

Mindfully Incarcerated

By Daniel Labbe

Through breath and body I open to whatever is Present as my Path. I silently repeat this mantra as my neighbor at the chow table elbows me, and the C.O. barks at a confused elderly man. From behind I hear: "Kill Yourself, Shitbag," then Bang! I jump as another C.O. raps his fist on the stainless steel table and yells, "Hey, Speed it up! We ain't got all morning to serve breakfast." My jaw clenches ~~as~~ as my heart thuds against my chest. I push out my elbow, reclaiming stolen space at the cramped table. The watered-down grits slides down my throat like backwash - Through breath and body I open to whatever is Present as my Path. Suddenly, everything pops into sharp focus as the tension in my jaw releases and I straighten my posture. I take a deep, slow, breath and a smile creeps into the edges of my mouth. Now I recognize the people around me as the fellow travelers on this great adventure of life that they are. I pull my elbows in and give my neighbor a nod. He says, "What the fuck you smiling at?" and the adventure continues.

Prison is a challenging environment to practice mindfulness in. This fact is unescapable, but it is only through my practice that I've found a way to survive here. One reason why it's difficult to be mindful in prison is that few people really want a deeper experience of pain and suffering, yet this is exactly what happens when we become more mindful, because suffering is such a natural part of all our lives. ~~the~~ The unique thing about prison is that there is no fooling yourself

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about the suffering in your life; it's an intense part of daily experience and as common as your next breath. Corruption, violence, mental illness, loneliness, anger, and desperation are just part of the air we breathe in prison. Most people who have to live or work here end up trying to protect themselves by "checking-out" in one way or another. Unfortunately, mindfulness does not come as a natural reaction to suffering.

Most inmates check-out by losing themselves in a variety of meaningless distractions leaving only their past conditioning to dictate how they react to situations. Whatever latent mental health issues or unhealthy coping strategies lie dormant will flare up as ego roles harden leaving inmates imprisoned by their own attempts to protect themselves from the suffering that surrounds and saturates them. Under such conditions what reasonable hope of healing, growth, or rehabilitation do inmates have?

Because Zen or mindfulness practice doesn't come naturally in difficult situations it's difficult for inmates to discover that the deeper experience of pain and suffering that comes with practice also comes with a deeper experience of peace, joy, understanding, love, and connection. These are amazing gifts in such a dark place as prison, but the greatest gift of practice for me has been the process of profound healing and re-union with my own basic goodness and wholeness. As a result I've been better able to let down the walls that have separated me from others and myself allowing me to more fully inhabit the moment with authenticity, compassion, and wisdom. There are still more

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walls to ~~be~~ let down, but this gift of healing and re-union has made the suffering of prison far more tolerable.

How is it possible for such healing to take place in such a hostile environment? The power of mindfulness is not unlike alchemy, but rather than transmuting lead into gold mindfulness transmutes our sources of suffering into springboards of transformation and awakening. Without my practice the difficulties ^{through which I experience} ~~that I experience~~ pain, frustration, loneliness, or grief would only serve to break me down and make life miserable, but when I am able to experience the grit and pain of suffering with open, non-reactive, awareness allowing it to pass through me without getting lost in it the excrement of my life is transmuted into the fertilizer that nourishes my growth. Without such an alchemical process the corruption, abuse, and hostility of prison would only ~~not~~ serve to drive me into deeper levels of darkness that would eventually have an impact on the community I return to.

But my situation is a rare one in that I was lucky enough to be introduced to Zen practice when I was 16, and when I recommitted myself to the path in 2009 I was able to work with a great therapist who was also a Zen practitioner. This plus the support of loving family members has made it possible for me to use mindfulness practices to turn prison into the intense incubator of healing and awakening it has become for me. But what about those who are not ^{so} ~~so~~ lucky? How will they find a way to make it out of here stronger, saner, and more peaceful?

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There is a groundbreaking Program called The Path of Freedom that teaches the mindfulness and emotional skills necessary to embark on this great journey, but it is not widely available. I recently left a prison in Norfolk, Massachusetts that ran its first Path of Freedom session in February, 2014. At Norfolk there are 1500 inmates. Twelve seats were available for the course. This plus the violent, punitive, and corrupt nature of the prison system ~~does not~~ makes it extremely difficult to make healing and rehabilitation widely available.

I'm now at the Massachusetts Treatment Center in Bridgewater, but the course is not available here. The good news is that there are two one-hour weekly time slots available for Buddhist practice that no one is currently using, and I've talked to other inmates to see if there is an interest in a mindfulness-based support group, and there is. I'm presently in the process of putting together a program to make the benefits of Zen practice and mindfulness available to others here. It should be available sometime in late March. I was fortunate enough to facilitate a similar group at Old Colony Correctional Center for over 18 months. The group started out small and grew to over 20 participants.

Under the current system of punishment and counter-violence that dominates corrections today our only hope of giving inmates a reliable way to cope with the abuse, pain and corruption of prison life in a healthy way is to offer ~~more~~ ^{more} mindfulness and emotional intelligence based programs like the Path of Freedom; otherwise prison will only

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Serve to entrap inmates in deeper levels of violence and dysfunction....

At 12:30^{pm} our unit was given a routine shake-down in search of contraband such as drugs or weapons. A C.O. led me and two other inmates into a room, gave us a disdainful glare and said, "Hurry up, this ain't rocket-science. Now strip it all off!" His comments continued and grew more surly as we all got naked and were made to lift our scrotums and ~~we~~ spread the cheeks of our behinds. My face flushed with anger and shame. The other two men stared at the floor, ~~to~~ their shoulders slumped and backs bent. Through breath and body I open to whatever is present as my path. The thought of how much the C.O. must suffer to have to do such things, even if he seems to enjoy it rose up. Maybe I wouldn't be so happy, either, after years of working here and taking part in such dehumanizing procedures... They can imprison my body but never my heart and mind.

Please share your thoughts on this post. I appreciate all the feedback I can get and if you want a response the best way is to write me directly at:

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