Cator Shachoy
Angulimala Action Reflection #3
March 8, 2019

Section 1
Soledad prison visit
Saturday, December 8, 2018, 11-4p
Observe the GRIP program – Guiding Rage Into Power
Taught by Kim Grose-Moor, Sati program graduate
Gil and about half of our chaplaincy cohort attended. I carpooled with Amy and Allan.

I was anxious about the prison visit. I was also curious, interested in participating in what I viewed as a special opportunity, and afraid. I trusted we would be protected, but still did not like the idea of going into a lockup facility that housed aggressive men. I seriously considered not going. So I had a little conversation with myself about it.

‘Well, you don’t have to go.’ In feeling my way through that possibility, I realized that I wanted to go. Okay, so it’s a choice. The next question became,

‘How can I support myself in following through on this choice (since it may be difficult for me)?’ After some consideration, I took several steps to support myself both to show up (as in not cancel last minute), and feel more at ease about the prison visit. These steps included:

- Arranging a carpool. That way I would have companions on the journey, and since I was driving, I would have an obligation to show up. My cancelling would negatively impact others. This felt like a supportive commitment.
- Leaving plenty of time (i.e. planning to leave my home early so that I could drive at a moderate pace, pick everyone up with ease, and arrive early at the prison) so that I would not feel rushed or stressed about time or ‘getting there.’
- Going to bed early the night before so that I was not tired or overwhelmed.
- Getting up early enough to do a good yoga and meditation practice the day of the event so that I felt embodied, within myself, cultivating as much ease as possible for a potentially stressful situation.
- Planning to have good high quality food available to keep myself nourished and grounded and to avoid a blood sugar drop.
- Dressing in layers to keep my body warm or cool as needed.

Section 2
On the day of the event I engaged in several self regulation practices throughout the day to support my overall enjoyment of the day even as it was challenging. These included:
- Breathing consciously. Repeatedly taking time to investigate, 'Am I breathing?' or, 'How is my breath?' Asking this question reminded me to take purposeful, investigative breathes, to really feel my breath, notice the qualities present, and gently change it to create more ease if needed.

- Grounding, Connecting, & Observing. In order to ground I would feel my feet on the earth. Once grounded in my own body I would open up and become receptive to my physical space (connecting to the environment), and then to the people around me. While doing this I observed how I felt, how the space was impacting or affecting me, and then how I was reacting to or receiving the people around me.

- Perceiving my emotions. Again and again I would notice what emotions were present. Especially for my small vulnerable self. And also for my more expanded, external self. Following the act of noticing my personal emotions, I would affirm and soothe myself as needed.

- Conscious body movement. Small movements help to keep awareness in my body. Noticing when I was going rigid or tight and moving my body to counteract this tendency, and bring ease.

- Conscious relaxation. Since my body and mind were tending to tighten up, I put a little extra effort into creating ease, feeling at ease, cultivating ease and relaxation through mind and body.

- Engaging/stepping back to observe. Sometimes I needed to give myself time to arrive. And sometimes it was helpful to reach out to the people around me to ground and connect.

The visit to Soledad was an ecstatic experience. I think this is due to the intensity of it, on so many levels. To be in a lock up facility with the harshness of the environment, visiting known murderers, and the resulting uncertainty created a sensory overwhelm. In contrast, the GRIP program created a space of warmth, vulnerability and safety. Mix all of this together, and the nervous system was on high alert, going between fear, love, vulnerability, isolation, connection, warmth, and separation. Wowee! I both loved it, and don’t really want to go back. Funny, because I used to really seek out this sort of ecstatic sensory overwhelm experience. Maybe I’m getting old and set in my ways.

Section 3
Can we ever truly trust someone who has a violent past? Is it possible to heal the level of aggression involved in seriously harming or killing someone, or even many people? How do we know when someone is beyond committing such heinous acts of violence again? Will such a person ever be safe to society?

On our visit to Soledad prison, one of the participants in the GRIP program said, ‘I stabbed my victim 17 times.’ The tone of his voice sounded both incredulous and accepting, as if to say,

‘Was that really me? How is it possible that I did that?’ While simultaneously saying,
‘Yup, that was me. I did that. And I’m living with the consequences every day.’

In the book, ‘Finding Freedom’ the author Jarvis Masters has a violent past, which lands him in prison for an extended period of time. We don’t know exactly what he did, but in the words of his lawyer,

‘I’m glad I wasn’t in Taco Bell when you came through.’

Can these men ever be trusted with their own freedom again? Can they possibly be rehabilitated, and returned to live a, ‘normal’ life, participating in society in a way that offers something good to the community? Can they find their way to autonomy, self-sufficiency, and living in harmony with others after committing such horrific acts of violence? How do we know when this level of reformation has been achieved by an individual? How can someone who has been irresponsible with regards to physical violence and ethical conduct find their way to rejoining society? What steps are needed, and how can we ever truly know that someone has been rehabilitated? Is it even possible?

The story of Angulimala is the story of transformation. Angulimala is a mass murderer who is entirely a destructive force within society. There are no redeeming qualities within his actions. His name means literally, ‘garland of fingers.’ This refers to a string around his neck upon which he has threaded a finger from each of the people he has murdered. Just think about that for a moment. How completely out of your mind must you be in order to purposefully cut a finger off from someone you just killed, and then impale it with a needle, run a string through it, and wear the whole thing around your neck? And do it again and again and again, each time you murder.

Investigating the question of rehabilitation requires looking at our capacity to stop harming ourselves and others. How do we stop? By what means does someone radically transform themselves from overtly aggressive to sincerely concerned for the wellbeing of all beings?

The story of Angulimala suggests that stopping can happen all at once. Agulimala was a man out of control, so completely consumed by power and control - the sense of his own omnipotence - his mind lost any sense of connection to others or a healthy fear of consequences of his actions. Does this remind you of anyone you know?

When he cannot control the Buddha, his sense of being in control is challenged. He screams in defiance. The Buddha’s pithy reply sends Angulimala tumbling into a new reality. His mind breaks open and he surrenders in the moment to the man he thought he would murder. It’s a very dramatic tale. Does it ever happen like this in real life?
While I have never been close to murdering anyone, I have had a few moments of radical transformation. And I have seen them in others. When suddenly, we just get it that what we are doing isn’t working anymore. And then we stop.

I can give an example from my life. The spring of my senior year in high school, I was a star runner on the track team. It was the night before a major track meet. The last one for me before graduating. I lay awake in throbbing pain. My legs hurt so much. Every day for months, before each track workout, I would get wrapped in support tape from the base of my toes to above my knees. I had stress fractures in my feet, shin splints, and torn ligaments in my knees. Even though I was very physically fit I had to rest when climbing a flight of stairs due to the pain in my legs. No one suggested maybe I should stop running. Everyone supported me to continue competing. As I lay there that night, I began to consider the question of,

‘How did this happen? How did I end up in so much pain?’ As I reflected on this question, I began to realize I had done it to myself. While no one suggested I stop, it was also true that no one told me to keep going. No one said I should run myself into the ground. No one told me to harm myself. No one said I should be in constant pain. It was all my own doing. I had caused myself this much pain. Once I saw that I had done this to myself, I knew that I was the only one who could stop it. In that moment I quit track. It became non-negotiable in my mind. I went down to the track meet the next morning dressed in my street clothes, and explained the situation to my coach. He was angry. But it’s interesting to note that he didn’t try to argue with me or change my mind. He told me to stay away from the track that day. And I did.

Are there other ways to transform the habit of aggression, and really resolved it? Jarvis Masters is in San Quentin prison for the rest of his life – without option for parole. He’s got a lot of time on his hands. For awhile he played the game of violence for survival. The book Finding Freedom is full of stories of horrific violence which are commonplace day to day experiences in San Quentin prison. Living in such an environment must be anesthetizing. In order to survive you would need to become numb to the destruction taking place around you. Your heart would close, your body go numb, and your mind devolve into cycles of fear and defensiveness, pushing the terrible reality away.

However things begin to change for Jarvis. He is introduced to writing as a process for working through experiences. And also to Buddhism. As his interest in Buddhism grows, he takes on the Bodhisattva vows, which include a commitment to non-harming.

Through his writing, Jarvis begins to understand cause and effect. That is to say, he begins to see how the confusion, violence, and neglect he experienced in his early childhood directly impacted his life choices, and ultimately his actions. He connects his own tendency toward violence to an unfortunate but natural unmitigated result of how he was treated, and the lack of stability he experienced throughout his life.
And most poignantly to his very early childhood. Today, through the science of trauma, this truth is well understood.

We might add that Jarvis recognizes his actions came out of ignorance. Most of the people around him, including his family, friends, and sometimes even the social service network, supported and encouraged his unethical and violent behavior. He had few models or forces steering him towards ethical conduct.

Through the combination of his writing, and his Buddhist practice, Jarvis has a vehicle for reconnecting with aspects of himself he has dissociated from. His heart begins to open to his vulnerable child self. To the painful aspects of his life he had shut down from, and thus began to act out of. His heart also opens to the people he has harmed through his violence.

Taking the bodhisattva vows seem to be a turning point for Jarvis. He takes the commitment seriously. And yet he lives in an environment where violence is a way of life. Frequently the situation is, killed or be killed.

In the chapter, Stop! A Buddhist is Here! Jarvis presents his dilemma. In his daily life at San Quentin Jarvis encounters a situation that he recognizes will likely result in harm or death of one or more people if no action is taken. He also sees that he himself could be harmed if he tries to intervene. What to do? While he may have been violent in the past, something has changed deep within his being. He finds that he can no longer sit idly by and watch violence happen. Seeing the danger in the situation, despite his fears regarding the repercussions, he must take action. And so, without really knowing what he is doing, he trusts his instincts, and intervenes.

This is an example of what it means to truly stop. His sincere desire to protect all life, his vow to not harm a living being force him into action. It’s hard to say exactly how, when, where, but somehow, through a combination of a deep investigation into his personal history, and an aspiration to do something better, to protect and care for others, something is deeply changed in Jarvis. He learns to stop.

Jarvis’ story and the man at Soledad bring to mind the story of Angulimala. It can happen that when we finally see the harm that is caused, we stop causing harm. The human heart is resilient. The human mind pliable. The human body changeable. Yes, we can learn to stop harming. We can overcome deeply engrained habits. Whether it is substance abuse, bulimia, violence towards ourselves or others, it is possible to overcome our habits. It is not easy. It requires commitment. And recommitment. Brutal honesty. Perseverance. Faith. Asking for help. And trying again and again and again.

How can we know for sure when someone has overcome destructive habits? This is hard to say. It takes being with someone over time to know. It takes knowing ourselves over time to know. There isn’t a simple answer. By watching, observing, feeling into… we can see the change in someone. We can see the change in ourselves.
Human beings are resilient, and capable of profound transformation. We can overcome tremendous suffering, and learn to trust again. It may not be easy. But the effort is worth it. Through our own efforts, moment by moment, with clear intention, I believe healing is possible.