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The Body is Jailed, But the Mind is Free: Tibetan Buddhist Mind Training in Ontario Prisons

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Abstract

This article reflects on five years of adapting the Tibetan Buddhist lo-jong (Tib. blo sbyong), or "mind training" tradition, to prisoners in Ontario penitentiaries in my role as a prison chaplain. The Mind Training traditions are pithy and practice-oriented presentations of the Mahāyāna path that arrived in Tibet in the 11th century. My prison chaplaincy has attempted to connect the Mind Training tradition with secular therapy models. More generally, this work has sought to work with prisoners to explore mental and physical health models, or as I put it in my chaplaincy, mental freedom during physical incarceration. In this article, after giving a brief historical and doctrinal introduction to the Tibetan mind training tradition, I share ways I have adapted its techniques and models of mental health to teaching prisoners, including exercises, collaborative homework, individual counselling, and group sessions.

Introduction: Freeing the Mind When the Body is Jailed

According to Buddhist philosophy, when a body and a mind become connected, we label it a "sentient being" (Tib. sems can). When that body and mind separate, it is no longer a sentient being but a corpse. Acknowledging that human beings are a combination of body and mind, we must think about health and happiness in relation to both. One common problem is that we too often think about solving our mental suffering by focusing only on the body. For example, we seek bodily pleasure, drink alcohol, eat delicious food, and so forth. While these can produce some temporary mental excitement and pleasure, they never solve the actual sources of mental suffering. If a vase is unclean inside, it will never become clean by scrubbing the outside alone. This fundamental observation about the mental sources of lasting fulfilment and happiness is the basis of the Buddhist path. As readers of this journal already know, Buddhism is a tradition focused chiefly on what today we call mental health. It is a collection of a great many traditions, each with many meditative antidotes to mental afflictions. For example, śamatha meditation (Tib. *zhi gnas*) cultivates a restful mind, while meditation on loving-kindness is an antidote to anger.

We have the vast "Mind Training," or lo-jong tradition (Tib. *blo sbyong*) in the Indo-Tibetan tradition. Mind Training techniques direct the mind to identify and use positive opportunities in even the most difficult of circumstances. Someone we might typically see as an enemy becomes our dearest friend, according to Mind Training, since they provide the opportunity to practice patience and exhaust our negative karma. Mind Training is like eating nutritious food for the mind: always transforming

what we normally see as difficulties into opportunities for positive mental development, or Dharma practice.

In my own life as a Buddhist monk, I often turn to a particular Mind Training text by the great 14th-century master Gyelsé Ngulchu Tokmé (Rgyal sras dngul chu thongs med, 1297-1371). This profound and pithy text shows the unique perspective of Mind Training, which is always to find the positive opportunity in whatever situation we encounter. I share this short text, entitled *How to Transform Sickness and Other Circumstances* (Tib. *Nad la sogs pa lam du 'khyer tshul bzhugs*), in the introduction to this article since it was the basis of my strategies as a Buddhist prison chaplain. I still use this text to illustrate the unique perspectives of Mind Training when I first introduce myself and the Buddhist tradition to prisoners. It was written when a monk contacted Ngulchu Tokmé asking for advice on bringing sickness and difficulties into the spiritual path.

This illusory heap of a body, which, like others, I possess—

If it falls sick, so be it! In sickness, I'll rejoice!

For it will exhaust my negative karma from the past.

And, after all, many forms of Dharma practice

Are for the sake of purifying the two obscurations.

If I am healthy, so be it! In freedom from sickness I'll rejoice!

When body and mind are well and at ease,

Virtuous practice can develop and gain strength.

And, after all, the way to give meaning to this human life

Is to devote body, speech and mind to virtue.

If I face poverty, so be it! In lack of riches I'll rejoice!

I will have nothing to protect and nothing to lose.

Whatever quarrels and conflicts there might be,

All arise out of desire for wealth and gain—that's certain!

If I find wealth, so be it! In prosperity I'll rejoice!

If I can increase the stock of my merits that will suffice.

Whatever benefit and happiness there might be, now and in the future,

All result from merits I have gained—that's certain!

If I must die soon, so be it! In dying I'll rejoice!

Without allowing negative circumstances to intervene,

And with the support of positive tendencies I have gathered,

I will surely set out upon the genuine, unerring path!

If I live long, so be it! In remaining, I'll rejoice!

Once the crop of genuine experience has arisen,

As long as the sun and rainfall of instructions do not diminish,

If it is tended over time, it will surely ripen.

So, whatever happens then, let us always cultivate joy![1]

As the great Indian saint Śantideva puts it, if there is a solution to our difficult circumstances, then why become upset? If there is no solution, why become upset? The unique perspective of the Mahāyāna, as expressed in the Mind Training tradition, is to find spiritual nourishment in whatever good or bad circumstances arise for us, whether we are free or incarcerated.

Over the last five years of serving as a prison chaplain in the Ontario prison system, I have found that the Mind Training tradition offers prisoners a very useful and accessible model of mental health. It also offers a set of practical tools and methods that any prisoner, whether they identify as Buddhist or not, can learn and begin applying. While their bodies must remain in jail for the duration of their sentence, with Mind Training techniques they find that their minds can be free now. Not only can they begin to find contentment and find sources of happiness in difficult circumstances of prison; those difficult circumstances can offer amazing opportunities for growth and spiritual exploration. They can learn to take the root of happiness and suffering into their own hands. This has been my hope for them, and in many cases prisoners have reported positive transformations in their experience of incarceration from sustained Mind training practice.

A Brief History of the Mind Training Tradition

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[1] Thogs med bzang po dpal , 'gro mgon dpal ldan ye shes, "Sa Skya'i Dge Bshes Cig Gis Nad La Sogs Pa Byung Na Ji Ltar Byed Zhes Dris Pa'i Lan Du," in Rgyal Sras Thogs Med Kyi Bka' 'bum Thor Bu (thim phu: kun bzang stobs rgyal, 1975), 393-393. ; Thogs med bzang po dpal, trans. Adam Pearcey. 2012. "How to Transform Sickness." www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/gyalse-thogme-zangpo/how-transform -sickness. Accessed 06/22/2021.

First, what do I mean by the "Mind Training" tradition? The Buddha is traditionally thought to have taught 84,000 teachings, one for every one of the 84,000 types of negative mind. Aren't each of the Buddha's teachings a method to train the mind? In one sense this is true. But the scope of the Buddha's teachings are very vast and profound. In order to make these accessible and simple, many Indian and Tibetan masters have tried to create simple systems of Mahāyāna practice focused on our everyday life. Perhaps the most distinct example is the "Mind Training" (Tib. *blo sbyong*) tradition, which developed in Tibet and was based on the teachings of a 11th century Bengali master named Atiśa Dīpaṃkara Śrījñāna (982-1054 CE).

According to Tibetan biographies of Atiśa, the master had previously received the transmission of these teachings during twelve years' study with his Sumatran teacher Dharmakīrtiśrī (Tib. Gser gling pa), from his Indian teacher Dharmarakṣita (Tib. Chos skyabs), author of the famous mind training manual Wheel of Sharp Weapons (Tib. Theg pa chen po'i blo sbyong mtshon cha'i 'khor lo), and from his guru Maitrīyogi.[2] When he was invited to Tibet to help revive the Buddhist tradition there, Atiśa worried that Tibetans would be too kind and pleasant.[3] This would be an obstacle

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[2] rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas, "Jo Bo Rjes Rgyal Srid Spangs Nas Thar Pa Sgrub Pa'i Rnam Par Thar Pa," in Gdams Ngag Mdzod (paro: lama ngodrup and sherab drimey, 1979), 383-408.

[3] Atiśa was a master of Vikramasila Monastery in Bihar and was known as a great reformer of the Mahāyāna tradition there and in Sumatra. His graduated presentation of the Buddhist grounds and paths, known most famously from his verse Bodhipathadīpa, was widely influential. This was especially true in Tibet, where at the end of the tenth century Atiśa was invited by Yéshé Ö (Ye shes 'od) and then Janchub Ö (Byang chub 'od), rulers in the the Western Tibetan kingdom of Purang (Pu 'rangs). See: Mchims tham cad khyen pa. 1992. Jo bo rin po che dpal ldan a ti sha'i rnam thar rgyas pa yongs grags. In Lokesh Chandra, ed., Biography of Atisha and his Disciple Brom-ston, Zho[l] edition. Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture 1982, vol. 1: 49-236; Mchims tham cad

to his mind training practice, and so he brought along his ill-tempered servant, who always insulted and scolded the master, as an object of patience and love. This exemplifies the pragmatism of the Mind Training tradition: in both formal meditation and in everyday life, the systematic cultivation of altruistic thoughts like loving-kindness, compassion, patience, effort, and wisdom in even the most difficult of circumstances. In a famous exchange with his Tibetan heart disciple Dromtönpa Gyelwé Jungné ('Brom ston rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas), Atiśa summarized his teachings: "The most final among all teachings is the emptiness that is endowed with the essence of compassion [...] if you realize the truth of emptiness, which is the nature of reality, this becomes an antidote against all affliction."[4]

The "Mind Training" tradition that came from Atiśa was first systematized by many later Tibetan masters of what became known as the Kadam tradition (Tib. Bka' gdams pa).[5] One of the most well known of these was Géshé Chekawa Yéshé Dorjé (Tib. Dge bshes 'chad kha ba ye shes rdo rje, 1101-1175). Géshé Chekawa first encountered the mind training instructions in a text being studied by his monk roommate, in which the master came across the lines "Gain and victory to others, loss and defeat to oneself." Géshé Chekawa learned that the author of these lines was Géshé Langri Tangpa (Tib. Dge bshes glang ri thang pa, 1054-1123) and that the text was the famous Eight Verses on Thought Transformation (Blo

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khyen pa. 1992.Jo bo rin po che dpal ldan a ti sha'i rnam thar rgyas pa yongs grags. In Lokesh Chandra, ed., Bi*ography of Atiśa and his Disciple Brom-ston,* Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture 1982, vol. 1: 49-236.

[4] Thupten Jinpa, *Wisdom of the Kadam Masters*. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013).

[5] On the early history of the Kadampa, see: Das, Sarat Chandra. 1965 (1893). *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow*. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay; Ronald Davidson. *Tibetan Renaissance*; Kun-dga'-rgyal-mtshan, and B. Jamyang Norbu. 1972. Bka' gdams kyi rnam par thar pa bka' gdams chos 'byuṅ gsal ba'i sgron me: a detailed account of the spread of the Kadampa sect in Tibet. 11.

sbyong tshig brgyad ma).[6] Though Langri Thangpa had already died, Géshé Chekawa learned Mind Training techniques from the former's student, Sharawa Yönten Drak (Sha ra ba yon tan grags, 1070-1141). One of the main instructions Géshé Chekawa received from Sharawa was the private practice of Atiśa himself, which had previously been an oral tradition, known as "Exchanging Self for Others' " (bdag gzhan mnyan brjes).

Géshé Chekawa organized the teachings he had heard into one of the first written texts of the Mind Training tradition, *The Seven-Point Thought Transformation* (*Blo sbying don bdun ma*).[7] I will briefly share an outline of this text, since it gives a sense of the traditional presentation of these teachings, which were incorporated into all Tibetan lineages many centuries ago. I will then spend the remainder of this article sharing how I have tried to adapt these teachings and contemplative techniques into my prison chaplaincy over the last four years.

According to *The Seven-Point Thought Transformation*, a practitioner first trains in all the preliminary practices, such as going for refuge, contemplating death and impermanence, developing renunciation of saṃsāṛa, purifying negative karma, and accumulating merit. They then engage in the main practice, which combines the practices of meditation on emptiness and interdependence with great compassion for all beings. Contemplating emptiness in one's meditation session, one then trains to see the conventional world as illusory, as if conjured by a magician, in one's post-meditation period. In this dream-like world, according to this text, one should engage in the practice "giving and taking" (Tib. *gtong len).* This involves visualizing that one take's all of the suffering of all sentient

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[6] Dge bshes glang ri thang pa, "Blo Sbyong Tshig Rkang Brgyad Ma)," in Bka' Gdams Skyes Bu Rnams Kyi Gsung Sgros Thor Bu (s.l.: s.n., n.d). ; Dge bshes glang ri thang pa, Adam Pearcey. 2012. "How to Transform Sickness." www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/gyalse-thogme-zangpo/how-transform -sickness. Accessed 06/22/2021.

[7] Rgyal sras 'chad kha ba ye shes rdo rje'i, "Blo Sbyong Don Bdun Ma'i Rtsa Tshig," in Tshe Mdo Sogs (S.I: S.N, N.D), 87-116.

beings upon yourself, and then gives all one's happiness and causes of happiness to others, including one's enemies. At a certain point, practitioners of this technique can mount the visualization upon the breath, so that with each inhalation one imagines taking in all the suffering of other mother sentient beings and then with each exhalation giving away all one's happiness.

Like all Mind Training texts, an important feature of *The Seven-Point Thought Transformation* is that it records many instructions for transforming adversity and hardship in one's normal life into the practice of developing wisdom and compassion. For example, "Drive all Blame Into One" (Tib. *gyong kha rang gi len pa*) means to blame one's self-cherishing mind for all one's suffering, which we usually blame on the external world and other beings. Doing so in our habitual way causes more and more anger and aversion, which produces more suffering and negative karma. This instruction transforms our ordinary perspective, seeing our selfishness and ego-grasping as the primary causes of our unhappiness, and practicing love and patience towards others. This is not just a matter for the meditation cushion: "Whatever you encounter, apply the practice" (Tib. *rkyen ngan byang chub kyi lam du bsgyur ba*). Like Géshé Chekawa, who "sought instructions on subduing ego-clinging" in the Mind Training tradition, practitioners in his lineage are instructed to transform their entire lives and all their interactions according to the precepts of this tradition. By this, like the author of *The Seven-Point Thought Transformation*, "even in death," we "shall have no regrets."[8]

Strategies to Transform Buddhist Mind Training into Prison Chaplaincy

In the West, many values and perspectives from European philosophy and the Enlightenment continue to affect people's perspectives and attitudes, even if they are not trained in those traditions. For example, strong individualism and ideas about community and perceptual development.

[8] Rgyal sras 'chad kha ba ye shes rdo rje'i.

Similarly, in Tibetan societies, Mind Training has come down over the generations. Even those without real training in Buddhism have learned to think about hardship from a certain perspective based on Mind Training traditions. For example, my father is a tailor in Tibet. One day, he packed a large amount of money and took his bike to purchase some bulk cloth. However, when he arrived at the store, he realized all his money had been lost somewhere along his route. Many people would be profoundly affected by losing so much money. When I called my father, however, I was shocked that he was peaceful and happy. He had applied a mind training technique, telling me that he must have stolen a large amount of money in a previous life. Now his karmic debt was paid off, and so he felt profound relief and peace. I was amazed. My father had lost all his money, but not his happiness, by thinking about his situation from a different perspective informed by Mind Training teachings.

More recently, in 2017, a terrible tragedy befell a Tibetan family that I know in Denver. While the mother was preparing a bath, their two year old son wandered outside looking for his grandmother. It was the evening, and the boy was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver. While the family mourned, they wrote a letter to the public that was widely shared in local and national news. While "this loss is unbearable," they wrote, "it gives us an opportunity to practice compassion and understand that we are only here for a moment. As a Buddhist family, we forgive the person responsible for our great loss."[9] Though they were suffering terribly, this family turned to Mind Training perspectives to bring this tragedy into their spiritual path, thus turning poison into nourishing food. In personal communication with this grieving father, he further explained his reasoning to me. While his suffering as a mourning parent was inexpressible, he drew on the Mind Training teachings to develop a perspective on his emotions and the situation. The driver who struck his son, it turned

[9] https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/suspect-in-fatal-adams-county-hit-and-run-of-2-year-old-comes-forward

out, had not seen the boy and was not charged with any crime. Why wish suffering and harm on the driver and his family? Would this lessen the suffering of losing a child? Why not practice compassion for both the driver and for his son? For all grieving parents suffering the loss of a child? Just as with this Tibetan family, in my life I have seen so many people relieve their anger or resentment by using Mind Training techniques. These have not always been advanced meditators, yogis, or high lamas. They have been everyday people. When I have faced difficult circumstances, I have tried to remember and practice Mind Training and it helps me so much.

And so for these reasons, when I became a Buddhist prison chaplain five years ago, I decided that my chaplaincy would be based on adapting the Mind Training teachings to their needs. This is because to practice Mind Training, you do not have to formally be a Buddhist to derive benefit. This is because Mind Training works simply by focusing on reality. By "reality," I mean that every circumstance in our lives always has both positive and negative aspects. Mind Training is simply the systematic focus on the positive aspects--the aspects that contribute to our growth and peace, even during upheaval and challenge--and not dwelling on the self-defeating negative aspects. By focusing in this way, we feel better. When I first began my work as a chaplain, I felt that the Mind Training techniques would be familiar to the prisoners as a kind of secular psychology or psycho-therapy, and so I began teaching them these techniques.

Based on prisoner reports about their practice, my hunch that adapting the Mind Training tradition to the needs of prisoners would be accessible and helpful has largely turned out to be true. This is based not only on my experience as a Buddhist prison chaplain, but also in presenting Buddhist perspectives at many multi-faith or therapeutic events and workshops, such as events focused on end of life care. At those events, just like in prisons, the Mind Training tradition is very useful because it is just based on what we can observe in our everyday lives, no matter if we are

Buddhist or Muslim, Tibetan or Egyptian. Anger and attachment function in universal ways, and anyone can try and develop an objective perspective on their life and mind to think about what opportunities for positivity, emotional wellbeing, peace, and spiritual progress are to be found in even difficult life situations. All people and other sentient beings only desire happiness and to avoid suffering. Mind Training is focused on this task, and so it does not matter one's race or religion.

In fact, I am not being original in trying to translate the Mind Training tradition to my prison chaplaincy. In a long-running partnership between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Emory University (Atlanta, USA), researchers and educators have been developing what they call Social, Emotional and Ethical Learning Development.[10] This is based on research about the importance of emphasizing compassion, systems thinking, morality, attention training, and trauma-informed practice in secular public education today. My prison chaplaincy is inspired by this kind of cultural translation: I have been working for the last five years to make the essence of the Tibetan Mind Training traditions into an accessible set of perspectives and practices for prisoners, no matter what their religious beliefs. Indeed, Mind Training doesn't require any kind of Buddhist identity or beliefs to have a positive effect. It is based on a centuries' long, living tradition of human beings applying these teachings in order to understand positive and negative habits, emotions, and outcomes.

Before turning to my specific techniques and teaching strategies, I should point out that many of its themes and ideas do not work in prison chaplaincy. I have had to develop a way of presenting this tradition in a particular way that does not assume any Buddhist background. These have mostly to do with either the intended audiences or the world view of many of these texts and traditions. In the first place, many Mind Training texts were written by monastics for other monastics. These were practitioners who had renounced the world of family and business, which is

[10] See the SEE Learning homepage: https://seelearning.emory.edu/node/5.

very unlike prisoners in Ontario today. Also, not only were many of the authors of Mind Training monks, they were retreatants and extraordinary practitioners. There are so many cultural and lifestyle differences, that prisoners find it hard to relate. Also, I have been reminded while working with prisoners that not every person shares the same definition of happiness, and also that all of our individual definitions of happiness change over time. My chaplaincy therefore does not try and impose a Tibetan or Buddhist definition of happiness and well being on a prisoner. Over time, and from failure, I have learned to listen and carefully draw on tools and techniques from the Mind Training tradition to help individual people.

In terms of worldview, there are also many assumed ideas in these texts that seem either foreign or simply untrue to prisoners. A very central one, that is in basically all Mind Training texts, is the existence of past and future lives. While all of the prisoners I work with are legally identified as "Buddhist" or "undeclared," very few of the prisoners I have worked with over the years believe in rebirth. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said on many occasions while in dialogue with scientists, without rebirth traditional Buddhist ideas of samsāṛa and liberation begin to fall apart. The idea of the Buddhist path itself begins to look like another outdated religious belief system, and so careful use of reasoning and logic (Skt. *pramāṇa*; Tib. *tshad ma*) becomes important to explore this difficult concept. But this is not our work as Buddhist prison chaplains. My chaplaincy is motivated only by trying to help others, not by making more Buddhists![11]

[11] That said, many times the prisoners I work with want to talk about Buddhist philosophy and worldview, including the topic of rebirth that underlies the Mind Training tradition. When this happens, I turn to a very interesting and excellent recent work by the Tibetan scholar and lama Khenpo Tsültrim Lodrö. This text explores not just traditional Buddhist arguments for the existence of past and future lives, but also engages current scientific ideas about the continuity of consciousness. I wrote my Master's Thesis on this text and its understanding of neuroscience and Buddhist philosophy. I usually draw on its many

Working With Prisoners in an Eight-Part Session

When I teach prisoners, I first explain how we all have positive and negative minds. We possess positive and negative mental states that I teach are like a good king and a bad king, kind of like the devil and angel that we see on each shoulder in Western cartoons. If we entertain and listen to the bad king, then our negative mental states gain power and we act accordingly to others. So too with the good king, for if we focus on him and develop positive mental perspectives (like patience, love, compassion, and wisdom), we act in positive ways to others. In other words, I am first trying to have the prisoners reflect on their positive and negative mental habits, and that different perspectives on the same situation lead to very different experiences and outcomes. I also have to practice this when I am in prisons: unlike other chaplains who I work with, I never read the criminal history of the prisoners I teach. I don't want to know what crimes they have committed, since this could affect my equanimity towards them.

Over the four years of trying to teach Mind Training in Ontario prisons, I have developed an Eight-Part system. First, we settle our minds and chant prayers and Mind Training texts together. Second, I begin teaching a particular Mind Training text. Third, we practice walking meditation. Fourth, I begin teaching some specific analytical and stabilizing meditation, such as cultivating loving-kindness or "giving and taking." Fifth, we actually practice meditation on that topic. Sixth, we have a group discussion after the meditation, where participants share their experiences and questions. Seventh, I meet with prisoners privately, where we can discuss some difficulties they are experiencing. Finally, I assign the

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examples to engage the prisoners who want to think and debate about the proofs for these ideas (Kunga Sherab, "The Interpretation of Scientific 'Proofs' for Past and Future Lives Amongst Contemporary Tibetan Buddhist Scholars in the PRC." (Master's Thesis, Department for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto)., 2014).

group homework that will help them explore the teaching topic of that day during the time between our sessions.

In the first part, we chant together. I always choose prayers that have some practical meaning that is accessible to the prisoners, such as Mind Training texts or aspirational prayers expressing the intention to develop love, compassion, patience, and so on. I have noticed that chanting these prayers really have an effect on prisoners. Chanting them daily, again and again, transforms the prayers and aspirations into their second nature. I have really noticed this effect. I also use Mind Training to help individual prisoners. Individual prisoners often share some difficulty they are facing, either in their environment or in their practice. Sometimes, in group sessions, prisoners will share their troubles as well.

In both cases, I base my counseling and advice on Mind Training verses that describe such difficulties and the appropriate antidote, and bring that into my chaplaincy on my next visit. A particularly good resource for this is a collection entitled the *Hundred Instructions of the Jonang* (Tib. *Bjo nang khrid brgya*), which was compiled by Kunga Drolchok (Kun dga' grol mchog, 1507-1565) and Jétsün Tāranātha (Rje btsun tā ra nā tha, 1575-1635). I regularly look through this collection to find texts that could help prisoners in their practice, or just managing their emotions and their environment. Some other useful verses examples come from *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (Skt. *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*), an eighth century work by the Indian master Śāntideva (Tib. Zhi ba lha) that is a main reference for Tibetan lamas in the Mind Training tradition.[12] The first focuses on the cultivation of patience:

[12] Śāntideva, "Byang Chub Sems Dpa'i Spyod Pa La 'jug Pa (*Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra.*)," in Bstan 'gyur (Sde Dge) (Delhi: delhi karmapae choedhey gyalwae sungrab partun khang, 1982), 3–81.

If a problem can be solved,

What reason is there to be upset?

If there is no possible solution,

What use is there in being sad?[13]

The next verse, which comes from Chapter Five of Śāntideva's text, concerns cultivating vigilance:

To cover all the earth with sheets of hide

Where could such amounts of skin be found?

But simply wrap some leather round your feet

And it's as if the whole earth has been covered![14]

If you wish to destroy all external enemies and avoid all difficult circumstances, you will never be successful. But if you destroy anger and attachment and other internal causes of suffering, then lasting peace is possible. This is the same as destroying all enemies and negative life situations, since there is no longer any internal basis for suffering. I never identify the individuals ('he has this problem!'), but work in a more general way to introduce an antidote from this tradition. I try to explain how reflecting and meditating on these verses gives perspective and solutions to those problems.

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[13] Śāntideva, 29.

[14] Śāntideva, 20.

Then I move into the second stage of our sessions, which is group teaching. I generally focus on a larger, shared kind of problem or difficulty and how to apply a Mind Training perspective. I always share problems I have faced in my own life, or stories from the lives of great Tibetan practitioners, as examples that the prisoners can follow in their practice. Often, this comes down to trying to think about the perspective of the other people involved in my difficulties, such as those who at first appear to be harming me or causing me trouble. An example I read that I like to share in my chaplaincy comes from the early life of the Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh. When he was still in Vietnam, French soldiers would come to Thich Nhat Hanh's monastery with their guns and demand they give up their only sack of rice for the soldiers. Thich Nhat Hanh would become so angry as he was forced to carry the monastery's precious sack of rice to the army camp. But eventually he applied some Mahāyāna mind training and began to explore the perspective of those French soldiers. They had not come to his country by choice. They were poor and ordered by their government to come to Vietnam. Taking on the perspective of those soldiers, Thich Nhat Hanh could forgive them and get rid of his hatred for them.[15]

This is like the example of the dog and the lion in Śāntideva's classic Mahāyāna masterpiece, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra.* Śāntideva writes that if we throw a stone for a dog, it will chase it, but if we throw a stone for a lion, it will chase us! Being like a dog is like becoming angry at the person who is controlled by his anger, whereas being like a lion is to recognize the source and becoming angry at anger. A wise person recognizes this and attacks anger, and becomes a hero since anger is our real enemy. Ordinary people attack the person controlled by anger and are called a hero, but all they have done is attack a dead body!

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[15] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames.* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002).

In the prison, I use many Mind Training texts, one Mind Training classic by Géshé Langri Thangpa (Dge bshes glang ri thang pa, 1054-1123) entitled *Eight Verses of Training the Mind* (Tib. *Blo sbyong tshig rkang brgyad ma*). This short, pithy text is perfect for Buddhist prison chaplaincy, as it encompasses the entire Mahāyāna path and, specifically, the practical medicine of the Mind Training techniques.

By thinking of all sentient beings
As more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel
For accomplishing the highest aim,
I will always hold them dear.

Whenever I'm in the company of others,
I will regard myself as the lowest among all,
And from the depths of my heart
Cherish others as supreme.

In my every action, I will watch my mind,
And the moment destructive emotions arise,
I will confront them strongly and avert them,
Since they will hurt both me and others.

Whenever I see ill-natured beings,
Or those overwhelmed by heavy misdeeds or suffering,
I will cherish them as something rare,
As though I'd found a priceless treasure.

Whenever someone out of envy
Does me wrong by attacking or belittling me,
I will take defeat upon myself,
And give the victory to others.

Even when someone I have helped,
Or in whom I have placed great hopes

Mistreats me very unjustly,
I will view that person as a true spiritual teacher.

In brief, directly or indirectly,
I will offer help and happiness to all my mothers,
And secretly take upon myself
All their hurt and suffering.

I will learn to keep all these practices
Untainted by thoughts of the eight worldly concerns.
May I recognize all things as like illusions,
And, without attachment, gain freedom from bondage.[16]

I should say that some part of Mind Training teachings need to be adjusted for Western culture. I have noticed since coming to the West, that people here often have deep struggles with self-image and confidence. In prison this can be intensified to a great degree. So sometimes Mind Training verses such as "Whenever I'm in the company of others/ I will regard myself as the lowest among all..." need not be emphasized, or else explained carefully to prisoners. These kind of teachings are appropriate for a person with strong self-confidence, otherwise it is best to not emphasize. First one must love oneself before one can train deeply in love for others. I have found in my years as a Buddhist prison chaplain that, just like a doctor diagnosing illness and prescribing different medicine, working with prisoners requires listening carefully and recommending appropriate practices from the large Mind Training tradition.

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[16] Géshé Langri Thangpa, "Blo Sbyong Tshig Brgyad Ma," in *Tshe Mchog Gling Gi Chos Spyod Rab Gsal* (Delhi: ngawang sopa, 1980), 157–58. ; Dge bshes glang ri thang pa, trans. Rigpa Translations. 2012; "Eight Verses of Training the Mind" www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/geshe-langri-thangpa/eight-
Verses-training-mind. Accessed 06/22/2021.

I have found that, in addition to working with practices from the Mind Training tradition, the life stories of their authors are very helpful to prisoners. This is because these authors, who we call the masters of "the Father and Son Kadampa tradition" (Tib. Bka' gdams pa pha dang bu chos gzhung lugs), often overcame great difficulties in their lives that seem relatable to the prisoners. In Tibetan Buddhism we speak about several reasons for studying the biographies of past masters. For those engaged in deep study, reading the life story of exemplary scholars like Gorampa or Jé Tsongkhapa are useful since they inspire long term study. Similarly, for those engaged in intense meditation, such as long-term retreatants, reading the biographies of great yogis like Milarepa encourages them to continue. Similarly, for those of us trying to apply the mind Training techniques into our daily lives, we read the life stories of the great Kadampa masters like Géshé Potowa, Géshé Pochungwa, and Géshé Sharawa.

The stories of the lives of the great Kadampa masters are teachings in and of themselves. They show a very human struggle to train the mind in the Mahāyāna path. For example, there is the story of one master sitting at the end of the line in a monastic assembly waiting for the daily meal, meat and noodles. He observed his mind worrying that by the time food was given to him, all the meat would be gone. He immediately turned his bowl upside down and refused food in order to punish his greed and self-cherishing. There is also the story of the master who developed a very simple way of watching his mind and tracking his development on the path. Each evening, he would reflect on his day and make a pile of black stones for every negative activity of body, speech, and mind he had committed that day, and a pile of white stones for every virtuous activity. At first, and for a long time, the pile of black stones was much bigger. But over time, the pile of white stones grew and eventually became bigger. There are many examples, and I often go into great depth since prisoners like hearing about life stories that show the benefit but also the human struggle to train the mind in the Mahāyāna path.

After teaching about specific verses and life stories, I always want the prisoners to do walking meditation. This is important so that prisoners do not stay sitting for too long. Walking meditation brings body and mind together and trains in self-awareness and mindfulness, which is necessary to practice Mind Training techniques. Then we sit once again in order to meditate. Each week I give a different meditation. In the beginning, we practice shamatha breathing meditation, trying to develop some basic skills in awareness and concentration. When the fingers of our hand are extended and relaxed, we have little force, but when we gather our fingers together and clench our fist, we have strength. Similarly, our mind is normally scattered and undisciplined. But by practicing śamatha meditation, we can focus and gather its strength towards cultivating positive mental attitudes and perspectives. To help in this, I always have the prisoners do only very short meditations of no more than three to five minutes. Quality is always more important than quantity.

Once the prisoners develop some experience, I slightly extend the time of the meditation session to approximately 5-7 minutes. I strongly believe that these short sessions give the prisoners a sense of peace and improvement, which encourages them to practice more and more independent of me and our group. In my experience, prisoners are very excited when they first have the opportunity to learn meditation. They often hope it will be some kind of magic that will quickly remove all their problems. They want to practice very intensely right away, but then quickly get worn out and disappointed by trying to practice too hard too fast. To remedy this, I really emphasize short, quality meditation sessions as a basis.

After these meditation sessions, I hold group discussions with all the prisoners. I encourage them to share their experiences and questions, and then as a group we offer advice and reflect on what we have learned. Group sessions are also very important contexts where prisoners can inspire and teach others. For example, one prisoner might share a difficult

situation and how they applied the Dharma to see it positively, or to reflect on how that difficulty could become the basis for some positive response or personal development. Another prisoner might share some insight or breakthrough from his personal meditation practice. Just as often, group conversation is where a prisoner can raise something that is not working in his practice. He might say that he tried to apply an antidote from the Mind Training tradition, but that it did not help his anger or attachment. Then this is an opportunity for other prisoners and for me to share experiences in our lives when we went through a similar difficulty, and what Dharma teachings were most useful. I have found that these group sessions are excellent techniques not just because they offer practical solutions to problems in personal practice. It is also empowering for the prisoners, since they can take the lead in thinking about others' difficulties and offering solutions. I always emphasize in these group sessions that, because it can be so difficult, prison is the most perfect environment to develop our practice of Mind Training and to see if it is working; group session is a place where we reflect together on our progress.

After group sessions, I hold private interviews with prisoners. This is where they can share some personal difficulties that they do not want to share in a group. From my perspective as a Buddhist prison chaplain, meeting prisoners one-on-one is the most useful way to become a more effective support for them. Learning about their private struggles allows me to direct my public teaching, to address their problems for the group (while keeping an individual prisoner anonymous). For example, in private meetings prisoners often share that they are suffering from terrible regret. This allows me to talk to them about what is called in Tibetan the nyenpo top zhi, or “Four Opponent Powers” (Tib. *gnyen po stobs bzhi*). This is a method to purify our negative actions. The first is the power of regretting a negative action (Tib. *rnam par sun 'byin pa'i stobs*). The second is the power of re-establishing the right attitude; (Tib. *rten gyi stobs*). The third is the power of deciding not to repeat the negative action again; (Tib. *nyes pa las slar ldog pa'i stobs*). The last is the power of applying the antidotes

(Tib. *gnyen po kun tu spyod pa'i stobs ba*). I have found that this traditional presentation is useful for prisoners, since it shows a simple exercise of examining our actions and not just being tormented by regret. With the four opponent powers, we actually purify the imprints of our negative actions and move on with our life in a more positive direction. Prisoners really respond to this exercise of moving on, and also to the act of vowing to never again repeat that negative power.

This all brings peace and growth. We first recognize we have done a negative action and regret it. We then confess to the Buddhas and our teacher, before engaging in some practice to purify the negative karma (such as making offerings, meditating on compassion or emptiness, doing prostrations, etc.). We then vow before the buddhas and bodhisattvas to never again engage in that action, or at least to refrain from that action for a certain period of time. So prisoners who are feeling regret begin to feel like this difficult emotion is their position: it is the first step to changing their habits and stepping forward into a new chapter in their lives. Also in private meetings, prisoners often share how they are dealing with a lot of anger and resentment. I begin by explaining that it is very good that they are recognizing this negative attitude, since anger is like rotting meat: the longer we allow it to fester, the more powerful it becomes.

Focusing on 'Wise Comparison'

I then assign the prisoners homework in order to help them further explore these ways of examining our mind and our habits using "wise comparison." When I first came to the West, I met a Dharma student who had been in a long and troubled romantic relationship. Her boyfriend was very cruel to her, and they often broke up. However, she would become lonely, reach out to him, and they would get into another toxic relationship. She went to see a psychologist, who advised her to make a chart that recorded all of her boyfriend's positive and negative qualities. The negative far outweighed the positive, and so whenever she was tempted to reach out to him, she could look at this chart and resolve to leave this toxic

relationship behind her. At the time, I thought that this was very skillful. It is an example of an important concept we have in Buddhism also, especially the Mind Training tradition, which I like to call "wise comparison." Wise comparison is one of the most useful exercises I have developed for the prisoners I work with. In our normal lives, we are always comparing ourselves with others in unproductive ways. We compare what we have with others who have more. Or if we experience some problem or suffering, we compare ourselves with others who we see as happy, healthy, and unburdened by difficulty. This kind of habitual comparison is not wise. It leads to jealousy, depression, resentment, and so on. It increases our suffering, and is of course very common among prisoners, such as it is among those of us who are not incarcerated.

Wise comparison, by contrast, embodies the spirit of Mind Training, since it examines any situation to see both its positive and negative qualities and potential. Even situations that at first seem harmful, frustrating, or even threatening offer the opportunity to develop our Dharma practice and reduce our harmful emotions and mental habits. One simple way to do this that does not involve any advanced knowledge of the Buddhist tradition is what I call "wise comparison." For example, when a prisoner tells me he is suffering from the terrible food in prison, I share stories about the terrible food I had in my many years training in monasteries as a young monk. Or when a prisoner tells me that they are overwhelmed by the experience of being incarcerated, I tell them about the experiences of my uncle and my teacher when they were incarcerated during the PRC takeover of Tibet in 1959. What at first feels like hell can appear like heaven through the practice of wise comparison.

To help prisoners explore this practice of wise comparison, I often give them homework. First is to become mindful of negative emotions as they arise, and to do exercises exploring why they arose. The second is to do a chart exercise described below. Together, this homework builds on the old Kadampa géshé practice of carefully scrutinizing one's daily

activities, trying to account for our daily virtue and non-virtue. Their homework first involves making a chart weighing the benefits and drawbacks of a specific emotional affliction arising for them. They must first check and see if the emotion is mental or physical. Then they are asked to analyze their mind and honestly ask whether that emotion is based on wise comparison or not? Is it based on a realistic assessment of a situation? Are there other ways of comparing that would have produced positive emotions?

Then they are asked to carefully look at how the difficult emotion causes suffering in their body and mind. They are also asked to practice meditation focusing on a single person causing them suffering to see if they can forgive them or not. During their everyday life, they are asked to practice mindfulness and to try and apply Mind Training techniques to recognize and defeat negative emotions as they come up. They are asked to make notes about every time they tried and to let me know if it worked or not. And finally, I ask them to write about the feeling that arises for them when they have been able to forgive someone.

This way of doing homework is much like the way the old Kadampa géshés practiced: by carefully examining their everyday lives and trying honestly to apply antidotes to negative emotions. So, for example, when prisoners are suffering because of experiencing poverty while in prison, I ask them to make lists of those in the world suffering from far worse poverty. They think deeply about those who experience war and displacement, starvation, imprisonment in countries where food and medicine are denied to prisoners, and so forth. Compared to them, prisoners in Canada live like kings. My own chaplaincy employer, Bridges of Canada, is in fact an American company. When employees from the US meet Canadian prisoners, they often remark how clean, safe, and well-run Canadian prisons are compared with the US. Prisoners always tell me this, and I remind them that this is the exercise of wise comparison. I also tell them about my observation of new Tibetan refugees arriving in Canada. They are

always so happy to be joining Canadian society. They are usually quite poor, and face many years (even generations) of hard work and economic precarity, but they are not comparing themselves to what other Canadians have. They are thinking about what they left behind, and they are joyful even when facing hardship. This allows me to offer them another tool for wise comparison: listing needs versus wants. Prisoners always find this exercise most useful, since they struggle to find anything that they are lacking that is a "need."

The second "wise comparison" I assign as homework is a comparison chart. In my years as a Buddhist prison chaplain, I have realized how much prisoners struggle with anger. This is the number one mental affliction in prison, and so I first give this chart assignment to them as a way to explore anger (though later they can use it to explore other emotions). From certain perspectives, there is of course much to be angry about while incarcerated. One becomes resentful about being imprisoned, about daily interactions with other prisoners, about unfair treatment from guards and other prison workers, and about family situations happening outside of jail beyond your control. So I most often use Mind Training perspectives to help prisoners engage in wise comparison to deal with their anger. The chart asks prisoners to explore the good and bad qualities of anger: anger always at first appears necessary and justified, but it actually always leads to self harm, sabotaging our happiness and peace. I first share Mind Training verses like the following for them to consider:

Wrath disfigures your face and leads you to what is unwholesome;

It robs your mind of the judgment of what is right and wrong;

intolerance is swift to throw you to the lower realms.

But forbearance brings qualities opposite to those described.[17]

Those tormented by the pain of anger

Will never know tranquillity of mind

Stranger, they will be to every pleasure

Sleep departs them, they can never rest.18

I then work with them to complete the following chart. Based on Mind Training perspectives such as the above verses, I fill in the negative side. Then I ask them to think about the positive side of anger. This becomes the basis for fascinating and productive conversations and even debates. I find the prisoners love this analytical exercise, which gives them space and perspective to practice wise comparison.

Here is an example based on the reflections of one of my prisoner friends.

Negative Qualities of Anger (by Khenpo Kunga Sherab)	Positive qualities of anger (by Anonymous Prisoner)

[17] Candrakīrti, "Dbu Ma La 'jug Pa," in Bstan 'gyur (Sde Dge). (delhi: delhi karmapae choedhey, gyalwae sungrab partun khang, 1982), 405. Translated into English by Thupten Jinpa.

[18] Śāntideva, "Byang Chub Sems Dpa'I Spyod Pa La 'jug Pa (Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra)."

Unable to sleep	
Loss of appetite	Eat less and lose weight
It creates an angry expression that disfigures your face	People stay away from you
Leads you to do what is unwholesome	Helps you express your feelings
Robs your mind of the judgement of what is right and wrong	No friends, so spend less money
Use up your positive energy	Be able to purify
Become distanced from friends	Make people scared of you
Rob your youth and beauty	
Take away your happiness	Temporarily feel better
Lead you to make bad decisions	Make people know you are not happy about what has occurred
Lose your good reputation	Learn a good lesson
Make your loved ones unhappy	
Put your and others' lives in danger	Give opportunity for other people to practice patience

Produced unwanted results	
Turn many people into your enemies	You can get your debt
Unable to rest	Get things done
Make your body and mind into servants of anger	
Mind will experience no peace	
Lose love and compassion towards oneself and others	Make you powerful
Become lonely	
Create unwholesome environments	

When we meet again, we look at their charts together. In the spirit of fun and exploration, we play a game of challenging each other's reasoning. They try to disprove my list of negative outcomes of anger, and I try to dispute their list of positive outcomes of anger. Together, we use critical thinking to explore together, based on Mind Training texts, our experiences, and logic.

By putting the Mind Training teachings into practice through wise comparison, not only does our mind not need to suffer. At the same time, our body is incarcerated, the experience of being in prison can be a cause for Dharma realizations. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, often tells a story about my teacher, Khenpo Kunga Wangchuk. He was imprisoned and

tortured for twenty years for being a Buddhist lama. When he was finally released and escaped to the Tibetan refugee settlements in India, the Dalai Lama asked him what the most difficult experience he faced in prison was. Khenpo Kunga Wangchuk replied that his hardship was that he would lose his bodhicitta for his Chinese captors and his altruistic commitment to become enlightened to help his captors and torturers. I love sharing this story about my teacher to prisoners, which reveals how being incarcerated can actually be a wonderful spiritual opportunity by engaging the Mind Training teachings.

Conclusion

I became a Buddhist prison chaplain in Ontario after over three decades of formal Buddhist monastic education in Tibet and India. I came to my chaplaincy after teaching Buddhist philosophy and practice to devoted Tibetan laypeople and especially to monks and nuns. However, after coming to Canada and beginning to speak to audiences who were not Buddhist, I realized I needed to think very deeply about what aspects of my Buddhist tradition would be most useful in this new environment. This was especially true when I became a Buddhist prison chaplain and first entered into a prison.

Based on exposure to secular models of therapy, I realized that the Tibetan Mind Training tradition would be an excellent resource for prisoners, especially if I could emphasize texts and perspectives that did not assume a Buddhist worldview. Inspired by His Holiness the Dalai Lama's SEE education program, over time I developed the Eight Part Prison Chaplaincy program introduced above. This is based on collective and private explorations of the Mind Training tradition under the rubric of "wise comparison." Even though I am always learning and trying to improve my abilities as a prison chaplain, there has been some success with this method. The prisoners I have worked with report becoming more self

aware and have made a habit out of examining the positive outcomes of attitudes like compassion and patience and the negative outcomes of anger and attachment. Some have developed meditation practices where they deeply reflect on their mind and environment and try to find positivity in all their difficult circumstances.

Once a group of the Buddha's disciples came to him upset. They told the Buddha that they had been collecting alms, but instead of offering them food, people had ridiculed them and hurled insults and abuse at them. The Buddha asked them, 'If they had welcomed you with flowers and food, would you have been happy?' They replied yes. The Buddha told them, 'In this case, you have handed the root of your happiness and suffering into the hands of others. As soon as you do that, everything relies on others, and you will never have reliable fulfilment and happiness. If you take the root into your own hands, then you will always be happy whatever your external circumstances.' This is the goal of my Buddhist prison chaplaincy: to help prisoners find their way to take the root of happiness into their hands.

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