

PRISON DHARMA NETWORK



Volunteer Training Manual

PDN VOLUNTEER TRAINING MANUAL

by Kate Crisp & Fleet Maull

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This manual is a work-in-progress. Please contact us with your suggestions or additions.

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GETTING STARTED IN PRISON DHARMA

"We enter this world with an often dubious view of our ability to make a difference. Prison is a hard world of boredom and loneliness, but it is a fertile ground for the teachings. Nowhere does the path seem as random as it does behind bars. Prisoners make their way alone through some very rough terrain with very little guidance, but they are driven by the immediacy of their isolation and pain. To teach in this environment is to encounter your own mind in a vivid way. It challenges us to go beyond credentials and present the "straight" truth as we heard it from our teachers. The result is a mutual dharmic project between the teachers and the prisoners. Sometimes everything clicks and we see the power of the practice happening. Sometimes we soften. We stumble often. Sometimes everyone gets the humor, including the teachers. The atmosphere changes from moment to moment. It is always intense and full of need, so that we almost always teach from the point of view of the "heart of sadness." I've never walked away from a prison visit without thinking that something worthwhile had occurred."

Jim Colosi, prison dharma volunteer

Getting started in prison dharma work is less intimidating than it might appear. Prison program directors are often open to volunteer offers. You can often "sell" a program by pointing out the positive effects that regular meditation practice by prisoners may have on the environment, such as helping with discipline problems and stress levels.

WHERE TO ENTER

Chapel: Entering as a Buddhist Meditation or Prison Dharma Program

- The advantage to this approach would be that there is existing legal protection for the practice of religion in prisons. A Supreme Court case (Cruz v. Beto) granted the same rights to Buddhists as those given to mainstream religions for the practice of religious activities in prison.
- One of the challenges of this approach may be encountering prison chaplains predisposed to one type of religion and therefore may not be open to the contemplative approach.
- Another challenge to the chapel approach is that prisoners may be subjected to pressure from chaplains or other prisoners (i.e. negative peer pressure).

Continuing Education: Entering as a Stress Management or Stress Reduction Program

- Most prison and jails have continuing education programs that contain stress management or self-help programs. It is possible to interest a program director in a meditation program centered on stress management or stress reduction.

Drug and Alcohol Treatment Programs: Entering as a Recovery Program

- Drug and alcohol treatment programs may be connected with psychological services, the education department or the recreation department. Some prisons have libraries that run their own programs. For example, in Colorado, Fleet Maull (PDN founder) was invited to speak on meditation and contemplative practice at a state prison by a librarian who coordinated a workshop series of inspirational speakers.
- You might offer a meditation program as an option for those seeking ways to work with the 11th step (of

twelve-step programs). As a stress reduction group, meditation can help prisoners center themselves and focus on their recovery.

HOW TO ENTER

Preparation

- Once involved in this work, the complex dynamics of corrections setting can sometimes be difficult and confusing, so to best prepare yourself it is good to spend some time reflecting on your intentions and inspirations for doing this work. Developing this clarity of intention and periodically reflecting on it will help you deal with the challenges that will present themselves.
- Consistency is important. Before making contact, formulate your ideas. Be clear about the type of program you wish to offer, what its benefits are, and what your involvement will be. Perhaps write a short position paper to clarify for yourself what it is you will offer.
- Be able to express this position clearly and consistently.
- Evaluate what time commitment you will be able to give to the program.

Language

- Be mindful that the language you use is appropriate to the entryway chosen.

Choosing an Entrance

- Approaching numerous entryways at the same time may confuse the prison staff.
- Do some fact-finding with department heads at the institution. This may help clarify your decision on which is the most appropriate entryway.
- The organization of each institution differs. Some departments are more progressive than others.
- Volunteers from other organizations may be helpful in sharing how the prison works. Contact other groups that may be working in the facility.

Multiple Entrances

- You may be able to operate through two entryways. For example at the US Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, a Buddhist meditation teacher and psychologist began doing programs for the Buddhist meditation group and was eventually invited to do a nonsectarian mediation program for patients. She encouraged patients to attend the meditation group but didn't mention Buddhism.

Demeanor

- A professional and courteous presentation is very important. Promptness, follow through, and phone calls will demonstrate we are serious about our commitment.
- Flexibility and openness will create cooperation. An adversarial approach is not welcome. If the prison

staff detects any attitude on the part of volunteers they may become defensive and uncooperative. They will welcome us as long as we abide by guidelines and conduct ourselves in a professional manner.

- Although prisoners have a right to practice their religion, prison staff often see this as a privilege. The courts generally support prison staff, regardless of case law.
- We need to shift our mindsets from *our* rights to teach, and the *prisoners'* rights to learn, to the realities of the culture and political world of prisons. We are challenged to work skillfully in this world so we can get in, stay in, and be of benefit. An appreciation of this world allows us to develop better relations with staff and prisoners. We encourage you to educate yourselves through reading about the current prison industrial complex (*see bibliography*).
- Try to find staff allies. They may be very important to the functioning of our programs, but don't place them in compromising positions with other staff. Staff members that are seen as prisoner advocates can lose the trust of fellow staff.

Orientation

- Each prison has its own orientation. If you are entering as a volunteer you will be required to attend an orientation. Each prison will also have a set of guidelines. Be sure to become familiar with the information in the orientation and guidelines. Be aware that most religious orientations will be predominantly Christian in their approach.

ONCE INSIDE

The Unexpected

Be prepared for the unexpected. Sometimes you may go to present your program and the prisoners will not be released or you may have to wait for security clearance for a long period of time. You might travel a long distance to the prison, and the program may be cancelled without you being notified. These type of situations present a great opportunity to develop patience and equanimity. Changes will occur, expect the unexpected.

Conduct

- We need to abide by prison rules and regulations at all times. For example, most prisons have rules that prevent volunteers from having ongoing contact with prisoners. As volunteers, we may not be allowed to correspond with prisoners, visit them in the visiting room, or be allowed any phone contact. Many prisons do not want volunteers to have any contact with prisoners outside of the program.
- The security staff should be made aware of your visits by the program supervisors. You may not be allowed entrance if security has not been given notice. Be open and flexible with this.
- The most important thing is to care about the participants. Being open and caring will help with any mistakes you might make.

Materials

- Usually volunteers will not be allowed to bring meditation materials (cushions, etc.) into the prison.
- Any materials that are allowed into the prison (study materials, etc.) should be pre-approved by the staff person supervising your program. You may be able to give books or materials to the prisoners or perhaps donate them to the library. Donating materials to the library may attract people to the program.
- Normally, the supervisor will make the security staff aware of the material we are bringing in. Again we need to be flexible.
- Prisoners will most likely hear of and be attracted to your program through word of mouth.
- If there is a bulletin board available, a brightly colored poster will attract some people to the program. Update and replace posters frequently.

Prisoners & Staff Relations

- When inside the prison be aware that everyone is watching you very carefully. The staff will be watching your body language and noticing the attitude we express towards staff and prisoners. The prisoners' judgments will probably focus on the effectiveness of your program. But they will also be watching how you interact with them and the staff.
- Staff and prisoners will notice if we appear overly friendly with either. We must always be mindful of any biases. Yet, if we are professional and genuine with staff and prisoners we can maintain the respect of both.
- Get to know the program director and update them regularly on your program. They might become advocates for you if they see your program is going well. Some program directors may even have funds for your program (to purchase cushions, etc).
- If staff do treat prisoners and/or volunteers in demeaning ways, it would be good to find a skillful way to let the prisoners know we understand. But be careful not to give the staff the impression that we are prisoner advocates. A simple nod of the head or shrug of the shoulders may suffice, expressing empathy without appearing to take sides.
- Be mindful of the stress the staff is under. Harassment of the staff by prisoners and prisoners by staff is a vicious cycle. Having compassion for the staff is as important as having compassion for the prisoners.
- Demonstrating compassion for prisoners and staff in the intensity of the prison can be a challenging task. We can find skillful ways to work with both staff and prisoners in a genuine and open way.
- We should always answer all questions honestly. However, volunteering unnecessary information will often complicate the staff's responsibilities.
- Never lie. If found out it will end your program. Be careful never to put ourselves in situations by staff, prisoners, or fellow volunteers where we feel pressured to lie on someone else's behalf.

Be an Example

"Your actions will be observed—not as criticism—but because you are a role model for Buddhist practice. This fact came home to me with clarity one day when I moved my foot while sitting. Immediately after the sitting, the group all commented that it was the first time they had seen me move in 20 months. You don't have to be a statue—but be aware of intense scrutiny." *Kinloch Walpole, prison volunteer.*

ADVICE FROM PRISONERS TO VOLUNTEERS

The following is based on a questionnaire submitted to prisoners and a discussion on PDNs listserv (by ex prisoners). Below are their compiled answers.

What would you say about someone who wanted to do prison dharma work but had fear about interacting with those who have a history of violence? That's a tough one. First, I think people should be aware that 99.9% of violent offenders don't commit violence randomly or unprovoked. Most violent acts were for a reason. And granted, it's usually the wrong reason. But random violence is nothing to worry about. A volunteer is not a threat, they are someone who wants to help us—so why would we hurt them?"

"There might be a one in a million chance (or less than that) that someone thinks, "Gee, why don't I attack a volunteer today?" And if that happened he would probably be deterred by the repercussions he would face."

"I once read a science fiction novel that made this clever point, "violence is the last resort of the incompetent..." which in my experience is true. Violence is a lever one uses to control or subjugate another and it never works. Violence is not a solution, it is a temporary 'fix.' People that have communication skills, empathy, and patience need not rely on violence. When I was growing up I used violence and threats, as a man now, I fear violence—both my own and others."

How do you feel about web disclosure (prisoner records available on the web) or does a volunteer need to know what a person is in for?

this is just a little joke that Jarvis Masters made once when I asked him, talking about someone else in the visiting room, "What's that guy in prison for?" Jarvis answered, "For getting caught."

Melody Ermachild Chavis on prison dharma-talk.

"My first reaction to your question is—why do you want to know? Is there some information that you might discover that would alter how you deal with prisoners? As a person who began dharma practice in prison, I am keenly aware of the "pecking order" that is embedded in the prisoner mentality, with sexual offenders and informants being on the bottom. This is a real part of day-to-day life for prisoners. Some might be hesitant to tell you their history for fear of being judged. If they are serious about Buddhist practice, at some point they will come clean on their own and honestly share with you their past. If they were not all that serious to begin with, then . . ."

"Web disclosure is tricky. It's a public service that will continue and grow. I guess those of us that dislike it should stop complaining and just accept it. But it casts a rather ghastly shadow on those of us that are trying to change for the better, to prepare for our release and re-entrance into society. Be that as it may, we can not take offense with the practice of web disclosure, as it only portrays what has happened to us and *by us*. We will forever have to deal with this and come to terms with things as they were and as they are now, so we might as well get used to it."

"I am adamantly against it. In addition to this, I am strongly against even asking convicts why they're serving time. I served seven years, and one of the important "unwritten rules" of doing time is that you never ask someone what they're in for. It's a violation of privacy. If someone tells you, that's their business. To many, the path that led them into prison is personal, embarrassing, and private. When trying to get onto a new, productive, and positive path, it is often times (at least in the beginning) very appealing to be able to just be in the moment, on new ground, with a fresh start, rather than the sum total of all the things that brought you here."

"I see it this way, a volunteer who is new to prison work and has fears and/or questions should have the right to know who and what he/she is dealing with. And with a little experience they'll see that it might not be as dangerous as they thought."

"So if a volunteer does look you up, how does this volunteer 'spring' this disclosure on the prisoner: "Oh, and, by the way I happened to look you up on the internet," No, this isn't advisable—it shows a lack of something, be it tact, decorum, or simple acceptance. But disclosure could open new doorways for the discussion. Sometimes prisoners go on the defensive, playing the "woe-is-me/I'm-a-victim-of-the-system" role, and at times can simply shut-down by feeling pressured. So, be tactful."

"The volunteer will be more uninhibited if he's teaching free of fearing "Willie the ax-murderer" and "Joe the thief." In time, when the volunteer builds a certain familiarity, he or she may be comfortable asking someone 'What are you in for?'"

"No, the volunteer does not "need" to know, I'm sure. It may be that it could also turn some volunteers off from helping a prisoner."

From a prison volunteer:

"I don't ask a prisoner about his or her offense, because I'm there to teach the dharma and support that person in his or her practice. Inquiring about how they got where they are distracts us both from the task at hand. I've found that when the prisoner is ready to deal with that aspect of things, he or she will talk about it in an honest and open manner. I think this ability to come forward on one's own is very good for the spirit and is very healing. First, the prisoner realizes he or she is a *human being* who happens to have done something harmful. Second, he or she has the experience of being able to freely admit to the wrongdoing rather than having it hauled out of them, possibly against their will. This is a very powerful experience and a necessary one if one is to have self-esteem. If I have some worry about the prisoner and feel that knowledge of their crime will help me, I look it up in the state files. I try not to assume anything about the people I work with. I just try to meet them in this moment without making any assumptions. I am not there to evaluate and judge—they have lots of people who fill that role for them. I'm there to help. Moment by moment putting aside my stories and evaluations is good both for my practice and theirs." *Zuiko Redding, Iowa Zen teacher.*

What do you think of volunteers who try to talk like prisoners, by playing "tough" and using inside lingo?

"Don't! You're not being real which will be picked up on in a heartbeat. It will only breed contempt. Nobody respects a fake. Many participants will be disheartened. Just be yourself, as genuine as possible. Those who take a liking to you will respect you 100%. Be real. Be a Buddhist!"

"I always try to see what would motivate someone to use our euphemisms. Sometimes it's unconscious, but that's irregular, as they aren't around us enough to pick it up. Sometimes it may be that they are trying to "get hip" by using street slang, pronunciations, etc., to appear to be something they aren't. Don't."

What do you think is the real intention of most of the volunteers? What comes across?

"To me, it looks like most of them genuinely want to help someone. A lot of time it's a give and take thing where the volunteer is also dealing with his/her issues. But, I think that's great."

"I've often wondered. I like to believe that volunteers have the most noble of intentions, putting others before self. I decided for myself a long time ago that the answer didn't matter to me. A great service is being done for us who are in great need by individuals who really don't have to do it. I'm simply thankful that you do! I don't feel disempowered because of the fact that I'm in need, and am truly powerless. Humility is not a bad word when it is applicable."

Should volunteers become real friends with prisoners and invite them for dinner when they get out?

“Every person is to be dealt with differently and you should remember this as your relationship develops. Should you be a real friend? Absolutely! But that doesn't necessarily mean you want to interact with this individual in society. A volunteer may become a friend to someone they're working with but also realize that this individual may be threat in certain circumstances. Say for example, the prisoner is a rapist, you see he still has these tendencies, and he's coming home soon. Should you invite him to dinner with your family? Of course not. That hypothetical situation is extreme. But basically be a friend—yes—but use common sense just like you would with anyone on the street. Trust is something to be earned—not given.”

PRESENTING MEDITATION & THE DHARMA

"You may find that the cell is an ideal place to get to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings. In judging our progress as individuals we tend to focus on external factors such as one's social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education . . . but internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one's development as a human being: honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve your fellow men — qualities within the reach of every soul — are the foundations of one's spiritual life . . . at least, if for nothing else, the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you. Regular meditation, say of about 15 minutes a day before you turn in, can be very fruitful in this regard. You may find it difficult at first to pinpoint the negative factors in your life, but the tenth attempt may reap rich rewards. Never forget that a saint is a sinner that keeps on trying." *Nelson Mandela, Autobiography*

Simplicity

"It does no good to give prisoners something that is either too esoteric or of no immediate value. Common topics of discussion are practical problems like how to sleep, dealing with depression, dealing with anxiety associated with release, and what to do when they are released. Underlying much of the discussion is denial about their circumstances. I might focus on methods: letting go vs. stuffing it; self-trust; responding vs. reacting; non-judgmental awareness; non-striving; and taming/training the mind. To the brew, I add yoga, breathing techniques, progressive relaxation and a body scan meditation. In all of this, I teach from the heart as best I can. Whenever possible, I get there 30 minutes early so that I can get my act together by meditating alone."

Kinloch Walpole.

- We want to present tools, materials, and teaching that are of practical value to prisoners. Prisoners should be able to begin working on the practices immediately in their cells.
- Our presentation needn't be academic. The teaching we present here should help provide a context for practicing meditation and working with one's mind and one's experience.

Format

- Every institution and group is different. We need to find the right blend of:
 - Introduction
 - Check-in
 - Stretching
 - Meditation Instruction
 - Meditation Practice Period
 - Prisoner Feedback on Meditation
 - Short Dharma Talk
 - Prisoner/Volunteer Dialogue on Dharma Talk
- Most prison meditation groups are in continual flux with new people every week. At times we may have a fairly stable group with some of the same prisoners coming regularly, but turnover is generally high. So we often think of such groups as ongoing beginner's groups.

Introduction

- We should explain who we are, why we are there, and what we have to offer when beginning a new program at a facility and/or each time new prisoners attend our program.

Check- In

- It is helpful to begin meditation sessions in prison with a brief check in. Sometimes prisoners have concerns that they need to talk about before they can focus on meditation or the teachings.
- Check-in also lets you know how prisoners are doing and what their current concerns are which is rich material for dharma talks and presentations.

Stretching or Yoga

- You may want to include a short period of stretching or yoga at the beginning of each session. Basic yoga or Tai Chi stretches are often helpful. However, don't connect stretching or yoga with martial arts—prisons generally don't allow this.

Dialogue

"In keeping it simple, I also try to focus on immediate problems the prisoners may be having and how meditation can help. Case in point is sleep. Instead of getting involved in the downward spiral of "stinking thinking? between 1 and 4 in the morning, I encourage them to start meditating in the corpse pose if they are in a dorm or sitting if they are in a cell and just follow their breath. If that dose not work, then I have them switch to a mantra. In the last six months, I have been able to get malas into all the prisons and so I have them use their malas in conjunction with their mantras. This seems to work as they indicate that even if they spend most of the night doing a mantra or meditation, they are rested when they get up. Sometimes more rested than when they sleep."

Kinloch Walpole.

- After each portion of the session we may wish to check back in with the prisoners. After meditation instruction the prisoners might discuss their understanding of the technique and perhaps refine it. After meditation the prisoners might talk about their experience of the mediation. We can also dialogue about a dharma talk.

Meditation Instruction

- If we are trained meditation instructors we will present as we have been taught. But we might talk with our teachers about how best to present (and possibly simplify) our teaching for a prison environment.
- The technique should be presented simply. Beginning with a technique that focuses on mindfulness is often desirable. There are three general aspects to the technique of mindfulness:
 - (a) *Posture* is how to work with our body and various body problems that may arise during meditation. This includes how we work with pains, itches, etc.
 - (a) *Object of mindfulness* is usually the breath. There are various approaches: awareness of breath coming in and the breath going out, counting of the breath, and awareness of the breath going out only.

(b) *Mind* is how we work with discursive thoughts that arise during meditation. What do we do when we have “spaced out” and are no longer aware of the breath or the body? We may label thoughts or simply come back to the breath and the body.

- Be aware that when we give mediation instruction the participants may not hear or remember the instruction as we gave it. After giving meditation instruction and sitting for a short period it is often helpful to ask prisoners to how their meditation experience was and what their understanding of the meditation technique. We may be amazed how different what prisoners heard is from what we presented.

Other Practices

- We may encounter prisoners practicing different meditation techniques. We should always give prisoners permission to continue with their own techniques. But as we get to know their practices we may want to let them know that while they are welcome to continue practicing their own technique, are advantages to working with a technique and having a live instructor to work with on it.
- Prisoners may decide to set aside their own style for a period of time to practice the technique you are presenting. But this is totally their decision to make.
- Some prisoners may be interested in out-of-body experiences or astral travel. This is understandable. It may be questionable whether such techniques are helpful. Each of us can develop own ways of working with this. We may simply explain the benefits of mindfulness practice and leave it at that.

Working with Prisoners Minds

- Prisoners frequently struggle with difficulty sleeping due to racing thoughts about their cases, conflict with other prisoners and staff, and outside issues, such as family. Make the teachings applicable to the actual circumstances prisoners are facing.
- We may wish to frame Buddhist teachings in a way that encourages prisoners to work with their minds and look at how situations arise.
- We may choose to emphasize the pattern of development of mental states that begin with the first flickering of thought and ends with consequences:
 - *Thoughts* arise.
 - *Mental states* arise from dwelling on thoughts.
 - *Emotions* arise from dwelling on mental states.
 - *Behaviors* manifest from dwelling on emotions.
 - *Consequences* result from behavior.

This pattern is very import in prisoners’ lives. Prisoners often find themselves in consequences and don’t know how they got there. When they do have some sense of this pattern they may feel helpless to change it. Prisoners often feel their lives are a combination of who they are and the forces that are soon to be controlling them.

All of us generally share in this feeling of life coming at us. Often we all we feel life is happening to us and we’re just trying to “deal” with it. We have little sense of how we create and invite much

of what happens to us. The deeper our awareness becomes the more we realize how much we create our own experience and invite certain circumstances into our lives.

- As prisoners begin to recognize this process from thoughts to consequences in their own mind they begin to see a point where they can have a moment of freedom. They may decide not to choose certain behaviors or attachments. When they see this, they find their freedom. This is the greatest gift we can give.
- Meditation is the way to develop awareness of this pattern. It helps develop the presence of mind that recognizes moments of choice. Meditation can help prisoners realize when they are in the midst of a pattern developing to the point of behavior and consequences. They can see this and decide to do otherwise.

Basic teachings

- Many basic teachings can help prisoners further realize the pattern from thought to consequences. A few of these are the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Three Marks of Existence. Any teaching that discuss the nature of ego and how its self centered survival reflex affects ourselves and our world will help prisoners better understand their passing moods and their habitual behavior.
- Particularly helpful in explaining this pattern and the Dharma in general are the three poisons:
 - (a) *Passion* is the attracting of things to us in order to own and possess those things so that we might shore up and maintain our sense of solid self.
 - (a) *Aggression* is the pushing away of things that are threatening to our sense of self and security.
 - (b) *Ignorance* is simply not paying attention to things because they don't seem to enhance our sense of security or threaten it.

With the three poisons we are continually dividing our world into friends and enemies, into what is pleasant and unpleasant. Our continuous involvement in these processes keep us wrapped us in an unconscious, habitual relation to life.

- Some prisoners will be interested in advanced teachings such as Tantra. While we are in the prisons to support the prisoners, we can do this best by encouraging them to learn the basics first.

Resources

- We need not feel responsible for presenting all these teachings. There are many tools at our disposal. Simple, straightforward books by authors such as Pema Chodron, Jack Kornfield, and Joseph Goldstein can be very helpful. PDN publishes an excellent book geared toward Buddhist practice in prisons: *Sitting Inside: Buddhist Practice in America's Prisons* by Kobai Scott Whitney as well as the upcoming *Prison Writings of Fleet Maull* (published in Jan. 2003). Please see the PDN website for details.
- Dharma videos are also very helpful resources. We can acquire these ourselves or perhaps work with the chapel to acquire them. There are many good, basic videos such those by John Daido Loori Roshi (Zen), Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstien (Vipassana), Soygal Rinpoche (Tibetan), and Father Thomas Keating (centering prayer).

Logistics of Prison Practice

- Throughout our discussions we may want to ask the prisoners if they are able to meditate between sessions and how the meditation is going.
- We may also want discuss the logistics of finding places to meditate with the prisoners. Some suggestions we have received are: in dormitory situation top bunks are more accommodating to the meditation posture; empty stairwells and quiet chapels are also good places to meditate; early morning and late at night are good times to meditate.
- There is a power in daily practice. We can encourage prisoners to practice meditation daily, beginning with short, fifteen-minute sessions. We should encourage them to begin with a workable time, so as not to become discouraged. Fifteen minutes daily is often more helpful than an hour once a week. Prisoners will increase their time meditating as they start to recognize its value and power.

A Note for Non-Buddhist Meditation Programs

- Meditation programs in education departments, drug treatment programs, etc. will have to present meditation in completely secular language. We cannot make any reference to religion or Buddhism.
- The method of presenting the meditation technique does not need to be changed. We can still teach meditation and the dharma provided we find ways to talk about them without using Buddhist jargon or buzz words. Some examples might be:
 - While we present a meditation program to the staff as stress management, we can also teach prisoners the habits of the mind and body that produce stress.
 - We can discuss how our thinking invites certain experiences into our lives.
 - We can also teach how working creatively with the self in the world and in specific circumstances helps us become conscious of a way of living that doesn't create suffering for ourselves and others.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH PRISONERS

Pen pals should be experienced practitioners of a contemplative path. We recommend the main subject of your correspondence be practice and study, although becoming friends is vital.

We recommend you not use your home address or give your phone number. Perhaps use the address of your Meditation Center or a PO Box. On the envelope be sure that the Department of Corrections number (prisoner number) is clearly visible. The letter will most likely be returned to you if the number is missing.

Books & Magazines:

Each prison has different rules governing how prisoners may receive books. The prisoners will advise you as to the rules. Sometimes prisons require that books come directly from the publisher or a bookstore, although we generally are able to send books to prisoners directly from Prison Dharma Network, so it's possible we may be able to send books for you (depending on availability).

Books

PDN generally sends books to all prisoners who write us requesting one as well as general handouts on shamatha/vipassana and zazen meditation. We can email you these handouts if you like. Topics in books read provide a helpful way to begin communication. In addition, you could suggest that the prisoner read certain chapters in books available, perhaps asking a few questions. Then you would have an opportunity to clarify understanding in a return letter.

Shrines & Materials

Prisoners are usually limited as to what they are allowed for a shrine. A picture of the Buddha would be fine. It would be great if you could send the prisoner a postcard or a greeting card with a picture of the Buddha on it. Most prison chaplains who write us request Buddhist post cards, so if you could send some to your pen pal that would be nice.

Frequency of Correspondance

Please appreciate that as pen pals we may be an individual prisoner's only connection to the dharma and therefore, it is our responsibility to not fall away from a regular correspondence. If you are due to write a letter but don't have time, it is good to write a short "touch in" note and promise a longer letter soon. Please do not let too much time elapse between letters. The inmates look forward to letters and appreciate knowing they are not forgotten. If you find you are unable to continue corresponding, let PDN know and we will try to find another pen pal.

Prisoners are often starved for contact. It is good to convey our kind intentions right at the beginning. You should not deceive people by unclearly representing your intention (or by not having clear intentions in the first place). It is common for a prisoner to write back to a volunteer very quickly. An untimely response can provoke disappointment and negativity. On the other hand, the volunteer should not feel emotionally blackmailed by the prisoner's urgency. You can work out a balance in terms of timing together. Modulating frequency of response is a mutual learning process.

Requests

A prisoner may ask you to intervene with the Chaplain or his prison for his "religious or legal rights." We suggest you respond that you are sympathetic, and would like to help, but are unable to. PDN does not do any legal support, in our Resource Guide (available online) there are resources for legal aid listed. A prisoner may request

other things of you such as money, help when they are released, etc. Please use your own discretion with requests.

Post Release

Please realize that you are forming a relationship with a person who may consider you to be a great support. Many of these prisoners will be released. Before you begin this relationship please reflect on how you will respond when a prisoner wants to know you on the "outside."

Suggestions for "free persons"

Below is an almost verbatim copy of "*Some Perspectives about a Prison Pen Relationship*" by the Human Kindness Foundation and edited by the Insight Prison Project. We thank them for letting us use it, and making a few changes. We hope it deepens your understanding of one another, and allows both of you to bring meaning to each other's lives.

Guidelines for letter writing:

The following suggestions are written in an effort to facilitate your friendships. It takes into account the unusual situation of this relationship, being that one of you is in prison. A pen-pal relationship between a prisoner and a "free person" is an exploration of friendship. Being brought together by Prison Dharma Network is intended to encourage an exploration of a spiritual friendship. A spiritual friend is your ally in your quest to awaken to what is true. This is a rare opportunity to develop a relationship that is entirely based on choosing to communicate what is true. Please let this be an essential aspect in all that you share. As in many relationships, the depth and meaning of your connection is mainly established by how genuinely interested you are in hearing one another. To practice this listening is perhaps the greatest gift of any friendship. So do not assume that you're now in the role of the spiritual teacher of your prison friend. You both have much to learn from one another. He or she may daily face situations you can hardly imagine, so please respect that and yet don't be intimidated by it.

On the other hand, you are not the loyal side-kick of a larger-than-life "outlaw". Your pen-pal is a life-sized person, no bigger and no smaller, who has positive and negative parts to their personality. The challenge of a spiritual friendship is to be fully loving without supporting or reinforcing each other's self-delusions and vanities.

If you feel sexual or romantic vibes which make you uncomfortable, then do not allow them to build. Please be kind and clear about your intentions and ask for respect. If the situation continues, discontinue your contact and notify us.

If your pen-pal asks for material favors that you feel are inappropriate, please in a clear and respectful manner let them know that you will only send items that relate directly to their spiritual needs. In addition, you are NOT in a position to forward items, contact lawyers, or run errands.

Don't ever be manipulated into suspicious activity such as anything to do with government checks, money orders, forwarding money or mail from your return address, smuggling anything into prison, or lying in any way to anyone. You can bring serious trouble into your life in that way. If your pen-pal respects and loves you, he or she won't put you in that position.

Don't be frightened by your friends or family's panic about possible danger by writing to prisoners. They are human just like you. Use your common sense, and if you listen honestly to your gut feelings and conscience, you may find that this becomes one of the most remarkable relationships in your life. Prison is a challenging environment which can give rise to courage and wisdom.

If you have questions or are unsure about how to handle a situation, contact Prison Dharma Network. We will be happy to assist you or put you in contact with the appropriate person.

These guidelines are meant to inspire some clarity for your correspondence. Please do not feel intimidated by them; it is our fear that separates us, not our clarity. Conversely, when we open our hearts, we free each other, and ourselves.

Suggestions for prisoners(copy this if you wish and send to your prisoner pen pal):

Your pen-pal is neither your guru nor your disciple, but a potential friend. Remember that friendship is a two-way street. This is a chance for you to really get to know your self through connecting with an other human being. There is no need to lie, impress or seek approval. Are you really interested in his or her life, instead of just using them as a sounding board for your complaints or grand philosophies? Your pen pal wants to know you, not be impressed by you. We all get dealt a hand of cards in this lifetime and only a few chances to put them on the table.

Almost everyone in prison is broke, and almost everyone has material needs that aren't being met. But that's not what your pen-pal relationship is about. If you try to make it into that, you will probably lose a good friend. Which will do you more good in the long run—twenty bucks for a radio—or a life-long friend? Your pen-pal may be a little nervous about various aspects of your life and current situation. You don't have to pamper them or hide your reality, but please try to understand their difficulties and help address them.

Remember that everyone in the free world also has problems. It really is true "we are all doing time" one way or another, so both of you can try to help each other see and dismantle those prisons of the mind, which are far more limiting than any prison of concrete and steel. Take time to listen deeply to what is communicated, and let your response come from a place of reflection, not reaction.

Enjoy the gift of it all; friendship, spiritual growth and an opportunity to study the connection between true freedom and self knowledge.

Guidelines for Telephone Conversations

If you choose to talk with your pen pal over the phone, please convey to the prisoner the following guidelines. Please keep in mind that Prison Dharma Network attempts to support thousands of prisoners in their path of Dharma, and as a volunteer and member of PDN, you are a representative of the organization. Although we are certainly concerned with the problems and suffering which prisoners may experience in their lives, and wish to be true friends, we can in no way compromise our ability to continue as volunteers, or compromise Prison Dharma Network as an organization able to help thousands of prisoners in their Dharma path. Therefore clear boundaries must be established on what can and can **not** be discussed over the phone and in written correspondence. Please remember most phone conversations are taped and letters are often read by the authorities.

For prisoners:

Do not disclose to your outside friend any knowledge of the illegal activities of yourself or anyone you know, outside or in. Prison Dharma Network or your outside friend could legally be held responsible if they are privy to such information. Please respect this.

Do not engage in sexual banter or repartee. Your outside friend is committed to helping you on the path of dharma and to being your friend. If you are seeking a romantic pen pal there are numerous organizations that might connect you with such a person, Prison Dharma Network does not.

Prison Dharma Network always has a list of people seeking pen pals. Write pdn@indra.com if you are interested.

PRISON RETREATS

by Kinloch Walpole

Kinloch Walpole has led numerous 5-10 day prison retreats in Florida. Below are some highlights and reflections about these retreats that were originally published in Prison Dharma, the newsletter of Prison Dharma Network in Summer 2002.

Retreats like this alter perceptions, attitudes and lives and demonstrate profoundly how to create less stressful, violent prisons. The retreats are run solely on volunteer energy and donations. The group sits 10 hours a day.

DHARMA TALKS

There was no attempt by volunteers to convert anyone. The program was secular but some Buddhist talks were given. The chaplains were also recruited to give two talks about integrating meditation into their faiths.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews are essential. Each participant had three. There are questions the men won't bring up in front of other prisoners. The interviews had a depth not experienced in previous retreats.

INMATE SPIRITUAL LEADERS

One interesting occurrence at this retreat was the participation of inmate spiritual leaders. Four spiritual leaders from the black community attended. None had ever been to a retreat like this. One of them formerly participated in a centering prayer workshop and came to this event to deepen his understanding of meditation.

SPIRITUALITY

Unlike previous retreats, the importance of spirituality was emphasized by the participants, perhaps as a result of the spiritual leaders who attended.

ZEN CIRCLE

Here we spoke about retreat experiences in a two-and-a-half hour discussion. Forgiveness was discussed as well as brotherhood (the dominant theme).

RACIAL HARMONY

Hispanic and blacks represented over 90% of the participants. Talks were translated into Spanish by prisoners. There was no hint of racial problems. In fact, this retreat had a strong sense of brotherhood particularly between Hispanics and African Americans.

HAP CHONGS

Hap Chong is a half bow with both hands clasped, as in prayer. It is used to say "greetings," "no," "yes," "thank you," "excuse me," or a means of silent communication. Prisoners with retreat experience bowed effortlessly and the new participants picked it up easily. Bowing is something that is not part of the American culture, let alone the prison culture. But by the end of the first day, everyone was bowing freely.

INTRO RETREATS

The length of the retreats has increased in the past two years. But a big mistake was made by not providing an entry level retreat so that people could get a sense of the program and become psychologically prepared for a longer retreat. This was the main reason given by those who dropped out. We intend to hold a shorter intro retreat a month preceding the next five-day retreat.

CUSHIONS

Cushions are expensive but important items for retreat. They set the stage and help create atmosphere, even though

most participants spend 75% of the time in chairs. However, they keep moving towards the cushion and benches (some prisoners made meditation benches in the prison workshop).

COLD

Air conditioning in the chapel made it too cold. Also after 30 minutes of meditation the body temperature drops. Consequently, the inmates brought long johns, blankets and jackets.

PRISONER PARTICIPATION

Retreat planning and organization has been significantly helped by giving tasks, such as kitchen master, to prisoners. Prisoners also helped by setting up the chapel forming the cushions into what we call a "Zen Square."

CLEAR MIND

Dirt and water in a transparent jug in the center of the Zen Square serve as the example of clear mind. The dirt settles to the bottom after a few hours. Occasionally we mixed the dirt to reinforce the point.

PHOTOS

This was the first time FCC Coleman had their photographer take photos. There was no resistance on the part of the prisoners to photos. In fact, they made requests to have photos taken of themselves and the people near them. Previously when photos were taken, press releases were required, and there was some resistance. At one point when it appeared there was going to be a news photographer and television camera crew present, there was noticeable discomfort. The discomfort diminished when it was explained that the photos would help motivate others to try prison retreats.

CAKE

It may sound corny, but serving cake after the Zen circle is important. The circle ends with this social event. It took over a year to get the cake approved—there was resistance because it sets a precedence of serving food in the chapel.

MUSIC

One prisoner played flute during some evening sittings. The music was well received. Hearing the flutes after dark in the cold chapel gave the music an eerie quality. He played slow and notes appeared to hang and vanish into space.

SLEEP

Prisoners commented that they were getting a good night's sleep during the retreat. There may be two forces at play here. First, meditation. The thinking mind is slowed down and one is able to have deeper sleep. Secondly, they slept in the chapel which provided an added sense of security. Also a sense of trust among their companions on either side contributed to the sense of security.

SCHEDULE

Any attempt to make an hourly schedule for a prison retreat is a waste of time. We generally arrived at 7:30am but the retreat would not begin until after security checks and the usual unpredictable variables. Lunch was between 10:30am and noon or whenever it arrived, dinner: 3:30-5pm, and again, whenever it arrived. The retreat finished at 7:50pm, 10 minutes prior to evening recall. The only predictable event was the 3:30pm count which didn't interfere, as it was done without creating a disturbance. During the count the correction officers had a chance to walk into the chapel and observe, which appeared to make an impression.

CREDIBILITY

The program has developed a good level of credibility and respect with the prison staff. We don't have problems with its uniqueness or the equipment we need to bring although security remains strict.

CERTIFICATES

Certificates stating they had completed an intensive five-day meditation retreat which could be placed in prisoners files, will be given.

CURIOSITY

The staff and other prisoners didn't disturb us, but the chapel door is open several times a day and there are a lot of heads that look in and observe our progress. The dynamic of so many prisoners from assorted racial groups in a room for 10 hours in silence is a curiosity. The fact the inmates volunteer for these retreats and no fights emerge, adds to the Many prisoners that peeked in the door seemed interested, perhaps they felt the peace and calm of the group.

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Sitting Inside: Buddhist Practice in American Prisons by Kobai Scott Whitney, a long-time student of Buddhism--and one-time inmate. The book has two audiences: prison inmates who want to start practicing Buddhism and volunteers from American sanghas who want to work with prison dharma groups. The book discusses the basics of meditation, compassion and precept practice within the correctional facility context. Whitney discusses some of the history of Buddhist involvement in American prisons as well as the history of constitutional interpretations of religious freedom as applied to inmates. The book is meant to be as practical as possible and it emphasizes Buddhism in action-- through the precepts, peacemaking and sangha building inside and out. To receive a copy please send \$15(includes shipping) to PDN, PO Box 4623 Boulder CO 80306. Please allow 2-3 weeks for delivery. The book is also available on Amazon.com for \$17.99+shipping. For \$25 PDN will send you a book and donate one to a prisoner.

"I received my copy of "Sitting Inside." I must say I have been in prison more than 21 years straight. When I began doing time, I was given a copy of Bo Lozoff's book "We're All Doing Time." It was a great help to me in finding my way on the path. In between now and then, I have read over 2,000 books and none comes as close to what a convict needs as "Sitting Inside" --it seems to take up where "We're All Doing Time" led us...to keep us firmly on the path. It is a great help to my practice." Ron W. Indiana

"I just received your book today and what I have read so far I am enjoying greatly. Your book fills in a gap and I think that it will be worth encouraging all those who are thinking of joining the ranks as Buddhist prison volunteers to read. There are many topics for discussion there. At our next meetingt of volunteers I will use your book for study." Aryadaka, Buddhist prison chaplain, Washington.

*All of the books listed are available at the Prison Dharma Network online bookstore
www.PrisonDharmaNetwork.org/bookstore.html*

PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

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The Farm : Life Inside a Women's Prison by Andi Rierden

The Hot House : Life Inside Leavenworth Prison by Pete Earley

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PRISON SPIRITUALITY

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Breaking the Rules : Women in Prison and Feminist Therapy by Judy Harden (Editor), Marcia Hill (Editor)

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