

## **Prison Break**

People who have experienced trauma can live in a prison; a prisoner of their past. Even though they haven't experienced trauma for years, even decades, they are behaving like it is still happening. It is a prison of habitual patterns, impulsive reactions, anxiety, compulsive behavior, self loathing, suffering and unhappiness. Yet it is familiar, normal, and therefore somewhat comfortable. When one experiences actual trauma it is out of your control. If it was under your control you could cause it to stop. In this prison you are in control and the familiar feels "safer." It is common in actual prisons for long term inmates to become so comfortable in prison they are afraid of being released. This prison is no different.

Like in an actual prison there are many different locks and matching keys keeping you from escaping. One is made of fear; fear of uncertainty. Locks can also be made of habitual patterns. Self loathing is a third lock. One feels this familiar painful pattern is comfortable and safe. You can become so imprisoned and confused that don't recognize true happiness and your suffering becomes normal. A person who had childhood trauma told me "Happiness is such a vague concept." In this prison there is an inner voice like an internet troll that is constantly giving the prisoner negative thoughts. Thoughts of guilt, anger towards oneself, self loathing, anxiety. Messages like "I constantly fail." "I'm not as good as others." It can get nasty with thoughts like this. "I'm a ( expletive deleted) idiot" "I'm a terrible person." "I might as well kill myself." On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being completely good and 1 being completely bad, many traumatized people would rank themselves a 2 or even a 1. They take the troll seriously and do not realize it is not an accurate picture of themselves. The key to this lock is love and compassion.

This is a completely workable situation. A person in this prison-like situation needs to have the desire to escape, you cannot break out otherwise. There is no release date and no one can break in and open the lock for you. Then the troll needs to be recognized. The way out continues with learning to love yourself; not because you earned it but just because you are a living human being. You are just as valuable as everyone else. You can learn to love yourself without having to earn it. There is a Tibetan saying "If you have a warm place in your heart for yourself, you will be comfortable wherever you go." That warm place is one of love and compassion towards oneself. There is a practice you can do to strengthen your love and compassion for your self. Remember you are a worthy recipient of your love and compassion.

You will be a happier, kinder person with a warm place in your heart for yourself. Instead of needing love from others you will be able to give more love to others.

We can learn to nurture that warm place. Here is a simple practice or exercise in growing that warm place. This is the key to open the lock of self-loathing. The practice is called taking and sending, Tong Len in Tibetan. It is a practice of sending love and removing suffering. It is best to sit cross legged on a meditation cushion on the floor as you would when meditating. It can also be done in a chair. Visualize you in the future, perhaps 10 minutes into the future, sitting in front facing you. When you breath in imagine you are inhaling black smoke coming from the visualized you in front. It carries with it your suffering; your self loathing, stress, anger towards yourself, helplessness, powerlessness, any negative feelings you have toward yourself. Everything the troll tells you is in the smoke. The smoke can contain anything that you hold on to that causes you to suffer. It can be memories of painful events, situations, and people. This part is an exercise in compassion, the wish that people are free of suffering. You are a person and therefore worthy of compassion. If you do not have compassion for yourself, you cannot have compassion for others. Understanding your own suffering helps one understand other's suffering. Compassion for yourself is necessary for spiritual growth and to escape. Think about what causes you to suffer. You may become aware of other things causing you suffering as a result of this. Make a list if you like. Include the items on the list in the black smoke coming from the front visualized you. You are removing everything mentioned from the future you and inhaling them. The smoke goes into your lungs, dissolves, and disappears. The negativity and suffering does not accumulate in you. Concentrate on a few specific things in one session.

The in breathe is short as you are breathing normally. When exhaling we are preparing that warm place in our heart. Love is wanting people to be happy and again remember you are a person too and worthy of love without earning it. When you have been traumatized it can be difficult to know and experience love free from negative emotions. Fondness, tenderness, warmth and non sexual intimacy are associated with love in this practice. In that warm place you treat yourself like a loving mother treats her infant; whatever the child does the mother responds with tenderness, warmth, fondness, and gentleness. When you exhale breath out white light which goes to the you in front and soaks into you, like the future you is sunbathing and soaking up the sunlight. The light carries with it contentment, satisfaction, cheerfulness, joy, delight, well-being, lightheartedness and forgiveness; transferring it from the present you to the future you. It

can carry anything that makes you truly happy. When inhaling you remove the things that cause you to suffer, now think of the antidote and give it to this future you. This is love. The intimacy is that you allow yourself to look into the places where fear and loathing lurk. Then you can apply the remedy, love. Now you can have that love you may never have had as a child or even an adult. Now you can start working with the troll. Become friends, get to know him or her, but remember sometimes friends give bad advice and you do not need to believe it or follow it. You don't need to fear the troll either because it loses its power the moment you cease to believe it.

This intended to be done regularly for 5 to 10 minutes. As you do more it is fine to extend the time if you like. During any one session you can concentrate on a few things to inhale and a few other things to exhale. Use whatever is most needed at the time. One day it might be anger and forgiveness, another fear and fearlessness. This way the lock slowly opens. You discover the guard, the troll, gives bad advice and cannot control you if do not take it seriously. You begin to see the troll is suffering immense pain because he or she had bad experiences in the past and is holding on to them. We find the key to the prison door is now in our hands. Open the door and venture out into the present. Take that warm spot in your heart with you. Now you can be more compassionate and loving with those who you encounter in your daily life. They are contagious.