

BUDDHISM IN PRISONS

Along the Way

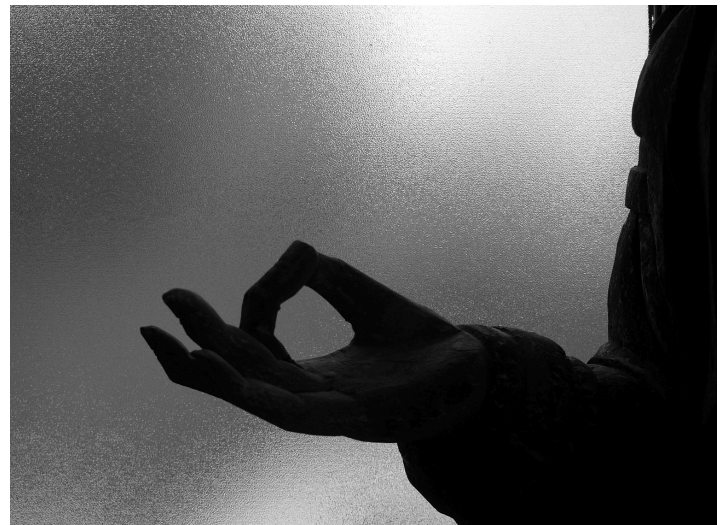
When asked about how I came to Zen practice, my short answer is the early 70's TV show "Kung Fu". In it, a Shaolin temple monk named Caine wanders the American Wild West, defeating outlaws and dispensing wisdom in his journey. Though not a very accurate portrayal of monastic Buddhism, it sparked a martial arts craze in North America and a fascination in me of all things Chinese. Later, like many spiritually minded young people, I read the books of Carlos Castaneda and Jack Kerouac, certain that there was more to life than what was on the surface.

Deaths in my family, sadness and substance abuse fueled my search. I read all kinds of "self-help" books, particularly by Buddhist writers, and got counselling from some therapists who aided me. Slowly, it became obvious that I wasn't getting to the root of my troubles, and that maybe the self I was trying to help was the real problem.

In my early 20s, I began to practise Tai Chi. Sometimes referred to as "moving meditation," this ancient martial art introduced me to the possibility of stilling my mind. To my good fortune, I attended a workshop at the Toronto Zen Centre and finally found the path, teacher, and community I'd been searching for.

Sitting in the stillness of the zendo, or on my cushion at home, I learned first of all to be patient. Training the mind has been compared to training a puppy; it takes time, and one must be firm, but kind. Training the body to sit still isn't easy either. Sometimes I felt like I was going to jump out of my skin. However, learning to let those uncomfortable sensations, difficult emotions and nagging thoughts come and go was so empowering. I began to see that nothing is permanent, and I could ride whatever troubled me, like a wave.

Having teachers who have walked the path before me is crucial. There are lots of dead ends and detours, and an experienced teacher will guide us when we go astray. A teacher is someone who "knows you better than you know yourself". I saw that my teachers had complete faith in me, and in my ability to do this work of spiritual transformation. It's a rare thing in this life to be seen in that way.



Vitarka Mudra

The gesture of teaching. The circle formed by the touching of the tips of the thumb and forefinger symbolizes perfection, with no beginning or end.

Photo Source: Barbara

Ordained to Serve

I wasn't looking for a Sangha at the beginning, but as time passed, I understood what the Buddha meant by the importance of the Kalyana-mitta, or spiritual friend. These people accompany, encourage, and even sometimes challenge us in our practice. It's a privilege to be with companions who are committed to working on themselves. My gratitude for the community led me to ordination as a lay Buddhist priest, in order to serve the Sangha in any way I can.

There have been so many wonderful influences in my spiritual journey. I've had the good karma to go on pilgrimages to India, China and Japan and see the ancestral homes of my practice. Working my way through the Sutras is giving me a feeling for the rich wisdom of the Buddha's teachings. Metta - bhavana, or lovingkindness practice, softens my heart and is a warm complement to the austerity of Zen.

My fellow lay priest and I have weekly precept meetings to review our behaviour in relation to the Buddha's guidelines for an ethical life. Volunteering

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The Noble Eightfold Path - Part 2

Part 1 of this article (on 1. Right View, 2. Right Thought, 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action) was published in the previous issue of this newsletter.

5. Right Livelihood, or Fair Means of Existence

The Buddha advises us to earn a living righteously, without resorting to illegal and heinous activities. Our work must not come from activities based on the suffering of other beings such as killing, stealing and selling stolen property, fraud, trafficking in weapons or human beings (pimping), selling poisons or drugs, or other illegal activities.

I know this may seem difficult, because when you get out you are going to have to find a job as part of your exit plan. I say that trying to find a service or helping job is always a good guide in our job choices. It doesn't always have to be service work like spiritual care, and so on. Working in construction is a job that meets the criteria very well too because we work to build housing so that someone feels sheltered from the elements and feels safe. But yes, working in bars is not a job that aligns with this because we know all the addiction and suffering that is present in these places.

6. Right Effort

This is the effort to apply the teachings of Buddha, the effort to work on oneself in order to improve oneself and free oneself from dukkha. We can see every action as an opportunity for self-realization that is favourable for our liberation. It is important to add a bit of nuance here. We must always remain vigilant, because if one's efforts are made selfishly, with the aim of achieving a result for oneself, the practice risks turning into a quest for profit,

which will be contrary to our liberation – we must always act for the good of all living beings and not just ourselves. I often remind myself that if I strive to be a better person, it is for the good of all living beings, because my actions impact and touch everyone.

7. Right Attention or Awareness

Right attention with meditation is the source of awakening and our liberation. Right attention can also be called “mindfulness”. This consists of being fully alive, fully in the present moment, and not getting lost in our thoughts and stories, in anticipation or worry, in the past or the future. It is the awareness of things, of oneself, one's body, one's emotions, one's thoughts and everything around us. Also, being fully aware, fully present, means stopping judging, making categories and attaching yourself to your opinions and points of view.

Just focusing on the present moment is very beneficial for our mind – because it loses its attachments and stops its desires to have and accumulate.

8. Right Concentration or Meditation

This is fundamentally the correct practice of meditation because that is the only way to achieve the right concentration. In fact, there are several types of Buddhist meditation, with different objectives, emphasized in different traditions.

Right concentration is the most important of all aspects in the

noble eightfold path because, without the practice of meditation, Buddhism can become just a kind of shallow intellectual juggling.

Right meditation is characterized by abandonment of the three poisons – ignorance, greed and anger, then all harmful states and conditioned states. It is founded on a return to the present moment, detachment from the everyday mind and thoughts, and transcendence of personal consciousness.

So, here is the essence of Buddhist practice explained with the noble eightfold path. This is the Truth presented to us by the Buddha; it teaches us that we can achieve complete liberation by following this simple path. 🌸

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.

The Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters

佛說四十二章經

Chapter 6: Tolerance without Resentment

The Buddha said, “When a malicious person hears about goodness and intentionally comes to provoke trouble, you should restrain yourself; do not be angry or reprimand him. Evil deeds will fall back upon the evil-doer.”

第六章 忍惡無瞋

佛言：惡人聞善，故來撓亂者，汝自禁息，當無瞋責。彼來惡者而自惡之。

Chapter 7: Evil Deeds Return to the Doer

The Buddha said, “Someone came to insult me upon hearing that I uphold the Way and practice great benevolence. But I kept silent and did not respond. After he had stopped, I asked him, ‘If you bring someone a gift and he does not accept it, does the gift remain with you?’ ‘It does,’ he replied. The Buddha said, ‘Now you insult me, but I do not accept it; this insult will only bring yourself harm. Just as echo follows sound and shadow trails form, there is no escape. Be vigilant to do no evil.’”

第七章 惡還本身

佛言：有人聞吾守道，行大仁慈，故致罵佛。佛默不對。罵止，問曰：子以禮從人，其人不納，禮歸子乎？對曰：歸矣。佛言：今子罵我，我今不納。子自持禍，歸子身矣。猶響應聲，影之隨形，終無免離。慎勿為惡。

Chapter 8: To Fling Dust into the Wind

The Buddha said, “An evil person who harms a sage is like one who spits toward the sky. The spit does not reach the sky, but falls back on himself. When one flings dust into the wind, the dust does not hit others but is blown back on himself. The sage cannot be harmed; evil actions will inevitably destroy the doer.”

第八章 塵唾自污

佛言：惡人害賢者，猶仰天而唾，唾不至天，還從己墮。逆風揚塵，塵不至彼，還坌己身。賢不可毀，禍必滅己。

Chapter 12: Twenty Difficulties in Cultivation

The Buddha said, “People have twenty kinds of difficulties:

1. It is difficult for the poor to practice dana.
2. It is difficult for the rich and eminent to practice the Way.
3. It is difficult to renounce life when facing death.
4. It is difficult to encounter the Buddhist sutras.
5. It is difficult to be born in the age of a Buddha.
6. It is difficult to subdue desire and lust.
7. It is difficult not to covet what one likes.
8. It is difficult to face humiliation without anger.
9. It is difficult to have power and not abuse it.
10. It is difficult to face situations with a detached mind.
11. It is difficult to master vast areas of knowledge.
12. It is difficult to extinguish self-conceit.
13. It is difficult not to belittle those who are unlearned.
14. It is difficult for the mind to act with impartiality.
15. It is difficult not to gossip or be judgmental.
16. It is difficult to meet the right, learned teacher.
17. It is difficult to see one’s original nature and practice the Way.
18. It is difficult to guide beings appropriately to liberation.
19. It is difficult to be unperturbed by circumstances.
20. It is difficult to master the expedient means of the Way.

第十二章 舉難勸修

佛言：人有二十難。貧窮布施難。豪貴學道難。棄命必死難。得睹佛經難。生值佛世難。忍色忍欲難。見好不求難。被辱不瞋難。有勢不臨難。觸事無心難。廣學博究難。除滅我慢難。不輕未難。心行平等難。不說是非難。會善知識難。見性學道難。隨化度人難。睹境不動難。善解方便難。

Chapter 13: Questions about the Way and Past Lives

A *shramana*¹ asked the Buddha, “What enables one to know past lives and to attain the supreme Way?”

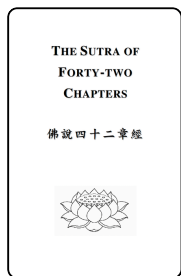
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¹ *Shramana* is a Pali word. In Buddhist Sutras, disciples of the Buddha are referred to as *shramanas*.

The Buddha said, “By purifying your mind with unwavering resolve, you will attain the supreme Way. It is like polishing a mirror; when you remove the impurities, brightness is revealed. By eradicating desires and seeking nothing, you will gain knowledge of past lives.”

第十三章 問道宿命

沙門問佛：以何因緣，得知宿命，會其至道？佛言：淨心守志，可會至道。譬如磨鏡，垢去明存。斷欲無求，當得宿命。🌸



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.

with Buddhism in Prisons has filled me with inspiration, witnessing how people in such challenging situations can turn their lives around.

In truth, we don't know what leads us to spiritual practice. To my mind, it seems clear that I had previous encounters with Buddhism in past lives. This is the only way I can account for the deep sense of familiarity I had when hearing the teachings. But it doesn't matter whether we believe in rebirth or karma. If we have the incredible good fortune to encounter Buddhism in this life, we should take advantage of this rare opportunity. Once we start down the road, all manner of guides and companions will appear to help us along the way.🌸

Barbara is a lay priest at the Toronto Zen Centre.

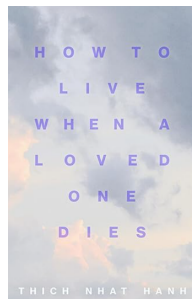
How to Live When a Loved One Dies

A Correspondence Study Course for Inmates

About This Course

This free course offered by Buddhism in Prisons helps inmates who have lost someone they love. It is a mindfulness-based grief support program that offers self-care meditations and practices to help you:

- Find relief, comfort, and healing in the face of grief and loss
- Reconnect with yourself, your loved one, and all of life



You will receive the book *How to Live When a Loved One Dies* by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, and two Study Guides with reflection questions for you to

complete and mail them to us. Two volunteer study partners will respond to what you share in the Study Guides. Up to three letters of response will be mailed to you. A certificate of completion will be sent to you after you have completed this course.

How to Apply

1. Ask your Chaplain for an application form for this course
2. Mail your completed application form to us
 - The book's Study Guide #1 will be sent to you for you to complete and mail to us
 - Pre-stamped envelopes will be provided to your Chaplain for mailing your completed study guides.


If you are interested in the other correspondence study course we offer — Understanding and Transforming Anger with Mindfulness — please ask your Chaplain for a separate application form.🌸

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.







This newsletter is sent electronically to prison chaplains. Copies can also be downloaded from BuddhismInPrisons.ca. Prison chaplains may also email or write to us to receive this newsletter.

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SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2  Shakyamuni Buddha's Nirvana Day (Mahayana) Theravada New Year	3	4
5	6 Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)	7	8 Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Birthday (Mahayana)	9 	10	11
12	13	14 	15 	16 	17 	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	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.

**“Let us live so very happily, loving among the hostile.
Among hostile humans, let us live with love.”**
- Buddha (the Dhammapada ~ suttacentral.net)

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).					

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“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)