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Working with those at risk

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Prisons may leave much to be desired but for the most part are a well ordered and safe experiences for volunteers. Almost half of the residents of the Cambridge Zen Center have been out to the prisons in Shirley, Massachusetts at one time or another in the role of a teacher. This has been a learning experience for both the residents and inmates. The one general comment after the visit common to all residents was they found many of their initial fears unfounded. That does not mean there is not an element of danger. Caution is always necessary. Most prisoners willing to undergo a period of intensive growth do not appear likely to cause trouble now or later.

I would like to share some of my experience in the hope that it will motivate others to become involved in teaching Buddhism to those at risk. Many of my observations are based on my own growth and my own situation while dealing with this population. What works for me may not work for everyone else; but I offer my experiences in the hope they will serve as something to build on.

My initial career was that of an Infantry Soldier (8 years with the Marines and 16 in the Army). After I retired, I got a Masters Degree from the University of Florida, and then started my own business in Information Management and Database Design. At about the same time I became involved in volunteer work. My first major projects lasted 4 or 5 years. I worked at a medical clinic for the rural poor, and also at Hospice. Then I moved to the Cambridge Zen Center where I was involved with the two prisons at Shirley and also taught meditation with Janet Pushkal at the Cambridge Psychiatric Social Club. In 1996, I started teaching meditation at the Suffolk County Jail one day a week as part of an interfaith project. That program evolved into an 8 week program that ran five days a week. It flies under the cover of the 11th step (recovery comes through prayer and meditation) of the 12 steps. It is based on the Jon Kabot-Zinn 8 week program on Stress Reduction and Pain Control as taught at the Medical Center of the University of Mass. (where I interned at in the fall of 1995).

The single principle that underlines every class, meeting or gathering is to find out what is needed at that moment by the group and then provide the medium for the need to be fulfilled. A good way to start is with a 5 or 10 minute question and answer period where I give everyone an opportunity to say something. Then we sit in meditation for 30 minutes or longer. Again I ask for questions and from that dialogue a short talk unfolds. I directly link and build the talk on to some basic tenet of Buddhism. To close, questions and answers and as time permits, more sitting is offered.

The Jon Kabot-Zinn course has been the single greatest influence in the presentation method. It was there that I picked up the technique to find out where the group is and teach from there. It does no good to give them something that is either too esoteric or of no immediate value. The single greatest common denominator are practical problems like how to sleep at night, how to come out of depressions, how to deal with the anxiety associated with imminent release and what to do when released. Underlying much of the discussion is a great deal of denial about their circumstances.

Consequently, I focus on the Four Noble Truths, The Heart Sutra, Wheel of Life, the Three Jewels and Karma. I also focus on strategies like: letting go vs. stuffing it; self-trust, responding vs. reacting, non-judgmental awareness, non-striving and taming and training the mind. To the brew I add some yoga, lots of breathing techniques, progressive relaxation and the body scan. In all of this, I teach from the heart as best I can. When ever possible, I get there 30 minutes early so that I can get my own act together by meditating alone.

One of the most important considerations is your own motivation and performance. Make no mistake about it, you will become a role model. Every action of yours will be observed, not as a form of criticism but

because you are the only model the inmates will have that is associated with Buddhism. This came home to me with particular clarity one day when I happened to move my foot while sitting. Immediately after the sitting, they all commented, it was the first time they had ever seen me move in 20 months. You may not have to be a statue but be aware the scrutiny is intense.

Everyone dealing with an at risk population needs to be alert to those that are on strong medications. These "Mentally Challenged" present a host of issues that are out of the scope of this paper. However, there are a couple general rules I have used with these individual. I present meditation as a complimentary strategy and never as an alternative to their medications. I also encourage them to inform their therapist that they are engaged in a meditation program.

Getting a program started is less intimidating than it appears. Bear in mind funding for prison programs is minimal. Consequently, program directors are very receptive to all offers. Many may not be very receptive to Buddhism per se. However, Buddhism is a very dynamic form of spirituality that can fly under many flags. The mental health people are always looking for ways to reduce the stress levels of at risk prisoners. Recovery people are always open to having someone come in to teach the meditation portion of the 11th Step. Program directors are always on the lookout for volunteers to teach almost anything. Chances of selling a program increase astronomically if you point out that practitioners should reduce the demand on medical services and have diminished discipline infractions. These programs could also provide you with a nucleus to form a Sangha at a later date. Once you have been vetted and have established the basis for a Sangha, your chances of getting it approved increase considerably.

There are always unexpected circumstances with which to deal. This is where my own practice has been critical. Make no mistake, in this business, nothing is as it seems. There have been times when I have sat alone because the staff has not released the prisoners. There have been times I have traveled out there to find everything closed down because as a volunteer you are never notified. This is a great opportunity to build on my individual practice of "just doing it" and watching my mind. As I look back, two things happened every time and incident of this nature occurred. The first and most important is that the inmates seem to know that I was there. The second is that there has always been a reason for everything and none of it had to do with me.

Trust is the single biggest and most multifaceted issue. Trust between the staff and you, the guards and you and the inmates and you. Most situations are quickly resolved by following the institutional rules and doing what you are told when you are told. By taking the time up front to learn all the rules by heart, one can avoid many of the institutional friction's and simplify the initiation of a new program. At least once every two weeks or so, I talk to the program director and keep him/her aware of everything going on, and to pass all materials for the inmates in the program through them. Consequently, I have been granted almost everything I have asked for. Additionally, I have found out that these people have some discretionary funds that they can spend on your program. They can get permanent rooms for you and become your advocates. By following the rules with security and establishing rapport, you can get into the prison easier and they will become attuned to your program requirements. I have gotten a lot of help from them but only after they got used to me. If you are in doubt about a correct action, ask the inmates, guards or program people. Violate the trust of anyone single group and your program is dead without reprieve.

What happens when an inmate is released and shows up at the temple to participate in practice? I suggest the first and most important thing to do is say hello and wont you come in to practice. When this happened to me for the first time, I was speechless. However, there was a Senior Dharma Teacher next to me who took the situation over seamlessly and invited him in to practice and have dinner as it was dinner time. The Cambridge Zen Center has never had an incident associated with inmates after release. That does not mean it wont. These people need the fellowship of the Sangha. In most cases, it is the only place they can go where they can be themselves, find new friends, learn and practice new behaviors. This is also good practice for the Sangha in Buddha nature and maintaining boundaries which in turn is also good training for inmates. Remember, these people do maintain contact with their friends on the inside. If your dogma does not hold up on the street they will find out and you will loose a lot of credibility if not your inmate Sangha.

A very careful distinction needs to be made not only between a residential temple such as the Cambridge Zen Center and a Dharma room that may be in someone's home. In the Cambridge Zen Center, everyone is allowed to practice during regular practice periods. However, inmates from any state institution are required to be out a minimum of one year before they are considered eligible for a residence. Both the general public and inmates are not allowed into the residential areas without escorts. This is because the center does not

have an appropriate staff or experience to deal with those special situations. A Temple that is a part of a private residence with children needs to carefully explore all the associated issues of prison work prior to becoming involved in any kind of prison program. Any Temple or Dharmaroom that has an open door to the public has certain risks. Recently released inmates may or may not compound that risk. To be aware of the risks and have procedures in place to address them reduces many of the problems before arise.

The best way to attract people to your program is having someone on the inside to talk it up and pass the word. However, every facility has a bulletin board. A little creativity and some brightly colored paper will go a long way to getting inmate attention. It will also sensitize the guards to your schedule. Make sure you include the who, what, when and where. I usually replace them every 60 days or whenever anything changes such as location, date, and time. I also include the address of the Zen Center in case someone wants to write. The images in Mel Ash's "The Zen of Recovery" are very good for special effects on the posters. Remember, every poster is a commitment and there are no exceptions.

Almost nothing ever happens the way it is supposed to. So don't get hung up on form. If people don't get there on time, don't remember what they are supposed to do, are uncomfortable with something or institution rules don't permit it, move on to the next step. Anything that can move them closer to their center is OK. It is critical to remember that they have to stay there when you leave. So don't take something away from them until you can put something in its place.

About books, papers, tapes, VHS and tapes, there are a number of Buddhist groups that will make all this stuff available to prisoners at no cost or great discount. The only question whether to give them directly to the prisoners as part of their study material or turn it into the library. My suggestion is both depending on the institutional rules. Putting some of the material into the library may attract new inmates to the program that otherwise will be out of the net.

Once of the greatest assets is other spiritual programs. I have never met one pastor, chaplain, rabbi or whatever that has not been willing to help in any way they could. I also encourage people to be seen talking with other faiths. Other chaplains will support your meditation programs by sending people under stress, announcing your meetings and most of all relieve fears in some inmates about idol worship. Some of the better established programs have equipment that you may need on occasion.

More than anything else, I am not nearly as together as I sound. Nothing is as hard and fast and these comments and suggestions have worked for me. Each inmate Sangha, facility, and teacher is not only unique but they are all dynamic in that they there is constant change among the three. Be attuned to it and adapt to what ever happens while always maintaining your direction.