Meditation and addiction: An inmate’s story

Melvin L Morse M.D.

“I am no longer an addict. Getting high would interfere with the abundance of happiness that I have through meditation. I want to protect the happiness I have.” James H.

James, age 28, has an 8-page rap sheet. H first started using heroin at age 22. He took the classic path to heroin addiction in that at first he started with pills and then he switched to heroin because it was cheaper. He has been in and out of prison his entire life.

Something very strange happened to him last year. Even though he has been locked up for the past 22 months, he has been waking up happy. “I’m not miserable anymore” He says. “I have a warm glowing feeling in my heart.” This warm glowing feeling represents something that he earned, that he worked hard to achieve. As he says: “it is not something that you just get. If you could package what I am experiencing now and give it to someone, they would gladly take the steps I have taken to get it. I am genuinely happy.”

James was introduced to meditation as part of the Sussex Correctional Institution’s Green Tree Drug and Alcohol Treatment program, although he has always been aware of it. However, it took him months of hard work teaching himself to meditate before he could say with confidence and pride: “I actually wake up happy. I have had opportunities in prison to get high and didn’t do it. I have a good connection with my creator through meditation. I don’t want to do anything to interfere with that.”

 James had been miserable for a long, long time. As far back as he can remember. His father was a 60-year-old man who had a brief relationship with his mother. He met him for only one week, when he was thirteen years old. His mom was a single mom until he was age 6 when she married his stepfather. He called his stepfather “Dad” and it felt good. However, he always felt his step father favored his younger sister who was his biological daughter. He disappeared from James’s life when James was twelve. He has a close relationship with his grandfather who taught him to fish. He was later confused when he learned that his grandfather had abused his mother.

James took medications for his behavior in school starting at an early age. At age 10 he had a self-described “mental breakdown” from taking all those pills” and was hospitalized at Meadowood Psychiatric Hospital for two weeks. He was taken there in handcuffs in the back of a police car, something he remembers vividly to this day. At age 17 he was hospitalized at Rockford Psychiatric Hospital for suicidal thoughts. His grandfather died the same year contributing to his depression.

Having dropped out of school in the ninth grade, James was hustling to make money. Hustling, I would learn is an all-inclusive term for making money mostly by dealing drugs but could include, for example, stripping irrigation fields of copper tubing and selling it for scrap metal.

He met his future wife at Rockford. Although they stayed together over the years, their relationship was stormy as both of them struggled with addiction. They have three children. The oldest boy has autism. James describes him as “the purest soul I have ever met”. James was as involved with him as he could be, taking him to therapy and often at times being his primary caretaker. The couple also had twin boys, currently age seven. Ultimately their mother moved to Florida to get a fresh start and go to college. James’s mother takes care of the children. She also has a job caring for autistic adults.

The Green Tree program is a cognitive therapy and substance abuse treatment program. It forced James to evaluate his life. For example, he had to tell his entire life story, year by year to his fellow inmates, starting at age five. The other 60 men in the program stood at attention lined up in the corridor of the Tier while he did this. Afterwards, the men ask questions and make extremely penetrating insights about the life story being presented. I too did this while I was in the Green Tree program and found it to be both cathartic and emotionally challenging. James learned meditation as a form of stress reduction.

At first he simply worked with this breathing to calm his nerves. He struggled with it. He found it very hard to be in the present while in prison. His thoughts naturally drifted to the traumas and mistakes of his past, or his fears and anxieties about the future.

He told me that he learned to not be frustrated by failure. He tried again and again. “I learned to reward myself when my mind was finally clear. I learned to listen to myself, not speak to myself”. For example, if my finger was hurting, soon that would create a dialogue in my mind that eventually I learned to shut down. I listened to the pain but did not reply.”

After two months of brief sessions several times a day, he had a starting breakthrough. He thought that he was talking to God. Not the external stereotypical God, but the something within himself that permeates all creation, that is creation. It wasn’t a verbal dialogue but rather an exchanging of sensations, as he said “like hearing a truth that cannot be denied”. He cried out in his heart that he was ashamed of being in jail. What he heard back greatly surprised him. “I didn’t hear ‘all is well’ or ‘your life will turn out alright’” James said. “instead I heard ‘keep on going, you are on the right path for you’”. I shared with James that people who have near death experiences report that the meaning of life is that we each have individual lessons of love and compassion to learn. Perhaps both he and I had to come to jail to learn our lessons.

James wondered how he could trust that this nonverbal voice within him is real. I told him that Buddhist philosophers wondered the same thing over two thousand years ago. They determined that within this consciousness accessed in meditation, one could examine anything in creation and test its validity. I told him that my research partner Isabelle Chauffeton Saavedra and I had developed Spiritual Sight, based on these access of these ancient mind technologies. I had a picture linked to a number. James could go into a meditative state, access of all creation, find that number and describe the hidden picture linked to it. James agreed and I gave him the number. The picture was in a sealed envelope with the number written on it.

James described a solitary outdoor place. The sky was blue gray. There was large central object that was very important. It was rough, solid and rock like, with jagged edges. It had grey speckles on it. The rock was brown with grayish green aspects to it. It was huge. (see picture). James precisely described an ancient stone f religious significance in Northern Scotland.

James told me that his Spiritual Sight experience taught him that we are all part of the Universe and part of God. “Spiritual Sight proves that God is real” says James. For him, it validates the God he communicates with during his meditation sessions. He says of his session: “it was as if I was asking permission to access a single thread on the Universal sweater”.

When I first came to prison I assumed that I would be on a higher spiritual and moral level than other inmates. I learned from James that at the level of wisdom, all men are the same. We all access the same spiritual reality within when we pray or meditate. James says that he has done evil in his life, and has learned from it. I have shared and grown spirituality from men who have committed all manner of evil these past two years. It has helped me to learn from my own experience. I understand that “evil” is a loaded world in our culture; But I use it in the Buddhist sense of anything that causes suffering.

I asked James what value there was in meditation. He replied: “I use it to open my channel to the Creator. If we open that channel, it speaks louder and louder and louder, until we have to change our lives. But (this voice/creator/god) only speaks love”