

Dharma Friends

For people in real and imagined prisons | Issue 240 | July 2022

A PSYCHOLOGICAL GUIDE TO DEALING WITH

CONFLICT

In this Issue:

From the Director: page 2

From You, the Readers: page 2

A Meditation: page 3

Thoughts on Joy: page 5

Bulletin Board: page 7

From **The Director**



“I’m still learning how to interact with my family.”

That statement was from Damien, one of our newest CWFA board members.

Damien was incarcerated for 10 years in federal prison and was released 9 years ago. But even today, Damien has to be very intentional about his relationships.

Incarceration does some funky stuff to our brains, especially in the areas that gauge whether or not a person is trustworthy. Research on areas like the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (dlPFC) and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) have shown that we develop a system of trust and distrust based off our surroundings. And people who are incarcerated develop a high level of distrust as a form of self preservation. And, truth be told, that might actually be a good thing in prison because it could keep you alive. But over a period of years, it will start to take a toll on your mind and body.

Dealing with conflict is a life-long journey. How we interact with other

people is not just an expression of our current emotional state, but an expression of who we choose to be in the world. You can be “Mindful AF” (as the kids say these days) when you’re all by yourself, but the real test comes when someone enters your orbit who makes your stress level rise a little. All the solitude and meditation in the world won’t solve the problem of a good old fashioned conflict unless you’re ready to put your practice to work.

I decided to dedicate this issue not to a mindfulness practice, per se, so much as a psychological tool known as the Karpman Drama Triangle and The Empowerment Dynamic. You’ll read in this issue all about the toxic nature of Rescuers, Persecutors, and Victims, and how transforming ourselves into Challengers, Coaches, and Creators will make all the difference. I hope you enjoy reading about this fascinating dynamic, and, as always, I’d love to hear your thoughts.

Namaste,

Cory
cory@compassionarkansas.org

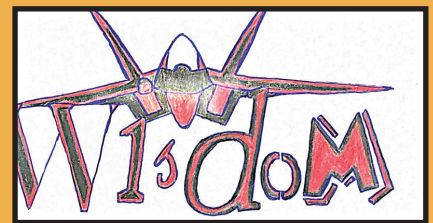
FROM YOU, THE READERS

I really don’t have anything for you to research. I just wanted to write and say, “Thanks” again. Your service is probably the singular most valuable to we incarcerated.

Matthew, TX

Thank you so much for your hard work knocking out the issues of Dharma Friends. I have enjoyed the many newsletters I have received over my many tenured years in Federal prison.

John, AR



Drawing by Jerome

A Meditation on Right Livelihood

The following was written by CWFA founder, Anna Cox, for a Dharma Friends issue dated December 2005.

In The Eightfold Noble Path, we are encouraged to: Develop wisdom by 1. Right view and 2. Right conception. Develop ethics by 3. Right speech, 4. Right conduct, and 5. Right livelihood. Develop in meditation by 6. Right effort, 7. Right mindfulness, and 8. Right one-pointed contemplation. We have already meditated on our base, Right View and Right Conception, in our past months' issues. This month, within the wisdom of Right View and holding the motivation of Right Conception, we are exploring the development of ethics in Right Livelihood. Last month, we did a meditation on Right Conduct. Right Livelihood is taking Right Conduct even further into life as our job or profession.

Consider what your livelihood is at this point in your life, whether you get paid for it or offer it as a contribution to your community. I know that some of you do not have a livelihood as such, so we can consider this precept to be your contribution to the world and what you are committing your life to. If you do not yet have a way of offering your gifts, this is a good time to contemplate what those gifts are and how you can allow your life to be an offering. If you are making a living or devoting your life to activities that actually bring suffering to others, this is a good time to rethink your career. If you do the activities that you do in a way that brings suffering to others, you might want to

reconsider your motivation in your work.

I would like to suggest that you consider this week's meditation as an opportunity to further develop a path of service in some way for your life. It may be that you can live this service through work that others pay you for or it may be your voluntary contribution with no remuneration. Take some time to think through what you would



like to offer. Meditate on what your heart says that you have often wanted to give but perhaps you have never followed through on giving this gift. I truly believe that every being born has the potential to benefit others if they will allow themselves to live their offerings.

Don't try to give more than you can or you will defeat your good intentions. You may be more likely to abandon an excellent goal if you do not get your own needs met as you need to along the way. Doing

'kindness' while feeling 'anger' is not dharma but suffering. Remember this is 'practice on the 'path' - you don't need to live as a fully actualized Buddha before you are one! If you drain yourself and feel resentful, then you will create more negative energy than positive. If this is a job that you can be paid for or can receive other rewards that make it an offering rather than a sacrifice, this is good

because everyone will benefit and you can devote more time to your project. If you will not be paid, be aware of how much time you can realistically put into your voluntary contribution. Your needs must be met too.

Once you have conceptualized an offering that you would like to make to others in your community, even if it is just for today, hold a vision in which you see yourself living your service and see others receiving it. Actually see them benefiting from your gifts. Find a way to work on your project every day if possible. It is ok to change

your offering day to day until you find something that you begin to live as a path of service. As you do your service, assess how you feel doing your work and how you feel as others receive your efforts. Let this path of service find you and 'use you' to present your gift to the world. You need not 'figure anything out, but just let the meditation become work on ourselves as we walk this path of Right Livelihood until it is the expression of our life's work.

A Poem

The Lost Poet

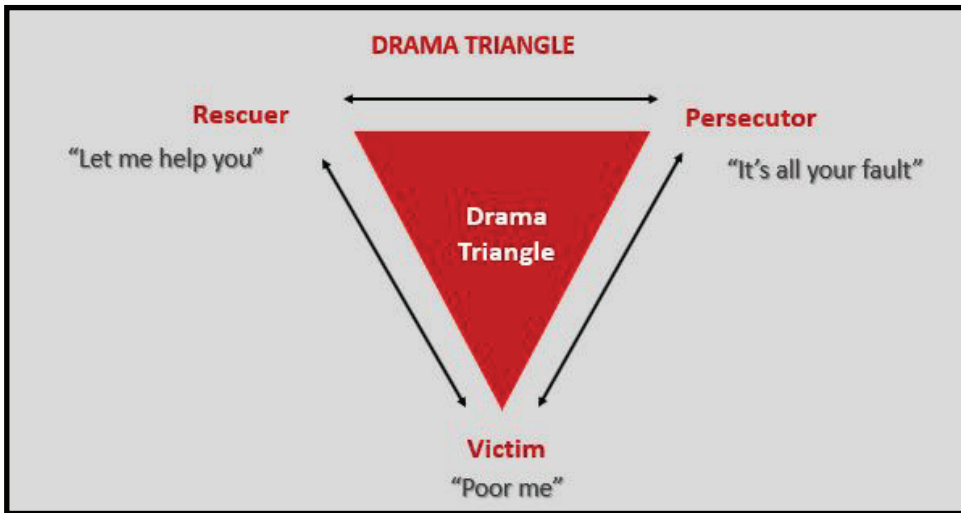
By Jerome, FL

When you get what you want in your struggle for self
And the world makes you king for a day
Just go to a mirror and look at yourself
And see what that man has to say
For it is not your father, your mother, or your wife
Whose judgement upon you must pass
But the fellows verdict who counts most in your life
Is the man looking back from the glass
Some people may say you're a square shooting chum
And call you a wonderful guy
But the man in the glass says you're only a bum
If you can't look him straight in the eye
He's the one to please - never mind the rest
For he's with you clear up to the end
And you'll pass your most dangerous and difficult tests
If the man in the glass is your friend
You may fool the whole world, down the pathway of years
And get pats on your back as you pass
But your final reward will be heartache and tears
If you've cheated the man in the glass.

The Karpman Drama Triangle and Empowerment Dynamic

The Drama Triangle was first described by Stephen Karpman in the 1960s. It is a model of dysfunctional social interactions and illustrates a power game that involves three roles: **Victim, Rescuer, and Persecutor**, each role represents a common and ineffective response to conflict.

It looks like this:



The Drama Triangle is also sometimes referred to as the Toxic Triangle, because each position is one of toxic attempts at dealing with the present moment, especially when it involves another person.

Let's take a look at each part of the Drama Triangle separately:

RESCUER

When I was a kid, my older sister loved to rescue me. If I forgot my lunch money, she'd share some of hers. If I was struggling in a class, she'd help me find the answers. If I was spending a little too much time with friends she thought were a bad influence, she would intervene. My sister operated much like a second mother. And for most of my childhood, we were very close and had a great relationship.

As adults, we still have a good relationship, but I'm learning to

recognize the ways in which she finds her identity as my rescuer.

"But Cory," you might be asking, "Isn't rescuing people a good thing?"

Maybe. If you're a firefighter rescuing a kitten from a tree, then sure, it's great to be a rescuer.

But being a rescuer becomes toxic when it becomes about you and not the other person. Toxic rescuers ride in on

the proverbial white horse to save the day, helping the poor, stupid, ignorant, friends or family who can't seem to stand on their own two feet.

Rescuers love saving the day, but only if they get credit for it. You might have had an interaction with a rescuer in which they helped you out and then proceeded to never let you forget about it.

Rescuers tend to rescue people as a way of avoiding conflict or confrontation. Rather than actually deal with the issue, rescuers offer a quick solution that doesn't actually get to the heart of things. And that's why being a rescuer can be a very, very toxic way of dealing with conflict.

PERSECUTOR

The Persecutor is self-explanatory. They persecute people.

Persecutors like to intimidate and threaten, forcing others (victims, especially) to back down out of fear or a sense of inferiority. Persecutors don't have to be big, muscular dudes - they can sometimes be the scrawniest nerd in the room. Whether they use their muscles, their intellect, or their emotionally manipulative abilities, persecutors avoid conflict by forcing other party to cave or surrender.

VICTIM

Which brings us to the third and final person in the Toxic Triangle - the Victim.

Victims are by far the most powerful person in the triangle, especially since they are, in fact, actual victims. A victim takes the harm that has been inflicted upon them by another person and weaponizes it against them. Victims wield their victimhood like Thor wields his hammer. They use it strategically to get what they want. Much like Rescuers, Victims never let their persecutors forget what they've done to them

To paraphrase a popular phrase, hell hath no fury like a victim scorned.

THE CONFLICT

As you'll note, the arrows all point each direction. That's because in any given situation, we can travel between each role depending on what we're trying to accomplish. You might operate like a Rescuer in one group, a Persecutor in a different group, and the Victim in yet another one.

Another common occurrence is for people to go back and forth between Victim and Persecutor. If you steal money from my bag (Persecutor) and I find out about it (Victim), I might decide to retaliate (Persecutor) and punch you in the nose (Victim). As long as I'm operating in this Toxic Triangle, I will believe I am perfectly justified in doing this because, after all, I was a Victim.

See **KD Triangle** on **Page 6**

KD Triangle

Continued from Page 5

. What makes the actions of the Rescuer, Persecutor, and Victim so toxic are that each person is operating out of a sense of self-preservation. Their goal is to protect themselves in every situation, and will therefore play whichever role suits them best.

Here are some good questions for reflection: In what situations have you been a Rescuer? In what situations have you been a Persecutor? And in what situations have you been a Victim?"

ESCAPING THE DRAMA TRIANGLE

The Drama (or Toxic) Triangle is escapable. You get out of the Toxic Triangle by engaging with what's called **The Empowerment Dynamic**. The Empowerment Dynamic is also illustrated by a triangle, but with some clear differences:

opposites (for example, Creator is not the opposite of Victim). Instead, they are transformed versions of each part of the Drama Triangle. Let's take a look at each one:

CHALLENGER (instead of Persecutor)

Where Persecutors get what they want through force, Challengers see the value in helping a person arrive at conclusions or resolutions on their own. As you'll see in the image above, Challengers "call forth learning and growth, provoke action, help the person through constructive and deconstructive processes, and operate like a cheerleader reminding the person that "You can do it!"

In short, Persecutors resolve conflict by forcing the other person into submission, but Challengers resolve conflict by building stamina and helping the person down the hard path to change.

COACH (instead of Rescuer)

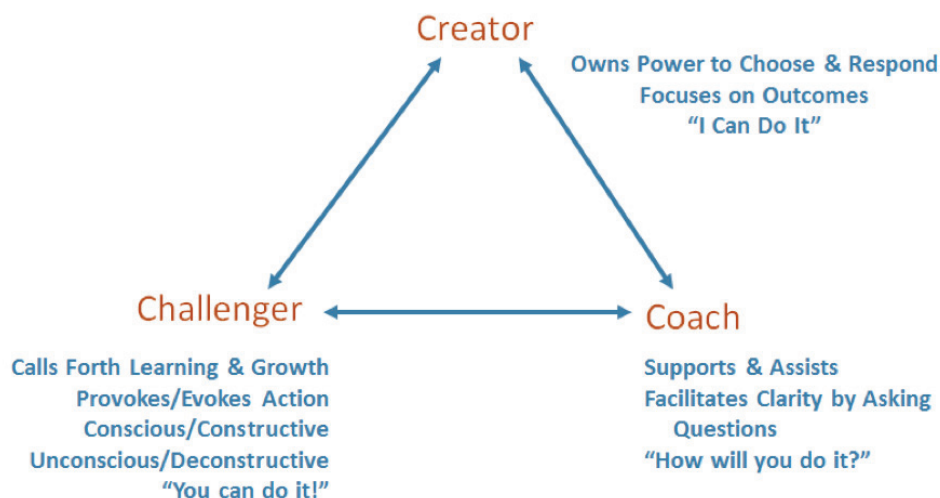
In the same way, a Coach is

I grew up playing sports and sometimes thought my coaches were, in fact persecutors (I HATED running)! But a good coach gets the best out of a person even when they don't want to put in the work to find it.

CREATOR (instead of Victim)

Creators and Victims do have something in common - they are both actually victims. Something legitimately bad has happened to them, but they've taken different paths toward overcoming it. Victims look back, Creators look forward. Victims want to hold onto their victimhood because they believe it gives them a legitimate excuse to stay stuck in their ways. Creators see how miserable they are as Victims and decide to transform themselves into something new, something wonderful, something powerful. Every major musician, artist, and performer has the ability to dig deep into the part of themselves that has been victimized and then take control of their reaction to the experience, tell the story their own way, and take back the power over their own lives.

TED* (*THE EMPOWERMENT DYNAMIC)™



And now we come to the reason why the Empowerment Dynamic triangle is inverted from the Toxic Triangle. It's so that the Creator is placed on top.

There is not a single more powerful person in the entire world than a Creator. You can't stop a Creator. You can't hurt a Creator. You can't make a Creator feel bad for something that happened in the past. You can't make a Creator afraid of the future. Because a Creator has learned that what matters most is who they choose to be, as they choose to be, and simply because it's what they want to be for themselves.

This is not selfish or prideful - it's power.

The first thing you'll see is that the triangle is upside-down from the Drama Triangle. We'll get to that in just a second.

The next thing you'll notice is that the corresponding words are not

different from a Rescuer in that Coaches don't just ride in and save the day. Coaches support and assist, facilitate clarity by asking good questions, and get to the heart of resolving the issue by constantly asking, "How will you do it?"

Bulletin Board

Write To Us!

Ask Tim

Tim answers letters asking for help with those things that we know you cannot do in prison. Tim looks up resources, but there are a few things he cannot do: Tim is not qualified to counsel about personal and/or relationship problems. Money or 'things' will never be given to any writer. We will not provide addresses of individuals in the free world to anyone. We cannot provide information obtained from Facebook or other social media websites.

Request Topics

Let us know what topics you'd like to read about. Whether you're brand new to mindfulness and meditation or a seasoned pro, let us know what piques your interest and it might be featured in a future newsletter.

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BUDDHIST PRISON MINISTRY: BODHICITTA BEHIND BARS

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

A TWELVE-
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This workbook "An Introduction to Buddhism" is the first in a series written specifically for the incarcerated population. It is a presentation of the core elements of non-sectarian (Ri'me) Buddhism, teachings common to all schools and sects of the Dharma. Thanks to generous donors and the Khyentse Foundation, this workbook is available free of charge to the incarcerated population.

Tools, skills and practices from the Buddhist tradition written specifically for the incarcerated population.

Rev. Susan Shannon, M.Div., BCC.
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We Need Your Help!

We've sold out of Compassion Works for All t-shirts and are on the hunt for a new design. If you're interested in submitting a design that captures the spirit of our work, please either use the frame below OR send us something on your own paper.

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- Jack Kornfield

