



THE DHARMA PUNX

MEDITATE & DESTROY

13

Dharma Punx is a way of being, it is how we have come to integrate our political and spiritual beliefs. We sought a different path than our parents, the once idealistic hippie generation that had long since cut their hair, left the commune and bought in to the system. Peace and love had failed to make any real changes and in response to the despair and hopelessness we felt came the punk rock movement. Seeking to rebel against society's fascist system of oppression and capitalist driven propaganda the kids responded in our own way, different from those before us, a new revolution for a new generation. Aware of the corruption in the government and inconsistencies in the power dynamics in our homes we rebelled against society and family in one loud and fast roar of teen angst. Unwilling to accept the dictates of the system, we did whatever we could to rebel. We wanted freedom and were willing to fight for it.

The situation was compounded by the personal despair so many of our generation were facing; broken homes, addicted parents, abusive teachers and a lack of elders on top of all the normal strife of growing up. Our parents were too busy trying to succeed or survive in the aftermath of the sixties and the race for riches of the seventies and eighties, or in my case the dedication to spiritual practice and service that at times kept my father ever occupied. So we hit the streets, fueled by the music of revolution, anger, angst, fear, despair, hatred and a total dissatisfaction with the status quo. We dyed our hair and donned new uniforms to set us apart from the mindless masses of adults and brain dead herds of kids that were going along with the lies, buying in to the great American fallacy, playing sports, going to school and listening to the awful popular music of the eighties that carried no meaningful message and was, in our minds, just another symptom of the disease that was plaguing our society.

We turned to drugs and booze to escape from the feelings of hopelessness and despair, many of us going directly to narcotics as teenagers. Eating acid like it was candy and chasing speed with cheap vodka, smoking our parents weed, consuming gallons of cheap beer all in a vain attempt to stay numb. Turning toward a nihilistic outlook on life. Having set ourselves apart, we were a constant target of violence and ridicule. Fighting to survive, fighting for our views and right to be different, we often found ourselves involved in some battle or another, if it wasn't the cops it was the jocks or hicks or each other. All the violence and drugs led to many early deaths; overdoses, murders, car accidents and countless suicides. Death and grief has been

a central part of the lives of all the kids who were associated with the early punk rock scene. Following the great examples set by Sid Vicious and Darby Crash, live fast, do lots of drugs, fuck the system by dying young. Half of the kids that I hung out with in the eighties are dead and that is just from my crew in a small town punk rock scene.

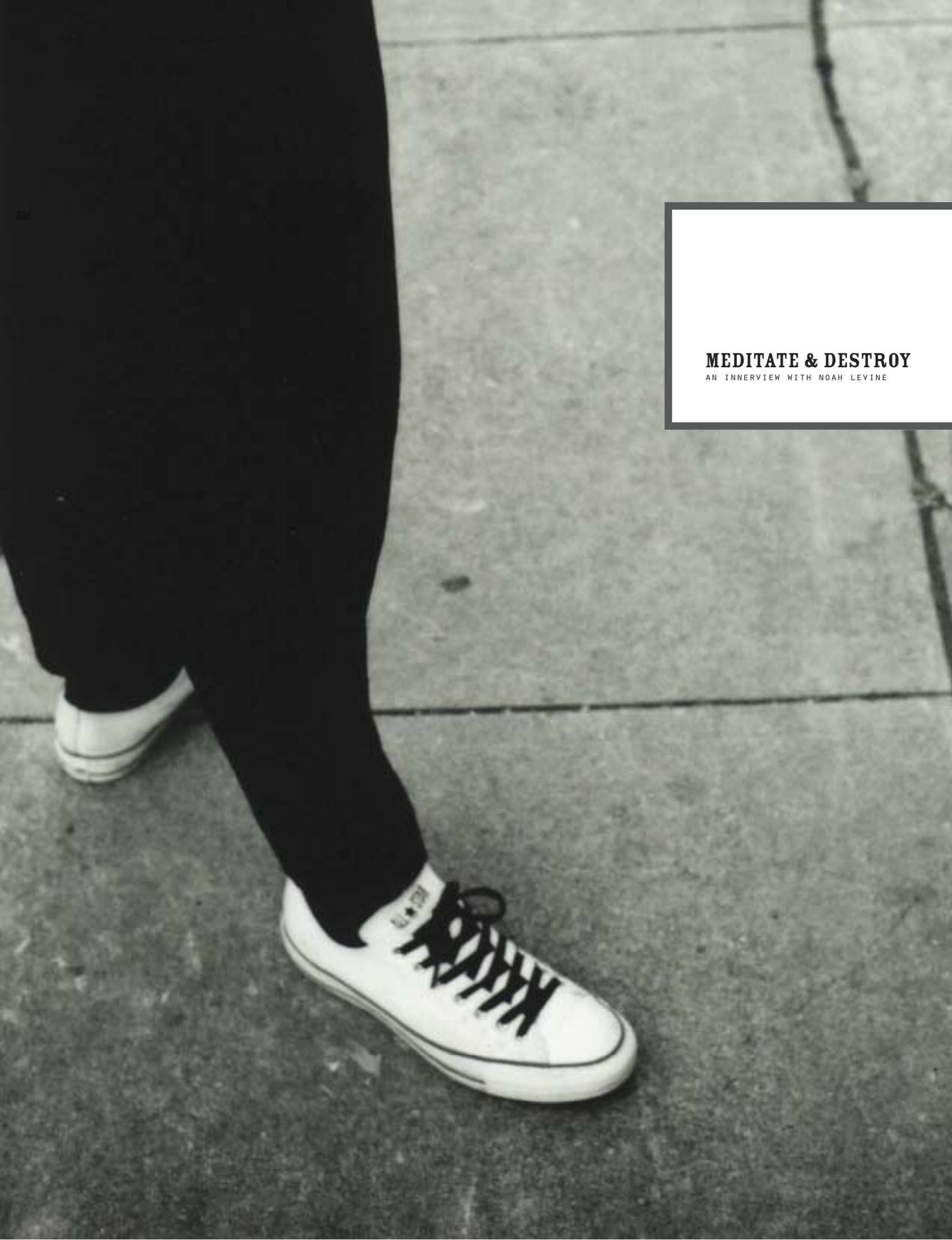
This Dharma Punx movement is about those of us who didn't die young and are still around in the new millennium. Those of us who haven't totally sold out, who go around talking about punk as a phase they went through as a kid, this is about those of us who, fueled by our dissatisfaction with life and the material world, have turned toward Spiritual Practice. It is a method for finding the freedom we were seeking as young idealistic punk rockers. Having clearly seen the uselessness of drugs and violence and having found positive ways to channel our rebellion against the lies of society, still being fueled by anger at injustice we now use that energy to Awaken rather than for self-destruction. This is a story about those of us who have taken ourselves and the struggle off of the streets. Those who are now fighting the inner battle against delusions and ignorance, yet continuing to express ourselves in our own unique punk rock ways outwardly. Having put down the booze and drugs, having let go of the violence and hatred, having lost countless friends to prison and death, we have found the Dharma. We have found the highest spiritual truth. The spiritual path has been described by the Buddha as being, "against the stream", against mans selfish desires, this fits in perfectly with the punk rock ethic, turning outer rebellion into an inner revolution.

This spiritual truth has come in many different forms and through many different spiritual traditions, while I find myself primarily engaged in Buddhist practice some of the other Dharma Punx have dedicated themselves to the Sufi path of Islamic mysticism, to a personal relationship with Christ or to the Hindu path of devotion and service. I use the term Dharma meaning the Truth with a capital T, and as my father often reminds me, "that which is true is found in all spiritual and religious traditions". No one has the corner on the truth.

This is a path of transformation, a generation often touted as X, finding meaning and purpose in spiritual practice and service. It is coming full circle, from being institutionalized to teaching meditation in institutions, from robbing and stealing to giving and forgiving. It's about finding freedom and then spending the rest of your life giving it all away.¹

1. text excerpted from **Dharma Punx; A Memoir**, Harper Collins 2003

2. Noah Levine of bay area Dharma Punx. Photograph by Michael Etter.



MEDITATE & DESTROY

AN INNERVIEW WITH NOAH LEVINE

The first time I met Noah was in the upstairs apartment of some acquaintances from around the Silverlake area. My friend Nina brought me to see her friend from Berkeley. She thought I would get a kick out of the Dharma Punx thing and she was right. We walked into an almost dark room, the living room of Ghia and Darrel, and it looked like a small party that you walk in on. Everyone, besides me and one other girl who was, I believe, dealing with the effects of chemotherapy on her system. The rest were not your typical meditation group. As he would go on to say, later, “this isn’t what I used to do on a Friday night at eight o’clock, and I doubt it is what any of us did. It’s nice to have so many dead people in a room practicing a little bit of loving kindness for themselves instead of being exactly what they expect, we are actually going against the grain – a way the Buddha used to describe the path of enlightenment. This is actually a lot more punk rock than smashing shit up.”

The situation was compounded by the personal despair so many of our generation were facing; broken homes, addicted parents, abusive teachers and a lack of elders on top of all the normal strife of growing up. Our parents were too busy trying to succeed or survive in the aftermath of the sixties and the race for riches of the seventies and eighties, or in my case the dedication to spiritual practice and service that at times kept my father ever occupied. So we hit the streets, fueled by the music of revolution, anger, angst, fear, despair, hatred and a total dissatisfaction with the status quo. We dyed our hair and donned new uniforms to set us

apart from the mindless masses of adults and brain dead herds of kids that were going along with the lies, buying in to the great American fallacy, playing sports, going to school and listening to the awful popular music of the eighties that carried no meaningful message and was, in our minds, just another symptom of the disease that was plaguing our society.

We turned to drugs and booze to escape from the feelings of hopelessness and despair, many of us going directly to narcotics as teenagers. Eating acid like it was candy and chasing speed with cheap vodka, smoking our parents weed, consuming gallons of cheap beer all in a vain attempt to stay numb. Turning toward a nihilistic outlook on life. Having set ourselves apart, we were a constant target of violence and ridicule. Fighting to survive, fighting for our views and right to be different, we often found ourselves involved in some battle or another, if it wasn’t the cops it was the jocks or hicks or each other. All the violence and drugs led to many early deaths; overdoses, murders, car accidents and countless suicides. Death and grief has been a central part of the lives of all the kids who were associated with the early punk rock scene. Following the great examples set by Sid Vicious and Darby Crash, live fast, do lots of drugs, fuck the system by dying young. Half of the kids that I hung out with in the eighties are dead and that is just from my crew in a small town punk rock scene.

This Dharma Punx movement is about those of us who didn’t die young and are still around in the new millennium. Those of us who haven’t

THE WHOLE THING COMES DOWN TO TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR ACTIONS. IN THE END, WE'RE THE ONES THAT WILL HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR UNSKILLFUL ACTIONS.

We're kicking off this magazine with an article about Noah Levine and the Dharma Punx. We feel that he is almost iconographic for our ethos and approach. He aptly speaks to the generation that is fed up with the way things are yet have generally hit some impenetrable wall in the "traditional" forms of rebellion and escapism. Addiction, gang lifestyles, sexual pyrotechnics that are increasingly unsatisfying and consumerist urges fulfilled yet leaving us even more unfulfilled than ever have fueled a wave of depression, apathy, and anxiety that has left a whole generation unable to take action in the face of the greatest threat to our civil liberties and hard won freedoms. These excesses coupled with many social inequities have brought some of us to our knees and yet as many have pointed out throughout history "our experience is our greatest asset". The voices developed in those dark places, whether they are real or imaginary has the power to heal and bring comfort to others – not by saving people but showing them positive alternatives to the despair of continuing down those paths. Some are building community where there was none. Some are giving their most precious resource whether that's time, money, creativity or patience with some project or with someone who just needs to be heard. We are transforming our previous misdirected rebellion into positive channels.

We come here to celebrate the unique but collective visions of those artists, dreamers, misfits and wise-asses that are now forging a new path with more heart. Discarding the old ideas about "charity" and seeing themselves as capable of making a larger contribution now that they have been disillusioned. We feel that disillusionment is good. Sometimes these changes are gradual – sometimes the actions will be radical, but they will always point to progressive visions supported by actions. Let our actions match our words will be one of our many, changing mottos.

We all know the problems, although we will always illuminate them from time to time, but we are more interested in people who are working toward solutions and making the changes the way they see fit. We will profile individuals and their efforts that are helping us get unstuck from the traditional ruts of apathetic depression laid out before us like landmines in the strip malls of our disconnected world. We know that many people will disagree with our approach calling us either; corporate apologists that are tacitly involved in stalling the revolution, hopeless, hapless idealists and possibly even communists under the current political climate. Good. That means that you are thinking for yourself, hopefully. We hope you are brought to the point where you are willing to step up and speak your peace.

We're kicking off this magazine with an article about Noah Levine and the Dharma Punx. We feel that he is almost iconographic for our ethos and approach. He aptly speaks to the generation that is fed up with the way things are yet have generally hit some impenetrable wall in the "traditional" forms of rebellion and escapism. Addiction, gang lifestyles, sexual pyrotechnics that are increasingly unsatisfying and consumerist urges fulfilled yet leaving us even more unfulfilled than ever have fueled a wave of depression, apathy, and anxiety that has left a whole generation unable to take action in the face of the greatest threat to our civil liberties and hard won freedoms. These excesses coupled with many social inequities have brought some of us to our knees and yet as many have pointed out throughout history "our experience is our greatest asset".

We're kicking off this magazine with an article about Noah Levine and the Dharma Punx. We feel that he is almost iconographic for our ethos and approach. He aptly speaks to the generation that is fed up with the way things are yet have generally hit some impenetrable wall in the "traditional" forms of rebellion and escap-

We're kicking off this magazine with an article about Noah Levine and the Dharma Punx. We feel that he is almost iconographic for our ethos and approach. He aptly speaks to the generation that is fed up with the way things are yet have generally hit some impenetrable wall in the "traditional" forms of rebellion and escapism. Addiction, gang lifestyles, sexual pyrotechnics that are increasingly unsatisfying and consumerist urges fulfilled yet leaving us even more unfulfilled than ever have fueled a wave of depression, apathy, and anxiety that has left a whole generation unable to take action in the face of the greatest threat to our civil liberties and hard won freedoms. These excesses coupled with many social inequities have brought some of us to our knees and yet as many have pointed out throughout history "our experience is our greatest asset". The voices developed in those dark places, whether they are real or imaginary has the power to heal and bring

WE CHASED FISTS FULL OF ACID WITH CHEAP VODKA AND ANYTHING ELSE WE COULD GET OUR HANDS ON IN A VAIN ATTEMPT TO STAY NUMB

to others – not by saving people but showing them positive alternatives to the despair of continuing down those paths. Some are building community where there was none. Some are giving their most precious resource whether that's time, money, creativity or patience with some project or with someone who just needs to be heard. We are transforming our previous misdirected rebellion into positive channels.

We all know the problems, although we will illuminate them from time to time, but we are more interested in people who are working toward solutions and making the changes the way they see fit. We will profile individuals and their efforts that are helping us get unstuck from the traditional ruts of apathetic depression laid out before us like landmines in the strip

malls of our disconnected world. We know that many people will disagree with our approach calling us either; corporate apologists that are tacitly involved in stalling the revolution, or hopeless, hapless idealists and possibly even communists under the current political climate. Good. That means that you are thinking for yourself, hopefully. We hope you are brought to the point where you are willing to flout it out and step up and speak your peace.

We'll be all about the freaking uptown draw kicking off this magazine with an article about Noah Levine and the Dharma Punx. We feel that he is almost as iconographic for our ethos and approach. He aptly speaks to the generation that is fed up with the way things are yet have generally hit some impenetrable wall in the "traditional" forms of rebellion and down escapism. Addiction, gang lifestyles, sexual problems and the ever-present status-consciousness of the age

more unfulfilled than ever have fueled a wave of depression, apathy, and anxiety that has left a whole generation unable to take action in the face of the greatest threat to our civil liberties and hard won freedoms. These excesses coupled with many social inequities have brought some of us to our knees and yet as many have pointed out throughout history "our experience is our greatest asset".

We're kicking off this magazine with an article about Noah Levine and the Dharma Punx. We feel that he is almost iconographic for our ethos and approach. He aptly speaks to the generation that is fed up with the way things are yet have generally hit some impenetrable wall in the "traditional" forms of rebellion and escapism. Addiction, gang lifestyles, sexual pyrotech-

I probably try too hard in the beginning to not sound like I think that someone like me should sound. I'm a little too stiff and somehow safe in my rebellion and all of that, but it feels great even when I fail to get what's in my head out on paper and eventually my mouth. I continue to come back because of those first experiences and because of the friends I'm making that are all on the same path contrary to what the television says.

Ultimately, I think I come back because something of my relationship to myself is being healed through listening to these kids. An unexpectedly strong motivation. Hearing what Maria and Daniel and everyone are saying. Really saying. It sounds more contemporary and with different concerns both culturally and economically, but essentially the same thing we were talking about long ago, and it's that relationship to my past that keeps getting some soothing relief from my sometimes-harsh judgments about it.

On another milky, hazy sunshine and smog afternoon, I sat down with Chris Henrikson, the director of the program, to find out a little bit more about why they do what they do.

So how did MindBody Awareness start?

The best way that I can describe why I started doing what I do is to say that, it came out of a kind of desperate desire for self-preservation, to be totally honest. It was not at all from uh ... well, I've always been really uncomfortable, let's just put it this way, with the phrase that gets bandied about a lot in our society and sometimes gets said in relation to me, with the idea of giving back. It's like oh, you get to a certain point in your life where things are going great and you decide that it's time to start giving back, and you know I'm really uncomfortable with the whole phrase or idea because the work sprang from desperation and a desire to save myself to be totally honest. You know this is all in retrospect that I say this, but I think I was dying quietly when I started to go up to camp to start teaching these poetry workshops. I think I was in a place where I was slowly suffocating in such a way that I don't think

anyone knew that it was happening beside me, think that some people were aware of the fact that I was slowly pulling away and a little less animated than I had been in other times in my life or less in contact with family and friends, but I knew that I was really in a pretty desperate place. I remember that I was living in a studio apartment in East Hollywood and I was taking a shower and I just had this panic attack, I felt like my heart was exploding out of my chest and that I was having a heart attack at the age of 28.

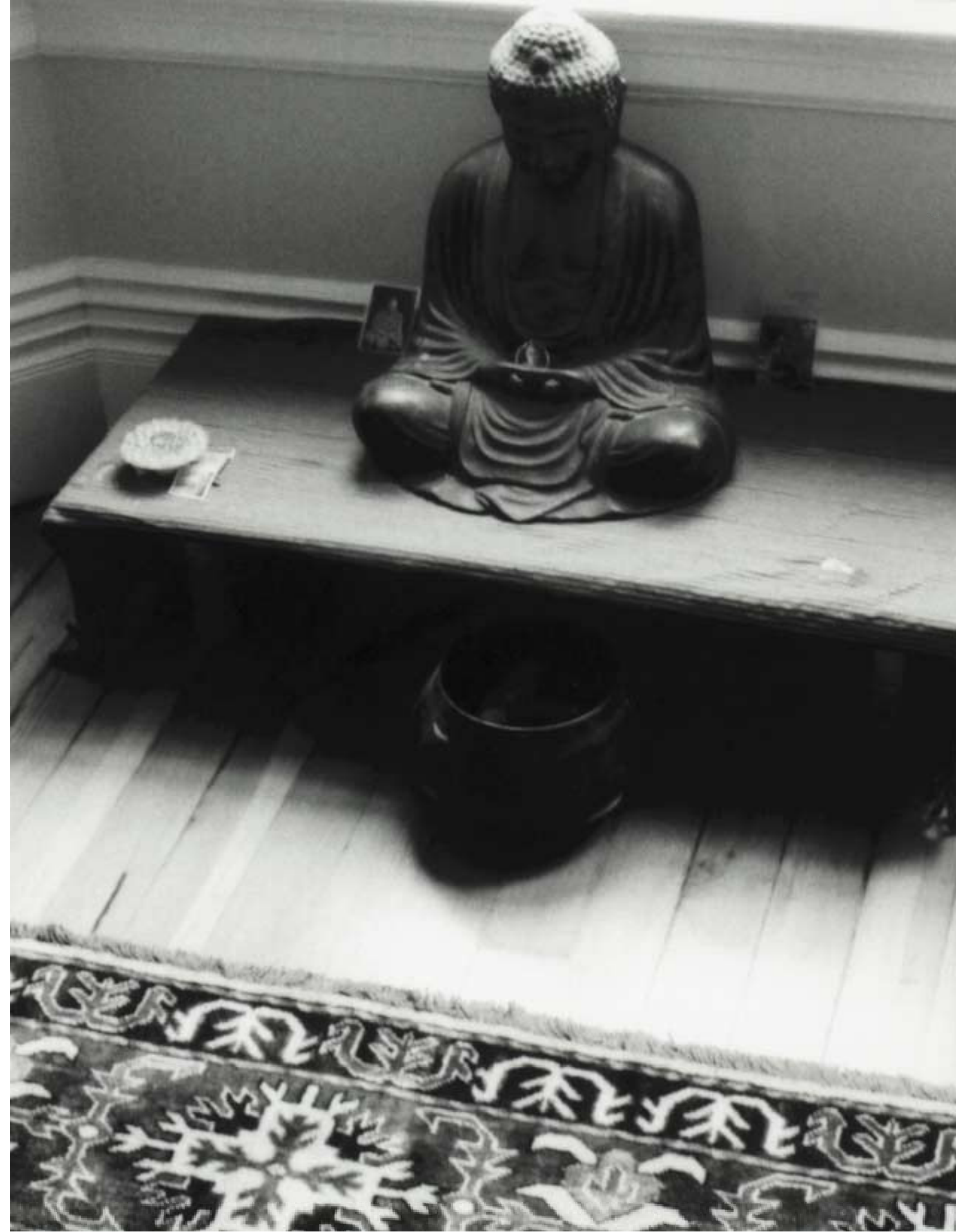
THE REALITY IS THAT THE WORLD IS ON FIRE, THAT THE NATURAL SYSTEMS OF LIFE ARE COLLAPSING BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF THE INDUSTRIAL KILLING MACHINE.

That's a pretty life altering experience to have.

Yeah, and it's basically because I had sort of sold my own voice out as a writer. It was because I had accepted money to write myself out of a script that sprang from a really deep personal place in myself. It was because I had just compromised a very sacred space in self, from which I write, that had given me my sense of identity as a teenager and I didn't realize how sacred it was at the time until I had just allowed all kinds of bullshit into that space to the point that I couldn't actually just sit there anymore. It was just too painful. I was unable to write as I was always written, a second nature to me. It was like someone had shut off the pipes and there nothing coming. It scared the hell out of me. It really scared me, and I saw an ad in the Writer's Guild Journal for writers to work with at-risk youth.

Did you respond to that because of something you felt you might have lost about your youth? A sense of lost integrity or something?

It's very possible. Why I responded to that, there are probably many levels. The sort of superficial ones and then there's the ones that probably happen on a deeper level and even on an unconscious level for some of us



What were you like when you were a young child? Did you have any role models growing up?

From an early age I was somewhat suicidal, I'd play with my favorite knife contemplating plunging it into my heart. All that changed when I found punk rock and drugs, instead of trying to kill myself I fell in to a slow suicide fueled by addiction and violence. My role models were killing themselves, or already dead. My parents were busy or distracted with their own suffering. I took refuge in the music and eventually on the streets.

What really brought about the understanding that made you step back and evaluate your whole life up to that point?

Suffering! Years of drugs, violence and crime. I wasn't looking for spiritual answers to some existential crisis or anything. I was just trying to survive, to get through my seemingly hopeless situation. The streets had become a total hell realm. Too much fear, pain and prison to endure it any longer. After a failed suicide attempt in juvenile hall and looking at spending the rest my life in prison, I had a moment of clarity that was more like a week of sitting in my cell and gradually realizing that it wasn't anyone else's fault, that I was the one committing crimes, shooting dope, smoking crack.... but that wasn't enough, I knew what the problem was... me... but I didn't know what to do about it. That's when I began meditating and going to 12 step meetings and got introduced to a solution to my dilemma... spiritual practice!

What similarities does buddhism have to punk, and what differences do you see?

The Buddha described his awakening and teaching as being "against the stream" against the human tendency towards greed, hatred and delusion. The first Noble Truth of Buddhism is acknowledging that there is a tremendous amount of suffering in life. I believe that those two teachings are the basis for the punk movement. To me punk is a rebellion against the lies and false promises of our confused western civilization. Most of us get into punk because we are suffering in some way or because we see how much suffering there is in the world and get angry at the lack of answers and solutions. Punk is our solution. Unfortunately most of us get stuck there, in the anger, and never get around to seeking a further solution to the predicament we find ourselves in. Perhaps that is the biggest difference, Buddhism offers a path of personal transformation that leads to complete freedom from suffering. Punk just offers us a great outlet for our anger and confusion, as well as a community of like-minded people to commiserate with. It never seems to come around to genuine freedom.

Are there still a lot of misconceptions about buddhist practice, in general, from a western standpoint?

Yes, I'm sure there are. For one, I know for myself, I always just associated it with hippies. I had a lot of resistance to it because I didn't want to be involved in anything that involved that "peace and love, shit" I wanted something more realistic. Probably the biggest misconception about Buddhism is that it's a pessimistic religion that teaches that life is nothing but suffering. What Buddhism actually teaches is that there is suffering in life as well as happiness and that there is path to end Suffering, a way to live in harmony with what is true.

What is mindfulness meditation ? Hopw does it relate to the "real" world?

Mindfulness meditation is basically present time awareness. Being aware of what is happening as it happens, this includes sensations, thoughts, feelings, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and intentions. The point is that in the present moment we can be with what is, as it truly is, without all of the minds stories, fears and fantasies. There are many different ways to practice mindfulness but one of the best ways to begin is by practicing awareness of breathing, since the breath is always present it is a great anchor to keep the mind in the present moment. If you are aware of the direct experience of breathing, the sensations of each breath, you are in the present. Eventually we can expand mindfulness to all of our activities and experiences. This was powerfully illustrated for me while I was locked up and began meditating. My mind was so full of fear of the future, what was in store for me, and regret and remorse for the past, all the shit I had been doing to get me locked up. It was hell to be alone in that cell with my mind wandering all over the place. Through beginning to practice mindfulness of breathing I had at least glimpses of just being in the present moment. It was much less painful when I was practicing mindfulness; I began to understand that satisfaction could only be found "here and now". □

Noah Levine is the director and co-founder of the Mind Body Awareness Project, a non-profit organization that serves incarcerated youths.

1. The site of the meeting provides an interesting backdrop fitting the context. A built-in set of paradoxes.

3. Jack Kornfield and Sylvia Boorstein teach Vipassayana practice regularly at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, CA



