

Mindfully Incarcerated

By Daniel Labbe

Greetings and welcome to Mindfully Incarcerated. In this blog I will attempt to share my personal experience with trying to lead a mindfulness-based lifestyle in a prison environment. You might think that mindfulness and prison go together about as well as pickles and soup, but for those willing to go "all in", and who happen to live behind the wall, mindfulness can actually be the perfect approach to doing time. It is also my personal experience and belief that a mindfulness-based approach to criminal rehabilitation and personal growth is the most effective approach. This belief is widely shared by a growing number of professionals and an impressive body of research.

So what practical benefits could an inmate really gain by applying Mindfulness Practices and Values in Prison? Is it even possible to lead a mindfulness-based lifestyle in such a dysfunctional and often hostile environment? And what would it be like ~~to~~ to explore these questions in Prison? Over the next year I will do my best to share with you my ~~experience~~ journey of mindful inquiry and personal growth. I will post personal accounts of my day to day experience with prison life and my attempt to use mindfulness practices to lead a healthier more positive life while working on any unresolved issues that contributed to my incarceration.

You may be wondering why I would want to share something so personal. There are many reasons but the most motivating is that I am a huge fan of Mindfulness Practices and Values -

they have transformed my life and given me a hope and confidence that I never dreamed were available to me. I have tried a hundred different ways to find healing and growth, but only ~~mindfulness~~ by applying mindfulness skills to my attempts at rehabilitation have I found any success. This being the case, I am in a unique position to share with you the power of mindfulness and a personal look into what it is like to try and find healing and growth ~~in~~ within today's prison system.

I was first introduced to mindfulness practices when I was invited to visit the Cambridge Zen center 24 years ago ~~when I was 16~~ at the age of 16. I was deeply interested in what I encountered there but my drug addiction and dysfunctional life-style overpowered my interest. I faded in and out of casual practice over the years. In the late 90's I attended an intensive nine-day retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. ^{But} I wasn't until 2009, six years after my incarceration, that I became serious about my practice.

For the last five years I have been studying Buddhism, Zen, and the Jon Kabat-Zinn-styled Mindfulness approach to healing and leading a fuller life. I've been engaged in individual and group therapy, participating in various D.O.C. programs, and doing my best to apply what I'm learning so I will not repeat the mistakes of the past and be able to live a healthier, more rewarding life that contributes to the well-being of others.

There was a time when my struggle with intense emotions and negative thought patterns overwhelmed my ability to live a

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a functional life. During that time I caused myself and others, especially those I love most, a lot of suffering. The shame and regret I felt over the pain I had caused, ~~the~~ in my deteriorating ability to cope with intense self-loathing and intense emotions, and the culmination of a long line of failed attempts to find healing and solace led me to such a dark place that in October, 2008 I made a serious attempt at taking my own life. Obviously, I survived, but it was close. This incident was the turning point of my rehabilitation.

Up to this point I had tried everything to try to either "fix" or escape my problems. Drugs, alcohol, therapy, AA, rehabs, church, you name it, but nothing worked. While in the Prison State Hospital I finally realized that there was no "fixing" or escaping the pain and problems. My epiphany was that the only way out of the insanity, the pain and suffering, was to go through it.

In my mind I envisioned ~~the~~ being harnessed to an unstoppable team of horses that were pulling me through a dark, stinky swamp. The ~~the~~ swamp represents pain and suffering, and the horses were life and time itself. The idea was that I could refuse to engage life, throw myself to the ground and try to hide, but then the horses would just drag me through the muddy swamp, or I could get up, and despite how awful it was, I could walk through the stinking swamp; but either way, those horses were pulling me through, there was no escape, so why not get up and walk with some dignity rather than get dragged through. This image gave me the courage ^{to} face my problems, something I had

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never done before. My previous approaches, "fixing" and escape through drugs, pleasure-seeking, and giving up, were both forms of denial. For the first time I was open to actually facing and experiencing what was previously too painful to bear.

Coincidentally, Zen and mindfulness practices are designed to support usⁿ just such an approach to ~~our~~ facing our problems, pain, and suffering.

So here I am with two to three years left to serve in prison and having had some success with healing, personal growth, and rehabilitation, but there is still a lot more work to be done. For one thing, I still struggle with some social skills, emotions can still overwhelm me, I can be a perfectionist when it comes to my practice - not a "good" thing - and I still struggle with a lot of unproductive habits and conditioned reactions. One good thing about prison is that you can't hide from your demons. It's such a stressful environment that whatever unhealthy coping skills and tendencies you may have will be triggered, and believe me, I have the chance to face those demons every day! So why not join me on this adventure of healing, self-discovery, and human connection in America's great prison industrial complex.

Over the next year I'll write two posts a month chronicling my experience on this wild journey. Below, you will find the maps and gear I'll be using to make this journey. You'll find a mixture of Zen and mindfulness-based tools and values that I use to guide me in search of unresolved issues, greater healing, growth, and deeper, more

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meaningful connections to others, myself, and life as it is. And all of this is only possible if I am able to keep my sanity in the most dysfunctional, corrupt, and abusive system in America - The Department of Corrections.

Maps, Tools, and Gear.

Mindfulness - an open, nonreactive, nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. This is the foundation on which the whole adventure is grounded upon. The instruction is to notice when your attention is caught-up in discursive thoughts, emotions, and reactive behavior, ~~and~~ note what is occurring, and return your attention to the present moment without judgement. When cleaning, eating, walking, or interacting you can deeply connect to the literal experience without overlaying it with a fog of thoughts and judgements, yet this is what the brain naturally does, so you notice what pulled your attention away and gently return it to the present moment.

Meditation - To help deepen and strengthen your mindfulness practice ~~is~~ it is good to sit in meditation at least once a day for 20-30 minutes. I usually sit from 6:30 AM - 7:00 AM

The Five Precepts - These are the ethical guidelines that help you live with peace and integrity among others. When you follow these precepts your practice will deepen and grow because you won't have to suffer the consequences of negative behavior as much.

- I. Not Killing - Aware of the suffering caused by violence

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I vow to refrain from committing violence toward any being. I will attempt to treat all beings with compassion and kindness.

2. Not Stealing - Aware of the suffering caused by theft, I vow to refrain from taking what is not freely given. I will attempt to practice generosity and be mindful of how I use the earth's resources.

3. Sexual misconduct - Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct I vow to refrain from using sex in ways that harm myself and others. I will attempt to express my sexuality in ways that promote joy, connection, and harmony.

4. False Speech - Aware of the suffering caused by unskillful speech I vow to refrain from false speech and harsh speech, from slander and from gossip. I will attempt to communicate in ways that promote peace and understanding.

5. Intoxicants - Aware of the suffering caused by intoxicants, I vow to refrain from consuming anything that dulls the mind or nourishes unwholesome intentions. I will attempt to cultivate a clear, wholesome mind.

By taking these precepts daily and trying to uphold them

• You strengthen your mindfulness by becoming more aware of your behavior. When you break a precept ~~you~~ the instruction is not to judge yourself but to bring awareness to how you feel ~~and~~ and to recommit to upholding the precept.

Attitude In the mindfulness approach certain helpful attitudes are ~~as~~ suggested. Some of these include Non-striving, non-judging, Letting be,

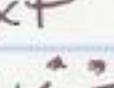
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Patience, and openness, among others. Compassion, empathy, ~~and~~ nondiscriminating wisdom, and Kindness are also heavily stressed in Zen and all Buddhist traditions.

Aspiration, or intention, ~~is~~ important to any practice. Having an aspiration helps^{to} give you a direction in which you can direct all your actions and effort toward. Currently, my guiding aspiration is to realize my true nature and to live in liberating presence with all beings.

There are many other practices I use but the ones I've listed here give you a good idea of what I'm trying to do. It isn't easy to live in prison, especially to live skilfully and ~~to~~ come out stronger and more able to lead a healthy life. This is where I believe having a practice like this is essential.

I hope you will follow along for what promises to be an eye-opening adventure behind the wall. I encourage readers to leave comments and to use this space to explore new ideas about ~~what it means to be an inmate,~~ new ways to apply mindfulness, and various ideas about healing and personal growth. I won't be able to respond to all comments, but if you would like a response please indicate that or write me at the address below. Thank you for your support and may peace and awareness be yours.

Until next time... 

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