

BUDDHISM IN PRISONS

From Punk to Buddhism

Our story, our spiritual path, is our strength; it is what motivates us and what gives us meaning in our search for truth. I was raised Catholic, as I am of Acadian descent. I really wanted to be a good Christian (spirituality was very important for me), but the more I tried to get a deeper connection to the Christian path, the more I was left with unsatisfactory answers. The more I tried to find answers to my questions from other people, the more questions I was left with.

Out of this frustration, I left the church, I left out of anger, which means that I left in a drastic way, making sure that there would be no ambiguities as to why I was leaving. I became a very vocal atheist (you could say that I became an anti-theist, as I was against all forms of organised religions) and made it my mission to find ways to disprove any spiritual tradition. This anger fueled a bitterness within me; it became a fire that I tried to appease with the punk rock community and, unfortunately, with substance abuse. From my teenage years, I started using to escape a world that I wanted to avoid and to quench the fire of anger that was burning within me.

The Angry Philosopher

Anger was a weapon; it fueled my sense of community and my anti-social values, which I thought gave me meaning and strength to continue this struggle that I was creating. During this time, I was also getting into philosophy and

getting politicized; I started participating in anti-racism protests and actions I helped found a chapter of Anti-Racist Action and was a vocal activist for other social justice causes). Philosophy also helped me satisfy this urge to find answers to my big questions about life and the human experience. I got a Bachelor's degree with honours in Philosophy and Religious Studies, and a Master's degree in Philosophy; I was mostly interested in Ethics and Morality, Existential Philosophy. I studied Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, Camus, etc. I became very interested in their philosophies of the Eternal Return, the Banality of Evil, and the Absurd.



**Acharya Samaneti,
Buddhist Prison Chaplain**

Still, I felt that something was missing, I started to be tired by this eternal flame of anger burning in me and just wanted this flame to be quenched. No matter how much I drank or used, every morning was more difficult and filled with more anxiety caused by my regrets of the days prior –

what I called the anxiety of existence. I was crashing and burning, trying to feel less of this overwhelming anxiety with drugs and alcohol, only to feel myself sinking deeper and deeper into what I would eventually understand as samsara. We say that we hit bottom the day that we stop digging; well, for many years, I simply kept digging and destroying relationships and opportunities along the way.

The “Ten-Page Buddhist”

For many years, I became what I call a “ten-page Buddhist.” I would read a few pages at the beginning of a Buddhist book and tell myself: “makes sense,” and do nothing to change my habits or views of the world and myself. Waking up many and many nights choking on my vomit finally became a wake-up call; that maybe I had to start putting these ideas into action, or that maybe next time I would not be so lucky, and my vomit would be the end of me...

I came to Buddhism on all fours. I was so desperate that I was even willing to try this hippy shit (sorry, but as a proud punk, the hippies were a sign of weakness). For the first time in a long time, I felt some peace in my heart; it was the beginning of my journey on this liberating path. At first, I had a lot of shame around the fact that I was meditating; as a punk, I saw myself as selling out and joining the hippies. This all changed when I stumbled upon a book called *Dharma Punx* by Noah Levine, a book that told the story of a punk drug addict who also became a

Continued on P. 2

Metta

The word Metta has many different meanings: loving-kindness, friendship, kindness, goodwill, harmony, gentleness and non-violence. Often in Buddhist teachings we use the word “kindness,” but it is important to know that it is more than that. Simply put, it is to desire the well-being and happiness of others. The essence of Metta is an altruistic attitude of love and friendship instead of putting our personal interests first. If we have a good practice of Metta, we will refuse to be offensive and we will not have bitterness, resentment or animosity; instead, we develop a caring and generous spirit to bring well-being and happiness to others.

Metta has no personal interest; it arouses warm, sympathetic, and kind feelings that can develop limitlessly with practice. Metta is universal, unconditional (we do not act out of personal interest), and total love.

With the practice of Metta, we become a source of well-being

for others; like a mother gives her life for her child, the Metta always gives without asking anything in return. So, when this primary selfish instinct is transformed into a desire to promote the good and happiness of others, the mind becomes more expansive by identifying our own interest with the inter-est of all. Attitude change at the same time develops our own well-being in the best possible way.

Metta is like the protective and very patient attitude of a mother who bears difficulties out of love for her child and who protects the child all the time. Metta is also the attitude of the person who wants to offer everything that is best for his or her friend. If our Metta practice is well developed, we can develop a great inner strength that pre-serves, protects and heals us, as well as the people who benefit from it.

We believe that Metta is the only constructive way to bring harmony, peace and understanding between people (this could even apply to relations between people or religions, and so on.)

Like most major religions, Buddhism believes that Metta is the supreme means because it constitutes the fundamental principle and basis of all benevolent activities aimed at promoting the good of human beings. When asked about his religion, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is well-known to have replied: “My religion is kindness.” You don’t need to be Buddhist to practice loving-kindness.

I recommend incorporating this focus when you have an established meditation practice.

This article has been excerpted with permission from The Inner Path: an introduction to Buddhist practice for those in prison (Sumeru Press Inc., 2024).



Acharya Samaneti is a Canadian Buddhist prison chaplain, philosopher, lover of the written word and seeker of truth. He wishes to bear witness to the universality of suffering and actions of love that awaken hearts.

FROM PUNK/Continued from P. 1

Buddhist to help him get out of the cycle of suffering that I was trying to get out of myself.

The Tattooed Buddhist Prison Chaplain

For months, I read his books and would meditate in “the closet” as I used to say (I would hide all my Buddhist stuff under my bed like it was a porn stash), and I didn’t tell anyone (even my girlfriend at the time, who was herself a Buddhist!). After a while, I went to a Buddhist centre around the corner from my apartment that offered dana-based lunchtime meditations – the first time I remember looking around on the

street to make sure that no one would see me going into the centre. As I sat in sangha, I started to understand the value of community and the support that you feel when you meditate in a group with people who are on the same path as you. This is when I signed up for a meditation retreat with Noah Levine in New York; this was a life-changing moment for me.

I met him at the retreat, and we had long and meaningful discussions together; we kept in touch for a long while. Eventually, he invited me to start training to teach meditation, which I accepted with great joy. I started training and flew out to California to meet similar Dhamma

practitioners who also came from the punk scene, had tattoos, and shared my values of social justice. I finally felt at home; the misfits of the Buddhist communities united together. Some of the best friends I have ever had came from this community, and we are still close to this day.

I started a Dharma Punx sangha and a new Against the Stream group in Montreal. I wanted to create the community that I had found in California here in Montreal (I think that it was also the first francophone community of this lineage). Unfortunately, the community came to an end after a scandal. During my time at

Continued on P. 4

The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters

佛說四十二章經

Chapter 14: Virtue and Greatness

A shramana asked the Buddha, “What is virtue? What is greatness?” The Buddha said, “To practice the Way and abide by the truth is virtue. When your will is one with the Way, that is greatness.”

第十四章 請問善大

沙門問佛：何者為善，何者最大？佛言：行道守真者善，志與道合者大。

Chapter 15: Tolerance and Purification

A shramana asked the Buddha, “What is great power? What is the brightest light?” The Buddha said, “Tolerance under insult is great power, because it harbors not hatred but peace and fortitude. Those who are tolerant are free from evil and will be honored by others. When the mind is utterly purged of defilements, it is pure without blemish or filth; that is the brightest light. From before the formation of heaven and earth, and through the present, there is nothing in the ten directions that one does not see, hear, or know—this all inclusive wisdom is indeed brightness.”

第十五章 請問力明

沙門問佛：何者多力，何者最明？佛言：忍辱多力，不懷惡故，兼加安健。忍者無惡，必為人尊。心垢滅盡，淨無瑕穢，是為最明。未有天地，逮於今日，十方所有，無有不見，無有不知，無有不聞，得一切智，可謂明矣。

Chapter 17: Light Dispels Darkness

The Buddha said, “Seeing the Way is like entering a dark room holding a torch; darkness dissipates and light alone remains. When you follow the Way and see the truth, ignorance vanishes and enlightenment always remains.”

第十七章 明來暗謝

佛言：夫見道者，譬如持炬，入冥室中，其冥即滅，而明獨存。學道見諦，無明即滅，而明常存矣。

Chapter 18: The No-Mind Doctrine

The Buddha said, “My doctrine is to be mindful of no-mind, to act with non-action, to speak the inexpressible, and to cultivate non-cultivation. Those who understand this are close to the Way; those who are confused are far from it. The Way is beyond speech and conception, and nothing can constrain it. To miss this point by a hair’s breadth is to lose the Way instantly.”

第十八章 念等本空

佛言：吾法念無念念，行無行行，言無言言，修無修修。會者近爾，迷者遠乎。言語道斷，非物所拘。差之毫釐，失之須臾。

Chapter 19: Meditate on the Illusive and the Real

The Buddha said, “Observe heaven and earth and contemplate impermanence. Observe the world and contemplate impermanence. Seeing one’s awareness is bodhi. With this understanding one swiftly attains the Way.”

第十九章 假真並觀

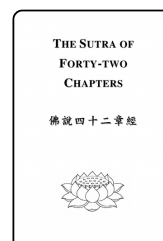
佛言：觀天地，念非常；觀世界，念非常；觀靈覺，即菩提。如是知識，得道疾矣。

Chapter 20: The Self Is Empty

The Buddha said, “One should be mindful of the four great elements of the body. Each of them has a name, but an intrinsic self cannot be found. Since the self is empty, it is illusory.”

第二十章 推我本空

佛言：當念身中四大，各自有名，都無我者，我既都無，其如幻耳。



The Sutra was translated into Chinese by Kashyapa-matanga and Gobharana of the Later Han Dynasty. We have selected some chapters with their English translations from buddhagate.org to be shared in this newsletter.

FROM PUNK/Continued from P. 2

Against the Stream, I became a Buddhist prison chaplain (which I still am today) and needed to find a new community and, more importantly, a new teacher. I found a Dhamma talk online by this Buddhist nun that spoke to me. I loved how she delivered the Dhamma, and her wisdom and compassion just seemed to flow out of her. A trusted friend told me they were joining a Dharma-charya program with her; I immediately got in touch with her and joined the group.

Many people wonder what brought me to prison chaplaincy vs. teaching in the community. It is hard to explain, but I have always felt at home in prison. My first night of volunteering in prison 20 years ago, I felt a strange calm when the Leclerc gate closed behind me. I was where I was meant to be. That night, I spoke with men who I would end up working with for many years; they showed me the special moments that occur in places like this and in relation to this life-changing practice. There is no other place I would rather be than with the incarcerated, exploring the Buddhist path and seeing them slowly liberating themselves from the cycles of samsara. I have always felt that the Dhamma is most alive within the walls of penitentiaries, where we can

witness the change that happens in hearts and minds when they discover this spiritual path.

The Buddhist Book Author

Venerable Pannavati and Venerable Pannadipa were the founders of Heartwood Refuge (now Heartwood Mandala), a lineage with empowerment in the Theravada and Mahayana schools. Venerable Pannavati was not only a Dhamma teacher, she also lived the Dhamma with her compassionate actions towards the marginalised and offered support for me that I have rarely felt or experienced in my life. She is the embodiment of the Dhamma and the transformative powers that it can give to those willing to receive it. This community was different from my past one, but it was a humble, caring, and sustaining community that has made me grow in ways I thought I would never be able to. It is important to find a community and a teacher who helps us feel safe and held; this path is very demanding and difficult at times, and we must feel that there is support when we need it. Without this community and teacher, I don't think I would have written my book, *The Inner Path, An Introduction to Buddhist Practice for Those in Prison*.

I am now empowered in the Embracing Simplicity Lineage, a

Buddhist community that helps us embrace humility and reminds us to be of service to those who may feel marginalized and put aside by society. On my altar, I have a picture of my teacher eating with some street youths, sitting on the sidewalk with them in fraternity. No ego, just kinship.

This is my practice, to meet you where you are; to hold space that can feel safe and contained – and share with you the experience of kinship. The sangha reminds us of the shared practice and the others who are on the path with us – I offer the merit of my practice to all of you in our incarcerated sangha.

When things get difficult, remind yourself that right now, someone that you do not know (and who does not know you) is wishing you: happiness, health, safety, and freedom. They are wishing you this because they believe in the interconnectedness of human reality and that lovingkindness, this Buddhist practice, aims to cultivate lovingkindness, empathy, and unconditional compassion towards themselves, but also, more importantly, you.

Acharya Samaneti is a Canadian Buddhist prison chaplain in Quebec.

About Buddhism in Prisons Newsletter







This monthly newsletter is published by Buddhism in Prisons Canada. It is intended to help inmates learn and practice Buddhism, and for prison chaplains to provide Buddhist spiritual care. Authors of the articles published herein share teachings they learned from their own particular schools and traditions. These teachings may not necessarily be exactly the same as those taught in another Buddhist school or tradition. The three major traditions in Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

P.O. Box 1048, Stratford PO MAIN ON N5A 6W4
info@BuddhismInPrisons.ca www.BuddhismInPrisons.ca

How to Obtain a Copy of This Newsletter

You can obtain a copy from your chaplain, who receives this from us electronically. Prison chaplains may also contact us to receive this monthly newsletter.



All current and back issues are available on our website BuddhismInPrisons.ca.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1  Buddha Jayanti's Birthday (Vajrayana)	2 Cundi Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)
3	4	5	6	7	8 	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17 	18	19	20 Manjusri Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)	21	22	23
24 Shakyamuni Buddha's Birthday (Mahayana)	25	26	27	28	29	30
31  Saga Dawa Commemoration of Shakyamuni's birth, death, and enlightenment (Vajrayana) 	 May 1/May 31: Unity Vesak - the Birth, Enlightenment and Parinirvana of Shakyamuni Buddha (Theravada & Global).					

Note: The 1st and 15th days of the lunar calendar are traditionally observed by Buddhists as times for spiritual practice.

“There are those who do not realize that one day we all must die.
But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.”

- Buddha (the Dhammapada ~ suttacentral.net)

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15 	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24 Padmasambha -va Guru Rinpoche Day (Vajrayana)	25	26	27
28	29 	30				

Note: The 1st and 15th days of the lunar calendar are traditionally observed by Buddhists as times for spiritual practice.

**“Sorrow springs from what we hold dear, fear springs from what we hold dear;
one free from holding anything dear has no sorrow, let alone fear.”**

- Buddha (the Dhammapada ~ suttacentral.net)