Love and Philosophy Between Prison Walls and Ivory Towers
by Awakin Call Editors

In 1987, while teaching a class at MIT [the Massachusetts Institute of Technology] on nonviolence, philosophy lecturer Lee Perlman had a novel idea: Why not take the students to a prison, to talk with men who had committed extreme forms of violence? Needless to say," an MIT publication reported, "the experience was an eye-opener for students — a powerful way to help them understand, at a visceral level, the nature of violence. And it also sparked Perlman's lifelong professional and personal interest in the prison system." What follows is the edited transcript of an in-depth Awakin Calls interview with Dr. Perlman. You can listen to the recording here.

Preeta: I'm really pleased to be here in conversation with Lee today. I think the work that he is doing is so tremendous and remarkable. As you said, the ability to radically step into a different environment and be open and curious to the learnings we receive from that. He is a teacher, but he is deeply curious and committed to learning and bridging so many of these social divides that appear in our external systems and to find the commonality within that underlies all those. So I'm very excited to be in conversation with him.

Lee Perlman is a lecturer at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), a lecturer in Philosophy. He has been there for almost 35 years now, teaching in this remarkable little group called the Experimental Study Group, which is MIT's first freshman learning community. It was a community that was founded in 1969, and it offers a tight-knit, intellectual community that is about innovation and creativity in the educational process. And Lee has taken this experimental study group one step further by founding the MIT Prison Initiative. In that he teaches classes to a mixed cohort of MIT students and prisoners at two medium to maximum security correctional institutions which are at Norfolk and Framingham.

He travels with MIT students each week by van to these correctional institutions to engage in discussion and study with prison fellow students, many of whom are incarcerated for life. And remarkably the courses that he teaches are so deep and intellectually rich as well as spiritually rich. The courses include Self and Soul, Philosophy of Love, and Non-violence as a Way of Life. I've actually glanced at some of his syllabi and they are just breathtaking. Certainly not light in any way, deep, deep, readings and deep and rich themes. So, Lee, we are just incredibly excited to have you. I'll just add by way of introduction as well, that Dr. Perlman, in addition to having a lustrous career in academia, has a pretty remarkable background in policy and politics. He was involved in Baltimore in Maryland for a number of years as a political organizer including serving as the Executive Director of Common Cause in Maryland. In 1978, Baltimore Magazine named him "the most feared lobbyist in Maryland." So with that, welcome and thank you for being here with us.

Lee: Thank you. I'm excited for this conversation.

Preeta: So I thought we could just start at the very beginning. Tell us a little about your story-- how you grew up, where you grew up, and how you got interested in philosophy and politics.

Lee: Well, I grew up outside of New York and outside of Detroit. I grew up in a pretty political family. My family was actually pretty chaotic. I think that had to do with my bend towards philosophy that I've had the "what is this all about" question in my mind since I was little.

I was always very intellectually curious, but I was for the most part not a very good student because I hated school. In fact, when I was a junior in high school, in the middle of the night, one night I got on a bus and just left town. I called my parents. I travelled hundreds of miles to another city and a couple weeks later, I talked to my parents and told them I would only come home if they would send me away to boarding school.

They agreed, and I spent a year in boarding school. That was a year that really turned my year around because I became a kind of monk of knowledge. I had always read a lot, but for the first time I really disciplined myself and just fell in love with learning.

That is the background of my philosophical interests. Although it took me a really long time to actually settle in to being a philosopher in the sense of devoting my life to learning.

Preeta: Interesting. So I just have to ask a little bit more about that. That was too intriguing. You are a junior in high school and you took a bus and then you said you'd only come back if you could go to boarding school. Can you tell us a little bit more about that? Did you have a particular boarding school in mind? Why? What was your frustration with your current educational environment?

Lee: I hated school and I was completely confused about why, because I read all the time. One anecdote: before I took the bus out of town, I got a report card and I had failed every subject in high school. One of my classes I failed was my history class. One anecdote about that is one time I piled up a bunch of books in front of me and the teacher snuck around behind me, clearly suspicious I was up to no good. And behind all those books, instead of paying attention in class, I was reading War and Peace. And he gave me the most curious look, like he didn't know what to do with that.

So there was some part of me that I could only do the things I wasn't supposed to be doing, but I read really serious stuff. And I just needed to figure myself out. Whatever it was in my home life, I couldn't fix it while I was at home. I just had the insight that I needed to go somewhere, it was back in the 60s, where they would shave my head and put me in a suit and lock me away so I could do nothing but study.

Preeta: Wow. Awesome. That’s amazing. You mentioned that you grew up in a political family. Maybe you could tell us a little bit about that. And also did you have any spiritual upbringing?

Lee: I had an anti-spiritual upbringing. My parents were both atheists and thought of anything smacking of spirituality as pure mumbo jumbo. They both had left-leaning politics. My mother was very involved in civil rights in Michigan. She was involved, especially around Pontiac, with a group that worked for fair housing.

In fact, when my parents moved away from Michigan before I was finished with high school, I wound up going up to Pontiac to stay with some of the African America folks that my mother was working with. I wound up working living for a while in a halfway house for delinquent girls.

There was always politics in my house, and there was no spirituality whatsoever. My parents actually saw both those two things as completely antithetical. Spiritual people were people not involved in the world.

Preeta: Interesting. So then after high school, you went off to St. John's College, which I know as principally as "the Great Books School." I don't know if it was still that back then. Just curious how did you make that decision. Was the kind of reading a big part of that?

Lee: Yeah. Life is a funny thing. It sometimes bounces you around until you find yourself in the right place. I started off at Kalamazoo College in Michigan because I wanted to stay in Michigan because my friends were there and my girlfriend was there.

It was a good school, but it was a typical cafeteria-style school where you picked and chose things. I had no idea what I was doing or why. And then one day I was visiting a friend of mine on the East Coast and we went to see the movie Yellow Submarine. I bumped into this guy who had gone to St. John's and as soon as I heard about it, I just knew this was the place I had to be. The thing about St. John's is that you start at the beginning. It's all Western philosophy, but you start at the beginning with the Greeks and then you spend four years going through everything, every great work in every discipline that's ever been written. I just needed to start at the beginning, that was the main thing. I needed to start at the beginning and work my way through how this civilization, at least, has thought through the same problems over and over again from different perspectives. And really intellectually that set the whole course of my life. That's the kind of stuff I've been doing ever since.

Preeta: That's amazing, that's beautiful. At some point in your education, maybe after college or grad school, you went into politics and policy. Can you tell us a little bit about that? Tell us what led you to that and then eventually what led you back to the Ivory Tower after your experience in the political policy world.

Lee: St. John's College is in Annapolis, Maryland which is the capital of the state of Maryland. My geographical situation captured a kind of split in my soul. Because St. John's is almost like a monastery of learning. It's a very deeply impractical place in a certain way, you just think about deep things for four years. You get out. People go onto regular careers afterwards. But you get out of there not prepared for any particular career. That's the part of my soul that just wants to contemplate and then there's this other part of my soul that wants to do and make a difference in the world. So St. John's, this little monastery-of-learning, is a block away from the state capital in Maryland and I began back then, my ping-ponging between the two poles of my soul. Even while I was in college I started to get involved a little bit in politics and when I got out it was just very natural given that I had such a political background in my family for me to start lobbying at the State Legislature. I was good at it I found. I could, from this contemplative personality, turn a switch and become a kick-ass lobbyist. I was pretty hardcore. As you said earlier, I was named the most feared lobbyist in Maryland.

After Common Cause I started with a couple of other guys I knew who were public interest

lobbyists. We started our own firm. We lobbied for environmental issues and tenant's rights and a whole bunch of things. So I was fully immersed in the act of political life in Maryland. Then you asked how I got back into the Ivory Tower? I was happy with what I was doing, I was going places, I was getting into lists - in the Baltimore Sun I was in a list of [the] most promising figures in Maryland. I ran for the State Senate and I almost won, when I was still in my twenties. But that other part of the soul was not being fed. So I thought to myself I'll find a compromise route - and I went back to grad school in Political Science, which got me to MIT and got my PhD in political science, thinking that would be a compromise between the contemplative and the active. But I found that it was actually neither - rather than both, it was neither. I neither could get to the depth of thinking that I wanted to, nor was I actually getting anything done in the world. So while I was in grad school I floated back into full throttle philosophy and my thesis advisor had a joint appointment in philosophy and political science. I went out and spent some years teaching in political science departments around the country.

Then came back to the experimental study group at MIT where I had complete freedom to reinvent myself. I reinvented myself as a complete philosopher. Since then it's been great. I just teach what I want. When I want to learn things, I formulate a course, so that I can spend some time thinking about them. I spent long periods of time completely immersed in the contemplative side. And it's only recently that I've got back into the active side. I'm trying a new form of synthesis of those two. So I have a lot to say when we come to that point.

Preeta: Great. That's so amazing. Such a great set of experiences. I'm curious when you were doing the lobbying in Maryland you mentioned you were named one of the most feared lobbyists. What was fearful to others about what you were doing?

Lee: Well, I was not just one of the most feared lobbyists, I was the most feared lobbyist. What they (this was in Baltimore magazine) said about it is that I was feared for making legislators do the things they didn't want to do. The legislators named me the wolf-man. There's a cartoon in one Baltimore magazine of me up in the gallery in the legislator looking like a wolf-man, with the full moon coming out and ready to pounce in the legislators. Legislators are like billiard balls. The least free people around. Whatever is the strongest force, they have to go in that direction. So I just learned to pull those levers of power.

I had one situation where I put such pressure on this legislator, he was the last vote we needed in a committee to get a campaign financing bill out. We had such pressure on him that he cracked and one point threw me against a wall, cocked his fist as if he was about to punch me. And then he went in he voted with us, and the bill came out of committee. It was that kind of a pressure cooker environment and part of me loved it. It was really exciting.

Preeta: You make that sound simple. Exerting the levers of power and that weight to get people to do what you want. But that's not an easy thing. I'm curious, what was the skill? How were you able to do that? How were you able to get people to do what was needed?

Lee: Yeah, when we get back into how I'm synthesizing it now, I want to say more about this. But even back then it was a combination. It was a combination of skills I think I had by nature and one of them is that I'm actually just [a] pretty friendly person and I really like people. Some of the people that have come before me who had done this kind of work had just been so dismissive of the legislators, but I actually liked them and I

hungout with them. I went to the bars at night where they went. Outside of the work, they had a sense of me that I was like an okay guy. But at the same time I had a large organization, Common Cause, at that time had 12,000 members. So we were very well organized, we could get the pressure on really quickly. One technique I would use when our campaign financing bill was in trouble I looked at the list of donors of some of the people that were on the fence. And I just called them. I found people like a president of a bank who is in the district of the guy that we were trying to move and I called them one-on-one and tried to convince them of our issue.

Sometimes those guys would then call up. It is just a lot of… sort of like “leaving no stone unturned” is part of the process.

Preeta: Wow. So as you were doing all this, you mentioned that part of your soul was not being fed - the more monastic contemplative side. Were you full on lobbying? Were you able to keep up your reading and yourintellectual search during that time?

Lee: It was both. Here is a funny story. There was one point, I did start taking philosophy classes at night. It was at Catholic University which was an hour away from Annapolis. I remember one day I spent doing the kinds of things I just described. And I would do things like I would sit in the gallery and watch the vote tally on the board. See who wasn't there. And then I'd run into the bathroom and I'd find legislators hiding in the bathroom. I'd see a pair of shoes pointing the wrong way in the stall and gently push it open. They were there, but there was so much pressure from both sides that they didn't want to vote.

I'd have a day like that and then that evening, I remember this very clearly, I had a class on Thomas Aquinas's theory of existence and essence. So there was this really cognitive dissonance between the parts of my life. I was trying to do them both. I couldn't really integrate them very well.

I also was, even though I say I loved this part of my life and I enjoyed the excitement and it was very visceral and physical, actually I was in very good shape physically because I would have to literally run around to get things done. Even though I was loving it, there was part of me that was becoming a person that I really didn't want to be. I discovered that most when I ran for office. I found myself shading the truth in ways I didn't want to, and making excuses for myself. I was starting to not like myself.

Preeta: Wow, that is incredible. The story of the legislator in the stall. Now I can understand why you were the most feared lobbyist. In talking about St. John’s, you used the term monastery a few times. Like a monastery for learning. Was it in this point of time intellectual, but contemplation is a bit deeper than that. Was there spirituality starting to infuse at any point?

Lee: There was. There definitely was. You know I come out of the 60s and this stuff was all starting to get mixed together. I was starting to read Eastern things. Back in the 70s, I got

involved with transcendental meditation. I had friends who were doing that. And even the intellectual part when I was at St. John’s. We read a lot of religious thinkers and I started to think about what this all means in a much broader way. I started meditating.

So I was… I didn't have a really systematic integration of all those things, but all those elements were starting to be a part of my life back then.

Preeta: And what drew you to Catholic university in terms of the courses you were taking?

Lee: There were some people connected to St. John’s who started teaching at Catholic. I had some other friends who went there for philosophy. I think at first I just followed the crowd. But it was interesting to me. I'm Jewish, so it was interesting to me to be involved in a Catholic university. A lot of my professor were brothers, so I did start reading some Catholic theology and got a sense of that world.

Preeta: So I'm fascinated by the wayyou described your turn back to MIT first as a PhD student. And you talked about political science being kind of neither. I agree with that because you are neither being in the political world nor are you really doing contemplation of life's biggest issues.

So what did you do your thesis on? Then you said at the end of that when you got in this experimental study group, you kindof went full on philosophy. So I'm curious about the subjects in both those disciplines that intrigued you.

Lee: Well, I did my thesis on the idea of consent and what kind of voting system would actually capture what we mean by consent--consent of the governed and what kind of voting system would capture that.

So when you think about consent if you really want to think about it full on, you have to think about who we are and what freewill means and a lot of deeper issues. And I was reading on those, but I couldn't really incorporate those in my political science thesis.

Partially, I married a woman who is life is really centered in spiritual practices and contemplation, so that also started to pull me more inward. I married her because that is what I wanted in my life. So it wasn't accidental. It is hard to trace the… I was teaching at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania for three years. And I think I was already

morphing into a philosopher because, although I was a really popular teacher and when they let me go there was a student protest, I think I was not really doing political science anymore as people in the political science department understood it.

I was doing a course on Hegel and Feminism. It was kind of titularly political, but I was really interested in who we are and how politics flowed out of who we are. Those kind of questions are hard to engage in the world of political science.

Preeta: Then you got involved with the experimental study group. If you want to elaborate on what that is about that would be great. But I'm really interested in getting into how did you get interested in working with prisoners? How did that come about?

Lee: So that is another thing that life has for a long time kept throwing me in that direction, but I didn't know it was throwing me in that direction, so I just kind of bounced back. But my very first job out of college was just one of those jobs, you know I had a degree in liberal arts and what do you do with that, so I just fell into this job at the Federal Bureau of Prison. That was my first job. I was just a lowly researcher, but part of my research, I was researching a federal drug rehabilitation program, but that took me into prisons where I actually got to talk to prisoners. It was an experience I never had before and never imagined I would have.

But after that I just saw it a job and an interesting experience and I didn't… one thing that happened I went back to Annapolis and helped form a group called Offenders Aid and Restoration, which was about transition from local jails to society. As part of our training in that we required everybody who was going to be involved in that to spend a night in jail. And we had an arrangement with the Fairfax County Virginia Jail. They would let us in for a night and they wouldn't tell anyone else what we were in for. We would be just be treated like prisoners. So that all happened.

But then I just floated away from that. Then in the 80s, I was teaching a course in non-violence. But at that time it was more about political strategy, using non-violence as a political strategy. And I was also teaching a course in gender relations with a psychologist who had a connection to a local prison. And through that, I just started the practice every semester of taking my class in to meet with the lifers group. Just because I had a bunch of kids who came from a pretty sheltered backgrounds.

We are talking about violence, let's talk about people who actually have had some experience with violence. So, that brought me back in touch with the prison stuff. But again, I wasn't thinking about some theme in my life. It's just another interesting thing to do. When [the] Willie Horton incident happened and they closed down a lot of the access to the prisons in the late 80s, so there was a period of time I

couldn't get back in. And then in the 2000s, I had a friend who was teaching through the Boston University [BU] program, the only university right now that can grant bachelor's degrees in prison. I just thought… I am just curious. That was my main motivation. What's it like to teach philosophy in prison? I got into that. It's just become the thing. I guess when you align with your Dharma, it sort of, it works. Since then, I'm now the head of this program. Our main thing is, we bring in the MIT students in and take class with them (the inmates). We are expanding to do other things too. We are trying to take technology into prisons and all sorts of things. But I started doing this thing out of curiosity just because I wanted to do it and then I found that people were throwing money at me to do it. And now it's the thing that I do.

Preeta: It's one thing courses in prison. It's another thing to teach philosophy in prison. Another thing is co-teach prisoners and MIT students together. So, I'm just curious if you can talk about what your experience was like teaching the prisoners. What was that like? What were your immediate impressions of that?

Lee: Well, the prison population is pretty different than the population at MIT. A lot of guys I teach came to the prison with an eighth grade education. Most of these guys didn't just get to prison and were ready for college. I have one guy I'll talk about, who told me the story that he came with an eighth grade education, but tested with a third grade reading level. He tells me he spent [his] first ten years in prison getting in trouble and spent most of it in solitary. Then a light just went off in his head that he was gonna be here for a long time and he started getting himself educated. He finally got into the BU program. This guy was quite brilliant. I want to use the term monk-of-knowledge again.

That's what he sort of turned his life into. Not only did he do his work splendidly, he was always educating himself, always reading all the time. I was kind of like that, always reading for knowledge. I meet guys like that. And the other thing is it's a broader range of people with both ability and experience. You know, college education, in many ways is a cultural minimum way of things, very middle class thing. In a way, the way we do it speaks more to people with a certain kind of background. Most guys in prison don't have that kind of background. They haven't been thinking that way in all of their lives.

Your second question is what is it like to teach philosophy? My incarcerated students love philosophies because philosophy is just about exploring. They love learning everything. My philosophy of philosophy is philosophy only takes place in conversations. So, my classes are very discussion-oriented. These people, I have a lot of experience with them and they love to get into deep questions. And they have a lot of time to think about them.

Preeta: The thought that comes up was that I've seen [in] some of [the] syllabi. They seem very nuanced and sophisticated philosophies. I think in your Philosophy of Love course you have people reach into them and their soul and other things. I guess the

question is, how, you know, for a lot of people, philosophy seems to be this nice flowery thing. But it doesn't seem immediately relevant to your life. I mean, especially with this abstract text in part. It's interesting to me that you feel your incarcerated students are able to find relevance to that they stay engaged.

Lee: My experiences are they find more relevance in the subjects we discuss in more than anything. First of all, I choose subjects that everybody cares about. I teach the course in love and I teach the course in non-violence. Look at our popular culture, our movies. And if you look, our movies, every movie, is about love or vengeance or some combinations of the two. These things are what we need to figure out in our lives. What love is and what role it plays in our lives and what anger and justice and vengeance play in our lives. How we go through life dealing with those issues. So, to me, I feel like the two courses, [are] my signature courses. They are the most important things in our lives. Philosophy just means thinking about them deeply. Not all the work I use is official philosophy. We read a lot of literature.

Preeta: These signature courses on non-violence and on love, did you develop these as you were working with incarcerated persons or were they already developed and you just kind of brought them to that population?

Lee: The Love course, I have been teaching for a very long time. When I left Swarthmore, and left political science, that was the first thing I wanted to think about. I actually developed it when I was teaching at Phillips Academy in Hanover, which is a really upscale private school. That is the root the course has traveled from… sort of teaching to the most wealthiest and well-connected kids in the country to teaching in the prisons. That I have been thinking for a long time. The non-violence course was one I decided… as I said, I taught back in the 80s courses, I taught a really political non-violence course. But at this stage in my life, what I really wanted to think about was the title of my courses, non-violence as a way of life. How do we take the principle of non-violence and apply them to everything we do in life. That one I developed because that was the topic I really wanted to teach in prison and especially in these mixed classes of my MIT students and prisoners.

Preeta: When I first reached out to you about that non-violence course, I loved the way you described it, which you made it clear that it's not non-violence as a political strategy, but non-violence on a deeper plane as a way of life, just as you have said, with the social and political flowing from that rather than vice versa.

Lee: I have to say that I've learned a lot from teaching that. I have only taught that once, but that very first time, I learned a lot from teaching it in prison. One topic we take up in that course is forgiveness. What is forgiveness? It's not so simple when you think about it.

(40-50)

And who has more to say about forgiveness then these guys that I am teaching in prison? We were struggling with the idea of what forgiveness is and we kind of planned a course Jacque Lacan and he has this one line that says, "You can only forgive the unforgivable" meaning sure we can say that I understand why he did it. He came from a bad background or we can say I can live with that, but that is not forgiving. That is excusing and there is nothing wrong with that but that is not what forgiveness is. Forgiveness is something deeper. Forgiveness is when you are still and when you fully understand the magnitude and the wrong of the act and still this one is able to forgive. So we are struggling with what that could possibly mean and one of my guys who is in prison for life, said “for me forgiveness is about an act. What I did,” he said, “was actually unforgivable and I don't expect anybody to forgive me for that act. What forgiveness means to me is that you are not reduced to the only person who committed that act and that you remain open to the possibility that I can become somebody who wouldn't do things like that. You remain open to the possibility that I can change, That is what forgiveness means to me.” I don't think I would have that kind of a conversation just at MIT. I mean I was in a room with people who think in a very deep and personal and really consequential way about what things like forgiveness mean.

Preeta: How are the MIT students doing in all of this? What is their experience and what are some of the stories of transformation that they have experienced? And I want to come back to the prisoners.

Lee: It is kind of an experience that is too big to articulate because every single one of my students if you call them right now and ask them, they would say it was a life-changing experience to do this, but it is hard for anybody to pin down exactly what that is. One thing is that we are in the presence of the kind of people we never meet. I mean people in the prison are the most despised people in society and you are having a civil, meaningful conversation with them that is a pretty important experience. So I don't find my MIT students to be extremely articulative by how it has changed them but everyone says it is one of the most important things that they have ever done.

Preeta: Life changing experiences are like that, it is hard to articulate. Going back to the prisoners, obviously as you described these topics and these discussions it must be very deeply moving. I can imagine for people to have access to you, access to these new ideas, access to these thoughts. What is the impact for them of being with MIT students? These are kids who come from a very different kind of a background, just wondering how they react to that?

Lee: Yeah, I had different kinds of reactions. First of all one prison that I teach there is a

room that is the college. It is Boston university classroom. It is painted with BU colors. When you step into that room you are in Boston University and my incarcerated students would often say that they are in class and not in prison. They are leading kind of normal lives. In addition, being in contact with the MIT kids it still normalizes there lives, they are not the kind of people they meet every day. At the same time, I had them write a little about the evaluation of the courses and their experiences at the end and often they say that they were kind of intimidated because MIT has a kind of mythical kind of effect on people. These people that you are bringing must be the smartest people in the world and most of my guys and women, even more, I think in the women's prison, their experiences of life isn't thinking of themselves as the smartest people in the world. One of the experiences they had in these classes is just learning how well they can think and learn the places that life would demand but they are not people who pull all their lives being intellectuals or capable of the kinds of things that MIT students are so part of their experience is that they are intimidated by the MIT students but I think at the end they also have the experience that I am as smart as these kids and some ways I am even actually smarter so I think that is liberating.

Preeta: What kind of prisoners or incarcerated people sign up for these kind of courses. Is it kind of a rare person who signs up for a philosophy course and especially philosophy course with MIT students. And how big are these classes?

Lee: The classes are bigger than I would like them to be. I usually bring in 10 MIT students in and there are usually about fourteen incarcerated students. What kind, I only come in contact with people who are mostly interested in self-improvement. So these are really motivated people. First of all it is hard to get into the prison programs. You have to often keep trying, you have to test into it and like I said most of these guys don't have their high school degrees so I am in contact with people that are really motivated and usually the guys that have kind of real leadership qualities and are kind of leaders in the prison. They are the kind of people that try to civilize their life in prison and they are people with real positive outlooks as positive as you can get in a prison.

Preeta: Have you got any feedback from the wardens or correctional officers from within the prison?

Lee: Well it is a tricky business, prisons are tough places. And balancing the needs of the institution and balancing with what I am trying to do takes work and time and skill and we are not even entirely there yet so for the most part in theory all the people that I deal within prison, the administrators are in theory in favor of the kind of things that we are doing but they have real concerns like for instance there is a tension between I wanted a lot of discussions in my class but there are real concerns in the prison with boundary issues between the inmates and what can go wrong and I respect and I have to take those concerns seriously so working out the proper balance is still in progress. `

Preeta: When I was glancing at your syllabus they are incredibly sophisticated in terms of the readings and topics and intellectual, I was wondering are there also personal practices that kind of go along with these kind of head based learning and I kept the real question for me in all of this which is a personal question in my own life like how does one cultivate non-violence and love from the head from different sets of practices that you might do.

Lee: So I want to make a very strong case and we go way back to Socrates. Socrates and Plato after him, really made the case that real philosophy only happens in discussions and that philosophy isn't reading books.

I want to make a very strong case for - so if we go way back to Socrates. Socrates and sort of, Plato after him, really made the case that real philosophy only happens in discussion. That philosophy isn't reading books. Soon as you actually, you can find this in Plato, as soon as you write it down, you have sort of calcified it. The philosophy is a living practice. It only happens between real people. And although there are universal truths, the universal truths are only discoverable in particular times as relevant to the particular times and the particular people that are discussing them. So I really want to make the case, that philosophical discussions is a spiritual practice. It is not all head. I mean as soon as you engage with another person, your emotions and your whole being is involved. You can't engage another person without having feelings about what you are saying. Without dealing with the whole of who you are. So as long as you keep it to the level of discussion, i think, you are in the realm of spiritual practice.

Preeta: That's great. I am curious. So many more things that we could go on with. I know there are some questions that are coming in. But couple more i will go with. I am just curious- you have got other work in the prisons as well, especially with the debate team. And I am just curious - all of this work - the debate work, the teaching - how has this work with the prison initiative transformed you? We talked about the prisoners and the MIT students; changing their lives. I wonder what effect it has had on you?

Lee: I think the main stage I am in right now, is you know, in the sort of Zen - first there is the mountain, and then during Zen the mountain is no longer a mountain , and then after Zen - it is the mountain again. I think I am in the mountain-is-not-a-mountain stage right now. That is - the way - the stage of transformation I am in right now, is that this has upset me. I am not in only the negative sense but it kind of [a] positive sense. It upsets my complacency, that I feel like very much in-process right now. I feel like I am really experimenting with letting go of a lot of my suppositions. A lot of the things that I have sort of taken for granted. And I am just in the stage of openness right now. You know I don't even want to jump to the side of complete - kind of lofty compassion - I think there are a lot of social injustices that are exemplified in how our prison system works. But I am also dealing with people that have done some very bad things. And I am just kind of open to what that means to me. Do you understand what I am saying? I am struggling with even saying it.

Preeta: Yeah. I am struck by your amazing openness and curiosity to all experience. And not trying to label it pre-maturely. That is what is jumping for me.

Lee: That's the way I am feeling. I just feel like it is - I was just wanna keep taking it in. And keep dealing with it and keep reflecting on what's happening and at some point in the road, it is all kind of season and I will have some big conclusions. But right now, I like being in the stage of upset. Of not knowing exactly what I think about all these things.

Preeta: When you mentioned the lot of presuppositions that have been upset, can you say a little more about that? Like what kind of presuppositions?

Lee: Well... I really struggle a lot with... I have been on sort of both sides of issues of blame and forgiveness. What we do - how we respond to people that have done terrible wrongs. I have presuppositions on both sides. That somehow society is - that somehow it is [a] disservice to us if we don't make very strong statements in terms of punishments - for people that have done very terrible things. And then on the other hand, it is not random, who it is that winds up doing these things. There are a lot of societal factors. So I have been upset and I am just struggling with that a lot. One of things is - I deal with some people that I know in prison have done some very terrible things and not even just randomly. In an organized way they have been involved in terrible things. And yet I find some of these people I actually like and respect a lot. So I am just trying to deal with those two sides without artificially coming down on one of them or the other.

Preeta: Great. My final question is a kind of a big one. So you can take this in whatever way you want to take... and go with it in any direction. But so much of what you just said in your last response about your openness to taking it all in, I come back to the way you described your experience in Minneapolis, about your experiences in politics and policy about the ways in which your contemplative side was not fully fueled. One way to ask this question - let me ask you in a couple ways and you can decide how you will answer - one way is just your current views about engaging with politics and policy as a model of social change. What you think of ways of engaging in more systemic ways of change? Another way is - when you were talking about your struggles with dealing with some of the incarcerated people - that you like them as people but obviously they have done terrible things. And it had shadows to me of how you describe some of the legislators. And the way in which you said sometimes the legislators were in some ways the least free people. And you know - a lot is coming up for me, you know, Beau's book about "how we are all doing time." So lot of different stuff. You can answer whatever you feel like answering. But I am curious about your views about systemic social change and kind of now as you are struggling more with the integration of the deep philosophy with activity in the world. What are your thoughts now, about the best ways that resonate with you of impacting our systems?

Lee: I had an interesting conversation just about a week ago with a guy inside. And he quoted to me a line from the Black Panther Huey Newton; and the line was " doing good is a hustle." And I think back in my political days, I think politics as it is normally practiced and as I practiced it, is really just an art of manipulation. I was proud of my abilities to manipulate situations to bring the most good out of them. And that doesn't satisfy me anymore. I don't blame him for to keep doing good as a hustle; but I don't want it to be a hustle for me. I really want to take a longer view and have faith that if I pursue what I pursue, as close as I can get to complete honesty, with compassion for everybody, the correctional officers, with trying to understand everybody's point of view. Not demonizing anybody. And you have to work in a system like this to not demonize anybody. It comes pretty naturally. I feel like that is the only way I want to do politics. And I guess it is just an act of faith. That that kind of political engagement is, in the long run, at least, going to be more effective than manipulation. Which clearly, in my experience, manipulation gets affects faster and gets really concrete affects. I think that's how I would sum it up for me. And for me right now, this is my spiritual practice. And that means, it is just not about, it is just not about the immediate effects that result.

It is about living my life as a person that I actually really want to be.

Rahul: That is so fascinating, Lee. Thank you for sharing. I've been on the edge of my seat. On that last answer, I was reflecting on this notion of how there are so many activist who start from the other end. They start from a place of feeling like they are being fully compassionate, fully transparent, honest, and as a result of being frustrated by their inability to achieve concrete action, they would love to have the skills that you have in actually manipulating the system to get a result in a reasonable time frame. And yet you have gone in completely the opposite direction. I'm curious whether you can reflect on the notion of the grass is always greener on the other side.

And what that means inside you're deepening spiritual practice, both philosophy and engagement at the intersection of what's is deeply true inside scaling to the outside world.

Lee: Well, as to the grass is always greener, my philosophical orientation is dialectical that my primary assumption is that on both sides of any important question there is some truth.

I don't even know if where I'm at right now is right. When I answered that guy about doing good is a hustle, somebody else said that the fact that you don't think of it that way is a product of white privilege, that you don't have to think of it that way. And I'm willing to contemplate that too. I'm willing to go back and forth between the two different sides.

I guess part of it for me though, the reason I'm on this side right now is I was involved in all the ferment of the 60s and I was very political back then. And things were accomplished and the world is a better place for some of the things, but look at the backlash we are getting. Somehow or other we didn't get through in the way we needed to to an awful lot of people. I think the foundational thing that has to be changed is the culture that underlies our politics. You can't do that from a manipulative standpoint. You can change the surface things, but you can't change the foundation manipulatively. And that is what engages me now.

Rahul: Nancy Miller from Arlington, Virginia, asks, "How does the dynamics of race and poverty enter your work? Many of the inmates and clients I work with are people of color. Many are traumatized for a variety of reasons--poor educational background and issues with addiction." So how does race and poverty figure into your work?

Lee: Well, by the time that people get to the classes that I'm teaching, they have to have dealt with a lot of those debilitating issues. Prison is distinctly not proportional in its racial composition to society. We all know that. I deal with common humanity. I deal with the ways in which we are all the same. Again, that is what I have to offer. It doesn't mean that it is a better way of dealing with it.

I'm certainly open to all those. I have an interesting story about that. An interesting story that speaks to that maybe you can't always extract from you circumstances even in the most abstract philosophical conversations.

There is a famous ethical thought experiment that is presented in every ethics class everywhere, which is called the Trolley problem. You are walking down a track, you see that there is one person working on one track and two people working on another track. You get to a place where the tracks join. You see a train that is out of control. There is switch there, You can tell that if you don't pull the switch the train is going to kill the two people on one track. If you pull the switch, the train will go on the other track and kill the one person. It is supposed to ask questions about utilitarianism, whether you are responsible to make sure that the least amount of harm occurs, whether acting is morally equivalent to not acting.

So when I teach that at MIT or Harvard or any place else like that, we deal with it on that really abstract level. When I taught that in prison, not one but a handful of guys, particularly African American guys said, "As a man of color, I just run, because if I pull the switch, I'm going to jail. If I don't pull the switch, I'm going to jail. I just get out of there.”

So even when you are trying to keep it on a really abstract level, the concrete circumstances of our lives do come in.

Rahul: That makes a lot of sense. Perhaps to hover on the center of Nancy's question, she may have been asking about the effects of trauma on the students of the class and probe into whether they may have dealt with those effects already through other things offered in prison or because it is so selective have they somehow found a way to transcend that personally. What is your experience with that?

Lee: Yeah. It is a really interesting question. A concrete answer is I've had people say to me, I teach philosophy of love, and it makes us think about the nature of love. It seems like a lovely thing to think about, but when I teach it in the women's prison especially, I'm dealing with a population of people who have been for the most part traumatized by love. Love has been an extremely hurtful thing in their lives. In many, many, many cases it has a lot to do with why they are there in prison. So I would have to consider whether or not am I really equipped to deal with the traumas that come up when I discuss those questions with these women, even though all of them have done all sorts of counseling and stuff like that. Sometimes when I get papers from them about these very erudite books they are reading, they put their own stories of their histories of love and the stories are… some of them are really horrible.

So I don't know. I do have to be aware of that. I can't just pretend that the life of a mind is detached from the rest of our lives. To think seriously about love when you come from a background of experiences that masqueraded as love and were extremely destructive. It is not a neutral thing.

Rahul: We have another question from Ian Schiffer from Madrid, Spain. He says, "Thanks Lee, for all of your work. How do you feel that spirituality can start and blossom within repressive systems? Keeping in mind the radical education that often takes place inside prisons and Paulo Friere's work in critical pedagogy, how do you recognize the lived expertise of people who are incarcerated within your classes, noting the gaps many of these students face, especially with outside students who are also included who often affirmed in their meritocratic achievement?"

Lee: I do have to deal with all those issues. I think as I said earlier that a lot of the incarcerated students report being intimidated by the MIT students. I think the wisdom that comes from experience, just cannot be repressed in a classroom like this. One thing we haven't mentioned is that one of the things that I think is so important to the MIT students is not only are they meeting and having discussions about central life issues with people from a very different background, but also you spend your whole four years in college talking only to professors who are hierarchically superior to you and equals that

are exactly your own age and probably come from a pretty similar background to you. When they take classes in prison, they are with men in their sixties. They are in class with people who come from really wildly different circumstances from them.

And it becomes really… I think one of the things the incarcerated students learn is how smart they really are and how the breadth of their experience gives them a kind of wisdom that these brilliant young whippersnappers don't have. And I think the MIT students learn that too. Before I referred to our discussion of forgiveness. Well, the MIT students sat in that discussion as the learners and the incarcerated guys were the teachers in that class. Although there was mutual learning going on, but that was the major role.

I actually think there is a lot of dignity in the life of a mind itself. And I think, they experience themselves as being… they get in touch with their own intelligence in a way that they have never done before in their lives. It is a big question.

Rahul: I'm curious. You kept mentioning you have obviously encountered people who have done some pretty horrible things. In your experience, have you ever encountered a person that you regard as evil? What I mean by that is we hear how the prevalence of psychopathy or sociopathy or both is about 1% in the general population and it is 4% in prisons and in the corporate boardrooms as well. The people who have made it into your classes and passed all the hurdles have obviously either worked through or been very successful in manipulating a system to be able to have access. So in my mind, if there ever was someone who was genuinely and truly evil they would have managed to work their way into the best part of the prison system and sounds like you are doing something that is pretty transformative and certainly helpful. But what is your reflection on evil?

Lee: Yeah, that gets to the real root of some things. So for me the main dividing line is how genuine somebody is and how much I feel like they are being entirely real with me. There are guys who have done terrible things, but I feel a realness about them. I'm sure of it. And they are really struggling with these things. And then there are other people. The people that come closest to what you are calling evil are people for whom they can't ever get out of their manipulative mind. It always feels like manipulation. And some of those people are the most charming people in my class. In some ways, some of the more charming guys wind up giving me the creeps more that the people that are just plain.

One of our class discussions on forgiveness, one of the guys who had taken a life said to one of the students, "Do you think I'm evil?" And she, taken aback, said, "Well, yes I do." And this guy said, "Thank you. Thank you for being so honest. I know how many people are thinking that but almost nobody will say that to me. And now we can have a real conversation."

But of course, by doing that to me he demonstrated that whatever is that has gone wrong in his life, I wouldn't call it evil. But, yeah, the hardest people are the people that I feel still come from a spirit of manipulation. Reality is a game to be manipulated. And some of the people I have the most trouble with and I struggle the most with being kind and compassionate, I think some of the sexual offenses that are most challenging.

Rahul: Yeah, that is quite understandable. Nancy Miller again from Arlington says, "How do you engage the inmates? How do you get them to talk and reveal aspects of themselves in an open and honest way? Same for the MIT students." She also wants to get a copy of your love, non-violence, and forgiveness courses because she teaches mindfulness and meditation in jails and detox centers in the Metro DC area and the topics that you teach come up frequently in her discussions.

Lee: For the courses, just email me at Lperlman@MIT.edu. And I actually find incarcerated students and there is some gender disparity here between the way men react and women in prison, but I find them easier to engage in a lot of ways than MIT students. They are much more comfortable with discussions. They are much more comfortable with being wrong, so they are more willing to speak up. They kind of argue and fight with each other in class in a very free way. And they are willing to back off when they are wrong. I find MIT students tend to have a more perfectionist constraint on their speaking and so they are very careful. They don't want to say anything that doesn't seem brilliant. So I find the incarcerated students quite easy to engage.

There is some difference between the men and women students on a kind of broad average. Which is the incarcerated women students tend to be a little less self-confident for obvious reasons given their backgrounds. So they don't speak up as easily. But even there I think it doesn't take a lot.

I don't have any specific method. I try to approach it with an air that anything is welcome here. It is my job to reign it in if it is getting too tangential.

Rahul: I had another question that sort of dials back into this topic on non-violence. I'm just curious to understand what you evolving understanding of that has been, particularly given that my exposure to the topic is from the Sanskrit ahimsa and non-violence is a very poor translation for that because it is sort of a double negative. But ahimsa is a completely different way of being which is overwhelmingly positive that there is no space for the negative. Just curious what your experience of that has been going from the political strategies to ways of being to what you are actually teaching and able to teach in class.

Lee: I think that for me, my understanding of Gandhi's thought, the central concept of Gandhi's thought, was not ahimsa. But his central concept was the term that he coined which was satyagraha, which is usually translated as "firmness in the truth." From satya, meaning truth, which comes from "sat"-- which means being. So it is a conception of truth in which in a certain way we live in the world as it is, as it truly is, without trying to fabricate it or romanticize it or pretend it is something other than what it is.

In a way ahimsa is a goal all in itself, but it is also a goal that served satyagraha. That is when you don't manipulate a situation or introduce violence to try to wrench it out of its natural path then you will see that world as it is. To me that has come to be the central concept and it is how I integrate philosophy with action. To me it is all a search for truth, understanding who I truly am, who we truly are together. What the situation we find ourselves in without trying to manipulate it, which requires an acceptance sometimes, and a willingness to impose on the situation what you want it to be, but to see it as it is. I think for me that is the central concept right now of non-violence.

Rahul: That blends so perfectly with my next question which is understanding what you think the role of mindfulness or meditation has been in prison, particularly given your experience with mental meditation.

Lee: Well, I have had a lot of experiences in meditation since. I've gone on long meditation retreats. I've spent 14 hours meditating in a kind of a cave. I think to see the world as it truly is, you have to come to grips with your ability to be with yourself as yourself. That is one of the things that meditation does for me. When I'm not in a meditative frame of mind, when I drift far away from that, then all of my restless, random desires take over and they impose on the world my restlessness and what I need it to be, and I can't just experience it. So for me it is very important.

I can't really introduce those elements into my courses for institutional reasons that it is important that my courses be seen as traditionally academic. I probably have more freedom to do that outside of the prison than I do inside. But one thing is that men and women in prison, it is very, very common to turn to spirituality as a central meaning in your life. So when I teach that course on the soul, one of the things, I try to look at conceptions of the soul across all the religious traditions, but look at it philosophically, but it is really easy to do in prison because almost all of the men and women in my class, the incarcerated ones, are engaged in spirituality. They are all either practicing Muslims or Buddhists or Christians, so we have real experience, but we can't do the experiences in the class, but we have real experiences to draw on.

Rahul: Fascinating. Lee it is my privilege as the host to ask you one final question which is how can we as the larger ServiceSpace community support your work?

Lee: The first thing I'd say is become aware of the criminal justice system in this country. The criminal justice system is in some respects, our crazy relative in the attic. We don't want to look at it. We don't want to know what is going on there. And it is also one of the most difficult things to raise in the political environment because we are dealing with the people that we have all decided are some of the most despised people in our society that deserve the least from us.

So the main kind of support I ask is that people just... I won't tell you what conclusions to come to, but just become aware. Become aware of what we do with the people that we lock up in this society. Become aware what that system does to the people that have to administer it. Become aware of it and decide for yourself if this is what you want. And if it is not, then become involved in trying to make a difference.