

# From Prisoner to Peacemaker

## A Conversation with Dow Gordon of the Freedom Project

by Tiffany Meyer, PuddleDancer Press

*Serving a 10-year sentence for heroin trafficking, Dow Gordon was a self-described career criminal with a long arrest record and an external toughness that screamed of self-protection. Little did he know that the Nonviolent Communication course he would attend back in 1999—attended, he admits, as an act of rebellion in a system of walls and bars—would subsequently transform his life.*

*Dow Gordon is the Prison Program Manager for the Seattle, Washington based Freedom Project, turning prisoners into peacemakers through Nonviolent Communication and Mindfulness training for inmates and returnees. The conversation below describes his story and how he became involved with this now internationally recognized inmate rehabilitation program.*

**Q: Describe for me how you came connected with mindfulness practice.**

**DG:** I was what you'd call a career criminal, in prison in 1995, serving a 10-year sentence for heroin trafficking. The life I knew then was one only of intensity; the submit or rebel world where I knew of very few choices for surviving or living my life. So I chose to be a criminal, to live as far outside of the mainstream as I could. I chose again, again and again to fight instead of to take it. What fueled my life back then was the energy of anger—I had enormous anger in my heart.

I wish I could say that I purposely sought out something like NVC and mindfulness, but it didn't happen that way. It was by a really great fortune that I came to study mindfulness. I learned and practiced it honestly as an act of rebellion. I was trying to find some choice in a world where I was powerless. I thought, well, they can't stop me from sitting on a rolled-up blanket, can they? I began studying mindfulness mostly through books because I wanted to express my freedom of choice. I didn't set out to change my life. I didn't have any spiritual convictions or connections—spiritual connection came to me.

**Q: You say spiritual connection came to you. What kind of impact has mindfulness practice had for you, emotionally or spiritually?**

**DG:** If I had been a Christian, I would express it as I opened a door a crack and God reached out and touched me. I wanted a way to express myself. See, I wasn't scared of being in prison, it was just part of my life.



**Q: When was the connection made between mindfulness and studying Nonviolent Communication?**

**DG:** In 1999, when he was in a prison camp, Rusty Thomas (another prisoner) said I might get a lot out of the NVC class he'd been to. So, I went to the workshop with Lucy Leu.

**Q: And what was that class like for you?**

**DG:** In that class, I was seen in a different way than anyone had seen me before. I was seen as a human being. Over a couple of years of taking NVC classes, what I came to understand is that all it ever invited me to do, the only thing NVC ever really wanted from me was for me to live by my heart and what I really value in life. Through the space of safety and acceptance that NVC creates, I was constantly invited to that deep authenticity and genuineness. NVC invited me to be who I really was, rather than who I thought I was. See, I thought I was a tough guy, a bad ass, a rebel. And I'd spent a lot of time—my entire life, really—proving that was true as a strategy for protection and reassurance.

Before I began studying and practicing NVC and mindfulness, I was constantly scared. I thought the best thing I could do to protect myself was live with a pistol in my back pocket. And now I realize that was the only way I knew how to be safe. I recognize now that for the 25 years I carried a pistol in the back of my pants to feel safe, and I never really felt safe.

What's the difference? I got connected to what's really alive in me—joy, love, connection to the community, people who love me for who I am, not what I can do.

**Q: Since that first class, how did you come to be so involved in the Freedom Project?**

**DG:** In 2001, I got out of prison. I had a plan. I was in work-release and I realized that my plan would quite likely lead me right back to the life I didn't want to live. I was asked to join the Freedom Project when I was still in the prison (the project had just really begun to form). So when I got out, I went to work release, and I recognized I was desperately missing the quality of connection I'd begun to develop with people while studying mindfulness and NVC. In those days, returnees who'd studied with the Freedom Project couldn't be contacted by Freedom Project trainers who had worked in the prisons. So as soon as I got out of work release, I contacted the Freedom Project and got back involved. I got out of prison and immediately began working with the Freedom Project.

I wanted to live my life in a way my heart called me to. So I attached myself to the Freedom Project people I knew. I never quit growing. My only intention is to inspire other inmates to empower themselves. I can't do it for them.

NVC and mindfulness have enormously altered the course of my life and who I am.

**Q: For those of us who are unfamiliar with mindfulness, please explain its relationship to NVC.**

**DG:** Mindfulness practice or self-awareness practice describes a state of being where we are aware as individuals



of what is really going on in ourselves in that instant in time.

It's a Buddhist practice, but it's not specific to Buddhism. I believe every spiritual practice parallels this practice.

Mindfulness allows us to cultivate and strengthen our ability to stop, slow down, and check in with what's alive in our hearts. The Freedom Project is convinced that if we do that, and to the degree that we do that, we're much more likely to make life-serving choices. That's because we're more closely connected with, and more in harmony with, what is human, and parallel to that part of you that is human. Mindfulness allows us to develop this interior "space to be" (Eckhart Tolle) as a space to be human, to clear ourselves out, let go, and create a space to fully listen and be present to you.

**Q: What makes mindfulness training effective for prison inmates, specifically?**

**DG:** I believe, and it's my experience working with prisoners (in Seattle and in other places), that prisoners live mostly from that reactive state of mind where before I knew it, my fist was in his face, or the knife flew out of my hand. In other words, prisoners are not very skilled at creating that space between reaction and true action (that action that comes from continuous, aware choice).

I've never met a prisoner that got up in the morning of whatever crime they are in prison for, and thought to themselves, ok, who can I hurt today? They simple could not step out of that reactive mind.

**Q: How does this relate to what our justice system terms a premeditative crime**

**DG:** If we look at a pre-planned murder, for example, it's premeditated because I'm trapped in that reactive mind. The only way I think I can keep myself safe is to kill you.

If we can invite prisoners to move to that place where they are open to the possibility of making choices; away from mental prisons, habit energy, conditioning, the outcome will be vastly different.

Inmates or prisoners are particularly receptive to making the connection between how they act and the mental prison that motivates that act because they know directly by their own experience the reality of the razor wire, concrete and steel places we put them in. It is sometimes easier for prisoners to make that jump to the concept of "conditioning" or what "mental prisons" are because they've experienced the physical reality of a prison.

**Q: The Freedom Project training is categorized as an inmate rehabilitation program. How does the term rehabilitation fit with the NVC consciousness?**

**DG:** In the prison system it is called rehabilitation. To the participants and as we describe the training to other people, we don't call it rehabilitation. We invite prisoners into it, to empower themselves.

Within the prisons, there are many spiritual programs, and there are many mandatory programs and sentence stipulations that require things like anger management, or drug rehab.

The difference with the Freedom Project is that we invite them to attend, we never require it. We strongly



believe that if they come from a place of choice they are much more likely to change.

I absolutely do not want to be heard as believing that other classes are not good, but I do believe we are more effective if we come to them from a place of choice. The Freedom project has always insisted that prisons do not make our programs mandatory.

**Q: When inmates come to their first NVC class, how do you create that space you described, of absolute acceptance? And how do you keep the group from thinking, “this is just touchy feely crap”?**

**DG:** Often when people come into the program they’re coming from a reactive mind—that’s their only reality. They tend to be suspicious and closed.

I invite them to think about something that’s really important to them. And then we might write all of those up on a board and come back to them later. We also see that in prisons that a lot of men say “I need more respect.” That they really want to be seen as human.

The Freedom Project trainers constantly try to create an energy in our training circles where prisoners feel safe to express who they really are. NVC is a map to get from our heads to our hearts. We don’t want prisoners to be good little NVC’ers, following the model exactly—that’s not the point. We want them to see the process as a tool to get connected to their own essential humanness.

Another strategy we use, is we are open and honest ourselves. We reject the hierarchical world or idea that we’re trying to save them and we have the answer.

**Q: How do inmates come into the program? Do they volunteer? Are they selected? Is there a limit to how many people can be trained? What are these limits?**

**DG:** Usually with sign up sheets, with a cap on each class (20-25) at any one time for a 2-3 day workshop or a class. Because space is at a premium in the prison.

We’ve been asked by the department of corrections to work in the other prisons around Washington state. The biggest barrier to fulfilling this request is the number and availability of the skilled trainers we have (primary trainers) who can actually lead a workshop. Not everyone wants to train this group of people — it can be pretty darn scary and intimidating. So beyond being very skilled to lead NVC training, we also need them to be skilled with training this particular population and all of the challenges that go with it.

**Q: What is the Freedom Project team doing to measure the success of this program?**

**DG:** We’re in the process of developing success measures for the impact of the program in the prison and with returnees. We’re now exploring what kind of data is recorded with department of corrections and what data they’d be willing to give us. We want to measure the average percentage of change on the number of infractions. And, we’re developing a questionnaire at the beginning of their first intro to NVC and then retest at end of 6-12 months later to stratify results.



**Q: Are there specific barriers preventing this program from being incorporated into all prisons?**

Our two biggest barriers are funding and the availability of skilled trainers. All of our current funding comes from donations and we need additional funding to expand our programs and provide training to build our trainer pool.

Another barrier is the us versus them mentality that is so prevalent in our culture. Most of our culture still believes that the best thing to do for criminals is to lock them up and throw away the key. A big part of that mindset is manifested by a corrections system that doesn't address the root of violent behavior as NVC does. But in the meantime, between now and when we're actively measuring the impact our program is having in the prison, and in reducing recidivism overall, this cultural mentality is a tough thing to overcome.

**To learn more about the Freedom Project, contact us today at:**

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The Freedom Project is an affiliate of FOR (Fellowship of Reconciliation) and a project of the Center for Nonviolent Communication.