see the Truth in each trial. I am grateful beyond words for your diligence and generosity. All I can say is: Thank you ...”

Conclusion

Our own main aspiration in doing this work is to sow seeds. My contact with prison inmates started in 1997 in response to a letter from two men on death row who wanted to learn about eastern religions. Today we meet with several dozen people at OSP and CCCF every month. Reflecting on this expansion, one of the men who sent the original letter of inquiry writes: “This is a place filled with negative karma. When you arrived here we began working on my karma, but as time went on you became more active here at OSP with others, which has had a ripple effect on the overall karma of this place. There are more people working on their individual karma — softening the hard, negative edge, ever so slightly — yet felt even where I am.”

We want to express our gratitude to the people who so graciously shared their thoughts and insights in this article, and to all the inmates we have had the privilege to interact with in and out of our groups over several years. They have contributed to our practice and growth at least as much as we have contributed to theirs.