



Buddhist inmates upon release from prison to help with their transition.

My experience is that inmates look to the Buddhist tradition because they realize the only way out of their suffering is through mind development and meditation. I also meet many Asian Buddhist inmates who come from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Their motivation is often more culturally based, and they tend to be very isolated from other Buddhist inmates. I have been able to get monks from their countries into prison to visit them, and they really respond to that. I also try to bring the appropriate material from their traditions.

Recently, I was given a contract by the Washington State Department of Corrections to work officially as a Buddhist Chaplain. This means I can now visit all the prisons in Washington State as an employee. I principally work around the Puget Sound area from the Olympic Peninsula to the Pacific Coast. I drive across the state at least twice a year to meet with inmates in Spokane and Walla Walla.

One of the prisons I visit is unusual in that it has a Buddhist garden with flowers, pond and trees. It is a closed custody prison but it does have these spiritual privileges.

Since I have been able to attend Chaplain conferences, and work inside the system, Christian Chaplains and Superintendents can see the benefit of having someone help them to understand the Buddhist perspective and bring something of value into the system. It hasn't always been easy but I feel that I am helping them to understand the nature of Dharma practice.

But I'm not the only one in Washington State. There are several Tibetan groups involved, along with Zen and Theravada. ❁

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a thousand letters

Tibetan Buddhist nun VEN. KATHIE LOSANG (MANDALA September 2001) works for FPMT's Liberation Prison Project, founded five years ago by Ven. Robina Courtin when a prisoner wrote and asked for advice on Buddhism. Now close to 1000 prisoners have written, with requests coming in at the rate of 100 or so each month. There are also hundreds more who have been to teachings in prisons visited by representatives of the Liberation Prison Project.

It sometimes seems to me, and Aryadaka [see main story], that Buddhism is growing faster in prison than in the outside world; we get such an enthusiastic response from the prison population. If we send one book to a prisoner, it often ends up with 10 or more wanting material and the next thing you know, they've formed a study group. And they don't want just material, they want a teacher to come visit them. Ven. Robina has a very full prison-visiting schedule, not only in the US but also in England and Australia, which she fits in with her extensive teaching program worldwide.

From San Francisco's Tse Chen Ling, Ven. Losang Monlam and Ven. Tenzin Lama are teaching in several prisons in California where the groups represent a spectrum of traditions from different cultural backgrounds (Vietnamese, Cambodian, American, Hispanic).

In Raleigh, North Carolina, Herb Cunningham has been visiting prisons in NC and neighboring states for years. He's recruited other members of Kadamapa Center, and we work closely with them. At the center in Decatur, Illinois, Ven. Chonyi writes to prisoners and has begun visiting, and in Massachusetts, a new monk Ven. Gary Keiser will start soon. We need to set up similar groups all across the country. We're also starting to accept volunteers as pen pals for prisoners.

Ven. Yangdzom of Chenrezig Nuns' Community coordinates the project in Australia. She has developed a beginners' Buddhist course for prisoners, writes to those who request support and sends books and practice materials. And we give financial support to the families of prisoners in Mongolia. ❁

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