

A BUDDHIST CHAPLIANCY VOLUNTEER  
TRAINING GUIDE

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## BUDDHIST CHAPLIANCY VOLUNTEER TRAINING

*May we be clear about our part in supporting inmates in their practice,  
May we know our limitations and excellent qualities through our practice,  
May we fully realize the opportunity of working in the prison environment,  
Doing service as a chaplaincy volunteer  
May it be joyful and of lasting benefit to all that participate  
And may we all awaken, together, in this lifetime.*

*May all beings benefit!*

### INTRODUCTION

A Chaplaincy Volunteer is one of societies most valuable citizens, a valued resource for prison staff and for inmates that want a more whole and wholesome life and to stay out of prison. The worst thing that can happen in this situation is for a sincere and dedicated volunteer is to be walked off a unit for making a silly mistake.

In most of the prison systems in the United States, chaplaincy volunteers are an essential component of any religious or spiritual rehabilitation efforts. Without volunteers, the number of "faith based" programs would be significantly reduced since the position of chaplain has become more and more burdened with administrative responsibilities and paperwork. For this reason it is vital that the volunteer respect some of the particularities of working in the prison environment.

For the prison administration and staff, the number one concern is to maintain security. For the volunteer this can translate as the frequent delay and even cancellation of a class or service event. This can take the form of a unit lock-down, not having an officer available, or even a shake-down in the middle of a session.

The volunteer may feel inconvenienced or even unappreciated, but this is not the case, rank and staff are taking care of the business they were hired to do. Security personnel expect us to keep out of the way and not make their jobs more difficult. Any benefit we offer to inmates is secondary to the security concerns of staff. The volunteer cannot feel offended by being asked to go through a security check when entering a unit, just like the one we go through at an airport when we travel, it is for everyone's safety and peace of mind.

Almost every system requires that a chaplaincy volunteer undergo some form of security training. It's important to take this to heart and not be put off if the trainer(s) have an adversarial tone or attitude about inmates (offenders). For security staff, it's a matter of "us" and "them." This is how they are trained, and for the most part how they relate to inmates. The concern is that volunteers don't "over identify" with offenders and get caught up doing something foolish that can result in a violation of policy that would put the volunteer at risk. This is a genuine concern and must temper everything we do.

There is a clear distinction between being an advocate for prisoners' rights and prison reform and being a provider for individual spiritual training and growth. An advocate is someone that works on the outside to bring about change in the way the prison system operates. A chaplaincy volunteer is working on the inside to facilitate programs that will guide and support the individual offender to a better understanding of themselves.

A volunteer will be exposed to the fallibility and limitations of the system in working with an inmate program, and possibly even be a witness to both the attitudes and actions of apparent intolerance and inhumanity between staff and inmate. A volunteer will hear stories that will break your heart, but we must be discerning and careful in how we respond. We can listen, comfort and even advise an inmate in how to work with a difficult situation, to bring their experience into their practice, and know that this will have the greatest benefit for them, and will sustain them for the rest of their lives.

## GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR WORKING WITH THE PRISON SYSTEM

### *Advocacy and Chaplaincy*

- Advocacy works on the outside with a goal to change prison policy, or to facilitate an individual inmate.
- Chaplaincy works on the inside, in cooperation with the administration and staff, on behalf of individual inmates and the program group to learn how to do dharma practice in the prison environment.
- Know the Chaplaincy Handbook.
- Know and follow policy.
- As chaplaincy volunteers we work in cooperation with and in support of prison staff and administration. When we see fault or don't agree with a staff member, don't be confrontational. Talk first with the chaplain about an issue if we feel action is necessary.
- Keep a positive and respectful attitude, especially when faced with difficulty
- Keep the chaplain informed about what we are doing, he or she is our greatest ally if there is good communication between us. The program will not continue without the support of the chaplain.
- Benefit from the experience and lessons that the chaplain has to offer. Regardless of their religious affiliation, the chaplain is a valuable source of insights on making our program more successful. By earning and keeping the chaplains' respect, everyone will benefit.
- Keep to whatever schedule has been established.
- Show up on time every time.
- Dress appropriately, according to policy.
- Don't attempt to bring in anything except your car keys and an ID without prior approval.

## GENERAL GUIDELINES IN WORKING WITH INMATES

- Never ask why someone is in prison.
- Do not ask an inmate for any personal information.
- Do not offer any personal or contact information.
- Be careful of familiarity.
- Be careful not to violate a confidence (ask chaplain if in doubt).
- Discuss with the chaplain any concerns or knowledge about illegal activity. We can be walked off the unit if we knowingly conceal anything illegal from our supervisor.
- Never give or take anything to or from anyone.
- Be careful to not “over identify” with an offender. We can only sponsor a program, we cannot contact anyone, bring anything on the unit, speak to a family member or friend or anyone else but our immediate supervisor on behalf of an inmate.
- Observe the unique aspects of prison life and culture without judgment.
- Recognize the prison/free-world parallels, there are many similarities.
- Remember that our offering is entirely spiritual, not material in any way.
- Keep the focus on the Dharma, on study, reflection and meditation.
- Stay awake, alert and aware of what is going on around you.

We want to bear in mind that our actions will do more for the long-term success of a program than anything we say. The way we conduct ourselves will either gain or lose the respect of inmates and staff and reflect on the credibility of what we have to offer. Listed below are some basic common sense rules that may be helpful.

### COMMON SENSE RULE #1

What we do for one, we do for all, don't give and don't take anything from anyone that we are not willing to do with everyone.

The most common mistake made by chaplaincy volunteers is to over-identify with an offender. This means to single out an individual inmate for special treatment; to talk with family members; to bring in or take anything out of the prison environment; or to act partial in any way.

### COMMON SENSE RULE #2

There is no material thing in this world that will be of greater value and lifetime benefit than learning to practice the Dharma correctly.

The most beneficial, helpful, skillful and wise thing that we can do as a chaplaincy volunteer is to share the soothing, healing Dharma with interested inmates. By keeping our focus on practice, we model an attitude that will get results.

## WORKING BASICS – THE UNIT CHAPLAIN OR STAFF

- If there are any issues or situations that are in question, always take the time to seek the chaplain's advice and to keep him/her informed about what is going on in your program. As our immediate supervisor, the chaplain is responsible for us, and our program, keep this line of communication open.
- It's good to call in to confirm that “lay-ins” have been done and the unit is not on lock-down. The chaplains phone rings all day long, so keep these call-in's short and sweet.
- Make an effort to always follow procedure and policy. This begins with knowing policy. There is probably a “Chaplaincy Volunteer Manual” available in the chaplains' office. Ask to get a copy and

take the time to study it. It helps to know the meaning of terms like “contraband,” “out-of-place,” and the other infractions that can get an inmate a “case.”

- Remember that in a prison, security is the first order of business – always.
- Schedules are always flexible and subject to change and/or cancellation, even at the last minute. Don't take this personally. Maintain a positive, cheerful and respectful attitude.
- When in doubt about anything, check with the chaplain or your immediate supervisor. Don't assume anything, check with the chaplain just to make sure that what you are doing or want to do meets policy and has their blessings.
- There may be some push-back or resistance from a chaplain, staff member or other volunteer about holding a Buddhist service, our attitude and actions of being positive, cheerful, and respectful will speak louder than anything we say.

### WAYS TO SERVE AS A VOLUNTEER

Whether we are ordained in some fashion or a lay person in the free world, there are two basic formats for working with inmates, as a pastoral counselor or a program sponsor. The pastoral counselor usually meets one-on-one with an inmate, either by making rounds of the pods, or by specific request. A program sponsor holds regular meetings or services with a group. In some systems, a person cannot do both without additional training.

With additional training, one can become, at least in Texas, a Certified Volunteer Chaplains' Assistant, or CVCA. As a CVCA, in addition to being a program sponsor, one performs most of the functions of the unit chaplain such as making pastoral calls, doing interviews that include notifying an inmate of the death or illness of a family member, conducting a service and other duties assigned by the chaplain.

an alliance with a volunteer. This is an opportunity to discuss “not believing” our stories or the identifying ego that tries to reinvent the past, or to judge, blame or shame and reinforce guilt. Our ability to recognize the tendency to tell stories allows us to “Honor what we feel, without trying to change or transform anything.”

What seems like an innocent or touching story can be a manipulation or “Running a Game.” This will happen, someone in the group will attempt to run a game to see how we respond. The rest of the group will be aware of this. We need to be clear and strict about what we will and will not do: Common Sense Rules #1 and #2, What we do for one we must be willing to do for all; All that we have to offer is spiritual guidance, not physical or material support of any kind.

We cannot give legal or financial advice or make contact with anyone in the free world on behalf of an inmate. We cannot bring anything in or take anything out given to us by an inmate. We cannot send an inmate anything in the mail without prior approval.

All this is said because it needs to be said, however, the overpowering experience of being a program sponsor is that our practice will grow, our ability to transmit our practice will grow. We will see the direct effect of practice on the people we work with, see their appreciation and their Bodhicitta commensurate with our own. Our motivation to study, reflect and meditate will increase.

Participants will fall asleep, look around, slump and cross their legs. It's OK for them to get bored. Encourage them to sit with their back straight, the head balanced on the neck and shoulders, to notice their contact with the earth and how they are breathing. This will bring them out of daydreaming or discursive thought. We've gone as long as 45 minutes of silent meditation. 30 minutes is usually about it. It's not the length but the quality of the meditation, keeping it fresh, focused.

It's important to be real, to not try to fake anything. It's OK to "don't know." Here again, stay within your comfort zone about what you are willing and able to talk about. We rely upon our practice to inform us, and when we speak from our practice we transmit what we have received. It works to encourage further study and self-discovery of questions – we don't have to be the "answer man" to everything that comes up in discussion. Invite participants to bring something up in their own meditation to encourage insight and self reliance.

The introduction and discussion of Dharma principles is a big part of any session. There is a good chance that this will be the first time for many members of the group to hear a dharma talk, or to participate in a meaningful discussion of the Buddhist teachings. Sticking to the basic tenets will help the group to build together in their understanding and ability to practice. In this way it's helpful to keep an attitude of "We are discovering the truth of these teachings together," we are learning from our shared experience.

If an inmate does make it too difficult to stay on the topic, to come back to the lesson, then break off discussion by ringing the gong with the invitation of "Let's do some practice." Leading a guided meditation here works extremely well.

What about all of the stories? Group witnessing can be purifying for an inmate, but we are not leading a therapy or counseling session. If an inmate keeps telling stories, invite them to have an interview where you can encourage them to listen more to learn how to practice.

Stories can lead to "over identification" between a volunteer and an inmate. An inmate will tell stories to gain sympathy or to create

With additional training, one can qualify as a Mentor, able to be in contact with an inmate after discharge to provide additional guidance and spiritual support in their adjustment to the free world social community.

### BECOMING A VOLUNTEER

Each state system has it's own guidelines and requirements for becoming a chaplaincy volunteer. These can usually be found online at the system website or by calling the state Chaplaincy Department. In Texas it's necessary to fill out an application and send it in by mail. If the application is approved the next step is to take the required security training at a prison facility closest to you. The training is offered at different places and at different times of the year and usually takes the better part of a day. Once this is complete, your name will be entered into the system computer.

### PROGRAM SPONSORSHIP

The most beneficial, sustaining and satisfying work of being a chaplaincy volunteer is to sponsor a program. This is an opportunity to share what we have been given, to teach the dharma to individuals that have an extraordinary opportunity to spiritually awaken to their innate goodness and wholeness.

How can being locked up in prison, being surrounded by cacophony and negativity, repression and violence be considered an opportunity? An inmate is witness to the barest and broadest spectrum of the human condition, and they have "three hots and a cot" every single day, without the worry of food, shelter, clothing or bills. This does not mean that life in prison is either simple or easy, far from it, difficulty and suffering are everywhere, just what the Buddha invites us to face fearlessly, to recognize deeply, and to transcend.

Here are some guidelines that might be helpful if starting a new program.

## GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR

The best way to start a program is to have a request from an inmate or group of inmates that want to learn the dharma. Another option is to call a prison unit and talk with the chaplain about your interest in being a volunteer. Ask the chaplain if they know of any Buddhist inmates and if it would be possible for you to meet with them. If so, schedule a meeting. Ask the chaplain if they would be willing to have a notice of the meeting posted on each of the pods, or willing to "lay-in" the offenders on their unit that list their religion as "Buddhist." Offer to fax over a copy of the notice to the chaplains office.

Follow up with a letter to the chaplain confirming your conversation and outlining what you would like to do in your program, how often it would meet and what each "service" would look like. Provide your contact information and thank them for their willingness to work with you.

## CREATING A PROGRAM

Develop a clear idea of how you see to conduct a typical session. This might include things like how to arrange the chairs or cushions (a circle or rows), having a gong, doing chants, leading the meditation, giving a dharma talk, having discussion and doing the dedication.

If you want to bring in a gong, images or other altar items, a cushion, books, booklets, prayer books or other materials, be sure and discuss this with the chaplain so that he can authorize you to bring them through security.

## LEADING A SESSION

Establish a format for your sessions and keep to it as much as possible. A regular format creates a boundary from what's outside the room, it creates a place that is safe and inviting for practice. We set up an altar, hang some thanka paintings, take off our shoes at the door, put a chant CD in the DVD player, set out the library books and arrange

the cushions on the floor all to create a "sacred space" that invites reflection, contemplation, calm and intimacy. The mood changes as soon as we walk through the door.

Don't hold back from being a leader, a benefactor and a teacher, someone that has the willingness and ability to offer up the benefits we have received from our practice. It helps to have a focus for each session, a theme or topic for a short dharma talk after the meditation that will lead into a discussion. The topic may influence how you lead the meditation.

You can and will experiment with leading, I have found that it works best to begin with the meditation. I begin by striking the gong and doing a little chanting. This sets the mood, deepens the space for participants to relax, transition into being able to sit, breathe and observe whatever arises as awareness in the mind. Stick with meditation practices that you have practiced with thoroughly, not something you've just read.

It pays off to be prepared, to have a topic for the dharma talk and during the discussion to keep the focus on the topic. The tendency will likely be for a lot of inmate sharing, which is important, but not to the point of one or two individuals dominating the conversation with a lot of personal stories. This is a fine balance, having a topic and guiding the discussion back to the topic does two things; it allows a deeper exploration and understanding of the topic; and it keeps some measure of order so that everyone feels they have an opportunity to participate.

Our actions in leading express our equanimity.

Our actions also express "pure perception," the ability to recognize the buddhanature of each member of the group. Appearances may vary quite dramatically, as they do in the free world, but in prison, the sameness of the inmate dress code can make this even more apparent.

- Be sensitive to what you can do, don't extend yourself beyond your comfort or authorization.
- Keep it simple: Ring the Bell – Meditate – Dedicate – Talk - Discuss – Ring the Bell.
- Keep the emphasis is on basic meditation and basic dharma.