

unlearning hate

habits

Hatred is never appeased by hate.

Hatred is only appeased by love.

This is an eternal law.

— *The Dhammapada*

In December 2000, a *Time Magazine* interview with Jan Willis, author, long-term Buddhist and African-American, caught the attention of Joe Lea, a schoolteacher at the York Correctional Institute for Women, Connecticut. He asked Jan to read from her latest book, *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey*, thinking that the women of his school would be inspired by her life story. She complied, but also suggested that a workshop on ending hate and transforming prejudice might make more of a contribution than a one-time reading.

A few months earlier Jan was preparing for a workshop on the issue of diversity and race in Buddhist communities, and asked me to help her. I had been giving seminars and workshops on topics like health, self-esteem and leadership qualities for years. Jan, being African-American herself, and often the only person of color at Buddhist gatherings, wanted to know what methods might be effectively employed in the self-exploration of prejudice and racism in a Buddhist venue. We exchanged ideas about practical exercises and both concluded that a compilation of such exercises and methods was sorely needed.

The resulting book manuscript and the workshops that have sprung from it

are now called *Ending Hate: Practical Exercises for Groups and Individuals*. The methods are partly based on Buddhist principles and meditations, and partly on practical methods developed by the Dutch Women's Self-help Movement. This combination has provided practices that help us to unlearn our habits of hate – towards others and toward ourselves – and to replace them with the positive virtues of kindness and compassion.

The exercises in *Ending Hate* move methodically through the dismantling of harmful prejudices (beginning with the recognition that we all harbor them), exploring the origins of our particular prejudices with honesty and resolve, understanding how and why we, as particular human beings, have come to harbor the specific views we do and, through this understanding, to the willingness and confidence to replace them with more positive views and behaviors.

The book concludes with a unit devoted to how we can commit ourselves to making a difference in our world by generating the confidence and commitment to work together for positive change in society as a whole.



Photo Marlies Bosch

"Forgive yourself for what you have done and forgive others who have harmed you"–

of hate

By Marlies Bosch (with Jan Willis)

Armed with this manuscript, we first visited York Correctional Institute in March 2001. York houses 1,400 women inmates, 400 of who attend the school. Working with an inspirational teacher at the school, we became convinced that this was the perfect place to test the effectiveness of our exercises. After our first visit, everyone at the prison agreed that if we wanted the workshops to succeed, there should be a longer-term program. So we set up a schedule to return to York three times during the year for a series of four weekly visits each time.

Our first group consisted of three teachers, and fifteen women inmates, interestingly dressed in Buddhist colors, since maroon T-shirts are a mandatory part of their uniforms. Combining meditations and visualizations, the workshops focused on issues like self-esteem, anger and trust. Most of the women suffered from guilt, fear and extremely low self-esteem. One of our most effective exercises we called "obstacles and goals." Here, one of the two participants is invited to be the "obstacle" barring the way of the other from reaching a predetermined goal in the room. When focusing on the obstacle,

the women discovered, we experience this obstacle as a pure obstruction, but, when focusing on the target, the goal, the person going toward this doesn't even seem to notice the obstacle. Participants became aware that it is this exactly what we do in life: we focus too much on the "obstacles" that we then blame for preventing us from reaching our goals. Once this is clear, it also becomes easier to set our goals, whether they be personal ambitions, or ways that we can help to make the world a better place for all its inhabitants.

Time after time the women also told us how much the Green Tara meditation had helped them to overcome their fear; and how the visualization of "letting go of shame" had helped them daily let go of the garbage-baggage that cluttered their minds. As one woman said, "We have to put our garbage outside our cells every night. I visualize putting my shame, fear and anger in that garbage can, and I let it go." Learning to meditate, the women said, helped them to create a silent space within themselves in that very noisy prison environment. The most moving part of our first series was that the teachers who participated really became members of the group, sharing and showing their emotions. For the inmates, who are daily confronted by unsympathetic, power-wielding guards, this was an exceptional experience.

We noticed a growing confidence in the women of York that they "could make it" once they went back to their old lives. One woman put it this way: "I am so ready to leave this place, never to return. I miss my children so much! The time I've spent in here has been a wake-up call. People sometimes say you have to go through the bad to see the good. I've found that to be true because I am not the same person that came to York Correctional Institute. I did a lot of growing up here and I have learned how to survive through our meditation classes, so I have a lot to be thankful for." Another woman told us during one session, in reference to 9/11, "When I think of all the victims of the World Trade Center, I also think of the family of this one

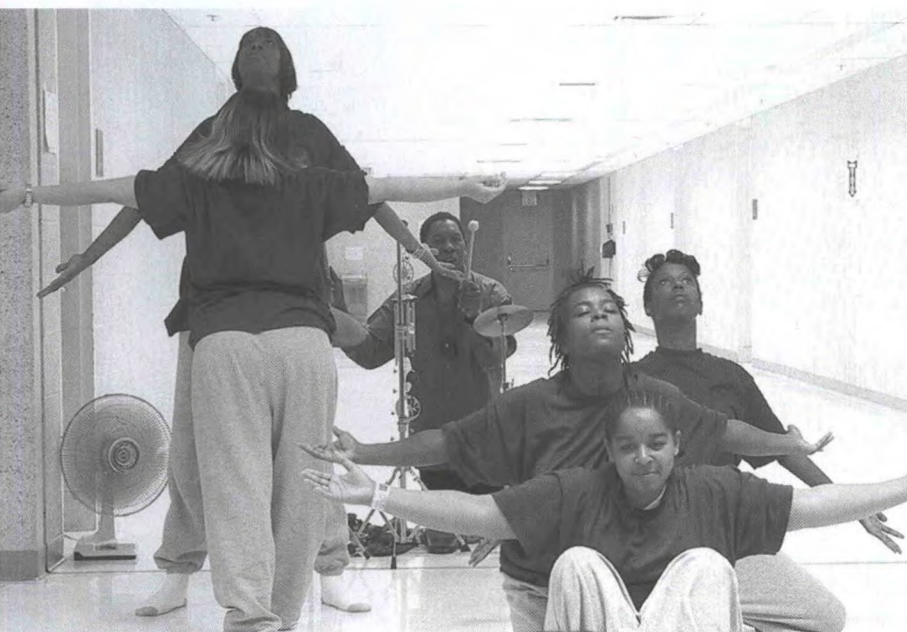


Photo Marlies Bosch

The women of York Correctional Institute perform the "Forgiveness dance."

particular person. I know that he still would be here, that is, with his family in New York, and maybe helping to comfort them, if not for me; and I take responsibility for my crime."

Once, after a two-month-long hiatus between workshops at York, we returned for a new series. Before beginning the formal session, an inmate reported on what had transpired in her life since our last visit. With tears streaming down her face, she recounted the following: "My mother passed since you were here. They let me go to the funeral though. But they shackled me like this (with her arms crossed over her chest). I couldn't lean over and kiss my mother in the coffin." Then, she continued, "I'm still using that 'obstacles and goals' practice you taught us, and it's been helping me a lot."

As our time at York went by, we felt more and more humbled, and often felt that we were learning more than we were teaching. The women and we seemed to get closer each time we came into their class, and our first impression – of being suddenly "locked up" ourselves – turned into a joyous and comfortable feeling whenever we walked into the heavily guarded walls of this prison for women.

The last time we visited York CI was to attend the culminating event of a weeklong Forgiveness Project held for the 400 women who attend the school in May of 2002. Taking the Judeo-Christian principle that one should "love one's neighbor as thyself" (more freely translated in this context into: "Forgive yourself for what you have done and forgive others who have harmed you") as its center, the processes of forgiveness were expressed through collages, readings and writings, and ultimately a "Forgiveness dance" choreographed by JoAnne Tucker, artistic director of the New York City-based Avodah Dance Ensemble. Twenty-three women inmates performed their dances of forgiveness in the center hall of the prison. Through dance, they had been encouraged to express their individual processes of experiencing the stages of forgiveness, that is: acknowledging the wrong, recognizing its impact on others, finding ways of forgiving oneself, and discovering the impact of forgiving oneself and others. In a deeply moving dance, we witnessed one woman striking someone, another cradling a baby, one showing shame, another taking responsibility, another showing pride.

In the meantime, other groups and organizations had heard about our project and we started to get other invitations for workshops. Especially following September 11, many more

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people became concerned about the well being of multi-cultural America and Europe. We were invited, for example, to do a workshop on Transforming Prejudice at Kurukulla Buddhist Center in Boston. There, 13 male and female participants had already worked with conflict resolution but needed some directions in introducing diversity into their Buddhist communities. I was invited to the Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade where I gave a workshop for women therapists and social workers who want to work with war rape victims – Serbian women, raped by Muslim men. I worked with the many exercises, meditations and visualizations described in our book. Here again, the "obstacles and goals" exercise was one of the most effective. Participants in our workshops, regardless of venue, have found this particular

physical exercise to be the eye-opener to adopt and use in their daily lives. Especially now, with the world in turmoil, unlearning prejudice, racism and hatred is more necessary than ever.

The *Ending Hate: Practical Exercises for Groups and Individuals* manuscript is with Boston agent, John Taylor Williams, of the Hill and Barlow Agency. Workshops can be arranged through the Jodi Solomon Speakers Bureau, 325 Huntington Avenue, Suite 112, Boston, MA 02115. Email: jodi@jodisolomonspeakers.com www.jodisolomonspeakers.com ☛

Marlies Bosch was born in Holland and has traveled widely as a journalist and photographer. She connected with Tibetan Buddhism in India and Nepal, where she has done a number of projects with Tibetan nuns, most recently adapting *Our Bodies, Ourselves* for Tibetan nuns and laywomen.

Jan Willis is Professor of Religion and Walter A. Crowell Professor of the Social Sciences at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she teaches Buddhism. She is one of Lama Yeshe's earliest students, meeting him in 1969. Her most recent book is *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey*.

