

The Prison Meditation Project is an interfaith organization which is actively bringing meditation to many who are incarcerated in prison, detention centers and jail. Please read the heartfelt letter below from one of the founding leaders, Rick Avery, and consider supporting our volunteer outreach program.

Dear Friends,

I remember eight years ago writing a letter around New Year's Eve asking for support for our budding meditation program inside Donovan State Prison located in Otay Mesa. We didn't even have a bell to ring. More often than not, we were turned away at the gate. When we were able to get into the one yard in which we gave services, only two or three guys would show up. A lot of this, I am convinced, was due to systemic bureaucratic resistance and distrust of our program, in particular.

Today we offer services on three yards, with two yards having very active meditation groups, amounting to a total of approximately 70 to 80 prisoners. Also we have some Buddhas and bells, and in some cases, zafus and zabutons. But more than that, the head chaplain has become both friendly and respectful of our work. The guards know us. Most importantly, we have rapport with many men inside who appreciate the benefits of practice and have established themselves as a viable community on their respective yards.

That is the macro-picture. I want to tell you about "Chops." That's not his real name, but it is what the guys call him. Chops is an African-American in his late 50s or early 60s. In this respect, he is quite typical of the graying, minority population overcrowding our prisons today. Chops is different because at some point he received a severe traumatic injury to his face, causing several of his teeth to protrude, almost perpendicular, to his face. Hence his nickname.

A while back, Chops needed a hip replacement. One day a guard came and got him, drove him in chains to a local hospital, refusing to tell him what the visit was for. That is how he got his hip replacement--not sure what was happening to him until right before the anesthetic was administered.

As a result of that surgery, Chops has constant pain in his hip that radiates down his leg. He has been prescribed minimal doses of Tylenol. Now, Chops uses his meditation practice to work with his pain. He locates the pain into specific areas: hip, upper leg, lower, etc. and methodically uses mindfulness to break down the pain into specific sensations in these different regions of his body. This does not make the pain go away, but if done regularly, allows him to get through the day. His practice also seems to fill him with kindness and wisdom that are appreciated by all the other men in the group. He is one example of men using the practice we share in heroic ways that teach all of us about the essence of the dharma.

All of us who offer our time in this program get so much back for our efforts. Last year, for the first time, we were able to present a day long retreat on two different yards to celebrate Buddha's birthday. We were able to do extended sitting and walking practice and provide the men with nutritious, tasty, vegetarian Thai food. We also brought in some fresh fruit. I can't convey strongly enough the joy in my

heart as I watched a number of men mindfully eat fresh strawberries after not having tasted even one for as long as 20 years. Some of these guys had tears in their eyes as they ate.

Of course our needs for this project are many. Because of our expanded program, we need another Buddha statue, another good bell, several zafus and zabutons as well as cash to buy the food for this year's Buddha's birthday party. In addition, we are setting up a separate nonprofit organization so that we can apply for grants and expand our program to include systematic follow-up in the community. All of these new activities require seed money.

I know there are many worthy projects out there. But please don't let these men, as sincere practitioners of the dharma as you will ever find, be forgotten and unacknowledged. Also, if you are inspired by this project, consider becoming a volunteer and bear direct witness to the dharma in action and the delusion that unfortunately still dominates the California Correctional System.

The Buddha said that no true spiritual path is possible without a generous heart. If you can, please help us with a donation so that you may experience the joy and delight of giving. Send Contributions to:

Prison Meditation Project
2727 National Ave.
National City, CA 91950

Or use the PayPal link

<http://www.prisonmeditation.org/Donate.htm>

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