



HOLY OBJECTS ARE RARE IN PRISON

By Ven. Robina Courtin and Kate Macdonald

Most people reading this magazine, especially if we're involved in Dharma centers, are literally surrounded by holy objects: photographs of our lamas, paintings of buddhas, holy words on prayer flags, stupas on our altar. How lucky we are! With every glance we are inspired and reminded of our potential – and effortlessly create inconceivable merit.

As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, “An incredible amount of merit is created just by seeing a Buddha image. Normally it would take eons to create so much merit.”

People practicing in prison understand this too. But in such institutions, where restrictions on what an inmate can possess are severe and poverty is pervasive, even the smallest item is so hard to come by.

The things that the unincarcerated don't give a second thought to, the incarcerated treasure beyond belief. At Liberation Prison Project we are so moved by their reports: A copy of one of Lama Yeshe's books was “worn thin” from having been read by scores of people; just seeing Lama's face on the cover of a book “saved my life;” a book retrieved from the trash in the chaplain's office helped someone climb out of despair.

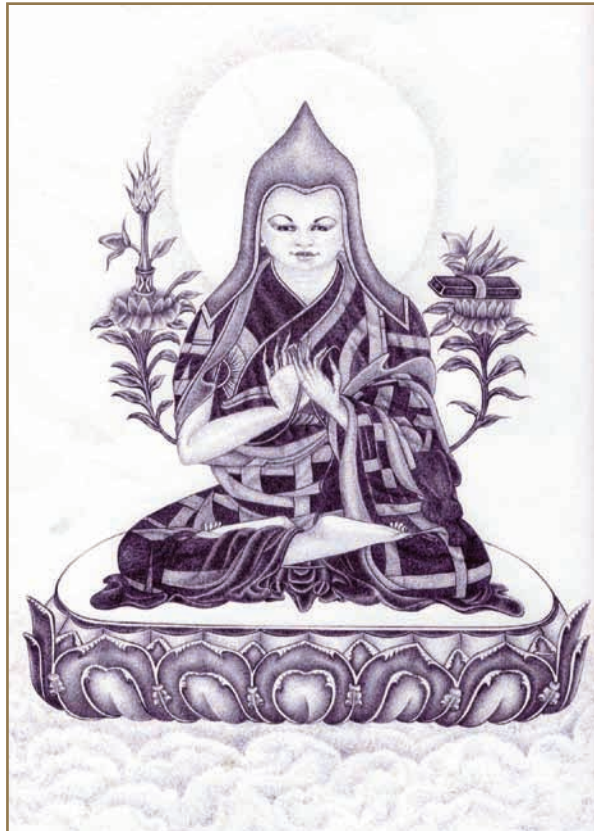
If they have the luxury of a spare foot of space in their dormitories or cells, they might make offerings in plastic cups to a Buddha carved from a bar of soap. This, of course, assumes tolerant cellmates and no unexpected searches for weapons and contraband in which offerings and altars are confiscated or destroyed.

Our students are often compelled to make their own practice items: malas out of Cheerios, incense from crushed deodorant and toilet paper, candles from the wax used to seal toilet drain pipes.

One student who recites *The Heart Sutra* daily told us that he memorized it years ago because his printed copies were constantly removed during searches.

Another won't ever read a single issue of *Mandala* because the holy images of “half-naked” deities are deemed unsuitable by the prison mailroom.

Not allowed to have statues or stupas in their cells, many will circumambulate the stupa logo on their treasured Wisdom books (often bringing the



Lama Tsongkhapa offered by Henry Haro of California's Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit to His Holiness Zong Rinpoche.

“I prayed to Lama Tsongkhapa that anyone who sees, touches or comes into proximity of His image during its journey from here to LPP, from LPP to the residency of Zong Rinpoche, be blessed.”

cockroaches with them).

Over the years we have received hundreds of images of buddhas drawn by our students. In segregation, where they're often in permanent lockdown with no natural light or air and immersed in constant and deafening noise, they are capable of producing the most beautiful and precise images with the inside of one pen (the hard plastic casing is forbidden for fear that it will be used as a weapon).

If making effort is crucial to creating merit, then our friends in prison are heroes. Let's all be inspired by their perseverance!

www.liberationprisonproject.org

The Precious and Wish-fulfilling HOLY OBJECTS OF FPMT