

## B R E A K I N G F R E E

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Imagine standing in the middle of a large auditorium filled with three to four hundred people who are incessantly shouting, coughing, sneezing, snoring, and flushing toilets. Imagine the smell of unwashed bodies, human defecation, urine, tobacco, marijuana, and garbage all mingled together—so intense that sometimes these smells permeate even your dreams. Imagine all the different personalities, moods, emotions, and phobias these people have and exhibit to varying degrees, some stable—some not so stable.

Now imagine that you are in a house, or out for a walk, and that you are subject to be confronted by someone in uniform, handcuffed, searched and/or harassed at any given time, day or night, without even the slightest provocation. But most of all imagine your privacy being so limited that it is actually a blessing to be housed in a cellhouse where you can be locked alone inside a six-by-eight foot concrete cell (as opposed to an open dorm), just so you might enjoy a few precious hours of solitude each day, away from the daily chaos and insanity which are the norm of prison life.

Now again I ask you, to imagine trying to build and maintain a daily meditation practice which is both meaningful and beneficial in such an environment. Can such a practice be accomplished? Yes! There are many prisons around this country, as well as the world, that allow devotees of Buddhism to maintain a well-balanced practice. What I said above was to illustrate what the daily environment of a prison can be like. The following paragraphs will, I hope, convey what a daily practice can be like for the incarcerated.



My own experience has been one of good fortune because I live alone in a cell. Some of our sangha brothers are not as fortunate because they must live and try to practice in an open dorm. The dorms are a hindrance to practice because there is virtually no privacy—not even when one goes to the toilet. There are no walls to sit behind or to use as a sanctuary; and there are always some elements of humanity who can't stand to see you doing anything positive. It's their nature to constantly interrupt and harass you. So I applaud our brethren who are forced to practice—and find ways to practice successfully—in a setting like this.

The next obstacle we have to overcome is the lack of quiet. I tried to illustrate earlier how the noise level can at times be maddening. It definitely takes getting used to. In this environment quiet is—without a doubt—as much of a luxury as privacy. It usually begins to quiet down around 10:00 pm and the quiet lasts until 5:00 am. We know that ideally we should rise early and begin our practice then. But sometimes, depending on outer circumstances, we are learning to modify our expectations. Let me use myself as an example of how we can use our time in our current situation to cultivate a practice of mindfulness, loving kindness, and compassion.



My day usually begins around 9:00 am. I rise from bed, wash, dress myself, and clean up my cell a bit. Around 10:00 am I will begin my day with a short morning practice. First I bow, then I will go for refuge and recite the five precepts. After this short preliminary practice, I will then sit quietly for between twenty and thirty minutes. Last, I will recite the Four Great Vows. After I have cleared the cobwebs from my head with this short practice, I am ready to begin my daily interactions with the rest of the prison population. Since I attend college classes, I have the opportunity to be out of my cell walking for long periods of time. This gives me a chance to practice walking meditation.

We walk everywhere behind these walls. There are no cars, cabs, or buses. There isn't really that much space in which to walk, let alone to justify vehicles. When I walk to and from different buildings I try to keep a quiet, focused mind. When the weather is nice I like to go out to the recreation yard and find a spot where I can practice walking meditation for about an hour or so. I can also do walking meditation in my cell, though the space there is extremely limited.

I also enjoy practicing silence. I usually try to maintain my silence throughout the day by only speaking when necessary. Silent meals are kind of haphazard because it is easy to be drawn into conversations about one thing or another. I know that my mind stays fairly clear when I am able to practice in this way.

I have also taught myself a simplified form of T'ai Chi, also known as moving meditation. This practice complements my sitting practice in many different ways—such as relieving the stiffness one feels after sitting for long periods of time. And I can practice these simple movements just about anywhere, anytime.

At the end of the day when I return to my cell I spend most of the evening studying for my classes. When I have finished my studies I like to sit back for a couple of hours and wind down a bit. This means that sometime between 12:00 pm and 1:00 am I am finally ready to do my formal practice. This I begin by doing the 108 bows at the foot of my bunk. Then I do the various chants. When I have finished chanting I will sit zazen for about one hour. At the conclusion I will once again recite the Four Great Vows. Now my day is complete and I retire.

As you can see by this short presentation, practice inside of these prison walls isn't much different from the way you yourself may practice. Some of the questions that I like to ask myself as a way of exploring my practice is: Do I feel less stressed than usual? Am I growing as a human being? Does my practice benefit others besides myself? Does my practice bring or give more meaning to my life? If I can answer yes to these questions on a regular basis then I know that I am doing well. But as my teachers Ron Kidd or Tricia Teater might remind me, "It's not good; not bad. It's all in the doing, in this moment, at this time." It doesn't matter who we are or where we are—our situations are still the same. Some people are in more of a prison on the outside that we are on the inside. These prisons come from our own thinking minds. We are always making, making, making. Zen Master Seung Sahn offers us many teachings that can lead us out of this predicament. But we have to do the work ourselves. As the Buddha has passed down to us, we are all responsible for our own salvation. The fruits of our practice are measured by the diligence of our effort. So, if our practice is regular and strong then we will break free of the fetters that bind our minds. We will then realize our true nature—our Buddha nature. The point then is to practice. Practice, practice, and practice. That is our correct situation. That is our purpose.