

COMPASSION WORKS FOR ALL

Dharma Friends

For people in real and imagined prisons | Issue 231 | Fall 2021

LIFE IS OUR TEACHER



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FROM YOU,
THE READERS

Responses To The Last Newsletter

I'm a babe when it comes to Yoga and combining breath and mindfulness all at once. So a big Thank You to Tenesha Forest for the 4 poses and pictures that taught me the right way to do the poses. She has no idea how much those 4 poses helped me with my back pain, but to calm the storm within as I breathed through the poses.

-Adrian

I am free in mind + spirit—thanks to what others like you freely gave to me! PASS IT ON!! This is what gives me inner freedom, a sense of redemption, or accomplishment of a positive nature. I am WORTHWHILE.

-Dee (aka Dino), North Carolina

I wanted to respond to the question brought to your attention in the Fall 2020, Issue 230, newsletter. "Convict's Code" is a dilemma, however, there is a way to live, and a way to respond. I wanted to share my insight in this matter. I am ex-military, combat medic, and multiple overseas deployments. I was quick to resort to violence. I finally discovered the true warrior's path with mindfulness and meditation. There's your true discipline.

--Shon

From **The Director**



I was not a great student.

I remember walking home from school with my sister in 3rd grade. She is one year older than me and

was always a wonderful student - straight A's, top of her class, etc. It was report card day and I told her one of my grades was a 67. She froze, gasped, and yelled, "You failed a class?!"

A lot of us were told at an early age that we are failures at learning. Rather than risk more failure, we taught ourselves how to skate by in ways that were just good enough to get us through another year of school. Personally, I became really skilled in middle school at pretending I knew what was going on. And in high school I got away with cheating on a few occasions because that seemed easier than learning.

Maybe this resonates with you, and maybe it doesn't. But for those of us who struggled in school, the tragedy is

that we learned too late that learning happens everywhere, every day, and in an infinite number of ways. Learning is not about intellect; it's about curiosity and an open mind.

Because of that, everything in life becomes our teacher. We have professional teachers who lead classrooms in schools, but we also have friends, neighbors, elders, and people who pass through our lives for just a moment. And teachers aren't always human. Some of our best teachers are animals, plants, seasons, rivers, and stars. We learn from circumstances - both positive and negative.

In this issue, we'll take a look at all the incredible things life has to teach us when our minds are open and our hearts are curious. I look forward to reading your responses as we continue to teach and learn from one another.

Namaste,

Cory
cory@compassionarkansas.org



A Meditation

By IBRAHIEM, ARKANSAS

There's an experience I had a few weeks ago I have only shared with a couple of people.

While I was out on the yard walking a few of the laps there was this beautiful light-green and black butterfly that landed a couple yards away from me. Something...was tugging inside of me to go in the direction of that butterfly. I approached it. I mean I got so close to this creature that I could have simply closed my hands and I would have captured it in my palms.

But I didn't.

I had no intention of capturing it, and this creature could feel it was safe, and I could feel it trusted me. Right now trying to explain this is difficult, because this life form and I were trading energy with each other that transcends verbal description but can only be understood through that feeling.

If I had to sum it into one word, it is **PEACE.**

For that moment, we were both at peace with each other.

Take a moment and bring to mind an experience that taught you how true peace feels.

Let the memories that arise bring that peaceful feeling along with it.

Recall not only what happened, but also how it felt.

And feel that peace inside and around you now.

Let it linger for as long as it wants.

Take it with you into the rest of your day.

Poetry and **Art**

BED OF GRASS

By **Richard**

If you were a bed of grass
what would you do?
How could you spread
if people just walked over you?

Could you grow up green
and never turn brown?
What would your death mean
when they trampled you down?

If you were burnt
or fed with trash,
Could you live
As a bed of grass?

Wasted Life + A Hope of Amends

By **Michael**

Endless hours trapped in a cell,
Thinkin' 'bout Life, thinking 'bout Hell...
Wondering if I'll lose my mind,
Before I finish the rest of my time...
Time in prison, locked away,
Always losing another day...
Another day of my life gone,
A wasted memory, a wasted song...
Can't forget the pain I've caused,
From being away for far too long...
Away from family, away from friends,
I hope one day I'll make amends...

The Sage's Imploring Wisdom

By **R. Smalley**

Why do we fight our suppressed inner light
When all that we need is to be still, to take heed
When will we learn to share all that we earn
Where will we be when our light's are all free

How do you know that it's one way to go
Who do you see when you pray unto thee
How will you feel when you discover what's real
Why do we pray whist are ungrateful today

Who will you be when you finally see
Where will you go when you finally know
When will you learn to give what you earn
Who will we be when we finally see

Yoga On The Inside

Practice these four movements in a rotation to elongate the spine and open the breath.

1. Mountain Pose

Stand with equal weight on both feet
Engage your quad (thigh) muscles
Imagine a string is pulling
your head to the ceiling
Palms can be down by your side
or in prayer at the chest
Take 5 deep breaths.



2. Chair Pose

From Mountain Pose, bend your
knees and squat slightly
Continue to engage your quad muscles
Reach your arms above your head
maintaining the angle of your body
Make your spine as long as possible
Take 5 deep breaths.



3. Forward Fold

From chair pose, fold your
torso over your knees
Slowly straighten your knees as
much as you can
Draw your stomach in to deepen
the bend at your waist
Take 3 deep breaths.



4. Halfway Lift

From your forward fold, raise
your head and back halfway
Place hands on the floor or your lower legs
Draw your stomach in and
engage your quads
Take 3 deep breaths.
Return to Mountain Pose and
repeat the sequence.



TEACHERS

By Tracy, Arkansas

“Stay, Don’t let your mind run off” -Pema Chodron

I have been watching a wasp’s nest being built on the outside glass of my window. A few months ago a single wasp began regurgitating wood pulp and - forgive my unscientific vocabulary - wasp spit, turning the mixture with its mouth and front legs forming a tube. The process continued until several tubes were made and glued together with more pulpy wasp spit. One day my celly and I looked just in time to see a new wasp emerge from a tube. Immediately the youngster began diligently working on the nest. Four months later and over one hundred days into this interminable coronavirus lockdown, there are nine wasps and a substantial nest outside the window. And the wasps build on. Last week as I settled in my chair for my morning meditation, I looked at the wasps and realized they are teachers.

I first heard of Pema Chodron a while back when she was interviewed by Bill Moyers on his PBS TV show called “Now”. Over the years I’ve read many of her books; during these last twelve years in prison I’ve read them again and again. In the prison chapel I’ve listened to CDs and watched DVDs of her teaching. I’ve come to consider her my main teacher. I haven’t given her any say in the matter, but I always hoped she wouldn’t mind, especially since she didn’t have to see how poor a student I can be.

Once, wrapped tight in my cocoon, chest tightening with shenpa, I was suddenly yelling at a friend and slamming my hand on my desk. We had been having a normal conversation until I became a raving lunatic over some absolutely trivial disagreement. In the middle of my rant, from somewhere in my mind I heard Pema’s little giggle and her voice say, “See, you’re hooked! (giggle)”. It really happened that way. And it surprised the hell out of me. I stopped yelling,

breathed deeply a few times, and was no longer a lunatic. I apologized for my outburst. Normally I would have spent the rest of the night and the next day beating myself up, but I remembered that Pema taught me I could be happy that I saw what was happening and changed direction. Imagine that. The teachings work.

Another teacher whose voice I’ve heard over my shoulder is Joy Fox. Joy has visited our Lotus Life sangha several times at the federal low security prison in Forrest City, Arkansas. We were disappointed this past spring when the pandemic lock down cancelled a weekend retreat in the prison chapel that Joy was scheduled to lead. Joy teaches with humor as well as wisdom.

When I’m about to mindlessly give in to some shady part of myself, I’ll hear Joy say “Looky thar!” I stop and look at what I’m about to say or do, and I’ll do something different. Joy encourages us to laugh at ourselves, to take comfort in our silliness. I highly recommend a practice Joy teaches. When you first get up in the morning, cross your eyes, stick out your tongue and say “Bleh!” Do it a few times. It’s a great way to start the day.

One morning last week a tree frog climbed up and settled on the outside of our window well below the wasp’s nest. It found a good spot in the sun, drew in its legs and sucker tipped toes, closed its eyes and slept the rest of the day safe from threat. The wasps tended to their construction oblivious to their green neighbor. I had yet another teacher.

Recently I’ve been reading Pema’s book “No Time to Lose”, her guide to “The Way of the Bodhisattva”, a text by the 8th century sage Shantideva. She writes that the Tibetan word for teacher is “Kalyanamitra”, which

means “spiritual friend”. A spiritual friend is someone who doesn’t let you get away with your mindlessness. Pema also reminds me to look at things the way they are; to be present. She says “Stay. Don’t let your mind run off”. It is in this that she would find me a poor student. Absent minded doesn’t begin to describe me. I am rarely present.

These teachers of mine are always with me. When I am mindful I see and hear them. And when I’m off chasing the monkeys and following the curious elephants in my mind, that’s when my teachers really show up. The kalyanamitra I need will come to me bringing the teaching I need to hear at that moment. It’s uncanny. The right teacher and the right teaching. Every time.

The wasps and the frog don’t have the advantage I have. They lack a precious human birth. They can’t, in their current realm, wake up. They’re nevertheless teachers. They teach what I think is maybe the most important Dharma teaching; just be. Be. Do what is before you that needs to be done; like the teaching says, sleep when you are tired and eat when you are hungry. The wasps and the frog remind me that the Dharma also teaches, and as long as I’m practicing I might manage to be present enough to hear. On occasion, I might wake up a little bit.

My spiritual friends surround me; the grass, the sun, the rain. This prison, the prisoners, the guard; even the hate and the violence are my spiritual friends. I am, like the wasps, the Bodhisattvas, the Buddhas and the frogs, a part of the Dharma. It is important to remember that we are all teaching something to someone, all our lives. Thank you, Pema. Thank you, Joy. Thank you, my teachers.

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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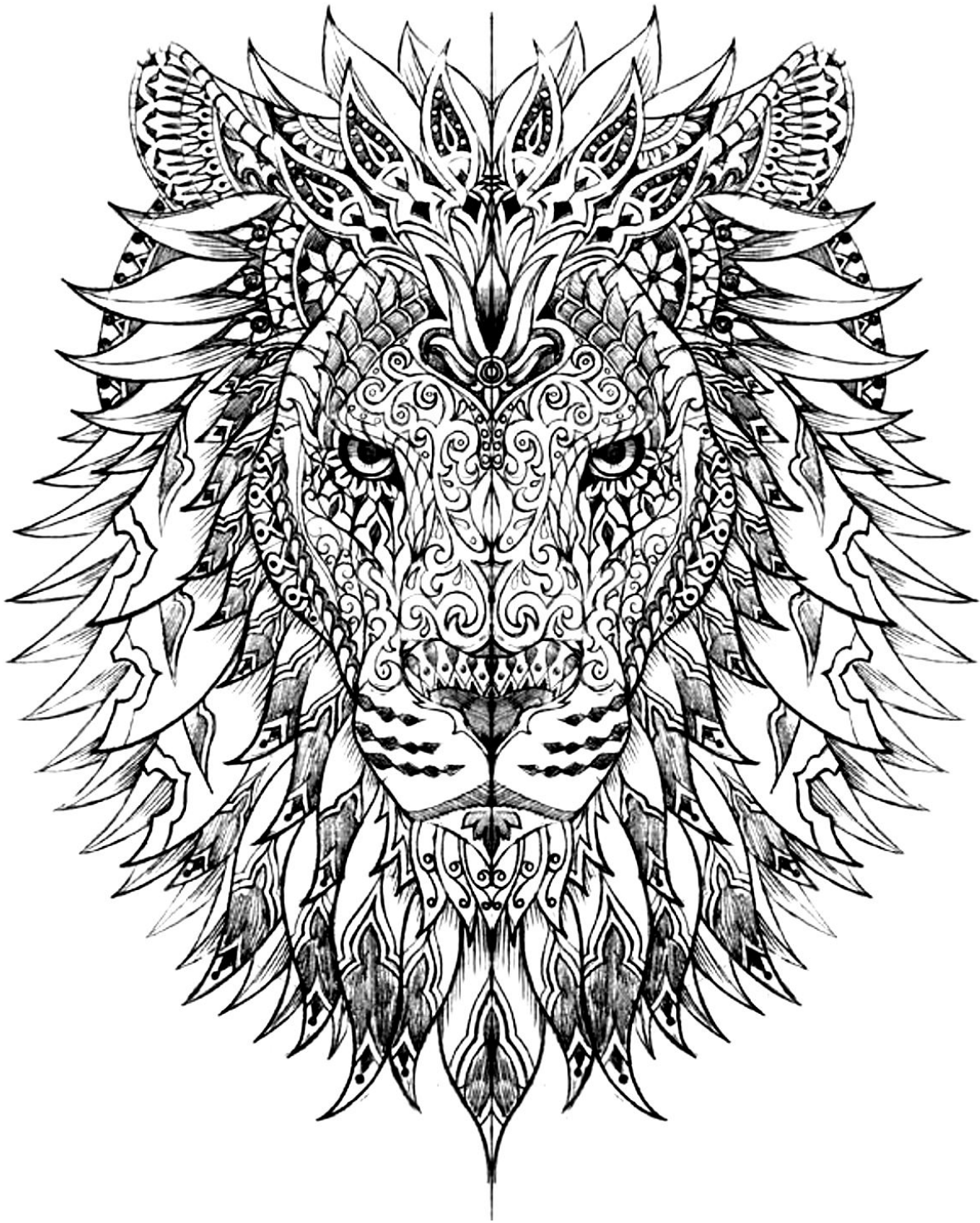
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