

Meditation Packet -Spring 2022

Dear Present and Future Meditators. We have an interesting packet this cycle created by Sarah and Tara. They created their pieces independently so there are two different flavors to the packet. Here is some background info on the packet creators. Sarah is a student just getting ready to graduate. She is a nontraditional student in that she is older than your typical student and she had to overcome addictions that were creating lots of problems in her life, before she could come to university and succeed. It is not far in her past and she relies on the "Recovery community" to stay strong on her path of sobriety. She is clearly happy with this choice and is not so far away from her past addictions that she remains vigilant, so she does not slide back into addiction. Her story is inspiring, and that she is getting ready to graduate Cornell and planning to attend law school is a testimony to her dedication to recovery work and healing. She came to the library to volunteer and told me of her story and how meditation was one of the tools she used to help her on her healing path. Whether in the free world or imprisoned many of us have dealt with substance abuse issues. It seems like it is endemic in society that we all are trying to change our frame of reference and drugs and alcohol as an easy though at times a destructive way. Sarah agreed to share her story with all of you and the first part of this newsletter is just that. Please write and let us know if this story touched you in ways that help and if more info on recovery would be useful in future packets. You can reach Sarah, by writing "Attn: Sarah 2022" on your responses and send them to us at the library. We will forward the letters to Sarah as she is leaving Ithaca after she graduates.

Sarah's timing was excellent because a few days before she came to PE to volunteer, Tara contacted me to say she has become caregiver to her 101-year-old mother and was unable to focus on the next meditation packet. As time went on Tara realized she wanted to share with all of you as well. She found the time to create some content for the packet for those of you who are new to PE or this packet, Tara has been creating packets twice a year for many years and welcomes individuals to write her directly. She cannot answer every letter, but she reads them all and my guess is she does answer when she can. She puts enormous amounts of energy into providing you with meditation instruction and feels very protective of you all. I am so glad she was able to contribute some meditation philosophy and practice in the second part of this newsletter. To

summarize. To write Sarah send mail to address at the bottom of the page.

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To write Tara
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Please make sure you put your contact information on the envelope AND on your letter!

I hope you find some useful tools to balance your body, mind, and awareness in this packet.

Blessings on us all-Gary

Meditation and Recovery

My name is Sarah, and I am excited to share my experience with meditation. I discovered my practices through getting sober so a lot of this will be tailored to recovery from addiction/alcoholism (I will be using these terms interchangeably in the upcoming pages as I was heavily dependent on alcohol and drugs.) However, even if you do not suffer from either of these afflictions, there might be insight for you in the coming pages. The headspace that led to my addiction is something that anyone might relate to. I tried to fill an emptiness in my soul with substances which did not work. Meditation has helped me to find fulfillment beyond the fleeting peace I found in other places.

Serenity is hard to find in this world where there are always difficulties cropping up. Meditation is a way for me to reconnect with the universe. I hope to share something in these upcoming pages that helps you even just a little.

How it Started

I was not in a good place when I finally decided to try to get sober. I had found myself in trouble with the law and was faced with the decision to either get sober or face worse consequences. Even with this threat looming over my head I was unable to get sober on my own. I say all of this to highly encourage you to look into recovery programs. Though meditation

has helped me a great deal, it was just one facet of my recovery. I needed to feel like I was a part of a community.

Addiction

I feel as though I can't just state how meditation helped me through addiction without qualifying myself as an addict.

I first started drinking when I was 15 and started to try other substances a year later. My first real drink was the first time I finally felt comfortable in my own skin. Honestly, drinking became my solution to life. With alcohol and drugs I could take on any situation. I could connect to the world, and it made life infinitely easier. I can still remember at the beginning how much fun I used to have, until it stopped working. It wasn't an obvious transition. I dislike the phrase where people say that their worst day sober is still better than their best day using. While that might be the case for them, I can't relate. Whether it was setting fireworks off on a golf course late at night, or laughing till my face hurt with my friends, I had some amazing times messed up. I think it is important to mention this aspect because there is a reason, I am an alcoholic, it was fantastic at first. Little issues started to crop up slowly, like realizing I was still drunk when I needed to go to work or getting blackout drunk on a night, I said I wouldn't. The fun times made it easy to ignore these problems, until the issues started to severely outweigh the fun times.

I still sought comfort from substances but instead of finding relief I continued to feel uncomfortable. It got to the point where I needed to be messed up to go through the day-to-day motions, but I still felt hollow. Towards the end I was drinking a fifth of vodka every day and using drugs in tandem. I used daily and blatantly ignored the warning signs that I had a problem. My substance use started to have severe consequences, but it did not matter. I could lose jobs, relationships, my place to live, and more (which I did!) and I would still not stop. People mentioned I had a problem, including my bartender, but I would just ignore them, they didn't understand I could not stop even if I wanted to. I hit rock bottom and kept digging. To be honest, it got to the point where I did not think I would live past 30. I didn't really want to. I only attempted suicide once though I did self-harm constantly. Waking up every day was a relief and a burden all at the same time.

My mindset started to change after I had a DUI. I ended up in jail after hitting a cop car while driving. Not my best moment, though I can't say it was truly my worst moment, just one where I was caught. Yet I still could not stop drinking even though I knew if I continued, I would be in serious trouble. It

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was at this moment that I finally reached out for help. I can't say it was just the outside consequences of my actions that caused me to reach out for help, it was the overwhelming feeling that if I did not make some sort of change, I would disappear. I felt like I had become an empty shell of a person. Death seemed like the only way out, but I finally admitted to myself that I did not actually want to die. There had to be more to life than this.

Recovery

Realizing I had a problem was just the first part of getting sober. Self-knowledge was necessary but could only get me so far. I needed to be part of a community and work through why I felt hollow so I could live life without relying on substances. This was not an easy process. It was a lot easier to use but, if I continued the path I was on, I would be screwed.

The process I went through was difficult. It was not easy to give up the crutch I had come to rely on. To stay sober, I needed to find a *healthy* alternative to get through life. Substances had ruined my life, but I would not be better off if I started to rely on other people, who are fallible, or other escape mechanisms that did not actually fix the problem. No, I needed to find something else to find wholeness in myself.

The solution I found was relying on something greater than myself. I wouldn't call it God, rather a belief that there are forces in the universe greater than myself. If you believe in God, fantastic, if you don't, fantastic. The only thing I have found necessary is the humility to know I am not the greatest being in the universe. After all, I can only control myself. There are many things outside of myself that, though I wish I could control them, I cannot. It is something I continue to remind myself every day. I am only in control of my actions and reactions. Nothing more.

Through hard work I have been able to do more than just survive, I have been able to find a life worth living again. I show up in life, whether in work, school, or relationships with others. I went back to college after dropping out and am about to attend law school in the coming Fall. My DUI was the best thing that happened to me because without it I don't think my perspective would have ever changed and I probably wouldn't be alive.

This is not to say that you should have the same experience to qualify as an addict/alcoholic. Life is different for everyone, and your struggles will be different than mine. I suggest not focusing on the differences but trying to focus on the similarities. It is

easy to brush off what someone says by looking at how different we might be. But something I have found from listening to many people in recovery is the similarities are always there if I am willing to listen for them.

I share all of this to say there is hope.

Meditation Practices

So, you might be wondering how meditation ties into all of this. Trust me, I thought the same thing. Freshly sober I was a dumpster fire and a half. I didn't understand how to connect with the world anymore. When someone told me I should start meditating to help me get to a better headspace I wanted to laugh in their face. I could not sit for any amount of time in what I understood as meditation. Thoughts consumed my mind and trying to get rid of them was unbearably difficult, part of the reason I drank. To be fair a lot of those thoughts were rather toxic or unproductive. They were not helpful for my recovery so even though it seemed ridiculous, meditation was something I needed to start. So, I started to try to meditate by emptying my head and controlling my breathing. Honestly, I was terrible at it.

Focused Meditation

When someone suggested to me to try focused meditation instead of what I was currently trying to practice I was confused. I had no idea what they meant. It was explained to me as taking time to direct my thoughts towards specific ideas. This seemed much more manageable than trying to empty my head.

I start this type of meditation in the morning. When I wake up, I am facing a new day, no matter what happened the day before, I have a fresh start every morning. I have noticed when I meditate in the morning, I tend to have a better response to various difficulties throughout the day.

I would sit, steady my breath and focus on very specific things. At first it would be fairly simple. It would be how I wanted to show up in life throughout the day. Now this doesn't sound simple but at this point in my life I just wanted to not hurt others with my actions. I was very selfish before getting sober and this did not just magically change after I quit drinking. So, I would think about how to not be a selfish asshole. It would start with a focused thought on "Let me take 5 seconds before responding to someone if they make me angry or hurt today" or "Let me focus on others today."

As I meditated on that singular thought I was able to sit still longer, eventually working up from 1 minute to 15 minutes. It

helped that I gave myself leniency to let my mind slip off that one specific thought as long as it was still focused on the overall subject. This also helped me to continue the practice daily. I didn't feel tortured, instead I could see my days improving as I continued to meditate which helped me continue practicing.

As I continued to practice, I would change how I directed my thinking for the day. Sometimes it would be towards something I had messed up the day before. If I had been slacking at my job, I would focus on "I want to show up to work today with a positive mindset" or if I had lashed out at someone after they hurt me I would focus on "I want to remember that everyone is dealing with their own issues and I hope to respond with kindness today." Being able to do something a little different each day I was able to grow in different ways.

There was one thing I would focus on the most though and meditate on constantly was "Help me let go and let God" or "Thy will be done." It sounds rather silly, but I am someone who, still to this day, likes to be in control. I have ideas on what I believe would be best for my life and for others around me. However, anytime I tried to control things... life was more stressful, and things would not work out how I wanted them to anyways. If I trusted in my understanding of God/the universe, things tended to work out better than I could have imagined. This didn't mean that I did nothing, rather I just did the next right action in the present moment. This way of living was far better than when I was trying to control everything. It is still my go to for meditation today.

By focusing on how I could improve my approach to life, my life improved. It became easier to stay sober as my mind was no longer a dumpster fire. It was amazing to see how much better life became with a simple 15-minute meditation every day.

Consider what might be good "focused thoughts" for you. They might be different than what worked for me, or they might not. Either way, focused meditation is a great way to begin meditative practices and to make changes to your way of thinking.

Finding Peace in Difficulty

Just because my life had less problems because I wasn't drinking did not mean that everything was smooth sailing. Life goes on, disappointments occur, and shit happens. All of my problems weren't solved when I finally put down the bottle. Problems didn't occur as often and I usually didn't make them worse, but they never have magically disappeared. Meditation has kept me grounded through all that life continues to throw at me while I stay sober.

I cannot imagine your difficulties though. I will not act like my brief time in jail gives me the ability to understand what you are going through. However, I hope to share some potential practices to help you through difficulties you may face. Sometimes when we cannot fully be free from problems, we can find peace within the turmoil.

When people or situations piss me off, I usually have one of two reactions. Blow up or walk away. Sometimes walking away is not a possibility and usually blowing up is not how I want to react. In these situations, I try to do a mini meditation, repeating to myself 5 times "Thy will be done" or "Grant me the serenity." Each time I take a breath in and out which calms my mind and heart by the 5th time. For others it might take more, or it might take less but all I can say is what has worked for me.

Beyond that there are times where life becomes unbearably difficult. It isn't just one thing that is frustrating me, it is everything. A lot of times it results in this overwhelmingly hopeless feeling. It makes me want to drink. It makes me want to escape. If everything is going to go to shit around me and all I can supposedly control is myself, I might as well get drunk.

You might relate in some capacity to this. Maybe you turn towards something else to escape, it is one of the easiest ways to handle the feeling of being overwhelmed. I don't know about you but for me, I never truly escape those ways. It is just a fleeting respite. When I must face it again it is never better, although sometimes worse. It is maddening honestly. It is times like these I want to scream at universe and say a big "Fuck you!" I have actually done that. I have also smashed plates in an alley and have cried until there were no more tears. Sometimes letting out my emotions helped ease my burden, but it didn't give me peace.

Instead, I have found a mantra to meditate with when everything is going to hell. "This too shall pass."

Nothing is permanent in life. The good times do not continue forever but neither do the bad. Sometimes time passes as slowly as a snail, sometimes as quickly as a bird, and, unfortunately, sometimes as painful as a kidney stone. However, though sometimes it does not seem like it, it will pass. Once I started to understand this perspective, I have been able to move through some very difficult periods of my life without trying to run from the pain. It sometimes helps to pair this meditation with a "moment of zen" if possible. That might be just a quiet minute where you listen to your breath, or it might be

soaking in some sunshine outside. If you can find some "zen" it can help to remind you that the difficulties, you face are not the only thing in the world.

There are periods that pass too slowly. I am not going to be someone who will say that the universe or God does not give us more than we can handle. I really disagree with this sentiment. We, as individuals, cannot handle everything the world burdens us with. While I hope there are resources for you to utilize where you are, I wanted to give you other options in case you get overwhelmed. Please feel free to write to Prisoner Express, letters to myself or other volunteers if you need connection. Also consider utilizing the journal program which is a great way to organize your thoughts. P.E. is also in the process of lining up a book on meditation/self-help for a book club, keep an eye out for information on this opportunity in the summer. Gary's go to when all else fails is to do square breathing. This is when you breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 4, then breathe out for a count of 4, and hold out for a count of 4. Repeating this process until your mind has calmed is a great way to recenter yourself when everything has started to overwhelm you.

Pursuit of Happiness

I put this section last for a reason. Happiness is something I did not find quickly, nor easily. It is also not something I continuously have. While I want to encourage you to seek joy and live a happy life, it is a difficult task, especially if you are in a difficult situation.

The quote "Money can't buy happiness, but it is more comfortable to cry in a Mercedes than on a bicycle" always makes me smile. Mainly because I find it fairly accurate. I know several people who have any type of materialistic thing they could want, and they are miserable. I also know many people who have a modest life and are truly happy. It is not what we have (or don't have) that determines our outlook on life. That does not mean life is not *easier* with more wealth or power at our disposal.

So how do you seek happiness when things are not easy? There are plenty of self-help books to tell us what to do to live a more fulfilling life, to be a happier person, and to change our mindset. All of it is easier said than done. Some people will suggest writing out a gratitude list of three things every day while others will suggest trying to have a more positive attitude. Those suggestions have not fully worked for me, so I want to give you a different perspective (well I do make a gratitude list at times but for different reasons, not to find joy rather

to remind myself what I have to be grateful for). So, I will just talk about how meditation has given me moments of happiness.

Every time I have thought “if only I achieve X thing, I will finally be happy” I have not actually been happy. Instead, I look towards the next thing which I think will actually make me happy. A rather vicious cycle that never ends with me being happy. Nor can I just say, “once X problem is solved, I will be happy.” Mainly because another problem would appear far too quickly. Alas, happiness never seemed within reach no matter what I did. This doesn’t seem to be going in a great direction, does it?

So now I am left with how to find happiness when I am no longer using my prior escape mechanism, alcohol. Strangely I found it within my difficulties. Not in the “finding the bright side to my struggles” kind of way. Rather it was finding happiness despite the struggles. Despite how unfair the world was and despite the shit that would occur, there were still amazing moments within life if I was willing to be present. Sometimes those moments would occur around me without any prompting, other times I would engage in meaningful activity to create my own happiness in the present. To do this I would mindfully meditate on the idea. “Let me be present today, not worrying about the future nor lamenting the past, and let me be of help to others within this present day.” I cannot find joy in the now if I am not allowing myself to be present. This idea paired with being of service to others has brought me the most joy when I get stuck in my head.

There are times though where I need to work through some painful and traumatic parts of my life to let go of the past. Alcohol was helpful and suppressing things I did not want to work through but to be happy I needed to let go of my trauma. This can require a different meditative approach. Consider letting yourself sit and with steady breathing, let your mind calm. Then let those burdens come to the surface. Don’t attach to them but rather use a witness perspective on the situation and support yourself from that view. By witness perspective, I mean to say, let yourself think about it from as a 3rd person. This should allow you to confront your trauma and process it without letting it overwhelm you.

Happiness is not easily found nor is it easily kept. *The beauty of only being in control of ourselves is the fact we can take actions to make changes.* Whether that is trying to be present, letting go of the past, or focusing on others, we have opportunities to make changes for the better.

Progress Not Perfection

So that is how I meditate and how it has helped me to continue on the path of recovery. As the years go by sobriety gets easier, though sometimes I slack on meditation. It is always easier to do the work when everything is going to shit versus when things are going well. Luckily when life starts getting crazy (and I start getting crazy because of life) I know that if I start meditating again my mindset will usually get better. No one is perfect at these things, and I find that rather reassuring.

So do your best to find recovery, to find peace, to find calm, to find happiness. But don’t beat yourself up because those results don’t come right away or because you forget to practice every day. I am a firm believer in focusing on the progress we make in life; it is a better determinate than focusing on the end result most of the time.

You should take what you find helpful from this packet and leave what you don’t. I hope you give meditation a chance to help you on your road to recovery.

Please let me know what you think! I want to hear your thoughts, both good and bad. You can reach out about more than just your thoughts on the packet. If you are struggling with alcohol or addiction, feel free to reach out. Or if you have anything else you want to write to me about, feel free! Just send your correspondence to Prisoner Express at: Sarah F. 484. I will be leaving the area after I graduate, but your mail will be forwarded to me through the summer of 2022.

Quotes

“I ask for the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I, and the wisdom to know the difference”

“God, direct my thinking, especially that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonesty, or self-seeking motives.” - Alcoholics Anonymous

“Meditation is not spacing out or running away. In fact, it is being totally honest with ourselves.” - Kathleen McDonald

“Meditation can help us embrace our worries, our fear, our anger; and that is very healing. We let our own natural capacity of healing do the work.” Thich Nhat Hanh

“I will try to grow in this new life. I will think of spiritual things often and unconsciously I will grow. The nearer I get to the new life, the more I will see my unfitness. My sense of failure is a

sure sign that I am growing in the new life. It is only struggle that hurts. In sloth - physical, mental, or spiritual - there is no sense of failure or discomfort. With struggle and effort, I am conscious not of strength but of weakness until I am really living the new life. But in the struggle, I can always rely on the power of God to help me.” - Meditation for the Day from *Thought for the Day*

Tara on Meditation

My dear friends,

I hope this finds you with peaceful hearts and kindness in your world. I'm still caretaking my mom. Thank you so for your kind thoughts and prayers! My mom is remarkable - in and out of the hospital and ER and she keeps getting better! Such resilience. Yet, In the moments of powerful arising afflictions, anxiety or stress, I find mindfulness has been one of the greatest treasures helping me to drop into the silence of the body, to bring precious attention into the utter boundless depth of this very moment. And in this dropping in, an alignment happens awakening strength, kindness, compassion and patience that carries me into the next moments like a river of powerful, peaceful grace. I wish this grace to all of you, in whatever your challenges are dealing with, into every moment of your precious human birth. Cultivate deeper mindfulness ! Oh, it's such a treasure! Within the infinite present moment is our Teacher, our sanctuary, our jewel., May all beings awaken into ever deepening compassion, joyful peace and kindness.

JOY: Documentary about the friendship of His Holiness Dalai Lama of Tibet and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa

When I saw this delightful movie on the internet about these two extraordinary beings, I was moved again and again thinking to send you all the inspiring wisdoms that they said! So, I rewound the YouTube film, and wrote these down for you. These teachings say much with few words. I hope you take some of these words to heart. May they bring many moments of true joy to you, till the rivers of joy and kindness are overflowing through your being, overflowing to all with blessings...

Sonja Lyubomirsky, PhD, a Behavioral Scientist:

We started testing a happiness strategy. People who did acts of kindness for others were happier and stayed happier for 2-4 weeks after the act was over. People who did acts of kindness for themselves felt good while they were doing it, but that didn't change their happiness.

With kindness we are connecting with another person, and it also has effects on the body.

So, we collected blood and found that those who did acts of kindness for others showed changes that were associated with a stronger immune system.

Desmond Tutu:

You can endure the most horrendous circumstances and emerge on the other side not broken, having an eagerness to spread goodness and compassion in the world.

Some suffering, even intense suffering, is a necessary ingredient for developing compassion. It's like being put into a fiery furnace to be refined. You are a masterpiece in the making! We are wired to be compassionate. We are wired to be caring for the other.

There is an incredible nobility and strength - we have the potential to be instruments of compassion and forgiveness. It is totally wrong that forgiveness and compassion are signs of weakness. Totally Wrong!!100% wrong! 1,000% wrong! People who say forgiveness is a sign of weakness haven't tried it.

Dalai Lama then said:

There is a Tibetan who spent many years in a Chinese prison. Difficult, hard labor, immense torture. He told me during those 18 years, he faced dangers. I asked, 'What danger?' I thought danger for his life. He answered, 'Danger of losing compassion towards those Chinese perpetrators.'

Suffering is what makes you appreciate joy.

The key to joy is to find your compassion and live from there.

Find a way to live from there.

from Dalai Lama's translator:

Cognitive reframing is really a powerful technique to change your mindset. In Buddhist language we call it 'outlook'. And this is a mental insight in Buddhist psychology, why so much emphasis is placed in Buddhist psychology on how you see the world. Instead of resentment and bitterness, reframing instead can help us, liberate us from resentment, and free us.

the Dalai Lama: If you look through one angle, you feel 'oh, how bad'. How sad. But if you look from another angle about that that same event, 'that has given me a new opportunity. To learn. To change. To grow.

Desmond Tutu continued: "What you say is very beautiful. And you can think, how can I use this as something positive. The thing is not to think 'How can I escape'. But how can I use this as something positive. You can transmute something that can be totally negative, into goodness. You, my friend, didn't say 'How can I be happy? I lost my country.'" You didn't say that. You said 'How can I spread goodness, compassion and love? So, the best way to fulfill your own life, is to begin by helping others.

Take Refuge from Afar with Garchen Rinpoche

"Use your time well! Use your time to awaken!"

Prison is the greatest gift in your life

if it leads you to the Dharma,

if it leads you to the Buddha !"

Garchen Rinpoche has a special place in his heart for prisoners. He was imprisoned in Tibet for 20 years of hard labor, when the Chinese were arresting monks because of their religion. Mindfulness was his major practice for those years. If he was caught meditating, he'd be killed. Some monks committed suicide, but Rinpoche has said that he found joy in prison because he knew he was burning negative karma. And as he told me when we met, "Prison wasn't a bad place for me. I had so many opportunities to practice compassion". He knows the profound power and importance of practicing dharma in prison.

To take refuge does not mean you give up your religion. The Dalai Lama said, "if you do Buddhist practices you become a better Christian, Muslim...whatever your religion, because practicing Buddhism helps us to become better human beings".

Rinpoche will give refuge to everyone who wants it. It's a blessing to be connected to his mind stream. Once you have taken refuge with him, as I have, he will guide and protect you until you are enlightened. And, only do this if you feel to. Trust your calling!

You can send me the following and I will send it off to Rinpoche. If you can't send any of these, you absolutely can still take refuge with him.

~a clipping or 2 or 3 locks of hair from the top of your head (the crown), cut with sincerity, a picture of you, and if you can, something as an offering (picture, poem, feather, stamps)

You will receive a packet including a refuge card with Buddhist prayers, your new Tibetan name, and teachings. You'll also receive the teachings for, and the Bodhisattva Vow, which you can take after taking refuge. As long as Rinpoche is able to, he will offer this. I highly recommend acting on it as soon as you feel to. I'll let you know when I receive your request for refuge; the turn for this is a few months.

If you have already taken refuge with Rinpoche and you have moved, please let me know!

I want to send everyone who has had refuge the Bodhisattva Vow, with teachings.

You can take the vows after you have taken refuge.

From Garchen Rinpoche's Teachings on Refuge

Refuge Prayer

I take refuge in transcend awareness,
the heart essence of Buddha
I take refuge in compassion,
the heart essence of Dharma
I take refuge in spiritual friends,
the heart essence of Sangha

H.E. Garchen Rinpoche has said that it is extremely beneficial to take vows online, as it really shows you have a strong aspiration to receive them! Rinpoche explains that the reason we are truly able to receive vows online, is due to the ultimate nature of the Three Jewels — the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings), and the Sangha (spiritual community). Their ultimate nature is actually love, which is all-pervasive like space. So, if we have the heart and intention of love, we receive the vows whether or not we are physically present for the ceremony.

When we take refuge, we take refuge in the Three Jewels, and a jewel or a source of refuge also exist in other religions and spiritual paths. Here, in the Buddhist path, we take refuge in 3 sources of refuge - the Three Jewels, but in general the sources of refuge are very similar in other religions. According to the Buddhist tradition, the first jewel or source of refuge is the Buddha. That is the quality of our spiritual teacher. It is the nature of great wisdom, awareness. That is the essence of the Buddha. Secondly, we also take refuge in

the dharma, and that is the path that the Buddha had shown to all sentient beings. That path basically means the understanding of karma, cause and effect, and the existence of future lives. There are countless dharma teachings, but they are included in a few statements. And that is in the refuge card that you are receiving. It has 4 lines. The essence of karma is that action that is virtuous leads to the result of happiness, and action that is non-virtuous leads to the result of suffering.

What is the purpose of taking refuge? Why do we want to take refuge? Do you experience suffering, difficulties? Do you want to be free of suffering, of difficulty? Yes, I do experience difficulty and I do not want to suffer. So, if you don't want to suffer, then you should seek refuge in the Buddha. The Buddha shows the path to freedom from suffering.

On the refuge card, it has what the Buddha said: "Do not commit any wrong." Harming others is just like harming yourself. So therefore, do not commit any wrong because in the end it will fall back on you, when that negative karma comes back to you.

And then secondly the Buddha said, "Perfectly practice virtue." So, in brief, to do that, we need to develop a mind of love and compassion. So first we must give up harming others and then we must benefit them, help them as much as we can. So, what does that actually, mean, helping others and not harming others? It mainly has to do with the mind, actually. With our mind we should sustain an aspiration to benefit others. You should never separate from that wish in whatever you do.

And it says on our card "Completely tame your own mind." That shows that mainly the karma in helping others has to do with the mind. This aspiration to benefit others, that state of mind will protect you. That's your real refuge. Actually, what is refuge and what will protect your own mind and refuge, is your own love and compassion. The path of the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, show us how to tame our minds, practice virtue, and not commit wrongdoing.

Shanti Devi's Prayer

May every being ailing with disease
Be freed at once from every malady.
May all the sickness of the world
Be instantly and permanently healed.

* * * * *

I offer this following piece to you, to all beings...may we dedicate our awakening to benefit of all: we who are all born under the same shining sun and boundless sky.

Like an eagle let your mind soar. We are the people of the Eagle.

From great heights we see far below, we can see ourselves and the smallness of our lives from the greatness of our flight.

Such relief, to not take ourselves quite so seriously in this dance of life!

See yourself, a speck like every other on the Earth.

yet each a treasured piece, a precious unique role to play,
among the billions of other
leaves of beauty and grains of simple sand.

With the confidence of the mountains, and their strength and
stillness within you,
Know who you Are, and rest in your magnificent Self.
For every Self is magnificent, beneath the layers of the lost
and illusion.
Beneath the shadows and masks
of fear and anger and darkness,
we are peace and silence and contentment.

Our greatest power we will find in the gentle quiet within, that
we won't need to display to others.
The great lakes and mountains are content to be still, and their
greatness cannot be denied.

With the warmth and brilliance of the Sun let your heart
awaken and shine on us all.
We all need your blessings. We all lose our way.
We are all on the cosmic sometimes comic dance of
lost and found, lost and found, lost and found,
and shining upon each other.

We are each the Profound Pure Voice of the Buddha,
comforting and guiding ourselves as we guide and comfort
each other.
We are all the same spark of Radiant Divinity within.
Our sparks are hidden beneath the ashes.
The spark needs a little more spark to make it sparkle and then
it shines...

Shine on, my friends, and see or look for the sun shining heart
in everyone.
Learn to be truly kind to yourself and you will naturally be kind
to all others. .
Know yourself and you will know all beings.
Become who you truly are.
You are the gift we are waiting for.
You are the gift you are waiting for. *Tara*

from Garchen Rinpoche

"Generally speaking, Buddhas and sentient beings are like one
river. Buddha, however, realizes the nature of the self and, free
of doubt, sees that all the activities of samsara are like a
dream or illusion. Buddha's mind abides like the nature of
peace - like a river that cannot be frozen.
Sentient beings, on the other hand, have not realized their own
nature, and their minds are influenced by conditions which
cause afflictive emotions. (i.e., anger, confusion, grasping)
This is like meeting very cold water and freezing, the ice then
becoming like a rock that cannot be broken.

If the heat of devotion and compassion melt the fro-
zen mind, one will realize there is no difference between one-
self and Buddha. Therefore, the most important sources of

blessing are devotion. Be devoted to becoming mindful, com-
passionate and kind. It is like hundred rivers going under one
bridge." Garchen Rinpoche

From the many years of teachings, I have received
from great Tibetan masters, the essence of their teachings is
always the same. What is most important is to cultivate com-
passion - compassion for yourself and for the suffering of oth-
ers. Even if it starts as pity, it can evolve into compassion. And,
to offer whatever you accomplish for the benefit of all beings -
so you are not feeding your ego with your accomplishments,
but rather you are embracing humanity with the jewels of your
consciousness. Cultivating this kind of generosity of the heart
is infinitely more important than getting all the practices 'right'.
If you can cultivate mindfulness, bringing the mind fully into
what you are experiencing or doing in this very moment, this
will give you a practice you can do all day long, in absolutely
every action of your day, in the quiet inner sanctuary of your
own mind. It's simple, not always easy as we forget, and yet
utterly profound.

And remember to do your very best to cultivate the
Six Paramitas, the Six Perfections! These actions are the path
to enlightenment! These qualities are the qualities of the Bud-
dhas and bodhisattvas. As you practice them you are purifying
your karma, turning your mind inward to the dharma, and turn-
ing away from actions that cause suffering for you and others,
and you are creating habits of actions that will bring more
peace, joy and kindness to you and others. The Six Paramitas
are patience, equanimity (even tempered), right effort (joyful
diligence), compassion, (loving kindness) generosity, medita-
tive wisdom. If you can only cultivate one quality, Garchen
Rinpoche has said let it be patience. Through patience every
other perfection is accomplished.

Simple Meditations

I have shared these meditations before—they are certainly
worth repeating! And if you're new to them, enjoy. Let it be
your intention to do these practices to help all beings -including
yourself - the quality of attention that you're cultivating, and dili-
gence of your efforts that can make these simple practices pro-
found and life changing. Stick with the practices you feel con-
nected to, the practices you feel natural and comfortable with,
and the ones with which you see results from your efforts.
For me these practices are not religious. They are tools that
will help you relax and center, let go of stress and help you
deal with negative thoughts and emotions. Whatever your reli-
gion, these can help you to be more comfortable with yourself.
And then we become happier, saner Christians, Buddhists,
Muslims, Jews, Native Americans...As the Dalai Lama says:
Loving kindness is my religion. Let's all learn to be more kind
to ourselves. Healing ourselves is our act of kindness for our-
selves, for the world.

Healing Breath

Breathing gently, inhale twice, then exhale slowly. Notice how
the body moves as you breathe. Notice how much more air

you bring in with the second inhale. Do 5-10 breaths. Not more than 10, or you may hyperventilate. Don't pull in or push out the breath aggressively. This is a relaxing healing breath.

Meditate on the Space Between the Breaths

Inhale a natural relaxed breath Notice the space between the inhale and the exhale, at the top of the breath. Exhale a natural relaxed breath. Notice the space between the exhale and inhale, at the bottom of the breath. Rest a brief moment in the stillness in that space, without grasping. Relax and let go. You can experiment with holding your breath and resting in the stillness...

Mindfulness is the mind looking at itself.

The more diligent we are about being mindful, the more centered and calm we will be. We keep learning to bring our attention right to this moment, to fully be present with what we're doing. Eating, drinking, walking, breathing, turning door handles...whatever the action, if we're aware of what we're doing, we're being mindful.

Mindfulness: Meditation in Action

Pay attention to as much as you can, in your experience as you drink or eat—weight, temperature, sensation of the utensil or cup, color, shape of food, taste, texture, teeth, tongue, chewing, swallowing, change of texture as you chew. Notice your preferences and aversion. If you have the time, try chewing until each bite is completely pulverized before you take another bite.

For drinking, feel the cup/mug, weight, texture, hold the liquid in your mouth a little before swallowing, feeling clearly the sensations, then the swallowing.

If you keep practicing this, eating and drinking will become a profound experience of deep mindful awareness. And this will carry over into other experiences of your body.

Lifting your foot...putting it down...weight shifting...You can do this slowly to cultivate your awareness. Then, you will become wonderfully mindful no matter how slowly or quickly you move.

Try different speeds of eating and walking and see how mindful you can be.

I found this following piece in my notes for a previous newsletter. It has great advice!No matter what our practice is, sitting or moving meditation, even prayer - strong concentration and awareness are powerful skills to help us deepen our experience. Every moment of our day can be our opportunity to deepen, and awaken.

The Venerable Lama Tashi Namgyal Concentration, Awareness (Mindfulness), and Practice.

Without concentration there can be no spiritual progress. Gaining the ability to concentrate—to meditate single-pointedly without distraction—is like sharpening a drill, and then learning to hold it in one place as you apply it. If you try to use a power drill while holding it loosely, it will bounce and skip

wildly all over the place. In the same way, if you try to apply the powerful vehicle of tantra without the ability to concentrate—or at least without an ongoing commitment to improving your focus and concentration—then when you say mantras your mind will jump all over the place—here, there, and everywhere. Just like a poorly held power drill, your mind will never get a grip, and then, just as a power drill without a steady grip will not produce a hole, nothing much will happen in your meditation. There will be no penetrating insight. This is not to say that there is utterly no virtue in practice done with less than perfect concentration. But the ability to penetrate into the nature of reality, which is what liberates from suffering and confusion, requires sustained single-pointed concentration.

You may worry that slowing down and relaxing will make you less efficient, less productive, or lazy. But you will find that this is not the case. In the late fifties the fastest sprinter in the world was Ray Norton. When he first started training at San Jose State College, his coach took him out onto the track and had him run ten successive 220-yard dashes. The first one he was told to run as fast as he could; the second one he was told to run at 5/6 speed and with his hands and jaw relaxed, so relaxed that his lower lip would bounce up and down as he ran. The third one he was told to run at full speed and the fourth one again at 5/6 speed. In this way he alternated the ten sprints. The coach timed and recorded each sprint, and when Ray Norton had finished, all of the races he had run at “5/6 speed” he had actually run faster than the ones he had run “full speed.” Thinking to slow down and relax a bit, the sprinter actually became more efficient. If you slow down and relax a bit you will have energy to spare, which will automatically manifest as greater awareness and a greater ability to concentrate.

Thus, if you slow down a bit, relax a bit, and make sure that you see very clearly where you are and what you are doing, your concentration and awareness will develop; you will cease to make so many mistakes and false starts, and you will find that you actually become more efficient.

You cannot devote yourself exclusively to practicing concentration and awareness. But if, in your everyday life, you see very clearly where you are and what you are doing, and notice very clearly what you are experiencing, you can use your daily life to practice these values. To see very clearly what you are doing is to practice concentration, and to see very clearly where you are while you are doing it and to notice very clearly what you are experiencing is the practice of awareness.

So please, in all of your activities, see very clearly where you are and what you are doing, and notice very clearly—without suppressing or acting out—what you are experiencing. When you walk, walk; when you eat, eat; when you wash the dishes, just concentrate on those activities. You do not have to solve the world's problems at the same time, and you do not have to waste your precious energy complaining about having to engage in such activities or complaining to yourself about the way you are treated. Be simple and use your life to learn to witness,

In order to do this, you must slow down and relax a bit. Mind and energy are inseparable. If you slow down and relax a bit you will have energy to spare, which will automatically manifest as a greater capacity to concentrate. Without concentration there is no hope for spiritual progress.

If when you walk, you are not all there, if you are absorbed in daydreams and personal crisis, or if you are thinking "profound thoughts;" or if your mind is wandering, complaining about this and complaining about that; if while you are walking, your mind is constantly full of melodramas of all kinds, then that is difficult, because you are lost and unconcentrated. If that is your situation, what can you do? Just concentrate on your walking. When you wash the dishes, concentrate on washing the dishes. When your hands, just wash your hands. Do things very simply, straightforwardly, and with concentration and awareness. Be aware of the distraction if it is there; you do not want to ignore it. But concentrate on what you are doing, simply, straight forwardly, and precisely. And make yourself aware of the total environment. See very clearly where you are and what you are doing and remember that it is all like a dream.

You are your training ground; the school is your mind. Exactly where you are you have the opportunity to practice and attain awareness. You can actually open up into your situation on the spot, right where you are. If you can develop the contentment that arises out of seeing whatever happens in whatever situation as an opportunity to practice, and then you practice mindfulness of what you are doing and awareness of the environment in which you are doing it; then by so doing you will be able to bring all the little tasks that you have to perform in your life to the path and utilize them for your awakening.

Then you will see that there is the possibility of practicing mindfulness in everything we do. When I am editing, and when I am typing, then being mindful and focused on the movement of my fingers is shamatha; I am practicing concentration. When one's typing or work becomes a little sloppy, as we have all noticed, if we simply slow down, relax, and concentrate a little more carefully, we eliminate a great deal, if not all, of the error. Being aware of the environment in which the editing and typing is going on, remembering that it is like an illusion, or looking directly at the process to discover its nature is the practice of awareness.

When you talk to your friend, there is always the possibility of concentration and awareness. If you understand that, and if you then develop mindful concentration and a kind of spacious awareness in your daily life, then gradually all of the mental disturbances that fill our minds will subside. Do not always wish to be somewhere other than where you are. Do not always wish your situation to be other than what it is. Your personal situation, whatever it is, is actually your karmic marvelous training ground.

You won't be able to apply the tremendous mental powers that are inherent in your mind anyway until all of the confusion in your mind subsides. And that confusion cannot subside until you incorporate concentration and awareness

into your daily life—until you use your daily life in such a way that you develop a kind of peacefulness and contentment about being where you are exactly in the situation in which you find yourself. In this way you will gradually develop the ability to focus your mind and concentrate, and to do that with spacious awareness and openness. In this way, you see each situation as its own perfection.

So, the situation that one finds oneself in is actually extremely useful—if we are willing to see it that way, if we are willing to change the way we see it, if we are willing to see it as an opportunity rather than as a drag or a curse.

The key point is to learn to concentrate and be aware, be mindful. So please do that. And remember that it is all just like a dream or an illusion. That will help you to cut through the attachment that turns everything into such a big deal. And then, if you can do that, if you will do that, then seeing and taking the next step on your path will always be easy. It will be easy to see how to deepen your practice and how to take the next step towards improving your situation in your world. Opportunities will become apparent, and you will be able to take advantage of these. The urge for deeper practice will naturally awaken in you.

"Change is inevitable— except from a vending machine." – Robert C. Gallagher

"You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day, unless you're too busy - then you should sit for an hour." – Zen Proverb

"Meditation: Because some answers can only be found on the inner net." – Shira Tamir

Where to get Prayer Beads- and more -for free!

Thank you for sharing this Jeremy Brown !
"Ask questions. Answers you will receive" Yoda

**ISKON Prison Ministry
PO Box 2676
Alachua, FL 32616**

Write directly Head Chaplain: c/o Bhakti lata Das
(to share intro, ask questions, etc)

They respond fairly quickly. They are free for you (they would cost \$2.50) and do not violate V.A.C. Ch 33. I get new beads every 6-8 months so I can give a pair away.

Items available:

Prayer beads with counter and prayer bag.
Valued under \$5. Stamps appreciated.

Bhagavad Gita As Is

Prison Newsletter

Back to Godhead Magazine

**c/o Laksmi Barsel
Satchidananda Ashram
Yogaville
108 Yogaville Way
Buckingham, VA 23921-2229**

This is a Universal Interfaith organization that represents all faiths and will send items according to faith preference. Into letter required.

Items available:

Prayer Beads:

Japa Mala - Black regular - smooth coated plastic.
108 count

Catholic Cross Prayer Beads

Muslim - Dikkar Beads - 99 count

Jewish - Tassels, Torah, Jewish Bible.

Bibles, Quoran, Yoga & Pranayana techniques,
Info on Kundalini Shakti

Note: Prayer mats are hard to find. Good ones, that is. You could ask for a cheap plastic one that costs \$2-\$5 and it will be sent directly to your prison address.

About Property:

A Religious Property Approval Form is needed to ensure the safety and security of the institution or facility where you are at. The pandemic has only made things worse. If you're already submitted Forms of Religious Property before and have received religious property in the past you may not need to submit another. My facility lets things come in because I frequently go to property and do favors for people. Be on the safe side and work it.

Dedication of Virtue: the Karmapa

Through all roots of virtue accumulated by me or by anyone in samsara or nirvana,

May I and all beings quickly achieve unsurpassable, authentic, perfect, precious awakening.

Through these roots of virtue, may I benefit all beings

with my actions. May I benefit all beings with my

words. May I benefit all beings with my thoughts.

May thoughts of desire never arise. May thoughts of anger never arise.

May thoughts of pride, jealousy, acquisition, position, fame, and renown never arise.

May my being be moistened by love, compassion and bodhicitta.

May I become a caring, virtuous friend to all throughout the reaches of space.

In this very life may I achieve the supreme siddhi of Mahamudra, the great realization of reality.

RESOURCE LIST

(Updated April 2020)

All books and newsletters are free to inmates

American Buddhist Temple

10515 N Latson Road

Howell, MI 48855

Ask for 2, 3 free books. When finished, ask for another.

B.A.U.S Buddhist Association of the US

2020 Route 301

Carmel, NY 10512

Free books and booklets

Christian Pen Pals

PO Box 11296,

Hickory, NC 28603

Christian penpal for friendship and spiritual support, to help prisoners, prisoners families, and chaplains.

Compassion Works For All

PO Box 7708,

Little Rock AR 72217-7708 /

CWFA offers a monthly newsletter. Dharma Friends supports Buddhists in their meditation practice and provides healing and psychological guidance. Write to be placed on the mailing list.

Human Kindness Foundation

PO Box 61619

Durham, NC 27715

Free books, newsletter. Free copy of Eckhart Tolle's The Power of Now and A New Earth. Address letter to Tolle Books Offer at HKF... Additional books can be requested after 1 month... Spanish Books: Una Vida Sagrada, Toso Estamos Encarcelados, El Encuentro de Dios Interior

Dear HKF, My name is T. I am in prison in Texas. I have seen over the last two years, the most complete change in a man I have ever seen. He went from being extremely violent and remorseless to being kind and thoughtful. When I finally got up the nerve to ask him how that happened, all he said was to write you and ask for two books, read them with an open mind and I would know.

Please send me We're All Doing Time and Just Another Spiritual Book. Thank you. T.

Liberation Prison Project

PO Box 33036

Raleigh NC 27636 415-701-8500

Free Tibetan Buddhist books, small booklets for specific practices and prayers; materials for prison libraries; a

free subscription Liberation Magazine; and practice support for serious students. Some literature available in Spanish

The Lion's Roar Magazine

PO Box 469095

Escondido, CA 92046

May send free 1 year subscription for quarterly Buddhist magazine

Parallax Press

PO Box 7355, Berkeley CA 94707

Free slightly damaged books of Buddhist teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. You may request a catalog, or a specific book which they will send if they have.

Prison Mindfulness Institute

Prison Dharma Network

P.O. Box 206 South

Deerfield, MA, 01373

Buddhist books

Prison Yoga Project

PO Box 415

Bolinas, CA 94924

San Francisco Zen Center

300 Page Street,

San Francisco, CA 94102

Fee Books on Zen buddhism

Tathagata Meditation

1215 Lucretia Ave

San Jose, CA 95122

Dharma books on Vipassana and Buddha's teachings

Zen Mountain Monastery

National Buddhist Prison Sangha

P O Box 156

Mount Tremper, NY 12457,

Books on Zen Buddhism, correspondence about Buddhism



Buddha Shakyamuni