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Breaking the cycle of crime—jail—more crime—more jail: This is what AWE is all about.

John: From Meditation to Making Amends

In 1996, a prison van rolled into the yard at Potosi Correctional Center. When it stopped, two guards opened the back doors. Among the shackled prisoners sat a slightly built teenager, John. Certified as an adult for a murder he committed at age 16, John wasn't leaving much behind: his father had died; his brother had committed suicide; and his mother didn't want him. Perhaps what he missed most were the drugs that sustained him much of the time. John awkwardly stepped out of the van. He had arrived at an end point: a sentence of life without parole.

John did not adjust well to prison life. Shunned by other inmates because of his rage, John frightened even himself. He didn't want to be alone, yet his fighting often sent him to the "hole" where he spent time in solitary confinement.

After four years in and out of the hole, however, something changed. John joined a Meditation class offered by Alternatives With Education. In the weekly 2 ½ hour class, John seemed uncomfortable. While other participants sat, John paced back and forth. When John finally did sit, he tapped his feet and drummed his fingers on the table.

Part of the class included the reading of passages from a Zen meditation book. John followed along as another inmate read; then he reread the same passage to himself. He looked up at the teacher, his dark eyes quizzical. "Can I take this book back to my cell?"

John returned the next week having read the entire book, and he asked for more books on meditation. Over the following months, he stopped pacing, his body quieted, and he began to sit, eyes closed, still as a statue. This progression to a peaceful stance took almost a year, but cracks in his armor appeared as he got in touch with the hurt, anger, rage, and shame that filled his past. His practice of meditation deepened; he began to acknowledge his guilt and take responsibility for his behavior.

Then John began studying Buddhism. He imbibed Buddhism's tenets of nonviolence and compassion. Two years later he committed himself to a strict practice of Tibetan Buddhism to which he still adheres.

With the exception of one nonviolent violation in 2001, John has had no behavior violations since. One time another inmate attacked John, but John refused to fight back. Amazingly, he also established himself in such a way that no one has attacked him since. Such a situation is rare in prison.

Today, as he serves out his sentence of life without parole, John's days are full. He writes for a national Buddhist quarterly, teaches math in our GED program, and studies Linear Algebra on his own. John co-facilitates the meditation class, organizes meditation retreats at the prison, and is involved in countless restorative justice projects that help bring healing to victims, accountability for offenders, and service to fellow prisoners as well as to local families who are in need.

John realizes the suffering he has caused. Knowing that he cannot change the past, John is working to change the present. Who he is and what he does at Potosi Correctional Center helps create a caring community within the prison. John is *not* one of the 95% of prisoners who will be released. But because of the efforts of John and men like him, ex-offenders can go into the free world having experienced goodness and compassion.

We see in John the power of education to transform lives. AWE wants to continue offering our classes in Meditation so that more prisoners have the opportunity to develop their own potential and become contributing members to society.

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