

Meditation helps inmates reach 'natural awareness'

By ALLAN TURNER, HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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BEAUMONT - *Hung. Or gyen yul gyi nub jang tsam.*

Barefooted, eyes closed in reverie, bodies folded into lotus position, the men in white chanted the ancient Seven Line Supplication to [Guru Rinpoche](#), who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century.

As their voices swelled, their leader, Galveston artist [Terry Conrad](#), swayed with the cadence. *Pe ma gey sar dong pol la. Yam Tsen chog gi ngo drub nyey*

This could have been a scene from a 1960's love-in, with college-age acolytes - decked out in exotic garb - paying fervid homage to the wisdom of the East. But these men were not students, and their attire was anything but exotic.

They are inmates at Beaumont's [Mark Stiles](#) state prison; their duds, functional prison whites. And, under Conrad's gentle guidance, they were here to meditate.

Now in its eighth year, the weekly program offered through the prison chaplain's office, is designed to help prisoners, some guilty of the most heinous offenses, achieve "natural awareness."

"Meditation," Conrad said, "is not about creating a certain state. It's just an opportunity to be present to whatever is going on. Sometimes that's quiet and peaceful, other times the mind is going 100 mph." Such awareness can help the individual "become who they truly are - innately good and wise and compassionate."

"How has this changed me?" said [John Harrup](#), 39, of Magnolia, who has been part of the class since its inception. "I was a different person when I came in here. It has taught me to be more patient, how to deal with people. In laymen's terms, how to communicate better, how to understand another person's viewpoint, to realize that my way is not always the right way."

A prison ministry

Harrup is serving a 40-year sentence for aggravated sexual assault, and Conrad - who also teaches a Buddhism-based ethics class and corresponds with inmates about the philosophic system - said he is not unaware of his students' criminal pasts.

"People have been seriously hurt, families affected by these men, horribly affected," he said. "What I'm doing is not being insensitive. It's work with *this* part, not *that* part."

That said, Conrad asserted, "there is no such thing as an evil person, only evil actions."

"When we are ignorant of who we truly are, we act out in ways that are not very beneficial to us or to society," he said. "We make a lot of mistakes, some bad, serious mistakes. ... Some of these people are confused, some deeply disturbed. Does that mean we just write them off and warehouse them for the rest of their lives?"

Conrad, who employs meditation in his Island Brainworks "brain training" practice, first became intrigued with Eastern religions during a high school comparative religions class in his hometown, Bozeman, Mont.

"I started to look at a lot of different spiritual traditions. I wanted to go deeper and deeper," he said. As a sculptor - Conrad holds art-related degrees from [Montana State University](#), the [University of Oregon](#) and Massachusetts Institute of Technology - he embarked on a career he found "very solitary, very meditative."

But, he said, "I didn't know how to meditate." Thus began a 15-year quest that involved study with authorized Tibetan lamas John Makransky and Surya Das. It was while working with Das, reading and responding to mail from inmates, that Conrad perceived the potential value of meditation for criminals.

'Do good'

John Whiteman, 66, who is serving a 50-year sentence for aggravated kidnapping out of Dallas County, said he had casually studied Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions before becoming a charter member of Conrad's class.

"Buddhism is very simple," he said. "Do good. Don't do wrong. Tame your mind. But it ain't easy."

Whiteman said he has "learned to put space around my thoughts."

"Physically I've changed - I've gotten older. Mentally I've changed - I've gained knowledge. Emotionally, I'll always be the same," he said. "The thoughts will always be there. You talk about thoughts of doing harm, violence, anger - they're going to be there. But by putting space around those thoughts, you can look at them before you react. That's my biggest change: I'm much less reactive, much less impulsive."

All faiths 'have value'

Stiles Assistant [Warden Darren Warren](#) said Conrad's Buddhism-based classes have the potential of nurturing positive change in prisoners - as do Judaism, Christianity and other religions. "All have value as long as prisoners take them seriously," he said.

Conrad conceded many may question the purpose of his prison outreach.

"At one point or another, we are very self-centered. When we become more aware of others and feel deep spiritual connection with others, then things are better. We get along better - more peaceful, loving, caring.

"We are all imprisoned in our minds to some extent."

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