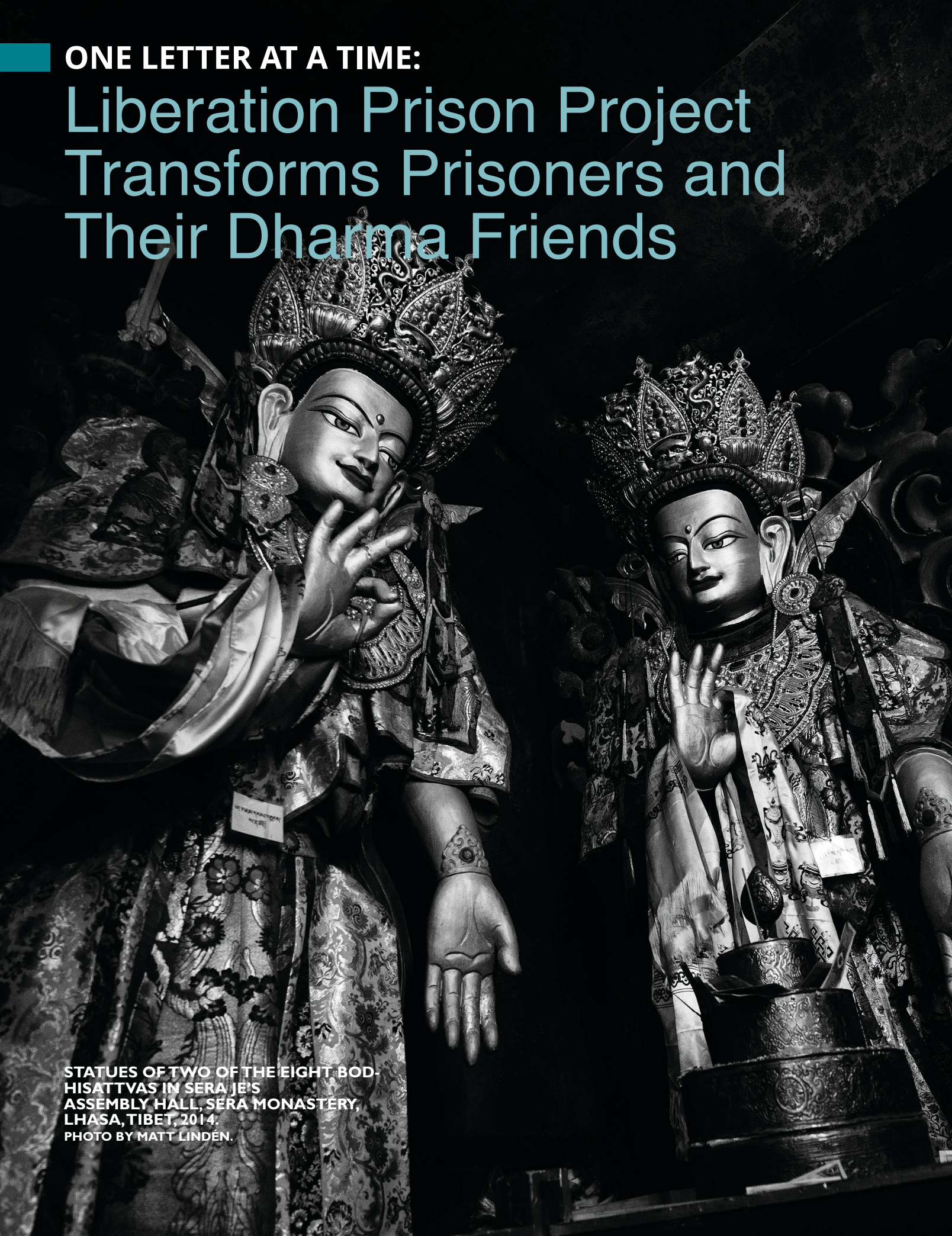


ONE LETTER AT A TIME:

Liberation Prison Project Transforms Prisoners and Their Dharma Friends



STATUES OF TWO OF THE EIGHT BODHISATTVAS IN SERA JE'S ASSEMBLY HALL, SERA MONASTERY, LHASA, TIBET, 2014.
PHOTO BY MATT LINDÉN.

Offering community and social service is one of FPMT's Five Pillars of Service. The Liberation Prison Project is an example of this pillar and illustrates how FPMT students and centers can engage with the world.

Each year the Liberation Prison Project (LPP) receives more than 1,000 first letters from prisoners seeking Dharma advice and resources. Inmates and the Dharma friends with whom they correspond come from more than 20 countries. Some Dharma friends have volunteered with LPP for 15 years or more, others for a few months.

Typically, prisoners don't have access to computers or internet, and phone calls are limited. So at a time when the world is mourning the lost art of letter writing, the correspondence between LPP students and their Dharma friends remains a vibrant and necessary form of communication, creating a precious and unique Dharma relationship, which is at the core of the LPP program.

Around 160 LPP students are currently studying FPMT Education Services' *Discovering Buddhism* by correspondence. Whether studying or reading Dharma books, Dharma friends encourage students to reflect on what they read and its relevance to their own lives, and to ask questions – and they do!

Ven. Sangmo, an Australian Dharma friend, became increasingly bedridden over the six years before her death in 2011. At the time she wrote that “the letters are my Dharma practice.” And so it is for so many of our Dharma friends. Here are a few Dharma friends and the LPP students to whom they write reflecting on this special relationship.

SARI AND SCOTT

Sari Galapo from Switzerland has volunteered for LPP for nine years and has mentored 15 LPP students. She has been writing to Scott Zirus, an Australian incarcerated in the United States, over the past few years.

It is often difficulties and adversity that bring us to the Dharma and this is one thing I have in common with the inmates with whom I correspond. My experience with them has been a huge source of inspiration. To adequately respond to my pen pals'

many interesting questions and discussions, I have had to do much research and have learned a lot. And I am repeatedly amazed at their dedication to practice in spite of incredible challenges, their optimism and positive attitude notwithstanding the daily pressures and restrictions, their bravery and camaraderie, their kindness, generosity, and love.

Scott is an exceptional person, who can really transform difficulties into positive change. He has almost single-handedly set up a Buddhist sangha in his prison, complete with a curriculum, a buddy system for new members, a rotating contribution from members in meetings, a Buddhist library and their very own newsletter. The sangha is growing, other members have joined the LPP program and are also studying the *Discovering Buddhism* course.

I am grateful and touched to be able to contribute to the success of Scott's prison sangha through our discussions on different aspects. It is truly a privilege to be able to support him with suggestions, advice, materials or just encouragement or a pat on the back, which can be rare in a prison context.



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Incarcerated in Texas, United States, Scott Zirus is studying the Discovering Buddhism course. He tells the story from his side:

A few months before my fateful trip to Texas, I visited Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, Western Australia, with a friend and her three children. I found the whole experience intriguing, but it wasn't until I was incarcerated that I read *Wise Heart* by Jack Kornfield and found my path.

Because I had no teacher to take my vows before, I wrote them out and sent them to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I vowed to establish a Buddhist group. In October 2012 I arrived at this facility and was assigned to work in the prison kitchen. I met two others prisoners there who were Buddhist. I told them about my idea and got their unconditional support. I wrote to different Buddhist organizations including LPP for letters of support. It was an uphill battle getting approval, but in August 2013 we had our first peer-run gathering.

We have around 10 dedicated members who meet every Thursday for an hour to meditate and discuss the Dharma. One of the hardest things about practicing Buddhism in prison is that we do not have a teacher. This is why it is so very important to have a sangha community and the advice of a Dharma friend.

It can be a lonely road in prison. Not many people can understand the difficulty of practicing Dharma in this environment. When I got my first letter from Sari, I was very excited. I now had someone I could bounce thoughts off of or ask questions. She has both inspired and encouraged my practice. I truly enjoy reading about her adventures traveling around India and listening to talks by the Dalai Lama. This reminds me there is more to the Dharma than reading books and meditating in my cell. Sari helps me feel connected to the wider Buddhist community. She encouraged me to start the *Discovering Buddhism* course and is willing to assist me if I have any questions or doubts about it.

On days when things feel overwhelming, I often re-read Sari's encouraging words. They give me a sense of motivation when I am not in the mood to practice. Most of all, I have found a sincere friend who I can trust and who has my best interests at heart. For this I am most grateful.

VEN. DROLKAR AND LUKE

Ven. Gyalten Drolkar has been writing to Luke Wentholt in an Australian prison over the past 12 months. She writes:

I was attending teachings at Vajrayana Institute and through Ven. Thubten Chokyi, director of LPP, I started working for LPP, to support the US office. Last year, I took ordination vows and did a Buddhist chaplaincy course. I visited St. Heliers Prison and Cessnock Prison while training as a chaplain.

Working with LPP and writing to inmates has helped me to grow in the Dharma and as a nun. It is a constant reminder that keeps me grounded. I truly love what I do and love being of help – even in a small way – to those I write to, as well as supporting the Dharma friends.

Luke writes:

At age seven, I witnessed the death of my father, and due to the family environment, was not able to properly grieve. None of my family took responsibility for me. At 13, I was put into state care in Western Australia, living with other children damaged by their life experiences of emotional neglect, physical, verbal and sexual abuse. Problematic delinquent behavior was rife. I soon entered the juvenile detention system. Through my own fumbles, stumbles and confusion, I have been incarcerated for 15 of the last 20 years and have just over 12 years to serve on my current sentence.

While serving a prison sentence in Queensland, a friend taught me how to meditate and told me about LPP. He invited me to attend his refuge ceremony. This gave me such a positive mental impression, so I decided to investigate more.

The Dharma challenges me to think with mindfulness. I see now very clearly that every decision that I regret (and I have many) were choices I made without being mindful. It means a lot to have a friend who does not judge you by your past actions alone and can challenge you to use your mind, without forcing. Drolkar's loving-kindness and encouragement to be the best I can makes a difference.

SANDI AND IRVING

Sandi and Will Manson were Dharma friends with LPP for around 10 years. They regularly visited a prison in Lancaster, California, where they met Irving Relova. Will died in April 2014 [see Mandala October-December 2014]. Sandi said:

Irving is the most amazing person; he's in for life without parole and has been incarcerated since he was 19. He is a very serious, consistent and conscientious student who Will and I just adored.



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Irving grew up in the Philippines and after moving to the United States, found himself in prison on his 19th birthday. He reflects on meeting the Dharma in prison:

The world I live in is full of chaos, despair and hopelessness. No matter how much you try to do the right thing, you're always seen as someone who committed a crime and therefore, you have no worth. After years of feeling lost and confused, I came to a point where I started questioning if there was still any morality left inside me. I started looking deep within my heart. This was when I started my spiritual journey.

I wrote to different organizations requesting spiritual books, and all the books I read talked about meditation. I started practicing meditation in the chapel and in my cell. For a few years I just kept on with my practice and reading, even though I didn't have a Dharma mentor.

In 2007 Will and Sandi Manson visited Lancaster. At first, I didn't say much. I just wanted to listen and learn the Dharma. I absorbed everything they taught us, the wisdom and knowledge they shared. The Dharma gave me a whole new perspective. It gave me an opportunity to learn something positive and make a better life, not only for myself, but for those around me. Of all the places in the world, this is where the practice of bodhichitta is most beneficial for everyone.

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LIBBY AND PHILLIP

Australian student Phillip Parkes is well on the way to completing his Discovering Buddhism studies. He corresponds with Libby Mowlam. This is his Dharma story:

At the age of 49, I found myself in prison doing a sentence of 13 to 18 years. I had a very hard time coming to terms with where I was, how I got here and the reality of my life. I ended up in the prison psychiatric ward. I was very depressed and unhappy and saw no point in life. A nurse suggested I talk to a Buddhist nun who visited the ward once a week. I thought, “Well, I have nothing to lose.”

Having a Dharma friend encouraging me to study the *Discovering Buddhism* program in jail has been invaluable. I am now completing “Module 13: Introduction to Tantra.” Without my Dharma friend, I would not have reached this far. She has been instrumental in bringing ordained nuns to the jailed. She has visited me in other jails and arranged for me to take refuge

with Rangjung Neljorma Khadro Namsel Drolma (Khadro-la), who visited our prison Dharma group last year. I feel so fortunate.

Studying the Dharma has given me an inner peace and acceptance of myself and others. Prison authorities are satisfied that my Dharma practice is essential and it is noted in official records. When eventually released from jail, I will continue in my practice, visit Dharma centers and hopefully take the formal step of asking a qualified teacher to be my guru.

MASSIMO AND GRAZIA

Massimo is a student of LPP Italy who organized a post-release meditation group. He shares:

My life has been very troubled. When I met Grazia Sacchi from LPP in 2010, something started to change in my mind during meditation and when we spoke about bodhichitta and loving-kindness.

When I left jail I was very afraid I would use drugs again and return to that world of anger, violence, egoism and hatred. So I looked to the Dharma for help. I used what I learned in meditation classes, like the loving-kindness practice. Lord Buddha's teachings are really useful for everyday life. Today, I can see bad and good tendencies in my mind, just like before, but I can choose which to feed and which not to.

For the past three years I have met regularly with Grazia and another volunteer, Alessandro, to speak about the Dharma. I attended the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Livorno and once he touched my hands. In 2013 I took refuge with Geshe Tenzin Tenphel, and in October 2014 with another ex-prisoner, I organized a meditation group outside of prison with Grazia, Alessandro and another volunteer.

To other LPP students who are still in jail, I can say LPP classes don't make your time in jail shorter, but they do give you a chance to be more skillful and to use that time in prison in a peaceful way. I know that life in a jail is not easy, but when you introduce yourself to inner change, the whole environment around you will change with you, thanks to your new point of view. ■

Thank you to all LPP volunteers and students who sent contributions for this article. We are sorry we couldn't include all of your stories, and we are touched by your overwhelming response.

To host a LPP program at your center or volunteer as a Dharma friend, contact director Ven. Thubten Chokyi: chokyi@liberationprisonproject.org. You can write LPP at: International Office, PO Box 340, Blackheath, NSW 2785, Australia; or USA Office, PO Box 33036, Raleigh, NC 27636.

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