

freedom inside prison



Aryadaka, an American, was ordained 17 years ago. For the last four years he has been working with prisoners in Washington State, USA.

Actually, when my older brother received his appointment to the Merchant Marine Academy while I was in high school, I had the wish to go to the Air Force Academy because I always loved planes and flying. But in those years, girls were not accepted and my vision was not good.

Last January, two cadets attended Ven. Geshe Gyeltsen's weekend retreat in the Rocky Mountains. They went over the Five Precepts and both took refuge vows with Geshe-la at the end of the retreat. I heard that as Geshe-la left the room, he said to one of the cadets, "Don't kill people, but kill your delusions!"

With the current international atmosphere of state power and influence, the belief that a strong military is needed for keeping peace attracts people with a particular worldview. The nature of today's wartime weapons systems seems to encourage an impersonal detachment to their potentially devastating effects. Some individuals in the military who are drawn to Buddhism feel that being with the forces and conscientiously keeping in mind the noble eight-fold path, equanimity and working for the benefit of others is important. I hope these teachings on compassion, and understanding of the nature of reality, will help increase the sensitivity and thoughtfulness of these young, intelligent and energetic students, that there will be positive results for these future officers of the military and others as well.

I'm starting my third year at the Air Force Academy and soon my fourth year teaching in Colorado Springs. I was invited in 1998 to be the resident teacher for Thubten Shedrup Ling, a center established by Ven. Geshe Tsultim Gyeltsen in 1991. After managing a busy center in Los Angeles I am thankful to have time to study the Dharma applying what I learn into teaching and living.

Because I am also working on my master's degree at Naropa University while teaching several days a week, I avoid getting burnt out by trying not to take on too many additional classes or projects. Meditating with the students during an open period when I don't need to teach is very rejuvenating. This way I can sit without the preoccupation of leading the group, yet enjoy the synergy of meditating together. ☸

Prison visitor ARYADAKA is a member of the Western Buddhist Order, founded in England over 30 years ago by Sangharakshita, an Englishman who spent 16 years as a Buddhist monk in the East. Some Order members are full-time meditators living a monastic life; others either live with their families and have ordinary jobs, work full-time in a 'right livelihood' business, or are supported to work at their local center. The Order has about 800 members in 20 countries.

I have wanted to work with prison inmates since I was incarcerated in Scandinavia for two years in 1974. That's when I began my practice. Prison is an incredibly fertile ground for the Dharma to take root.

Since I was able to start working with prisoners, I have met all sorts of people – from murderers to people in for what they call non-violent crimes. Usually I don't get to know the nature of their crimes, except for those in the sexual offenders' unit and even then I don't know nor do I ask the nature of the offense. I do know that most inmates have committed their crimes while on drugs or alcohol.

I have seen amazing results and I am just now working with an inmate going back into society. I am a representative for the 'Way Home Project' headed by Rowan Conrad in Missoula. This Project provides grants to



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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