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Finding the Buddha: Seeking Solace in Prison

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Ryan Moser

Reflection

Being part of a community of meditators, a sangha, is important in Buddhist culture. When I first came to prison and with introduced to meditation and yoga over fifteen years ago, I did not understand the importance of community—not just in Buddhist circle, but also with writing workshops, educational projects, neighborhoods, etc. After practicing now for many years, the sangha has become an important piece of my learning path, and being able to find a community at Everglades (in the before times, our class has been cancelled) allowed me to grow as a person.

Finding the Buddha: Seeking Solace in Prison

“No matter what part of the world we come from, we are all basically the same human beings.

We all seek happiness and try to avoid suffering.”

—His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama
Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize, Stockholm, Sweden

Ringgggg....

Ringgggg....

Ringgggg....

I breathe deeply, inhaling air through my nostrils and exhaling from my belly. The final chime of the bronze Tibetan singing bowl reverberates through our confined space. Sounds of arguing echo from outside the classroom as I adjust my zafu cushion under the base of my spine, aware of the noise but letting it go. My lanky six-foot frame is folded and I look at my tattoo of a purple lotus flower on the inside of my forearm. Long ago, I refused to slow down, to open up, to try new things—my mind wasn't teachable. But now I have an Om stamped on my flesh and spirit. Now I sit still.

I smell cheap *Fresh Scent* deodorant. The blood flows to my legs as I am erect and at attention, eyes slightly closed and tongue pressed against the roof of my mouth, hands circled in a mudra, monkey-mind racing, anxiety slowing.

I breathe in....

I breathe out....

This isn't my first time in a prison meditation class; I'm leading this morning's zazen with our outside sponsor Ta-o, a kind soul from Miami who's hip and wears beaded jewelry. We sit at the head of the class, facing six students and easing into thirty minutes of silent contemplation, insight, and painful body aches. As a long-time Zen practitioner, I'm considered a mentor and a dharma teacher in my *sangha*, or community, and after two years facilitating the group I've grown to like the men in the room: Ed and Ramirez, Leon, Papa Zoe. We run into each other on the rec yard and bow respectfully, as if we share a secret. Our meditation group meets every Thursday morning in a space the size of a large walk-in closet, avoiding the extra desks stacked in storage and sweeping before we set up our blankets and cushions, eager to start our weekly moment of peaceful silence.

My sangha is a community of like-minded men studying our minds through meditation, and the origin of this convergence dates back to the Buddha himself. During a time in India when people were shunned for being born in a lower class, Buddha invited one person from all four caste systems to him as disciples. The irony is not lost on me that I now sit in a modern day sangha as an outcast from society; the ethics of my sangha is to include anyone, anytime into the community of seekers.

I never imagined that I would meditate inside the violent walls of prison: after all, living as a conscious being of peace while surrounded by brutality is a true dichotomy. The duality of the two worlds is comprehensive and stark. But after I was introduced to the ancient art of quietude during my first year of incarceration, I knew that it would remain a part of my lifestyle forever—thanks to a bald-headed ex-Green Beret with a bamboo stick.

Coming to prison is traumatic—a crisis similar to going to war, being abused, or living with a grave disease. The reason for the suffering is self-imposed in my case, as I chose to break the law, but the pain it inflicts remains the same. Regret, fear, misery, and loss are all universal sorrows experienced by people in these situations, and just as someone who faces personal turmoil in their life must learn to cope, prisoners like me must look deep inside to find a way to get through it.

When I first entered the penal system, when all was bleak and life seemed over, as my family accepted my sentence and I lost everything I'd ever owned, while fighting and searching for some way to make the years bearable, I couldn't find hope. I wasn't even close to centered, and I wanted to fight at the slightest provocation. Worry consumed me, and I didn't know how to let go. I wouldn't try. Growing up I was filled with constant worry, and as I aged from an anxious boy to a neurotic adult, it seemed that I would never find inner peace. My brain wouldn't tune out or turn down. This nonstop firing of circuitry caused many meltdowns, and when faced with the chaos of prison, it felt like I was destined to lose my mind.

Then a small ray of light came into view in the form of a simple Buddhist monk.

He was an imposing, stern-looking Polish man wearing traditional robes and twisting his mala bead necklace, a scowl on his rosy face and sweat glistening atop his clean-shaven head. I'd never met a monk before (let alone a large white one) and was unsure of the etiquette as he reached out his large paw and gripped my hand like a vice.

Casey was friendly, with the relaxed confidence of an ex-boxer. I stepped into the prison chapel and looked around; a group of four inmates were gathered by a table of free books by Alan Watts, Thich Nhat Hahn, and other Zen masters. I picked up a copy of *No Mud, No Lotus* as we were ushered into an empty space behind a partition with several cushions lined up in an orderly row.

Casey lifted his robes above his knee as he squatted onto his cushion and waited for us to join him. The room was silent of the usual chatter you hear in every space within the walls of a penitentiary. The teacher stared at us for a moment before bowing with his palms pressed together at his chest.

“When I was in Nam’ I killed people for a living, and I was good at it.” A long bamboo stick was lying on the ground next to his cushion, alongside a bronze bell and a flower. His abrupt confession threw us off. “After the war I spent some time in Cambodia studying Buddhism at a monastery, then traveled to South Korea for a three-month silent meditation retreat in the mountains.”

I raised my hand. “You mean you didn’t talk for three months?”

“That’s correct.”

I didn’t understand why someone would *choose* not to speak for so long, and was skeptical of the motivation. But looking over the hardened warrior, I respected him enough to keep listening. Our group spent the next hour discussing the human mind and science, breathing techniques, and how meditating can help calm our fears and worries. I was intrigued but not convinced; furthermore, I’d read new age-y things for years, and Casey wasn’t solving any of my current problems with his stoic whimsy.

I was living in a faith-based prison in Florida and had volunteered to check out the meditation class solely out of curiosity. I’d read the book *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* a couple of months prior, and the philosophy of studying one’s own mind had appealed to my nonreligious beliefs. But now that we were lighting incense and hearing a monologue on loving-kindness, I had some reservations.

I was starting with a fifteen-minute sit. “Focus on your posture while breathing in and out through your nostrils. Now, let’s begin.”

The intimidating teacher stood and paced behind us while we sat in quiet concentration, occasionally stopping to adjust our position gently with his hand and thrice hitting one of us sharply on the trapezoid with the bamboo stick, startling me back into the moment. When we were beckoned to end our session by the ring of the bell, Casey edified the benefits of being aware of every second and letting go of our worries.

“The past is gone and tomorrow is not guaranteed, men—focus on the now.”

That first meeting was auspicious, as I was searching the narrows of my mind for a reprieve from the pain of prison, and mining my heart for inner peace. Meditation—Zen in particular—called to me. I’d shunned the dogmas and ceremony of other religions, but here was a practical guide to living: right thoughts, right speech, right action.

Our meditation classes got incrementally longer until our small group was doing zazen for thirty minutes straight—a feat I’d never imagined possible. When Casey lectured before and after our sit (dharma talks), I was enthralled, but I was still testing

things out myself. He became a sage guide for the prison world we lived in, one of cruelty and manipulation.

“The Dalai Lama teaches that only the enemy can truly teach us to practice the virtues of compassion and tolerance. See the obstacles around you in prison as a test.”

I began to transform the way I looked at my environment and the incarcerated residents around me, observing their intrinsic worth instead of their flaws. I understood that happiness was only a state of mind. My racing, irritating thoughts started to slow down. In time, I became more centered and dealt with problems differently: I was less on the edge and more balanced; I practiced equanimity amidst distractions; I attempted to lose my ego and felt more empathy.

Each night in my noisy dorm, with cigarette smoke hovering in the air and commotion all around, a heavy pall of misery weighed down the mood. I would sit on my bed bunk, contemplating my mistakes, while sitting in silent meditation on top of my pillow. I'd try to still my mind by counting slowly with each breath, using the tips I'd learned, but thoughts would sprint laps around my mind like a greyhound.

I forgot to buy coffee at the canteen...The nurse looked really good today...She smiled at me again...Man, I haven't had sex in two years...Don't forget to watch American Idol tonight...

Inhale . . . exhale . . . one . . .

Inhale . . . exhale . . . two . . .

How the fuck did I end up in prison...? Why can't I stop using drugs and go back to living a normal life . . . ? Will anyone remember me when I get out...?"

Inhale . . . exhale . . . one...

Harnessing my mind was like corralling a wild mustang, so I always came back to the breath. Casey, Thick Nhat Hahn, Watts, all the teachers in my nascent meditative life preached the same thing:

Still your mind. Follow the breath.

In the mornings I would read about the Four Noble Truths and it made sense to me—all of my suffering in life was avoidable! I was attached to every single thing that I felt made me happy, and when those comforts were stripped away, or change came, I was dissatisfied. This aversion to change and attachment to people, places, things, and ideas caused me such great misery, so I adopted a lifestyle in prison that I could continue when I got out.

Several months after my first meditation class with the decorated soldier, I attended a three-day silent meditation retreat with Casey and 10 other inmates in the education building—only returning to our dorms to sleep. We ate peanut butter in quiet and practiced yoga and *kinhin* (walking meditation) in between our grueling 30-minute sits. My back hurt. My legs were numb. I had anxiety over the silence and got hit by the bamboo stick a lot. But above all, I found insight and calmness in the eye of the storm.

During the retreat, the deep sense of existential crisis I'd fought since coming to prison was laid bare before me, and I had no choice but to confront it—fighting for your life is not unlike facing down death. I needed to find my true nature and stop living so superficially. After days of being honest with myself, I admitted that prison

was the only place that could force me to examine my past so introspectively, and I never would've taken the time to immerse myself in self-betterment and meditation if it wasn't for being isolated for a long period of time. I had hit rock bottom as an addict on the streets, and it would've gotten worse if I weren't arrested. Against all reason, after much emotional struggle, I acquiesced to one hard truth: prison may have saved my life.

Years later and long after Casey had retired, I sit at the head of a meditation class with Ta-o, watching over the Blue Lotus Sangha like an inquisitive guardian. Having a community of friends brings me a sense of connection. I wonder if these men are asking the same question or finding the same answers that I am while contemplating a better life.

Ringgggg....

Ringgggg....

Ringgggg....

I breathe deeply, inhaling air through my nostrils and exhaling from my belly. The final chime of the bronze Tibetan singing bowl reverberates through our confined space. I am finally at peace—at least for a moment.

Author Bio

Ryan Moser's work has been published in *Evening Street Press*, *Progressive*, *Muse Journal*, *Santa Fe Literary Journal*, *december*, *Iconclast*, *The Marshall Project*, *Wild World*, and more. In 2020, he received an award by PEN America, including publication in the *Pen America Literary Journal*.