

Spiritual Journey

The Way To Happiness

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GOOD morning, everyone. My name is Kris Kresge and I am thirty-four years old. Thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to share my Dharma Journey with all of you in the sangha today.

I believe that all that I have experienced in life has led me to a point where I can finally appreciate all of my sufferings. Through the teachings, I am living a much better life, better than I could have ever imagined.

I was paroled three years ago from the Waiawa Correctional Facility, where I served two years. It's a minimum-security prison that aims to integrate inmates back into the community. Now, I am in the final month of my original ten-year sentence. As I stand before you now, this has been the longest period I've ever been out of incarceration since the age of thirteen.

Growing up, my family was always there for me and still is. My father is a retired harbor patrol officer and my mother is an office clerk. I also have an older sister who is mentally challenged, but she has one of the biggest hearts in the world. We have always been a very close family with open communication and still talk to each other daily. My family also values helping one another and, as a member of this family, I learned the meaning of donation from a very young age by always being helpful to my family.

My parents gave me many things, including the opportunity to learn various sports, such as baseball, soccer, and martial arts. But for one reason or another, I always desired more.

I started having repeated run-ins with the law when I was ten or eleven years old, before I was even old enough to be legally fingerprinted. From a very young age, I wanted to have the best of all things and

would do whatever I could to get them. I envied others and gravitated towards those who felt the same way I did. Right after I finished elementary school, my close friends in the neighborhood introduced me to drugs such as marijuana and crystal meth, which sent my life into a downward spiral. Overnight I became a drug addict but was the type called a "functioning user," who could outwardly project normalcy. I began committing various criminal acts including burglarizing homes, shoplifting, and drug dealing, which eventually led to armed robbery. At first, committing crimes with my close friends gave me a sense of camaraderie, but soon I began to carry them out alone for myself.

I was sixteen when I was sentenced for armed robbery to a term in the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility that lasted until my nineteenth birthday. This is where I spent the majority of my teenage life, learning to adapt to long-term living in a controlled environment.



Mr. Kresge giving his Dharma Journey talk.

Spiritual Journey

Just before I was released on my nineteenth birthday, I was caught smuggling contraband cigarettes into the facility, which delayed my release. When I was finally released from prison, I had already reached adulthood and was placed on probation.

But by that time, I was no longer afraid of going back to prison and my criminal lifestyle escalated. I had become so used to life inside prison that I did not care about the consequences of my actions when I was on the outside, thinking that if I were caught I would just go back to what I was used to.

Obviously, I violated the terms of my probation and at the age of nineteen I was sentenced to ten years in the Halawa Correctional Facility.

Before this sentence, I was given every opportunity from the state to turn my life around. As part of this, I was sent to various behavioral and drug treatment programs, but I didn't expect that any of them would help me. So, I tried to convince the staff that the treatment was working for me by always giving the "correct answers" to the questions asked in the programs so that I could finish them quickly and be free. I posed as a good student and as soon as I passed all the programs and was set free, I went right back to my criminal lifestyle.

While incarcerated at the Halawa Correctional Facility, I was reunited with all of my peers that had been through the criminal justice system their whole lives with me. As I spent years of my life with them getting through the prison time together, I grew strong bonds with them. However, most of my friends that I grew close to in prison have since lost their lives to murder, suicide, or health issues. Otherwise, they are still in jail serving even longer prison terms.

I was twenty-seven years old when I was released on parole after completing the work furlough program. I began to work regularly outside the prison and earn my own living. For the first time in my life, I had acquired legal, gainful employment to support

myself. However, I again became involved in an unhealthy relationship where arguing and drug use became normal. Soon I was sent back to prison.

This time I participated in the KASHBOX Program, which is an intensive residential substance abuse treatment program for inmates with serious substance abuse problems. With the instruction of my counselor, Mr. Kalama, I became aware of the spiritual aspect of all things. For some reason, I then knew this was the time to change my life. I began to read books on Buddhism, which inspired me to pursue my path.

Around that time, I was introduced to the Buddhist service at the facility, where I met Ms. Jo-Ann Ozaki, a volunteer from Rissho Kosei-kai. I started taking in all I could about Buddhism from her. I studied hard and also shared what I learned with other inmates. For some reason, the teachings felt familiar to me and I was able to connect with the inner part of me. Jo-Ann gave me much advice on many parts of my life and used teachings such as the truth of causation to guide me in making my daily life better for myself and others.

Through learning the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs, in chapter 5 of the Lotus Sutra, I became aware of the benevolent rain that the Buddha had been giving me throughout my whole life. I found that I could grasp the teachings more deeply through this and other parables in the Lotus Sutra. I also realized that I could be happy by being helpful to others, being sincere, and appreciating every moment of the day. I was determined to continue on this path and live correctly. While incarcerated I would share all that I learned with people around me and I discovered that this not only benefited them but also helped me retain firmly in mind what I'd learned.

I was paroled in March 2019 and returned to my family's home in Waipio Gentry. I cut all ties with my old friends and began to attend the Rissho Kosei-kai Dharma center in Pearl City on a regular basis.

Spiritual Journey

Everyone at the Dharma center has made me feel so welcomed and I enjoy attending service. Since I began actively applying the teachings, my life has been growing brighter in every respect.

Participating in the various activities at the Dharma center is a very exciting experience. I am a member of both the Men's and the Youth groups, where we sit in *hoza*. I always relate to the experiences shared in *hoza* and apply what I've learned to my own life. Once a month, I attend the Dharma study session on Zoom, where I learn new things, and reviewing each chapter of the Lotus Sutra deepens my understanding of the teachings. I have also learned how to help with Sunday services, the role of *toban*, or Dharma center duties, and the basic movements of *matoi*. In addition, I find it rewarding to be able to help with special events at the Dharma center. I feel connected to the Buddha and the Dharma center. Furthermore, at the Dharma center, I can express myself freely, and receive guidance from senior members as well as Rev. Meya.

In January 2020, I was able to enshrine the locally-bestowed Gohonzon at my family's home. I asked everyone in my family if they were okay with welcoming the Buddha, and they all agreed to it. My family was very accepting. Ms. Ozaki led the enshrinement ceremony for us. Ms. Karen Fujii, my chapter head, and members from the Youth Group also came to the ceremony. I felt relief and extremely happy after making offerings in front of the Buddha and my ancestors at the ceremony.

My family has always remained strong and supportive even though I caused many problems in the past. Sometimes I can't believe it when I think about how they have stuck by me even in the many times when I did things to hurt them. It brings me much happiness that I can fill my family's lives now with joy rather than disappointment. Now that my parents are getting into their older years, I am

reclaiming the time with my parents that I missed as a child by helping them more than ever. I'm also preparing myself to become a reliable brother who can take good care of my sister for the rest of her life.

I had an opportunity to ask my parents how they felt when I put them through all the turmoil of my past misbehavior. They responded that they were so disappointed and hurt that their son could keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. How close-minded I was when I did not listen to anything that anyone had to say! When I thought about it, my parents' words sank in. Despite all those years of pain, they still believed that I would turn around and walk in the right direction. Today, I would like to sincerely apologize to my parents for my past attitude and promise to be the best son I can be for them.

Since then, I have found a person I want to spend the rest of my life with. I also asked her to join Rissho Kosei-kai, and she did. On March 14, 2021, I married my wife, Jolyn. With the help of the sangha and Rev. Meya, we were able to hold the wedding ceremony at Rissho Kosei-kai. Due to the pandemic, only family and close friends attended, but we were able to have a drive-through reception afterward. There were many friends who celebrated our special day with us and we were overjoyed. My wife and I have formed an even stronger bond since we got married. I am very grateful to my wife for being my strongest ally and supporter.

Since my early twenties, I've had an interest in the plumbing trade. With all the problem-solving skills and subfields within the trade, it has always fascinated me. I was so excited when I became a member of the local plumbers union. I could finally wake up to a job that I enjoy doing.

I have also become very appreciative of my ancestors and all those who have come before me. It brings me much joy to acknowledge and show appreciation to them. I have grown much closer with my family and am grateful that I can be a dependable asset to them.

Spiritual Journey

Moreover, I'm now able to show respect and consideration to all people and objects around me instead of being careless as I was before. I am grateful every day that I can wake up in the morning and have a choice about how I'm going to make my day. Even if unfavorable things happen, a lesson will be learned.

The Buddha is always guiding me through the people I encounter and the experiences I live through. I see my past misfortunes as experiences that I can use in the future to help others who might be going down the same road I went through, because I can relate to them. I now see myself improving as I polish my buddha nature each day so that my true self will shine through.

I understand that every day will have its set of challenges. There may be days when the challenges will be too much to bear. But I have faith that the Buddha will always allow only what I can handle and give me the guidance to get me through it.

Today I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of you who have been a special part of my life and helped me build a foundation to walk the bodhisattva way. I will continue to persevere through life's challenges, always remain teachable, and become a person who is helpful to others.

Thank you for letting me share.



Mr. Kresge helping with the drive-thru omairi [worship] with Mr. Neal Matsushima.