

## **PRISON MEDITATION GROUPS**

**(research by Connie Kassor, Buddhist Peace Fellowship Prison Project)**

Ministry helps individual prisoners develop skills necessary to meet the everyday violence in prison, and to lead productive and satisfying lives while in prison and post-release. While the idea of starting to work inside may seem daunting at first, the rewards gained from the experience are well worth the effort. This handout will help your chapter in starting its own prison dharma work on the inside. Use it as a guide, but keep in mind that rules and procedures vary widely from institution to institution; you may need to be creative in finding ways to start your own group.

### **STARTING A GROUP**

The first, and sometimes hardest, step in doing a meditation class inside a prison or jail is getting in. We often joke with the prisoners that it's almost as hard to get *in* as it is to get *out*! You will find that it may take a long time to get a class started, so actually the prison work starts right then – with patience practice. Working inside requires us to draw upon that practice frequently. The wonderful thing about it is that we can use all the frustrations about working inside to help us gain empathy for what all the prisoners are going through every minute they are incarcerated.

### **Getting Inside**

Sadly, few meditation groups have been started by simply walking through the front door and asking the warden. And -- if the warden says no to your proposed program, then it absolutely cannot be done. But if you start by asking other prison staff under the warden, such as the chaplain or the head of recreation (see below), your chances improve greatly. If they say yes, you have a better chance of getting your program approved, and if they say no, you can always go over their heads and ask their supervisors.

Practically speaking, here are some strategies:

1. If you are already volunteering in a certain jail or prison, notice which staff members seem particularly caring about prisoners' needs. This might be a program teacher (if the institution has programs), the community resources manager, a chaplain, or a psychologist – or even a correctional officer (the name “guards” prefer to be called). It usually works better to keep a low profile, because staff members who oppose classes for prisoners may otherwise become energized to work against the class you want to start. Often the rationale used in those cases is that they see classes as unnecessary coddling and free perks, which don't fit with their idea of punishment. They may also be concerned about security breaches.
2. If you have correspondence with any prisoners in the prison where you want to work, ask them who on the staff might be willing to support your program, and who to avoid. The prisoners usually have a better idea of this than anyone else, and it will greatly improve your chances of getting a program approved.
3. It may be easier to offer a general “stress reduction” class that focuses on meditation and yoga than to start a class that is explicitly affiliated with Buddhism; some prisons refuse to recognize Buddhism as a religion and will not allow any organized forms of it to be practiced. Although this is illegal, it still happens in possibly the majority of facilities. When this is the case, usually only a lawsuit by a group of prisoners will get this practice reversed (upon appeal), such as has happened in New York State. However this process takes years, and need a number of elements to come together, including a lawyer willing to do the case pro bono and a group of prisoners who feel strongly enough to go through a lengthy court process like this.
4. When planning the content of your classes, spend as much time as you can listening to people, especially when starting your program. Your proposed ideas may offer too much or not enough for the people involved. If you take the time to listen and respond to

people's needs instead of trying to impose your own set program in the institution, you are more likely to get a group approved, and have a more successful group.

5. Do some research before hand. Talk to people in the mental health, religious, and community services departments of the prison to see how groups generally operate. Research currently existing programs in the prison, and see if your proposed group can relate to any of these. It's sometimes easier to piggyback off of an existing group than it is to start up a new group from scratch. If other religious groups currently have programs inside, try to sit in with them on one of their meetings. This will give you a good sense of how the prison operates, and what to expect inside.
6. Once you have spoken to people who seem to be receptive to your ideas, you may want to write a proposal to the head of the department through which you will be working. Include an outline for a typical class, a thorough explanation of your goals, and the ways in which meditation/yoga/stress reduction can benefit prisoners. You may be asked to perform a demonstration class for some members of the staff.
7. Often the most powerful strategy is for prisoners to request the class in writing *and* have a sympathetic staff person support the request.

### **Class content**

It's often wise to keep your proposed plan simple. Aim on one, or maximum two, goal(s) for the program, and limit it to a fixed amount of time (such as six weeks) especially at first. After the initial period, talk to the prisoners, prison staff, and volunteers to see how they felt about the program, and make necessary adjustments.

Prison Meditation Network classes vary in content and format. Below we list a sampling of various formats we have used:

- 90 minute stress reduction class: 20 minutes mindful movement or yoga; 20-30 minutes sitting meditation; 35-45 minutes of check-in around the circle plus meditation questions and discussion.
- 60 minute stress reduction class: 20/20/20 yoga, meditation, check-in and meditation questions.
- 90 minute stress reduction class: 15 minutes mindful movement or yoga; 20 minutes sitting meditation; 10 minutes check-in; 30 minutes short inspirational reading, then prisoners write in their journals; and 15 minutes of prisoners who want to read out loud what they wrote.
- 90 minute Zen class: chants, including Heart Sutra; 30 minute sit; chant; dharma talk; dharma discussion.

### **WORKING WITH VOLUNTEERS**

It is important to be careful when selecting people to work on the inside. All volunteers must have a thorough knowledge of what they are teaching, and must be willing to abide by the strict rules that prison administrators set forth. If they do not, the prison may not only bar them from returning; it may also decide to end permission for the whole program to come in. Most of the rules are based on the prison's perceived security needs. Although we might not agree that a certain action we are doing actually will create a security risk, we have found that prisons are generally rigid in their enforcement of their rules. Moreover we might even get prisoners who associate with us in trouble, which could add time to their sentence, or have other consequences. This is not the place to start doing prison advocacy work!

If you know of any other prison meditation groups in your area, see if you or some of your volunteers can sit in on a few meetings with them to see what they ask of their volunteers. There are also several groups, such as the Prison Meditation Network (PMN), that screen and provide

limited training for volunteers who want to run a group inside. The PMN is happy to provide copies of their volunteer application, as well as “Frequently Asked Questions” handout.

We in the PMN have found that volunteers should have at least 3-5 years of daily personal meditation experience, as well as be able to handle working in a prison environment. Prisons are disproportionately populated by people of color who come from poor and working class backgrounds. Plus prison cultures are harsh and defined. So hopefully volunteers will have a variety of skills:

- Experienced and comfortable in relating cross-culturally;
- Able to maintain some clarity about why they are doing this work;
- Ability to teach the meditation and movement skills as well as answer questions about both topics;
- Capacity to connect with the prisoners in this environment;
- Ability to facilitate the group so that it is as safe and supportive a learning environment as possible for everyone in it.

Once you have a solid foundation of experienced prison volunteers, you can begin your own screening process for new volunteers. Experienced volunteers can serve as mentors to newcomers who would like to lead groups as well. A new volunteer who is not as experienced could begin by facilitating a discussion on a particular reading or tape (if you are allowed to bring in tapes).

### **WHAT TO EXPECT**

Some prisoners may come to the group with expectations that are different from your own and will not want to go along with your agenda. Sometimes this is because a class is mandatory (this always is harder on class facilitators). It may also be because you are working in a jail, and newcomers are still detoxing from active drug use on the streets. The detoxing process takes variable amounts of time; up to weeks depending on the combination of substances the person was using. It might be because a prisoner is feeling embarrassed at doing something that seems “soft” and s/he is worried about maintaining a strong image among peers (there is significant pressure to do this inside). However, many prisoners are willing to learn the techniques that you are teaching and will be eager to participate. A surprising number will know something from the media about meditation or yoga though often their information is not what one might call traditional practice! Sometimes the people who seemed the most uncooperative at first keep coming back, and later express gratitude at how their lives are changing.

As a volunteer, you will probably not command the same kind of attention from prisoners that paid staff members do. Paid staff, especially correctional officers, determine many things about a prisoner’s day-to-day life. It makes sense for them to obey C.O.’s as much as possible. However we have noticed that often prisoners are extremely moved by the fact that we go in as volunteers. It counteracts their shame about being incarcerated to know that people who have a choice actually choose to spend a few hours working them each week or month. Remember that your attitude will affect your interaction with others. Prisoners need to have finely honed bullshit detectors in order to make it inside. So it is very important to be real. Plus if you are open and flexible, while maintaining your values, and if you listen to what people inside have to say (without believing all of it!), you have a better chance of earning respect from prisoners.

Make your role as a teacher clear from the beginning of the program. Prisoners may try to manipulate you in seemingly inconsequential ways (such as asking for small favors), but these minor requests can become bigger over time. It’s best to say no to these requests right from the beginning, so that neither you nor a prisoner is put into an awkward position. In our experience all jails and prisons forbid volunteers to bring in “contraband”, which can range from bringing in

a book, pen, chewing gum, or anything larger as well. We get everything we need to bring in cleared by the jail or prison in advance (in accordance with their specific rules), and then do not bring in anything else. And we always take out what we brought in unless we got specific permission to leave a book, for instance, inside.

Often, the prison administration places a low priority on programs such as meditation groups. For one reason or another, they may not inform prisoners about a scheduled class, or not allow prisoners to participate in a class. Try not to get discouraged; rather use this as part of the whole practice. Teaching a class to one person is just as important as teaching it to ten people. And showing up reliably is very important to the prisoners, even if they are not in your class. They will notice, and tell others if you are always there. Most have had so many crushing disappointments in their lives, and have come to expect to be let down repeatedly. So when someone actually shows up reliably it is tremendously healing.

If staff members or other prisoners treat you disrespectfully, try to bring that into what you are teaching and use it as grounding for your practice. Remember that the prisoners with whom you are working have to face this same disrespect and hostility every single day. Appreciate the experience of such challenges; it will give you more empathy in your work with prisoners.

It is important to not have too many expectations as to how a class will go; sometimes things run smoothly, and sometimes they don't. This is all part of working on the inside. There isn't any one particular way to run a group; the key is to be flexible and willing to make changes as obstacles arise.

### **VOLUNTEER SUPPORT**

Having a sangha, and/or group of other volunteers doing similar work, can help you all sort through the feelings and uncertainties that inevitably arise doing this kind of work. You can talk through problems that come up in class, or prisoners who you find difficult to deal with. A monthly support group, where you all sit together, and then talk about the classes inside can be helpful. You may also want to bring in people to train your group in various areas: different kinds of mindful movement, including yoga; group dynamics; race and class diversity issues; how to teach; etc.

### **PERSPECTIVE**

Don't forget that prison dharma work is fairly new, and we are all figuring things out as we go along. Reading whatever has been written plus attending to your own experience and talking with others can add to the body of what we are collecting in this important field.

### **RESOURCES**

1. Prison Meditation Network handouts (free) on:
  - Frequently Asked Questions
  - Volunteer application form
  - Quaker women's handout for women volunteers working insideEmail [prisons@bpf.org](mailto:prisons@bpf.org) for copies of any or all of these.
2. *Sitting Inside: Buddhist Practice in American Prisons* by Kobai Scott Whitney  
Available from the Prison Dharma Network, for \$15 from PDN, PO Box 4623 Boulder CO 80306. Please allow 2-3 weeks for delivery.
3. Booklets called *Doing Your Time with Peace of Mind: A Meditation Manual for Prisoners*, by Doug Booth. Available in English and Spanish from Heart Mountain Prison Project. Email [dougbooth@cybermesa.net](mailto:dougbooth@cybermesa.net) for more information.