



Affiliated with the Kwan Um School of Zen

622A NE 2nd Street  
Gainesville, FL 32601  
Phone: (352) 336-1517  
E-mail: [gatelessgate@hotmail.com](mailto:gatelessgate@hotmail.com)  
Web Site: <http://www.gatelessgate.org>

## **Modern Volcanoes for Sacrificing Youth - Prisons**

**Kinloch C. Walpole**  
**Bodhisattva Dharma Teacher**

**January 31, 2006**

No longer is the big divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots.' It is now between those we sacrifice to the prison system and those who live off of the sacrifices. The youth of our nation are on the leading edge of the sacrifice.

As a community, we are doing precious little to reverse this situation. We need some creative and inexpensive solutions that address the core problem of avoiding incarceration and reducing recidivism. This is an offering that comes at no expense to the taxpayer.

Life is difficult. However, we have complicated the difficulties by creating a criminal justice system that ensnares our youth and then spits them out as dysfunctional middle-aged derelicts doomed to a life of indebtedness, poverty and misery.

About 25 percent or 8,000 of the men and women the state of Florida sent to prison last year were between 18 and 24 years old. Such young people mature under the tutelage of correction officers and role models from their prison peer group. At the end of their sentence, over 50 percent will return for one or more additional sentences.

The most significant causes leading to the first and subsequent rounds of incarceration are lack of education, substance abuse, lack of employability, and dysfunctional decision making. The state is throwing away the opportunity to address these issues on the first round of incarceration.

If past performance is indicative of future actions, there is no reason to believe the state will re-institute discontinued rehabilitation programs or improve existing programs in the foreseeable future. Since the state won't do it, the question is: who will? Who will undertake the task of providing those youths with the support necessary to overcome the obstacles of both a false start in life and a felony conviction?

The program I am proposing focuses on improving the decision making process involved in achieving a meaningful life, while also providing the opportunity to attain a good life.

Two dictums guide this proposal: The first is to meet inmates where they are and the second is to stay focused on a clearly defined process.

Meeting them where they are means going into the jails and prisons with a program that prepares inmates for their re-entry to society. My experience is that an inmate needs one to two years practicing introspection prior to re-entry. There is just too much confusion and disorientation when a person leaves prison to integrate them into an intensive re-entry program of this nature without a firm grounding in the practice of introspection.

The second dictum addresses the decision making process of choices between the good life and meaningful life. A good life can be characterized by having the wherewithal to live, but a the meaningful life is having something to live for.

Knowledge-based programs address education, employability and substance abuse and are essential for attaining the means to a good life. Decision making focused on a passionate desire to acquire the means for a good life is often a formula leading to prison.

Becoming aware of the distinction between having the means for a good life and a meaningful life is only the first step in the wisdom journey. The second step is the practice of intense introspection required to embark on the road to a meaningful life. This is a journey that can not be intellectualized by talking the talk. It can only be attained by walking the walk and a tough walk it is. The premise that guides the walk is: we are not born with meaningful lives but must attain them.

There is no reason to limit programs of this nature to people coming out of prison. Students, veterans, and professionals floundering in meaningless lives can and should be included in the mix. Meaningless lives are often characterized by failed marriages, substance abuse, deaths, depression, sicknesses and skirmishes with the law. Anyone can benefit from a support group and the ensuing synergy contributes to the wisdom journey.

The setting for this journey is a residential Zen Center. Similar centers operate in Providence, Cambridge, Hartford and Los Angeles. In a Zen Center, we see clearly how our opinions create problems by coming between us and the situations in which we find ourselves. When we let go of these opinions, it is possible to live our everyday lives with clarity and harmony.

Similar results can be attained by substituting Christian for Zen and centering prayer for meditation. The key lies in a community where everyone comes together once or twice a day in the practice of introspection be it contemplative prayer or meditation.

The practice extends into all phases of community life. Everyone shares in the tasks of cooking, cleaning, maintenance and community service. Learning to integrate community living and the practice with education and employment creates the combination that prepares people for a meaningful life.

Of particular relevance to all participants is these communities provide an inexpensive way to live. Program expenses do not exceed the capacity of what a resident can support thru part time employment. Additionally, if the mortgage is paid then what would equate to the mortgage payment can be returned to those residents engaged in the acquisition of knowledge as tuition assistance. This assistance can be used for GED training, vocational programs or college classes at UF or SFCC. In any event, these facilities are totally self-supporting or they cease to exist.

On the surface, this program sounds easy. Integrating work, education and introspection is hard enough, complicating this with recovery from substance abuse, court costs, restitution and community service requires a self-discipline few have had the opportunity to experience. It is a hard pull made harder by knowing that quitting is an option every step of the journey. As with the phoenix, the road to a meaningful life begins in the fire of transformation. The tragedy is few are willing to help those willing to embark on the journey of transformation.