



December 2019

Spiritual Practice in Daily Life

HKF family & friends talk about their practices

Life brings challenges, big and small. There's just no way to be awake and aware on this planet without some pain. Even the luckiest of us will sometimes feel heartache that seems too much to bear. And yet here we are, you and I, stumbling through somehow. I wonder why we don't have a class in every public school called *How To Handle Suffering*.

The letters we receive at HKF often describe the worst—abuse, injustice, illness and loss of every kind. The thoughtful and searching questions in those letters center around one big question: “how can I bear the unbearable?”

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism asserts that there is suffering in life. Fortunately, wise people throughout history have spent whole lifetimes working on answers to “how can I bear it?” We don't have to make up the answers by ourselves. If we want to benefit from their answers, though, we do have to make some effort. How did someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama—whose people were conquered and oppressed, killed or exiled—become a man of peace and joy? Through spiritual practice. He spends

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Sometimes I feel like giving up, and my faith has been stripped bare from the injustice of it all. And then “A Little Good News” comes my way to renew my hope. I treasure it.

—Joe Swainston

Meet Our Newest Board Member

William “Mecca” Elmore began serving on the Human Kindness Foundation board of directors in November 2019. A note from Sita:

Beloved Family, I seem to find myself in wonderful conversations with Mecca that I wish I had recorded! Mecca was sentenced to natural life (he was released after 24 1/2 years). When he first began that sentence, he decided to end his life—he just didn't know how he could do a life sentence. But then his mother told him that it would kill her too if he gave up in that way. He decided that he didn't want to kill his mother so he needed to figure out how to live and do what was necessary to endure. Once he changed his mind about committing suicide and felt that he was going to live it out, he realized that he wanted to be as healthy as he could. He started taking care of himself physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally and began attracting material to support that.

Since being released in 2015, Mecca has worked with RSN (Reintegration Support Network) serving youth in recovery from substance abuse, in re-entry support as program manager for Church Beyond Walls, and as an educator with Step-Up Ministries.

Human Kindness Foundation feels very fortunate to have Mecca on our Board of Directors. Dear friends, you can look forward to hearing more from him and about him—he's got so much to offer our family!! Much love to you, Sita



hours every day in meditation. That's probably not the whole answer to his Peace, but it's a big clue, and it's a practice we can use wherever we are.

Since we haven't focused a newsletter on the details of daily practice lately, we decided to ask a few of our volunteers and board members about their personal practices. Their answers are on the following pages. We hope their practices will encourage you in yours.

We've also included a very simple—but not easy!—meditation practice on page 4. There are many methods of meditation, and you might enjoy exploring a variety of them, but this simple technique can take you a long way. You can start today, even if you've never meditated or read anything about meditation before.

It's hard to find the motivation and self-discipline to practice every day. And it's worth the effort. You are worth the effort.

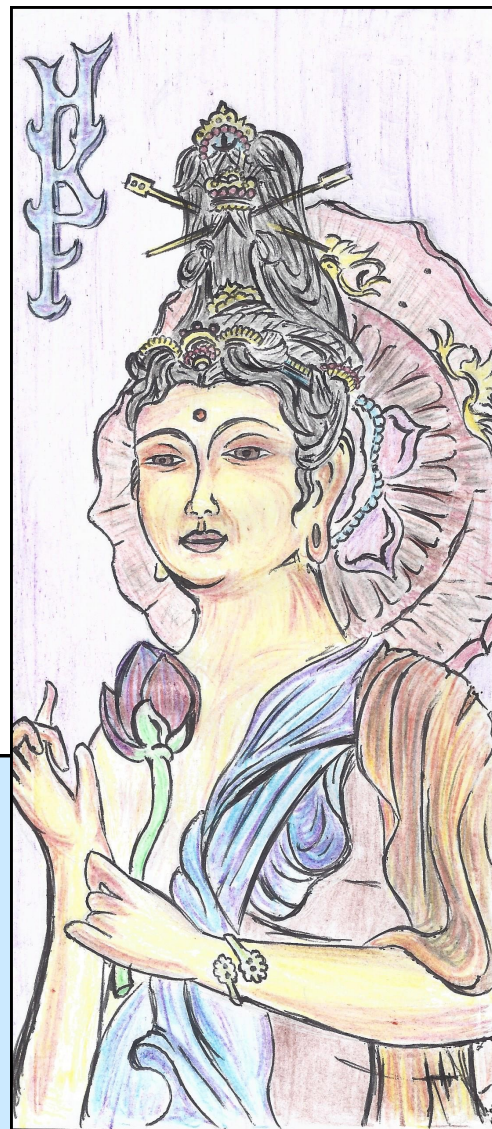
Love and blessings, Catherine

P.S. We have free books to help you learn more about spiritual practices. *We're All Doing Time* was written to be used as a manual, and it includes detailed instructions for several practices. Even if you've read it before, if you don't have it now and you want to get serious about a daily spiritual practice, please write to us and ask for one. (*If you write to us from a jail please tell us how long you expect to be at that address.*)

We asked some of the Human Kindness Foundation family, including board members, volunteers and other friends, to comment on their personal spiritual practices. Here they are, in their own words.

Tall Tom: I developed the practice while in prison that I still utilize daily outside the walls. Besides a structured time every day for meditation (silent mantra/observation of the breath 25 minutes+) and prayer (reciting from memory and/or reading), I also incorporate a mini-form of the same at any point in the day that stress builds. In prison I would get frustrated at waiting in lines: the line for chow, commissary, medication, recreation, shower, library, church, AA, school and don't forget work. Add in waiting for the doors to open to your cell to either come out or go back in and that is just a lot of time waiting. I started utilizing that time to focus on my breathing and settle down by repeating the mantra "Lord Come." I actually use the Aramaic word Maranatha which means the same thing but has a more melodious sound. Now when I am in traffic, a grocery store line or anything like that I remember what my teachers have taught me: the difficult times that can seem like a real struggle are my most heart-felt spiritual experiences.

Joe: My regular individual practices: silence and meditation, chanting the Psalms slowly, reading scripture and poetry meditatively, paying attention to the earth beneath my feet and the beauty of the creation all around. Communal practices: singing hymns, receiving the Eucharist, hearing scripture read aloud. What helps me in times of trouble: Chanting the Psalms.



Aaron: I practice mindfulness daily. Mindfulness provides me the opportunity to be aware of my thoughts and my actions which influence my interactions with those I encounter. As life's challenges ebb & flow, the practice of meditation allows me to make conscious decisions as best as I can, and encourages me that I have support from The Divine.



John: On a daily basis my practice begins with rolling out of bed and praying on my knees for guidance throughout the day, and specifically for my thoughts and actions to be devoid of self-pity and self-centered motives. At the end of the day, I again hit my knees and thank God for helping me, and I mentally review the day, thinking of any behaviors I want to avoid or improve, and I imagine how my Higher Power would have me act. Then I ask God to help me to handle the situation better in the future. These practices are the bookends of each day. During the day, I practice mindfulness on my jogs, paying attention to how my feet strike the ground. Just like when watching the breath, my mind will wander, and I get to bring the focus back to my foot strike repeatedly. I also find time to sit and watch the breath for periods, and find this basic mindful practice invaluable in helping me avoid foolish, detrimental decisions which used to happen so easily for me!

I am grateful to be a member of a recovery fellowship, which has explicit instructions about turning to the spiritual solution for help in any situation. The greatest, most fundamental is the practice of noticing (which regular mindful practice helps with) when I am getting caught up in selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, or fear. After noticing, I pause and ask for help, and for the right thoughts and actions. I then discuss the issue with a trusted friend to determine if my behavior has harmed anyone in order that I can make it right. Finally, I turn my attention to someone I can help. This practice isn't easy, and I don't always turn to it as quickly as I would like to. However, it absolutely works when I work it! It's a good thing it's called a "practice," because I can therefore let go of the notion that I fail when I'm not perfect.

Gina: Before most meals, I wish for blessings on Every. Single. Soul. No Exceptions. I spontaneously explode with gratitude. Pretty frequently. Meditation, both walking and still. When things get really tough I rely on prayer, walking meditations, and inspirational reading. I seek guidance from a trusted spiritual friend. I wish on stars, moon,

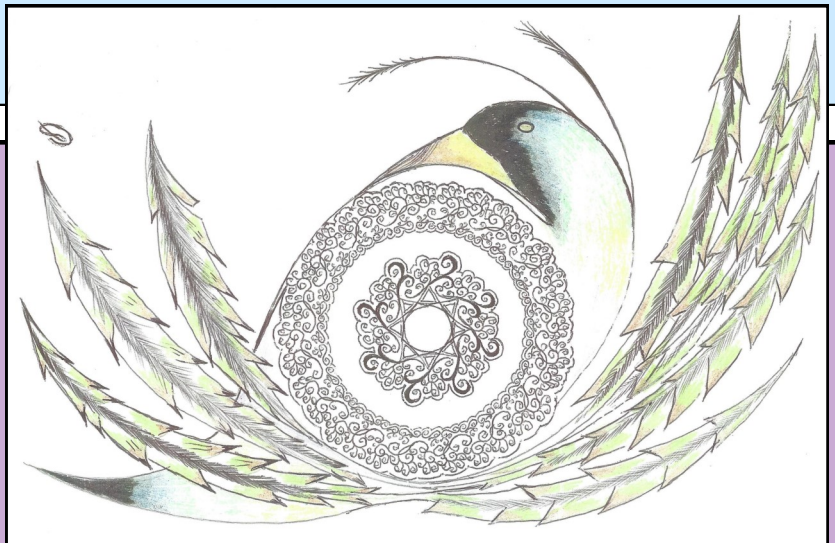
planes, distant radio tower lights, anything that glows in the sky. Or if it's cloudy, the absolute conviction that the starry sky is available anyway. Now that's faith!

Jeanette: I visualize connecting my crown chakra with my soul star above my head, and then connecting that stream of light up as far as I can imagine. I repeat the words "I am the soul. I am the Light Divine. I am love." I meditate on that soul star, a ball of light connecting me to Source and I picture light with unconditional love flowing down into my heart.

When things get rough, honestly, I tend to lose my center for a while. Then I come back to

This journey to obtain inner peace is a constant battle. Every day presents something new. We must really examine our lives and make the right choices. As a Muslim, I have to keep my armor with me daily. I'm not talking about a knife or razor. I'm talking about asking God for His protection and guidance.

—R.B., writing from a maximum security unit where he has lived for 26 years



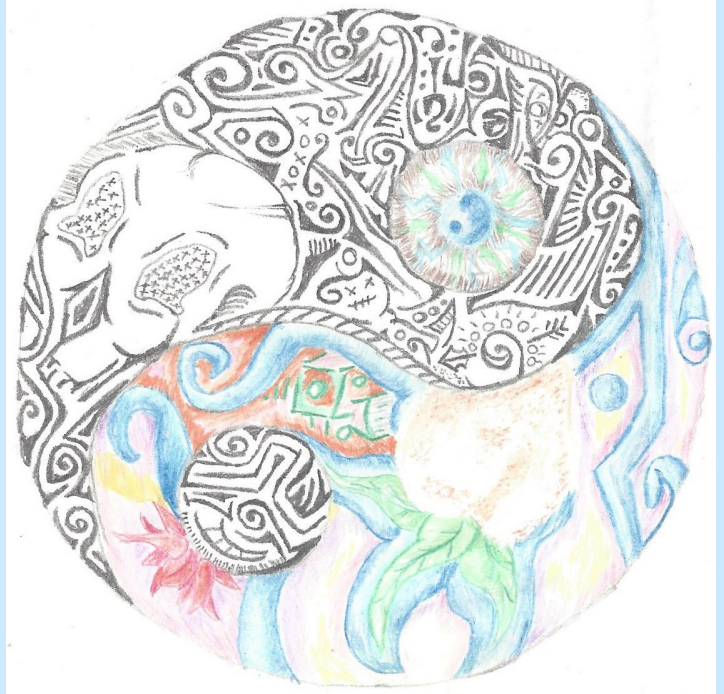
feeling Jesus, Buddha, and others with me. I believe our imaginations are both powerful and useful. Whatever works to create the feeling of connection with Source.

Mike: Recently, I found myself lost in Prague, Czech Republic and I asked a young Asian man for directions. He kindly walked with me to my destination. Along the way, we chatted and he said, "I'm young and less experienced in the world than you. What do you think is the meaning of life?"

I told him to look for opportunities to soften his heart. And that as to those instances in which he felt the most resistance, those were the ones to really dive into. That's my current growing edge, one that keeps me humble and inquisitive about myself and the world. He thanked me as he dropped me off at my destination. It was one of the highlights of my trip.

Sita: My Guru, Neem Karoli Baba, used to say, "Ram nam karne se sab pura ho jata." The translation of that is: "Everything is accomplished by taking the name of God." That's my main practice, and I take the name of God when life is going smoothly or when it's more difficult. A dear friend who lives on death row gave me pray-

er beads which I use to help me remember that "the divine plan is unfolding right now." And since it came from a friend inside, it has the added feature of opening my heart to all of my friends inside prisons and jails.



PRACTICE: A Simple Form of Meditation

Remember, simple does not mean easy! Meditation practice often feels difficult, but it does not need to be complex. You can get just as much benefit from this simple technique, practiced regularly, as you can from very complicated methods.



1) Sit very straight. Either on cushions on the floor, or on a straight-backed chair, or on your bunk. You don't have to sit in full-lotus like an Indian yogi; the point is to have your back, head, neck and shoulders in a straight line—firm but relaxed. You should be able to forget about your body without it slumping over; the only way to do this is to be straight and well-balanced. The easiest way to get your back to be straight is to raise your butt high enough off the

floor that your knees can point down. Use folded blankets, pillows, or even books to sit high enough.

2) Focus on your breath. After getting the body still, bring all your attention to one of these two points: The tip of your nose, where your breath goes in and out, or the lower abdomen, where the diaphragm rises with each in-breath and falls with each out-breath. Keep the mind right there, feeling the movement of each breath in and out. Don't follow it in or out; just keep the attention in one spot, observing however the breath feels as it goes by.

3) If there's a lot of noise and confusion around you, or a lot of busy thoughts in your mind, you simply notice it and get back to your breath, your focal point of concentration. You don't need to blank your mind. The idea is to keep gently returning your focus to your breath, no matter how many times it wanders. Your mind will keep thinking thoughts. That's OK. You can keep returning your focus to your breath.

We recommend starting with a brief time, 3 or 4 minutes, that you commit to doing every day. Gradually increase your minutes. Many people find that 20 minutes works well for them as a long-term practice. It's more important to stick with the practice than to have longer meditations.

From our archives:

Bo Lozoff on Christmas "Cheer"

People assume that Christmas is the worst time of year for prisoners; how can you be "merry" or have Christmas "cheer" when you're locked up away from your loved ones? And yet, if we could let go of the whole notion of Christmas as some sort of "fun" time, if we could just drop the heavy association between Christmas and "happiness," perhaps you can have a very profound Christmas instead, even behind bars; especially behind bars. And you needn't be a Christian to have a meaningful Christmas; Jesus himself wasn't Christian. Let's forget about religions for a moment and consider instead the teachings of this powerful spiritual master. Jesus was not one of the nice, respectable people in his society. He was an outcast; a gaunt, intense figure who refused to water down his teachings to be more acceptable to the middle class. Against all proper social customs, he cast his lot time and again with prisoners, lepers, prostitutes and beggars, and reminded his followers to love these other "outcasts" if they wished to love him. He showed them by his own example that comfort and security have nothing at all to do with dignity or self-respect; that worldly pleasures mean nothing if one's life is empty of spirit, and that even prison and death can be bearable if the living spirit is present. He showed and taught us new meanings of words such as humility, forgiveness and love.

It would seem that Christmas can be the most tolerable time to be in prison rather than the least, if you but tune in to its essence. Where can you picture Jesus? Century after century, most of us continue to miss the point of deep spiritual teachings

such as Jesus'. We water down the intensity, the go-for-broke devotion of the masters in order to keep our lives orderly and comfortable. We depict Jesus in our movies as handsome, clean, and Aryan, and the same things we do to his looks, we do to his teachings. But if all that is



missing the point, then what is closer to the point of Jesus' teachings? Why didn't Jesus simply emerge as a respectable, scholarly rabbi of his day, changing the course of biblical history in more conventional ways? With all his wisdom and power, why did he endure such hardships and suffering, includ-

ing imprisonment, humiliation, torture, and death on the cross? Jesus showed us that there is great power in our suffering. He showed us, really, that living without spirit is a greater form of suffering than physical pain or deprivation. And he indicated a mystical dimension of experience behind our suffering that we can share with him if we but surrender our pride, desires, and fears.

This Christmas season, if you can find strength to go deeper, then perhaps you might have a true Christmas surprise gift. Sitting alone in your cell, feeling your own self-dignity and allowing your mind to be quiet and humble, you may well find an unexpected friend sitting by your side or in your heart. You may well have the very most beautiful Christmas in your life, touched by the master who understands your imprisonment; who understands and loves you so much...and we do too.

HAVE A MEANINGFUL
CHRISTMAS

—Bo Lozoff, 1980



Kirtan (a sacred practice of chanting) offered for prisons and jails:

The Call and Response Foundation works with the kirtan group Kripa to offer the experience of sacred chant music (kirtan) throughout the country. If you are interested in having a kirtan in your facility or want to learn more about chanting, please feel free to write to the address below.

Call and Response Foundation
PO Box 108
Northfield, VT 05663

Letters

Dear HKF,

I pray that all is well for you all at HKF. I was feeling moved to write you all to thank you for the two greatest books ever written—the books that inspired me to finally experience God for myself. (*We're All Doing Time* and *Lineage & Other Stories*)

I have been walking firmly in wherever my spiritual journey takes me ever since. Love, happiness, and kindness lights my path. It makes my awareness so clear that I walk and talk it in my own truth now. It makes me so much stronger and better in every possible situation in life. It seems that all I have to do is stick to my self discipline and keep enjoying my journey to be an example in my love, happiness, kindness, actions and words that I'm hopefully going to inspire others to experience God for themselves.

So I have to give credit where credit is due. With these five words of Bo's, my life has been changed: SIT STILL AND SHUT UP.

Thank you Human Kindness Foundation for changing my life. I'm grateful for you all.

Love, T



Dear Friends of HKF,

I do my best to follow Bo's teachings from *We're All Doing Time*. I meditate daily, and meditation used to help with my depression, but as of late, I've been more and more depressed. I've been dealing with this depression regularly for years. It never goes away—even during my better days, it's lingering in the background. It's horrible. I've even fallen into old habits of abusing drugs, trying to fill the void in my life of 13 years of incarceration.

My life in prison has become so dull and boring. I don't sleep well, and I don't want to dream, because just about every dream becomes a nightmare with my victim asking me why. I can never answer because I don't know why. It was an accident, but nonetheless, I took his life. Every day is a struggle trying to cope with the facts of my crime. I try to apologize, but I can never

Dear Sita,

Thank You for Caring.
and God Bless You.



every time I look into the mirror, all I see is the unforgiven piece of shit!

I thought drugs would help me, but my drug abuse has gone on for over three years now and all I've managed to do is burn my family out as well as myself. I know it has to end—it's destroying me. I hate how it's made me look, think, and feel. Some days are better than other days, but even on my best days, I look into the mirror and see the unforgiven staring back with sad eyes.

Feel free to write me back. I could use a friend. Thank you for listening to the unforgiven.

Peace & love, J

Dearest J,

Forgiving yourself is what you really need to work on, and that takes a very deep looking inward, which, by what you've shared with us, is probably the last thing you want to do. The drug use is just a way of avoiding that, thereby keeping it raw and unhealed. The recurring dream about your victim can be used to help you to heal if you confront it. I suggest, when you feel ready, that you speak to your victim at a soul level. Ask for his forgiveness. Tell him what is in your heart and how sorry you are and how you wish it never happened. Really be honest with how you feel about it and how it haunts you. On a soul level, we are all connected, and karmically you two are very much linked. Until you come to peace with this, it will continue to run your life. Remorse is your way of knowing that you've done wrong, but now it's being used to torture you, and that will only

One of the most meaningful things that ever happened to me was being sent books (at no cost whatsoever!) and encouragement from a group in North Carolina I had never heard of—the Human Kindness Foundation. To be treated with charity and respect while in the deepest hole I had ever found myself was life-changing. Bo's book introduced me to the option of doing something with my time behind jail walls other than feeling sorry for myself.

I thank you guys from the bottom of my heart. You will stay on my automatic donation list until either you go out of business or I die. You will probably never know how many lives you have touched for the better, how many have decided suicide is not the best option, that conditions can and probably will improve, and that we should stick around so as not to miss out on all the beauty life can bring. Back in 1998 I didn't want to continue living. Now, 21 years later, I can't imagine missing out on all the great things that have happened since then. Life has turned out to be a blessing rather than a curse, and you are the ones who taught me that.

Love, D

lead to more harm. Forgiveness does not mean that you didn't do something wrong. You can still understand that what you did was wrong. But you can come to a deeper place of understanding about where your mind was at the time, how confused you were, and now, you choose to honor the victim by creating no more harm—to yourself or others. And that starts with forgiving yourself for the state of mind that you were in at the time.

Love, Donna



Dear Sita,

I received, for lack of a better description, a bat-shit crazy cellie who is telling me he's going to kill me in my sleep. He's a notorious killer who smashes heads and breaks bones. He'll destroy everything I have.

Honestly, I'm scared. And I ask myself if this is the fear I put in my victim? I'm so, so regretful. I was a monster. I am no longer that person. That was 24 years ago. I figure for what I did, I have this coming. If I get through this—great. If not—it's God's will. I won't fight.

Thank you for listening.

In God's love and mine, M

My dear friend M,

It's possible that you're in your present situation because of the fear you

put into your victim, dear one, but perhaps you can truly help to change this cycle by considering what might come next in a different way.

If the “bat-shit crazy cellie” harms you in some way, he'll be creating tremendous karma for himself just as you did when you harmed your victim. So is it possible, out of compassion for that potential karma, that you find a way to not let him harm you? The first thing that comes to my mind is protective custody. Can you ask for PC for yourself so that your cellie will not be able to harm you and create some very painful future karma for himself?

Think about this, dear one.

Love, Sita

PS: Until that happens, you can use the mantra of protection Ram Dass taught us decades ago:

“The Power of God is within me: the Grace of God surrounds me.”

As you repeat this mantra, picture yourself surrounded by a strong wall of God's grace, beloved.



Dear HKF,

Thank you for these books. I'm on the path with you, but I have a serious question. When I read *We're All Doing Time* I start to cry. What is wrong with me? I cry a lot now, and I don't know why. Please help me.

Love, E

Dear E,

Thank you for your letter. I can totally relate to your question. When I started on my spiritual journey, I used to cry all the time, especially when I read something moving like Bo's books. I think it's just us having very deep releases of things that have been buried and hidden from our awareness for many years.

I say, let it out!! Its very healing! It means that something is touching a very deep part of your soul—something that has wanted to be expressed for many years but hasn't known how to come to the surface. So keep reading, let yourself cry whenever you need to, and trust that this process is healing you on a deep level.

We are with you all the way!!

Love, Donna



Dear HKF,

You so totally rock my socks!

My sobriety is ongoing—60 days clean and sober! I continue to do my sun salutations every morning, and a funny thing happened—my “stir crazy” isn't so crazy anymore. I really feel like being alone with God, with a peace that follows me throughout the day. I'm excited to continue reading the books and sharing with the women in here with me.

Thanks, K



Many thanks to the artists: pg 1: Joe Swainston, Rosharon, TX; pg 2: Thomas Min, Columbia, SC & Carlos Rivera, Napanoch, NY; pg 3: David Counts, Fordyce, AR & Stephen Land, Joplin, MO; pg 4: Justin King, Great Falls, MT & Rick Morgan; pg 5: unknown & Gary Williams, Marienville, PA; pg 6: Dannie Locklear, Blountstown, FL; pg 7: Lee Hankins, White Deer, PA; pg 8: Tobias De Bardeleben, Eloy, AZ.



The difficult times that can seem like a real struggle are my most heart-felt spiritual experiences.

—Tall Tom

Tall Tom says he used to be “a manipulative dope fiend.” He is now a true leader in his community, serving others as an addiction recovery counselor. He has been out of prison for 11 years after spending more than 30 years inside. You can read more about him and other Human Kindness Foundation friends on page 2.