

Meet the Liberation Prison Project

A letter from Arturo Esquer, a young Mexican-American ex-gangster serving three life sentences at Pelican Bay, one of California's maximum-security prisons, to Ven. Robina Courtin sparked an international organization – the Liberation Prison Project (LPP). “I’m writing in hope to be able to receive [FPMT]’s journal on a regular basis,” Arturo wrote in 1996, having recently read Lama Yeshe’s *Introduction to Tantra*. “If possible, I would like to personally get involved in the Buddhist way of life.” Ven. Robina, who at the time was *Mandala*’s editor, replied to the letter, sending along some Dharma books and copies of *Mandala*, and planting the seeds for a project that has supported the spiritual practice of over 20,000 incarcerated men and women around the world.

In 16 years, LPP has offered over 200,000 Buddhist books, magazines, CDs, DVDs and practice materials free to LPP students, their families, and prison chaplains and libraries. Countless letters have been exchanged between LPP students and volunteers. Up until 2009, LPP’s central office was under the directorship of Ven. Robina Courtin in San Francisco, California. Today, Ven. Thubten Chokyi holds the position of director and LPP Australia near Sydney serves as LPP’s central office, coordinating international operations in addition to Australian programs. Kevin Ison, LPP’s resources coordinator, provides administrative assistance in Australia. Timothy Powell covers administrative work in the United States from his base in Raleigh, North Carolina. Together, they handle requests from the 1,500 inmates, prison chaplains and families of inmates worldwide, who write to LPP each year.

The project has regional offices in the United States,

Italy, Mexico, Mongolia, New Zealand and Spain, which manage the local, center-based FPMT programs within their countries. Activities to support prisoners at FPMT centers vary as each center provides services within its own means, capabilities and interest. Centers have offered meditation and Buddhist practice sessions through regular prison visits; correspondence to prisoners to support their Dharma practice; Dharma materials to prison libraries or chaplains; regular volunteer meetings to exchange ideas and share resources for writing to prisoners and/or coordinating local prison visits; refuge ceremonies in prison; visits to prisons by qualified lamas and geshe; and talks to university students about prison work.

“Writing letters to inmates who wish to practice meditation or study Buddhism is the most precious service we offer,” shares Ven. Chokyi. “The vast majority of inmates who write us are male, poor, estranged from their families and have histories of drug and alcohol abuse; their lives are dominated by violence and suffering and many have been involved in street and prison gangs. Most are desperately seeking to transform their minds, to make their lives meaningful, or simply to deal with the harsh reality of the situation they find themselves in.”

The majority of prisoners who write to LPP are based in the United States. However, there are prisoners writing from all the countries with a local LPP coordinator, plus many others, such as Canada, Germany, Indonesia, Thailand and Zambia. At any one time, LPP has around 800 students, both in prison and in post-release, in correspondence. This makes for one very large virtual Dharma center!

For many Buddhists busy with the demands of modern

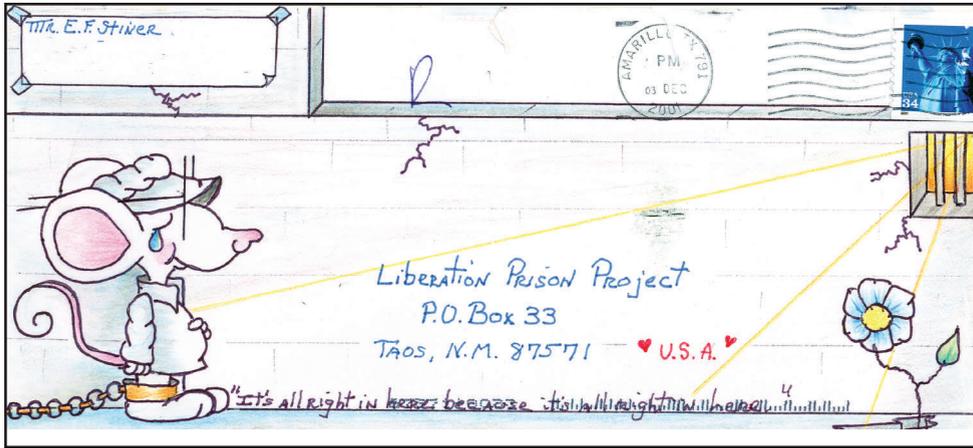


Image by E. F. Stiner, colored pencil on front and back of envelope, Texas, U.S., 2001

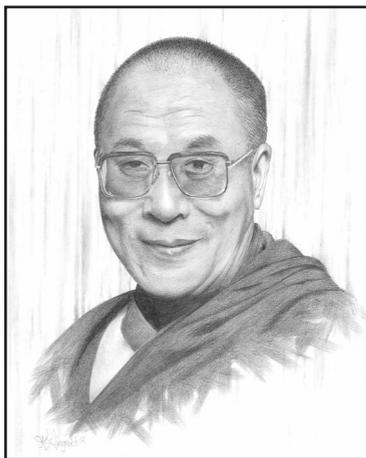
life, it can be easy to overlook people who have been sentenced to prison. But volunteers involved with prison projects can attest to the fact that, prisoner or not, we as Buddhists all share things in common, including an interest in authentic Dharma and finding personal liberation. In this issue of *Mandala*, we've included reports from three FPMT centers with LPP projects as well as several examples of prisoner artwork and a recent essay from an American LPP student. In this way, we are reminded that the FPMT

is an international community that includes hundreds of students serving out sentences in prison and many others offering them support.

To learn more, visit www.liberationprisonproject.org, or write to:

International Office, Liberation Prison Project
PO Box 340, Blackheath, NSW 2785, Australia

USA Office, Liberation Prison Project
PO Box 33036, Raleigh, NC 27636, USA



Progetto Liberazione Nella Prigione (LPP Italy)

By Alessandro Venuto, regional coordinator

The recidivism rate in Italian prisons is 80 percent and overcrowding makes surviving incarceration even more difficult. Normal life there is marked by violence, pain and suicide, and those on the outside of prisons tend to look down upon the inhabitants.

14th Dalai Lama – Tenzin Gyatso by Kenneth Gingerich, pencil on paper, Centennial Correctional Facility, Colorado, U.S., 2007

Grazia Sacchi, a volunteer who visits prisons, once asked a class of children to describe a “prisoner” and they answered: somebody dirty, tattooed, bad, ugly and alone! Who taught them all this? I believe we as a society give them this idea. Prisons, and by extension, prisoners serve as a symbol of what we as a society don't like and what we fear. This view creates a lot of division inside and outside us, which is a problem.

But another way to look at it is as Ven. Khenrab Rinpoche once told me, “Prisoners are like us, the difference is that nobody sees us do what we usually do, so we are still free.” Our LPP volunteers have also arrived at a different

way of seeing prisoners. After a prison visit, they tell me that they were just talking to simple human beings, men and women like anyone else.

LPP Italy is now turning the Wheel of Dharma in 10 institutions, with more than 20 volunteers teaching in groups or one-on-one, and others that teach by correspondence. We also support the collection of essential goods, hosts concerts, organize soccer tournaments and offer the prison libraries books. In May 2012, Geshe Sonam taught for two days in San Vittore and Milano Bollate Prisons to more than 90 prisoners.

■ Taking Care of OTHERS

Volunteers definitely are able to see how our presence changes people. One volunteer shared a story from an LPP student about a time when he had to make an important call home, but the corrections officers wouldn't allow him to because the officers wanted to see the student's reaction. It was very important to the student to make the call, he told the volunteer, and normally he would, in his own words, "lose his mind" if he was denied. This time, however,

the student thought about meditation and what he had learned in LPP class. Instead of getting upset, he controlled himself, saying to the corrections officers, "OK, *non c'è problema*, no problem," and they were shocked. We heard many stories like that, demonstrating the validity of our wish to create a new way to think about prison as a chance for a new life.

| <http://plpiltk.altervista.org>

Proyecto Liberación en la Prisión (LPP Aguascalientes)

In the city of Aguascalientes, Mexico, Centro Bengungyal has worked for almost seven years in women's and men's prisons, both in the city of Aguascalientes and in a facility in a little town called El Llano. In September, Centro Bengungyal makes its first attempt at working in a prison for young people, ranging from 12 to 22 years old. In total, we'll have 76 new young inmates – four women and 72 men – with whom we are working.

Over the years, we have gradually received permission from prison authorities to offer courses as well as books and videos to inmates. Currently, we offer "Working with Afflictive Emotions," a secular meditation program based in Buddhist principles designed to help people work with potentially destructive emotions, twice a year in Aguascalientes' prisons. The group ranges between 20 and 30 participants. Also this year, the director of the men's social rehabilitation center asked us to teach the course to administrative and custodial staff. This required us to share the program a little bit differently from usual because we are working with a group of more than 200 people.

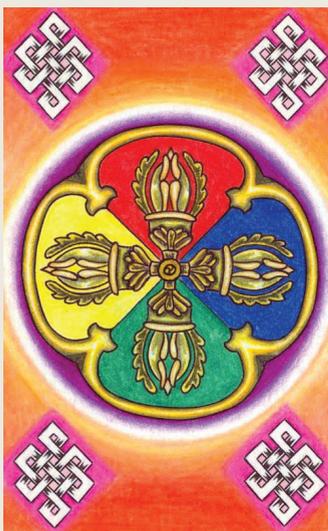
By Rogelio Pallares Valdés, local coordinator



Two LPP Aguascalientes volunteers, Laura Lugo and Rodrigo Jácome

Prison work requires patience and tenacity from volunteers, as well as confidence. Over time, we've seen that attendee participation in our courses depends on the leaders' dynamism. When an instructor presents the course principles well and involves the prisoners, the attendance grows. Inmates comment, "You put us in our place and make us think."

| www.fpmt-mexico.org/html/proyecto.html#dos



I have been receiving *Mandala* as a gift through my teachers and Dharma friends at the Liberation Prison Project. I want to say that each issue is a joy to read and study, and I thank everyone who contributes to *Mandala* in any way.

– Patrick Sluyter, Martin Correctional Institution, Florida, U.S.

Over the years, LPP has offered thousands of free subscriptions of *Mandala* to prisoners, due to the kindness of LPP, benefactors and an International Merit Box grant. However, these funds are limited and many more devoted prisoners would like to receive *Mandala*.

To continue to offer *Mandala* to prisoners and expand this beneficial program, we have established the *Mandala* Magazine for Prisoners Fund. Your generous donations to this fund make a tangible difference in the lives of LPP students.

In addition, current Friends of FPMT have the option of donating their *Mandala* subscriptions directly to an LPP student.

| To learn more, visit www.mandalamagazine.org/support-prisoners/.

"Double Dorje" offered by Robert Page, a Liberation Prison Project student who served a ten-year prison sentence and received a free subscription to *Mandala* during that time. Robert passed away in April 2011.

LPP New Zealand

By Kate Bukowski, regional coordinator

LPP New Zealand has been in operation for four years, sending Dharma books to prison libraries, corresponding with prisoners and visiting prisons. In 2010, we were able to set up some meetings with inmates at Paremoremo, a large prison complex north of Auckland and invited Ven. Tenzin Chogyi, who's been in New Zealand for the last five years, to teach.

Ven. Chogyi began the first session by telling the story of Shakyamuni Buddha's life. About 10 minutes into Chogyi's talk, one of the inmates interrupted. "Hey," he said, "I can't listen to a word you're saying – I don't know who you are, where you came from, why you're here. I don't know your story." "Fair enough," Ven. Chogyi said, and then started telling her own personal spiritual story, the struggles she had experienced, her search for some meaning in life, the promise that the Dharma had given her. As she was talking, this inmate periodically interjected, "*Kia ora, kia ora*, I hear you, I understand what you're saying."

Ven. Chogyi learned that in Maori culture, there is a certain way of introducing yourself at the beginning of a gathering, explaining about your lineage and family background, setting the context for who you are. It is done out of respect. Protocol is of utmost importance, and to establish who you are, you set yourself in context. And this is what the inmates were asking for – without that, they literally couldn't hear what Ven. Chogyi was saying.

For her next visit, Ven. Chogyi arrived at the prison having prepared a *pepeha* (introduction) in Maori, which she recited to the group by heart. After this, the energy shifted a lot and we had a great discussion. Rather than trying to find faults with Buddhism, the inmates were trying to find common ground with their beliefs and worldview. At the end, they offered a *waiata* (song), which is the traditional way of thanking a visitor.

In our second session within the complex's medium security yard, the inmates there also offered a beautiful *waiata* that they accompanied with guitar with beautiful harmonies. One of the inmates translated for us and said that it was all about building a bridge between people. They also offered the traditional *koha* (offering). They had organized ahead of time to collect their fruit and cookies from their lunch, and we were offered two bulging paper bags full of apples and oatmeal cookies. This felt like a really significant offering, as they don't get much to eat in prison.

| liberationprisonproject.nz@gmail.com

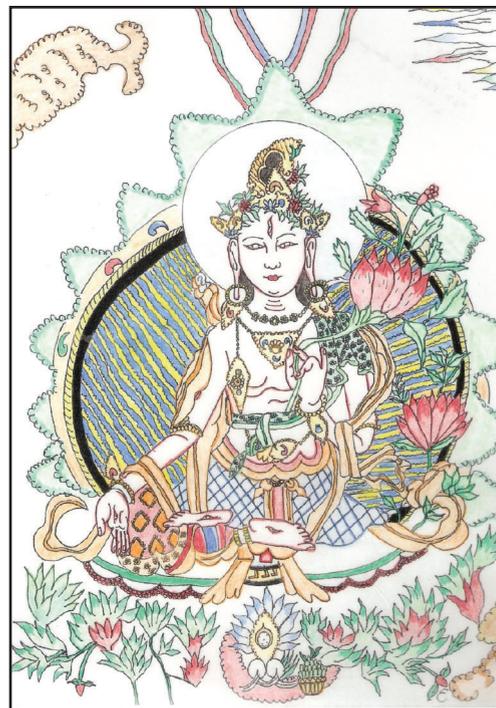
One Breath

By Mario Easevoli

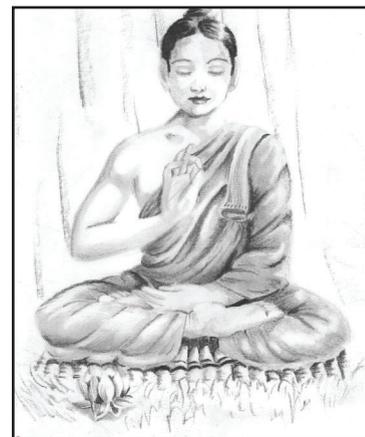
Mandala recently received this essay from an LPP student incarcerated at the Federal Corrections Complex in Coleman, Florida, U.S. We have edited it for length.

There I sit... breathing deeply, caught inside walls that do not vanish before half-closed eyes. My breath finds its way out, over the barbed-wire fences. Freedom of breath cannot be measured, contained, or punished – as I breathe, my aliveness asserts itself. Even laughs at its constraints. Yes, in this place it is an elusive joy; but I feel it now, as surely as I feel the suffering all around me.

Prison is typically an extremely negative environment. The average prisoner usually has serious emotional and behavioral problems, problems which have often lead to his or her incarceration. Prisons, even the "sweetest," are terrible places to live. Many of the things that make it so bad are beyond the prisoners' control. Larger issues,



White Tara by LPP New Zealand student Gareth, water color on paper



Buddha by David Lightsey, pencil on paper, Louisiana State Penitentiary, Louisiana, U.S., 2007

■ Taking Care of OTHERS

such as prison conditions, overcrowding, staff abuse, excessive sentencing and the like, should be addressed. The problem for us on the inside, however, is that usually these things are all we focus on, and, even then, what we do most is complain, doing little to correct the situation. The one area which we are usually loath to examine is the same one over which we have the most control, and which can impact our lives the most: ourselves.

This unwillingness to look within for the source of, and solution to, our problems is not limited to prisons. Prisoners and “free-world” people alike all share the same conditions: being subject to illness, old age, death and suffering. Whether we are in prison or not, we are all caught up in delusion of some sort.

Some say that prison is a monastery of sorts, and I believe certain parallels do exist, but a better comparison might be the Buddhist practice in which aspirants meditated in the charnel grounds, experiencing the terror of death and demons. In this parallel – where there are (prison) demons of fear, hatred, anger, despair and other myriad negative states – we have an advantage, or perhaps, an opportunity, that isn’t as available on the outside.

What one can learn here is that these demons exist within us and are creations of our own minds, born of our delusions. Through meditation and mindfulness practice we can see the true nature of ourselves and reality. It was when I first decided to try meditation at the very beginning of my sentence that I really began to breathe. My heart became less constricted, the Dharma path opened. I grew less afraid of what could happen to me.

As I meditate, deepening my breath, feeling my lengthened spine, I learn to discard my preconceptions and expectations – all of the many hopes and fears and attachments that have given shape to my life. I learned to lay aside anxiety about what I am missing and what I don’t have. Besides establishing a regular sitting practice, I practice mindfulness perpetually, including when gripped by anger, anxiety or any other strong emotion.

Each day presents a new confrontation with reality. Instead of wanting to run, I breathe. Each breath brings with it the freedom to choose my response in that moment. I know that through this practice I can arrive at a place of genuine peace. The path is before me. It is my choice to follow. ♦

108 Yaks: A Journey of Love and Freedom



Liberated yaks after arriving in Rolwaling, Nepal, wearing cords blessed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, September 2011

In 2011, more than 108 yaks’ lives were saved in Nepal through the efforts of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Thubten Jinpa and with support from FPMT’s Animal Liberation Fund and Amitabha Buddhist Centre in Singapore. Geshe Jinpa has released an exciting new video called *108 Yaks: A Journey of Love and Freedom* that tells the story of the 19-day journey made by the rescued yaks from Dhudkunda, Nepal, to their new home in the lush pastures of the sacred Rolwaling Valley in northeastern Nepal, where

the foot prints of Guru Rinpoche are said to be.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche arranged for the yaks to be rescued when he heard they were to be butchered for meat. With Geshe Jinpa’s assistance, 115 yaks were bought and given into the care of villagers living in Rolwaling. The video takes us along on the stunning trek as a team of 22 herders and porters guides the gentle and peaceful animals over treacherous mountain terrain.

You can order *108 Yaks* from the Foundation Store (shop.fpmt.org).