



Prison Mindfulness Institute

**Volunteer
Training Manual**

by Kate Crisp

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This manual is a work-in-progress.
Please contact us with your suggestions or additions.

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Table of Contents

Getting Started	Page 4
Benefits of Meditation	Page 5
Where to Enter	Page 6
How to Enter	Page 7
Once Inside	Page 8
Presenting Classes	Page 10
Retreats	Page 16
Advice from Prisoners	Page 19
Learning the Facts	Page 23
Bibliography	Page 31
Correspondence	Page 36

Getting Started with Prison Mindfulness

“We enter this world with an often dubious view of our ability to make a difference. Prison is a hard world of boredom and loneliness, but it is a fertile ground for the teachings. Nowhere does the path seem as random as it does behind bars. Prisoners make their way alone through some very rough terrain with very little guidance, but they are driven by the immediacy of their isolation and pain. To teach in this environment is to encounter your own mind in a vivid way. It challenges us to go beyond credentials and present the ‘straight’ truth as we heard it from our teachers. The result is a mutual project between the teachers and the prisoners. Sometimes everything clicks and we see the power of the practice happening. Sometimes we soften. We stumble often. Sometimes everyone gets the humor, including the teachers. The atmosphere changes from moment to moment. It is always intense and full of need, so that we almost always teach from the point of view of the ‘heart of sadness.’ I’ve never walked away from a prison visit without thinking that something worthwhile had occurred.”

Jim Colosi, Prison Meditation Class Volunteer

Getting started in prison mindfulness work is often less intimidating than it might seem. Prison program directors are often open to volunteer offers of new programming. You can often “sell” a program by pointing out the positive benefits of meditation and the subsequent effect on the prison environment when a group of prisoners regularly meditate.

“There’s so much need for what you do for people like me. I have been studying and practicing meditation now for three years and it’s changed me drastically. I’ve become a person of awareness not only for myself but for the world and its surroundings. I believe so much of the pain and obstacles in prison can be healed by these teachings. It brings a person to peace--it has me. I have about one year left and will be going home to my three children and wife with a totally new outlook on life.”

~Eric M., prisoner, Goodyear, AZ

Benefits of Mindfulness & Meditation in Prison

Mindful awareness can be the foundation for positive behavioral change. Through meditation practice, prisoners can achieve a greater awareness of their habitual thought patterns and behaviors that in turn will empower them to make healthier choices. Alternatively, a chronic state of unawareness prevents a person from understanding and responding to their body's signals and needs in positive ways.

Research shows the following effects of regular practice in prisons:

- Reduced neurochemical stress markers²
- Increased serotonin levels, associated with reduced impulsivity²
- Reduced hostility^{1,2}
- Reduced aggression and assault²
- Less disturbances of mood¹
- Increased self-esteem¹
- Increased psychological well-being³
- Decrease in criminal thinking⁴
- Reduced anxiety⁵
- Reduced depression^{2,5}
- Better sleep^{2,5}
- Decrease in substance use³
- Less prison rule infractions^{2,5}
- Increased participation in prison educational programs²
- Reduced recidivism^{2,3,4}
- Development of a more mature, responsible, self-monitoring, self-respecting, and communicative personality (according to Loewinger's ego development scale)²

1. Samuelson, M., Carmody, J., Kabat-Zinn, J., & Bratt, M. A. (2007). Mindfulness-based stress reduction in massachusetts correctional facilities. *The Prison Journal*, 87(2), 254-268.
2. Orme-Johnson, D. (2011). The use of meditation in corrections. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 55(4), 662-664.
3. Himelstein, S. (2011). Meditation research: The state of the art in correctional settings. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 55(4), 646.
4. Malouf, E. T., Youman, K., Stuewig, J., Witt, E. A., & Tangney, J. P. (2017). A pilot RCT of a values-based mindfulness group intervention with jail inmates: Evidence for reduction in post-release risk behavior. *Mindfulness*, 8(3), 603-614.
5. Harrison, J, Clarke, J & Maull, F. (2013) A Two-Year Study Conducted on Prison Mindfulness Institute's "Path of Freedom" Curriculum Transcript presented at 11th Annual Center for Mindfulness Scientific Conference on April 20, 2013 in Norwood Massachusetts

Please see our Research page for many other studies on prisons & mindfulness at PrisonMindfulness.org

Where to Enter

Continuing Education:

Entering as a Stress Management or Stress Reduction Program

Most prison and jails have continuing education programs that contain stress management or self-help programs. It is possible to interest a program director in a meditation program centered on stress management or stress reduction.

Drug and Alcohol Treatment Programs:

Entering as a Recovery Program

Drug and alcohol treatment programs may be connected with psychological services, the education department or the recreation department. Some prisons have libraries that run their own programs. For example, in Colorado, Fleet Maull (Prison Mindfulness Institute founder) was invited to speak on meditation and contemplative practice at a state prison by a librarian who coordinated a workshop series of inspirational speakers.

You might offer a meditation program as an option for those seeking ways to work with the 11th step (of twelve-step programs). As a stress reduction group, meditation can help prisoners center themselves and focus on their recovery.

Chapel:

Entering as a Religious Services Provider: Meditation, Dharma or Mindfulness Program

There is existing legal protection for the practice of religion in prisons. Example: a Supreme Court case (*Cruz v. Beto*) granted the same rights to Buddhists as those given to mainstream religions for the practice of religious activities in prison. In *Cutter Wilkinson*, a case decided by the United States Supreme Court in 2005, which holds that under the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), prisoners in facilities that accept federal funds cannot be denied accommodations necessary to engage in activities for the practice of their own religious beliefs.

A challenge of this approach may be encountering prison chaplains predisposed to one type of religion and therefore may not be open to the contemplative approach. Another possible challenge is that prisoners may be subjected to pressure from chaplains or other prisoners (i.e. negative peer pressure).

How To Enter

Preparation

Once involved in this work, the complex dynamics of the world inside prisons can sometimes be difficult and confusing, please prepare yourself by spending some time reflecting on your intentions and inspirations for doing this work. Developing clarity of intention and periodically reflecting on it will help you deal with any challenges that might present themselves.

Consistency is important. Before making contact, formulate your ideas. Be clear about the type of program you wish to offer, what its benefits are, and what your involvement will be. Perhaps write a short position paper to clarify for yourself what it is you will offer. Be able to express this position clearly and consistently. Evaluate what time commitment you will be able to give to the program.

Language

Please be mindful that the language you use is appropriate to the entryway chosen. Example: if you choose to present a 'stress relief' program, do not use religious terminology.

Choosing an Entrance

Approaching numerous entryways at the same time may confuse the prison staff. Do some fact-finding with department heads at the institution. This may help clarify your decision on which is the most appropriate entryway. The organization of each institution differs and it might take some time to find the appropriate entry. Some departments within facilities are more progressive than others and might be more open to your offering.

Volunteers from other organizations may be helpful in sharing how the prison works. Contact other groups that may be working in the facility. The volunteer coordinator at the prison may be able to connect you with these groups. You can also search for contacts in your area through our online searchable network page: <https://www.prisonmindfulness.org/projects/network-directory/> .

Demeanor

A professional and courteous presentation is very important. Promptness, follow-through, and phone calls will demonstrate you are serious about your commitment. Flexibility and openness will create cooperation. An adversarial approach is not welcome. If the prison staff detects any negative or aggressive attitude on the part of volunteers, they may become defensive and uncooperative. They will welcome you as long as you abide by guidelines and conduct yourself in a professional and friendly manner. Although prisoners have a right to practice their religion, prison

staff often see this as a privilege. The courts generally support prison staff, regardless of case law.

You might need to shift your mindsets from thinking about your right to teach, and the prisoners' rights to learn, to coming to terms with the realities of the culture and political world of prisons. Try to be skillful in this world so you can get in, stay in, and be of benefit. An appreciation of this world will allow you to develop better relations with staff and prisoners. We encourage you to educate yourselves through reading about the current prison industrial complex (see bibliography & "Learning the Facts" chapters in this manual).

Try to find staff allies for your program. Allies can be very important to the functioning of your program, but be careful not to place them in compromising positions with other staff. Sometimes, staff members that are perceived as prisoner advocates can lose the trust of fellow staff.

Orientation

Each prison has its own volunteer orientation. If you are entering as a volunteer you will be required to attend an orientation run by the prison. Each prison will also have a set of guidelines. Be sure to become familiar with the information in the orientation and guidelines. Be aware that most prison religious orientations will be predominantly Christian in their approach.

Once Inside

The Unexpected

Be prepared for the unexpected. Sometimes you may arrive and the prisoners have not been released, or you may have to wait for security clearance for a long time. Occasionally, you might travel a long distance to the prison, and the program may be cancelled without you being notified. These type of situations present a great opportunity to develop patience and equanimity. Changes will occur; expect the unexpected. It is always a good idea to call ahead and confirm your program before travelling any distance to a correctional facility.

Conduct

You should abide by prison rules and regulations at all times. For example, most prisons have rules that prevent volunteers from having ongoing outside contact with prisoners. As a volunteer (or eventually former volunteer), you may not be allowed to correspond with prisoners, visit them in the visiting room, or have phone contact, during and after their prison stay.

The security staff should be made aware of your visits by the program supervisors. You may not be allowed entrance if security has not been given notice. Be open and flexible with this. The most important thing is to care about the participants and the staff. Being open, kind, and caring will help with any mistakes you might make.

Materials

Usually you will not be allowed to bring meditation materials (cushions, etc.) into the prison unless you have made special arrangements. You may have to improvise by sitting on chairs or the floor. Occasionally facilities will let you bring cushions that can be left in a locked closet.

Any materials that are allowed into the prison (study materials, etc.) should be pre-approved by the staff person supervising your program. You may be able to give books or materials to the prisoners or perhaps donate them to the library. Donating materials to the library may attract people to the program. Normally, the supervisor will make the security staff aware of the material we are bringing in. Again you need to be flexible as rules sometimes change.

Prisoners will most likely hear of and be attracted to your program through word of mouth. If there is a bulletin board available, a brightly colored poster will attract some people to the program. Update and replace posters frequently.

Prisoners and Staff Relations

When you are inside the prison, be aware that everyone is watching you carefully. The staff will be watching your body language and noticing the attitude you express towards staff and prisoners. The prisoners' judgments will probably focus on the effectiveness of your program. But they will also be watching how you interact with them and the staff. Staff and prisoners will notice if you appear overly friendly with either. You should try to be mindful of any biases. Yet, if you are professional and genuine with staff and prisoners you can maintain the respect of both.

Get to know the program director and update them regularly on your program. They might become advocates for you if they see your program is going well. Some program directors may even have funds for your program (to purchase cushions, etc).

If staff do treat prisoners and/or volunteers in demeaning ways, it would be good to find a skillful way to let the prisoners know you empathize. But be careful, once again, not to give the staff the impression that you are a prisoner advocate. A simple nod of the head or shrug of the shoulders

may suffice, expressing empathy without appearing to take sides. We encourage you to see the humanity of each person, *and* we discourage you from overidentifying with prisoners as innocent victims who need you to rescue them.

Be mindful of the stress the staff is under. Harassment of the staff by prisoners and prisoners by staff is a vicious cycle. Having compassion for the staff is as important as having compassion for the prisoners. Demonstrating compassion for prisoners and staff in the intensity of the prison can be a challenging task. Try to find skillful ways to work with both staff and prisoners in a genuine and open way. We encourage you to avoid “taking sides” between prison staff and prisoners. Keep in mind that working in corrections is highly stressful and it is a profession with relatively high rates of suicide and detrimental health effects.

Always answer all questions honestly. However, volunteering unnecessary information will often complicate the staff’s responsibilities. Never lie. If found out it will end your program. Be careful never to allow staff, prisoners, or fellow volunteers to put you in a situation where you might feel pressured to lie on someone else’s behalf.

Be an Example

“Your actions will be observed—not as criticism—but because you are a role model for meditation practice. This fact came home to me with clarity one day when I moved my foot while sitting. Immediately after the sitting, the group all commented that it was the first time they had seen me move in 20 months. You don’t have to be a statue—but be aware of intense scrutiny.”

Kinloch Walpole, Longtime Prison Meditation teacher.

Presenting Meditation in Prisons

“You may find that the cell is an ideal place to get to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings. In judging our progress as individuals we tend to focus on external factors such as one’s social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education . . . but internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one’s development as a human being: honesty, sincerity, simplicity, humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve your fellow men — qualities within the reach of every soul — are the foundations of one’s spiritual life . . . at least, if for nothing else, the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct to overcome the bad and develop whatever is good in you. Regular meditation, say of about 15 minutes a day before you turn in, can be very fruitful in this

regard. You may find it difficult at first to pinpoint the negative factors in your life, but the *tenth attempt may reap rich rewards. Never forget that a saint is a sinner that keeps on trying.*"
Nelson Mandela, Autobiography

Simplicity

"It does no good to give prisoners something that is either too esoteric or of no immediate value. Common topics of discussion are practical problems like how to sleep, dealing with depression, dealing with anxiety associated with release, and what to do when they are released. Underlying much of the discussion is denial about their circumstances. I might focus on methods: letting go vs. stuffing it; self-trust; responding vs. reacting; non-judgmental awareness; non-striving; and taming/training the mind. To the brew, I add yoga, breathing techniques, progressive relaxation and a body scan meditation. In all of this, I teach from the heart as best I can. Whenever possible, I get there 30 minutes early so that I can get my act together by meditating alone."

~Kinloch Walpole

Present tools, materials, and teaching that are of practical value to prisoners. Prisoners should be able to begin working on the practices immediately in their cells. The presentation shouldn't be too academic. The teaching you present should help provide a context for practicing meditation and working with one's mind and one's experience.

Format

Every institution and group is different. We need to find the right blend of activities for each group and each session. Possible components include:

- Introduction
- Check-in Circle
- Stretching, yoga, tai chi or other types of mindful movement exercises
- Guided Meditation
- Silent Meditation
- Prisoner Feedback on Meditation
- Short Contextual Talk
- Group discussion or dialog
- Listening or Council Circle
- Check-out Circle (example: statements of learning)

Most prison meditation groups are in continual flux with new people every week. At times you may have a fairly stable group with some of the same prisoners coming regularly, but turnover is

generally high. Often the groups will be ongoing beginner's groups.

Introduction

When beginning a new program and/or each time new prisoners attend, explain who you are, why you are there, and what you have to offer. .

Check-In

It is helpful to begin meditation sessions in prison with a brief check in. Sometimes prisoners have concerns that they need to talk about before they can focus on meditation or the teachings. Check-ins let you know how prisoners are doing and what their current concerns are, which may provide you with rich material for contextual talks, council circle topics, and presentations you offer.

Stretching or Yoga

You may want to include a short period of stretching or yoga at the beginning of each session. Basic yoga or Tai Chi stretches are often helpful. However, avoid associating Tai Chi movements with martial arts training, as prisons generally don't allow this.

Dialogue

"In keeping it simple, I also try to focus on immediate problems the prisoners may be having and how meditation can help. Case in point is sleep. Instead of getting involved in the downward spiral of 'stinking thinking' between 1 and 4 in the morning, I encourage them to start meditating in the corpse pose if they are in a dorm or sitting if they are in a cell and just follow their breath. If that does not work, then I have them switch to a mantra. In the last six months, I have been able to get malas into all the prisons and so I have them use their malas in conjunction with their mantras. This seems to work as they indicate that even if they spend most of the night doing a mantra or meditation, they are rested when they get up. Sometimes more rested than when they sleep."

~Kinloch Walpole

After each portion of the session, check in with the participants. After meditation instruction, they might discuss their understanding or experience of the technique and perhaps refine it. You can also dialogue about any other issues that arise that meditation might be helpful to address.

Meditation Instruction

If you are a trained meditation instructor, present the technique as you have been taught. Whatever technique you teach, it should be presented simply. Beginning with a technique that focuses on mindfulness or even simple breath counting is often most workable.

There are three general aspects to the technique of mindfulness:

1. **Posture** is how to work with our body and various body problems that may arise during meditation. This includes how we work with pains, itches, etc.
2. **Object of mindfulness** is usually the breath. There are various approaches such as counting of the breath, awareness of breath coming in and the breath going out, and awareness of the breath going out only.
3. **The mind** aspect is how you work with thoughts that arise during meditation. What do you do when we have “spaced out” and are no longer aware of the breath or the body? You simply bring awareness back to the breath or the body.

Be aware that when you give meditation instruction the participants may not hear or remember it. After giving meditation instruction and sitting for a short period, it is often helpful to ask the participants how their experience was and about their understanding of the meditation technique. You might find how different what was heard is from what you presented.

Other Practices

You may encounter participants practicing meditation techniques that are unfamiliar to you. Some prisoners may be interested in out-of-body experiences or techniques like astral travel. This is understandable, considering that prisons can be miserable environments. Set aside judgments about other techniques and simply explain the benefits of mindfulness practice and leave it at that. As you become familiar with their practice, you may want to gently let them know that while they are welcome to continue practicing their own technique, there might be an advantage to working with the technique you offer, considering that they currently have access to a live instructor. Prisoners may decide to set aside their own style for a period of time to practice the technique you are presenting. Emphasize that this is totally their decision.

Working with Prisoners' Challenges

Prisoners frequently struggle with difficulty sleeping due to racing thoughts about their cases, conflict with other prisoners and staff, and outside issues, such as family. Make the instructions applicable to the actual circumstances they face. You might frame your meditation instructions in a way that encourages prisoners to work with their minds and look at how circumstances and their

results arise.

You could emphasize the pattern of development of mental states that begins with the first flickering of thought and ends with consequences:

- **Thoughts** arise.
- **Mental states** arise from dwelling on thoughts.
- **Emotions** arise from dwelling on mental states.
- **Behaviors** manifest from dwelling on emotions.
- **Consequences** result from behavior.

Learning to differentiate this pattern can be very helpful in prisoners' lives. Prisoners often find themselves in the middle of consequences and don't know how they got there. While they do have some understanding of this pattern, they may feel helpless to change it. Prisoners often feel their lives are a combination of who they are and the forces that are controlling them.

All of us generally share in this feeling of life coming at us. Often we all we feel life is happening to us and we're just trying to "deal" with it. We have little sense of how we create and invite much of what happens to us. The deeper our awareness becomes, the more we realize how much we create our own experience and circumstances in our lives.

As prisoners begin to recognize this process from thoughts to consequences in their own mind they begin to see a point where they can have a moment of freedom. They may decide not to choose certain behaviors or attachments. When they see this, they find their freedom. This is the greatest gift we can give them...to realize this point of choice. Meditation helps them find that gap where they do have a choice. Meditation is the way to develop awareness of this pattern. It helps develop the presence of mind that recognizes moments of choice. Meditation can help prisoners realize when they are in the midst of a pattern developing to the point of behavior and consequences. They can see this and decide to do otherwise. For a more in-depth account of how to facilitate this process for prisoners, you may want to consider our Path of Freedom course: <https://www.prisonmindfulness.org/projects/path-of-freedom/>.

Basic Teachings

Many basic teachings from the world's contemplative traditions can help prisoners further realize the pattern of thought to consequences.

- You need not feel responsible for presenting all these teachings. There are many tools at our disposal. Simple, straightforward books by authors such as Pema Chodron, Jack Kornfield, Jon Kabat Zinn, Father Thomas Keating, and many others from the world's contemplative traditions can be helpful. PMI publishes an excellent book geared toward Buddhist practice in prisons:

Sitting Inside: Buddhist Practice in America's Prisons by Kobai Scott Whitney as well as *Dharma in Hell, The Prison Writings of Fleet Maull*. Please see the PMI website for details: <http://www.prisonmindfulness.org/projects/prison-dharma-press/>.

Books are also very helpful resources. PMI can send you donated books that you may distribute to prisoners. Email us for details: info@prisonmindfulness.org

Logistics of Prison Practice

You may want to ask the participants if they are able to meditate between sessions and how it's going. You might discuss the logistics of finding places to meditate. Some suggestions we have received are: top bunks are more accommodating to the meditation posture; empty stairwells and quiet chapels are also good places to meditate; early morning and late at night are good times to meditate.

There is power in daily practice. Encourage prisoners to practice meditation daily, beginning with short 5- or 10-minute sessions. Encourage them to begin with a workable time, so as not to become discouraged. Remind them that fifteen minutes daily is often more helpful than an hour once a week. Many practitioners increase the length of meditation sessions as they experience the value and power of practice.

A Note for Non-Religious Meditation Programs

Meditation programs in education department's, drug treatment programs, etc. will have to present meditation and mindfulness in completely secular language. In setting where it is not appropriate, try not to reference religion. The method of presenting the meditation technique does not need to be changed. You can still teach meditation and find ways to talk about it without using religious jargon or buzzwords. Some examples might be:

- **Habitual Patterns:** when you present a meditation program to the staff as stress management, you can also teach prisoners the habits of the mind and body that produce stress.
- **Cause & Effect:** You can discuss how our thinking invites certain experiences into our lives.
- **Compassion:** you can also teach how working creatively with the self in the world and in specific circumstances helps us become conscious of a way of living that doesn't create suffering for ourselves and others.

Prison Retreats

by Kinloch Walpole

Zen Teacher Kinloch Walpole has led numerous 5-10 day prison retreats in Florida. Below are some highlights and reflections about these retreats. Retreats like this alter perceptions, attitudes and lives and demonstrate profoundly how to create less stressful, violent prisons. The retreats are run solely on volunteer energy and donations. The group sits 10 hours a day.

Dharma Talks

There was no attempt by volunteers to convert anyone. The program was secular but some Buddhist talks were given. Chaplains were also recruited to give two talks about integrating meditation into non-Buddhist faiths.

Interviews

One on one conversations between instructor and participant are essential. Each participant had three. Men ask questions they wouldn't bring up in front of other prisoners. The interviews had a depth not experienced in previous retreats.

Inmate Spiritual Leaders

One interesting occurrence at this retreat was the participation of inmate spiritual leaders. Four spiritual leaders from the black community attended. None had ever been to a retreat like this. One of them formerly participated in a centering prayer workshop and came to this event to deepen his understanding of meditation.

Spirituality

Unlike previous retreats, the importance of spirituality was emphasized by the participants, perhaps as a result of the spiritual leaders who attended.

Circles

In a circle we speak about retreat experiences in a two-and-a-half hour discussion. Forgiveness was discussed as well as brotherhood (the dominant theme).

Racial Harmony

Hispanic and blacks represented over 90% of the participants. Talks were translated into Spanish by prisoners. Facilitators didn't observe prisoners express any racial conflict. In fact, participants expressed a strong sense of brotherhood, particularly between Hispanics and African Americans.

Hap Chongs

Hap Chong is a half bow with both hands clasped, as in prayer. It is used to say "greetings," "no," "yes," "thank you," "excuse me," or a means of silent communication. Prisoners with retreat experience bowed effortlessly and the new participants picked it up easily. Bowing is something that is not part of the American culture, let alone the prison culture. But by the end of the first day, everyone was bowing freely.

Intro Retreats

The length of the retreats increased over two years. While the longer retreat worked for many, participants who dropped out said they were not psychologically prepared for such a long, intensive experience. One lesson learned as a result was to hold a shorter intro retreat a month preceding the five-day retreat so that people could get a sense of the program.

Cushions

Cushions are expensive but important items for retreat. Some prisoners made meditation benches in the prison workshop. Even though most participants spend 75% of the time in chairs, cushions and benches set the stage and help create atmosphere. Over time, participants move towards using the cushion and benches ().

Cold

Air conditioning in the chapel made it too cold. Also, after 30 minutes of meditation the body temperature drops. Consequently, the inmates brought long johns, blankets and jackets.

Prisoner Participation

Retreat planning and organization has been significantly helped by giving tasks, such as kitchen master, to prisoners. Prisoners also helped by setting up the chapel, forming the cushions into what we call a “Zen Square.”

Clear Mind

Dirt and water in a transparent jug in the center of the Zen Square serve as the example of clear mind. The dirt settles to the bottom after a few hours. Occasionally we mixed the dirt to reinforce the point.

Photos

This was the first time the prison had their photographer take photos. There was no resistance on the part of the prisoners to photos. In fact, they made requests to have photos taken of themselves and the people near them. Previously, when photos were taken, press releases were required, and there was some resistance. At one point when it appeared there was going to be a news photographer and television camera crew present, there was noticeable discomfort. The discomfort diminished when it was explained that the photos would help motivate others to try prison retreats.

Cake

It may sound corny, but serving cake after the Zen circle is important. The circle ends with this social event. It took over a year to get the cake approved—prison staff were concerned that it would set a precedent of serving food in the chapel.

Music

One prisoner played flute during some evening sittings. The music was well received. Hearing the flutes after dark in the cold chapel gave the music an eerie quality. He played slow and notes appeared to hang and vanish into space.

Sleep

Prisoners commented that they were getting a good night’s sleep during the retreat. There may be two forces at play here. First, meditation. The thinking mind is slowed down and one is able have deeper sleep. Secondly, they slept in the chapel which provided an added sense of security. Also a sense of trust among their companions on either side contributed to the sense of security.

Schedule

Any attempt to make an hourly schedule for a prison retreat is a waste of time. We generally arrived at 7:30am but the retreat would not begin until after security checks and the usual unpredictable variables. Lunch was between 10:30am and noon or whenever it arrived, dinner: 3:30-5pm, and again, whenever it arrived. The retreat finished at 7:50pm, 10 minutes prior to evening recall. The only predictable event was the 3:30pm count which didn't interfere, as it was done without creating a disturbance. During the count the correction officers had a chance to walk into the chapel and observe, which appeared to make an impression.

Credibility

The program has developed a good level of credibility and respect with the prison staff. We don't have problems with it's uniqueness or the equipment we need to bring although security remains strict.

Certificates

Certificates stating they had completed an intensive five-day meditation retreat which could be placed in prisoners files.

Curiosity

The staff and other prisoners didn't disturb us, but the chapel door is open several times a day and there are a lot of heads that look in and observe our progress. The dynamic of so many prisoners from assorted racial groups in a room for 10 hours in silence is a curiosity. The fact the inmates volunteer for these retreats and no fights emerge, adds to the interest. The prisoners that looked in the door perhaps felt the peace and calm of the group.

Advice from Prisoners to Volunteers

The following is based on a questionnaire submitted to prisoners

What would you say about someone who wanted to do prison work but had fear about interacting with those who have a history of violence?”

That’s a tough one. First, I think people should be aware that 99.9% of violent offenders don’t commit violence randomly or unprovoked. Most violent acts were for a reason. And granted, it’s usually the wrong reason. But random violence is nothing to worry about. A volunteer is not a threat, they are someone who wants to help us—so why would we hurt them?”

“There might be a one in a million chance (or less than that) that someone thinks, ‘Gee, why don’t I attack a volunteer today?’ And if that happened he would probably be deterred by the repercussions he would face.”

“I once read a science fiction novel that made this clever point, ‘violence is the last resort of the incompetent...’ which in my experience is true. Violence is a lever one uses to control or subjugate another and it never works. Violence is not a solution, it is a temporary ‘fix.’ People that have communication skills, empathy, and patience need not rely on violence. When I was growing up I used violence and threats, as a man now, I fear violence—both my own and others.”

How do you feel about web disclosure (prisoner records available on the web) or what would you say to a volunteer who wants to know what a person is in prison for?

“This is just a little joke that Jarvis Masters made once when I asked him, talking about someone else in the visiting room, ‘What’s that guy in prison for?’ Jarvis answered, ‘For getting caught.’ Melody Ermachild Chavis, prison volunteer.

“My first reaction to your question is—why do you want to know? Is there some information that you might discover that would alter how you deal with prisoners? As a person who began dharma practice in prison, I am keenly aware of the ‘pecking order’ that is embedded in the prisoner mentality, with sexual offenders and informants being on the bottom. This is a real part of day-to-day life for prisoners. Some might be hesitant to tell you their history for fear of being judged. If they are serious about meditation practice, at some point they will come clean on their own and honestly share with you their past. ”

“Web disclosure is tricky. It’s a public service that will continue and grow. I guess those of us that dislike it should stop complaining and just accept it. But it casts a rather ghastly shadow on those

of us that are trying to change for the better, to prepare for our release and re-entrance into society. Be that as it may, we can not take offense with the practice of web disclosure, as it only portrays what has happened to us and by us. We will forever have to deal with this and come to terms with things as they were and as they are now, so we might as well get used to it.”

“I am adamantly against it. In addition to this, I am strongly against even asking convicts why they’re serving time. I served seven years, and one of the important ‘unwritten rules’ of doing time is that you never ask someone what they’re in for. It’s a violation of privacy. If someone tells you, that’s their business. To many, the path that led them into prison is personal, embarrassing, and private. When trying to get onto a new, productive, and positive path, it is often times (at least in the beginning) very appealing to to be able to just be in the moment, on new ground, with a fresh start, rather than the sum total of all the things that brought you here.”

“I see it this way, a volunteer who is new to prison work and has fears and/or questions should have the right to know who and what he/she is dealing with. And with a little experience they’ll see that it might not be as dangerous as they thought.”

“So if a volunteer does look you up, how does this volunteer ‘spring’ this disclosure on the prisoner: ‘Oh, and, by the way I happened to look you up on the internet,’ No, this isn’t advisable—it shows a lack of something, be it tact, decorum, or simple acceptance. But disclosure could open new doorways for the discussion. Sometimes prisoners go on the defensive, playing the ‘woe-is-me/I’m-a-victim-of-the-system’ role, and at times can simply shut-down by feeling pressured. So, be tactful.”

“The volunteer will be more uninhibited if he’s teaching free of fearing ‘Willie the ax-murderer’ and ‘Joe the thief.’ In time, when the volunteer builds a certain familiarity, he or she may be comfortable asking someone ‘What are you in for?’”

“No, the volunteer does not ‘need’ to know, I’m sure. It may be that it could also turn some volunteers off from helping a prisoner.”

From a prison volunteer:

“I don’t ask a prisoner about his or her offense, because I’m there to teach meditation and support that person in his or her practice. Inquiring about how they got where they are distracts us both from the task at hand. I’ve found that when the prisoner is ready to deal with that aspect of things, he or she will talk about it in an honest and open manner. I think this ability to come forward on one’s own is very good for the spirit and is very healing. First, the prisoner realizes he or she is a human being who happens to have done something harmful. Second, he or she has the experience of being able to freely admit to the wrongdoing rather than having it hauled out of them, possibly against their will. This is a very powerful experience and a necessary one if one is

to have self-esteem. If I have some worry about the prisoner and feel that knowledge of their crime will help me, I look it up in the state files. I try not to assume anything about the people I work with. I just try to meet them in this moment without making any assumptions. I am not there to evaluate and judge—they have lots of people who fill that role for them. I'm there to help. Moment by moment putting aside my stories and evaluations is good both for my practice and theirs.” ~Zuiko Redding, Iowa Zen teacher.

What do you think of volunteers who try to talk like prisoners, by playing “tough” and using inside lingo?

“Don’t! You’re not being real which will be picked up on in a heartbeat. It will only breed contempt. Nobody respects a fake. Many participants will be disheartened. Just be yourself, as genuine as possible. Those who take a liking to you will respect you 100%. Be real!”

“I always try to see what would motivate someone to use our euphemisms. Sometimes it’s unconscious, but that’s irregular, as they aren’t around us enough to pick it up. Sometimes it may be that they are trying to ‘get hip’ by using street slang, pronunciations, etc., to appear to be something they aren’t . . . Don’t.”

What do you think is the real intention of most of the volunteers? What comes across?

“To me, it looks like most of them genuinely want to help someone. A lot of time it’s a give and take thing where the volunteer is also dealing with his/her issues. But, I think that’s great.”

“I’ve often wondered. I like to believe that volunteers have the most noble of intentions, putting others before self. I decided for myself a long time ago that the answer didn’t matter to me. A great service is being done for us who are in great need by individuals who really don’t have to do it. I’m simply thankful that you do! I don’t feel disempowered because of the fact that I’m in need, and am truly powerless. Humility is not a bad word when it is applicable.”

Should volunteers become friends with prisoners and invite them for dinner when the prisoner is released? (note: many facilities have strict rules about this).

“Every person is to be dealt with differently and you should remember this as your relationship develops. Should you be a real friend? Absolutely! But that doesn’t necessarily mean you want to interact with this individual in society. A volunteer may become a friend to someone they’re working with but also realize that this individual may be threat in certain circumstances. Say for example, the prisoner is a rapist, you see he still has these tendencies, and he’s coming home soon. Should you invite him to dinner with your family? Of course not. That hypothetical situation is extreme. But basically be a friend—yes—but use common sense just like you would with anyone on the street. Trust is something to be earned—not given.”

Learning the Facts

Context

In 2004 PMI Director Kate Crisp co-taught a class at Naropa University entitled “Public Life in the U.S.” The class examined the prison industrial complex in-depth. As a class project, the students created an resource document entitled “Learning the Facts” to support PMI volunteers in deepening their awareness of the systems that so profoundly impact prisoners. *(NOTE: In 2017 we updated the numbers to reflect statistical changes).*

Included is a general overview of prison history, the current conditions of prisons, and statistics on who prisoners are.

Historic Overview

- During the 25-year period from 1945 to 1970, the rate of incarceration averaged 110 per 100, 000 citizens.
- The U.S. prison population rose by 700% from 1970 to 2005, a rate far outpacing that of general population growth and crime rates.
- The U.S. incarcerates 716 people for every 100,000 residents, more than any other country. In fact, our rate of incarceration is more than five times higher than most of the countries in the world. Although our level of crime is comparable to those of other stable, internally secure, industrialized nations, the United States has an incarceration rate far higher than any other country.

Prison History & Labor

The First Prison

Prior to the late 1700's, criminal penalties consisted primarily of fines and corporal punishment. Jails held only debtors, suspects awaiting trial, and criminals awaiting punishment. In the late 1700's, however, Pennsylvania Quakers helped pass laws making imprisonment the major form of punishment in that state. The Quakers believed solitude, discipline, and hard labor could reform criminals. They felt prison could be a penance affecting prisoners' salvation.

Reformers altered the existing Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia in order to achieve these ends. The city built more than a dozen cells in the jail to hold prisoners in solitary confinement. It also separated male from female prisoners, and debtors from convicted criminals. The notion that prisoner reform could be affected through solitude, discipline, and hard labor quickly gained popularity, and the model of imprisoning criminals in individual cells spread rapidly throughout the United States and Europe. The system evolved within different locations often using less solitary confinement and less religious notions of reform. The Walnut Street Jail, however, is considered the first modern prison.

Post-Civil War / Reconstruction Era

Slavery and the abolition of slavery radically changed the prison in the reconstruction era. Imprisonment took different forms in the North and South. In the North, the idea of the “reformatory” took hold. Criminals were considered “sick” and had to be “cured” through imprisonment. Once “healed”, prisoners could return to society. At this time, the Auburn prison system gained popularity. This system, like the Pennsylvania system, isolated prisoners. They worked long days, slept in solitary confinement, and though they could eat together, were not allowed to look at or speak to each other. They were beaten if they broke the rules.

In the South, the convict lease system, or ‘chain gang’ emerged. Penal institutions leased inmates to private business owners, who used them as cheap manual labor. Thus prison labor, primarily African- American, functioned as a substitute for slavery. Penal farms were the second phase. Prisoners essentially did the work of slaves on plantations. Businesses leasing prisoners were not invested in the health or life of prisoners, so conditions were worse. Death rates were higher than in Northern prisons as a result of the intense manual labor and poor conditions.

Evolution of Prison Labor

In the 1800s, prisons began budgeting expenses by leasing prisoners to private companies. By 1885, three-quarters of prisoners were taking part in some kind of labor force, usually for private interests. Prisoners worked in dangerous conditions without pay.

The reemergence of leased prison labor can be traced back to the 1979 Justice System Improvement Act which, allowed businesses to both freely use prison labor, and to use prison labor in interstate commerce by implementing what was called Prison Industry Enhancement programs (PIEs).

Some Uses of Prison Labor

How many of us think of men in orange jump suits cleaning trash off the interstate medians when we hear the words Prison Labor? This is a minute example of the use of prison labor.

The increased prison population, a strong economy and the tightest labor market in recent decades have coincided with a rise in prison privatization and the expanded use of prison labor. Big name corporations compete with each other to underwrite prison construction with private, tax-exempt bonds and without voter approval. More and more states across the country are implementing mandatory labor for inmates, providing more labor pools open prison industry partnerships.

When looking into the American prison-industrial system, we see a situation that closely parallels that of China, - a country that the U.S. has repeatedly questioned for its use of prison labor. One U.S. state constitution was amended in 1994, requiring all inmates to produce a forty-hour workweek. It also required the state to actively market prison labor. One of the products produced

in this state was jeans called “Prison Blues”, made by prisoners for anywhere between 28 cents and 8 dollars per hour. Federal law prevented these jeans from being shipped out of the state. Prison factories in the Midwest pay inmates, who work in overcrowded basements anywhere between 20 cents to \$1.50 an hour while profits rise well into the million dollar range. Understanding the degree to which industries rely on and profit from this cheap, abundant labor force requires investigation into current prisoner labor uses.

Some examples are:

- Airline flights booked by youth offenders
- Data processing for private companies
- Manufacturing of shoes and clothing
- Manufacturing of air conditioners
- Manufacturing of corrective eyewear
- Use by major computer companies
- Manufacturing of women’s undergarments
- Automobile manufacturing
- Manufacturing metal
- Manufacturing sporting goods
- Construction of buildings for fast food companies
- Corporate restaurant industry
- Insurance companies

Privatization

The privatized prison industry is a fifty billion plus dollar business. It has steadily increased since the 90’s. The industry’s survival depends on a large incarcerated labor pool. The staggering amount of arrests for nonviolent, drug related offenses, “get tough on crime” laws and “three strikes” rules provide this labor pool.

When Federal Prison Industries (now known as Unicolor) was established in the 1930’s, inmate-produced goods were primarily used inside prisons or sold only to Government agencies. Now, prison authorities, along with cost-conscious entrepreneurs, budget-paring politicians, and private prison operators such as Wackenhut and the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), have taken leaps and bounds by replacing the old political consensus with the concept that private companies compete with other businesses by using prison labor.

Between 1990 and 2010, the number of privately operated prisons in the U.S. increased by 1,600%. These prisons bring in roughly \$3 billion in revenue yearly. Two of the largest private prison companies in the country, CCA and The GEO Group, made \$3.3 billion in annual revenue in 2012.

Who Are Prisoners?

- 70% of prisoners are illiterate
- 80% of prisoners have a history of drug abuse

- More than 1/2 of all prisoners are mentally ill.
- 67.4% sentenced for nonviolent crimes (drugs, property, public order)
- 93.3% Male
- 6.7% Female
- 37.6% African American
- 33.8% Hispanic

Juveniles in the Justice System

Approximately half of all juvenile inmates have a parent who has been incarcerated.

As of 2013, 79% of all juveniles are between 10 and 15 years old

- Nearly two thirds of these youth are non-violent offenders
- 50 % have had a parent who had been incarcerated
- 14% are female
- 56% are African-American
- 23% are Hispanic
- Over 50% have not been incarcerated before

Each year over 690,000 juveniles enter juvenile correctional facilities, detention centers, reception centers, training schools, ranches, camps and farms. From 1985 to 1997, the population of juveniles in adult prisons doubled to 5,400 youth prisoners. They are treated the same as adult prisoners. This necessitates that juveniles adjust to accepting violence as a part of everyday life. In adult prisons, they are 500 times more likely to be sexually assaulted and eight times more likely to commit suicide (than in a juvenile institution). Conditions require that they become more violent themselves in order to survive. A juvenile's exposure to prison culture increases their probability of becoming a career prisoner.

Juveniles and the Death Penalty

In March 2005, the US Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty for those who had committed their crimes while under 18 was barred. However, 22 inmates have been executed for crimes committed while under the age of eighteen. Prior to the current Supreme Court ruling,, 73 of the prisoners on death row were ages 16 or 17 at the time of their crimes. Their current ages range from 20 to 42 years. They are all male and two-thirds of them are minorities.

Women in Prison

- Over 1 million women in criminal justice custody
- 63% incarcerated for nonviolent crimes
- Two thirds of women in prison are women of color
- 60% are mothers of minor children
- Majority are primary caregivers 22% of minor children are under 5 years old

- Over 70% of mothers lived with their minor children prior to incarceration
- 20% of mothers report being homeless in the year prior to their incarceration
- Two thirds received less than \$6.50 an hour prior to incarceration
- 60% have not completed high school
- 57% have been physically or sexually assaulted, most (69%) before the age of 18 years old

Women represent the fastest growing segment of the prison population. In 1990, there were just over 40,000 women inmates as opposed to the current 1 million. Most women are arrested for nonviolent offenses, usually drug or property crimes.

They are disproportionately women of color and most have not finished high school. The Drug War targets women and, in part, explains the huge increase in women's imprisonment. From 1985 to 1996, female drug arrests increased by 95 percent while male drug arrests increased by 55 percent. During this same period, the number of women sentenced to prison for drug-related crimes increased tenfold (from 2,370 to 23,700). Women routinely receive harsher sentences, than men for the same drug-related offenses.

Elaine's Story

In 1983, Elaine Bartlett, a 26-year welfare mother of four, agreed to transport four ounces of cocaine for a drug dealing friend. She did it for the \$2,500 she was to receive- money that was in part going to go toward a lavish thanksgiving dinner for her family. Unfortunately, her friend turned out to be a police informant. When she arrived, Elaine and her boyfriend, who had come along to protect her, having been unable to dissuade her, were arrested. Though she had no prior record, Elaine was sentenced to 20 years to life; her boyfriend to a minimum of 25 years. The drug dealing informant remains free, putting a kilo of cocaine on the streets every other week, and gets paid by the police to continue his informing.

Ultimately, Elaine got out after sixteen years, thanks to repeated calls by the public to "overturn mandatory minimum [sentences] for low level offenders." Elaine's children grew up in her absence. Though she is hardworking and doesn't use hard drugs, she struggles to put her life back together. One of her children has been in trouble with the law, including going to jail, and her two daughters "flit about the edges of the criminal underworld." Elaine lacks many basic life skills, and continues to live hand- to mouth.

The majority of women prisoners are mothers. An estimated 80,000 incarcerated mothers are parent to approximately 200,000 minor children. African American children are nearly nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than white children. Latino children are three times more likely than white children, to have an imprisoned parent. Studies show that about a quarter of children remain with their fathers when the mother goes to prison, but nearly 9 out of 10 children remain with their mothers when the father goes to prison. Women are usually the primary caregivers. Their incarceration often breaks up a family.

When no extended family member exists to raise the children of incarcerated parents, that child ends up in the foster care system. The prevalence of "adoption mandates" opens for adoption any

child who has been in foster care for 2 years. Thus, many incarcerated mothers lose their parental rights and it is difficult for women convicts to regain custody of their children.

The “Supermax”

In order to address the increased prison violence resulting from overcrowding during the 1970's and 1980's, the Federal Bureau of Prisons developed the Super Maximum Security model, or “supermax (sometimes referred to as ‘control unit’ prisons).” The underlying belief is that increased isolation of prisoners will help to maintain order within a system increasingly out of control and balance. However, there are concerns surrounding the misuse of such facilities and the effects of long-term isolation on prisoners and their impact on society upon release.

A Brief History

Alcatraz is considered the “grandfather” of the supermax. Its intent was to house the most volatile offenders of the justice system. In response to public pressure, Alcatraz shut down in 1968. In the 60's, the public demanded that the prison system shift from its focus on punishment to a more progressive system of reform. Reformation sought to prepare prisoners for reentry into society as contributing members. Discontinued program funding in the 1970's and 80's led to prisoner discontent. In addition, the political “war on drugs” exploded the prison population beyond capacity. This overcrowding amplified prisoner and guard stress. Prison staff responded to the violence by “locking down” units—or confining prisoners to their cells—for indefinite periods in order to minimize inmate/staff contact. The relative success of this procedure led to the institution of the “security housing unit” (SHU) which served as a separate disciplinary housing unit in which prisoners were isolated within their cells for extended periods of time. In 1983, after two guards were killed in the SHU at Marion, Illinois, the director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Norman Carlson, lobbied for the design of an entirely separate high-tech, supermax [Super Maximum Security] prison in which the ‘worst of the worst,’ gang leaders and sociopaths would be incarcerated in permanent lockdown conditions. The Colorado State Administrative Maximum Penitentiary (USP ADX) was the first federally designed supermax. Since its 1994 construction in Florence, Colorado, it has become a prototype. In the last 20 years, the U.S. has built approximately 60 supermax security prisons in 42 states. These are in addition to the SHUs that currently exist within state and federal institutions.

Super Max Conditions

“Prisoners exist in a “steel and concrete world.”

- They live in concrete cells approximately 8 ft X 12 ft, with a built in concrete bunk, desk, and stool and steel toilet/sink unit (which is remote controlled by staff).
- Most cells have no window; some have a 4 X 42 inch slit which looks out into a concrete exercise area.
- Prisoners are confined in these cells 23/7 (23 hours a day, 7 days a week).

- Inmates are allowed 1 hour of exercise, in a concrete yard three times a week, one inmate at a time. However, this happens only when there is enough staff on duty.
- Lights are remote controlled, by staff, and usually are left on 24/7.
- Meals are shoved through a food slot cut knee high in steel cell doors.
- There are either no educational, religious, mental health or rehabilitative programs provided or those programs are broadcasted into cells on a black & white, guard-controlled television.
- Telemedicine is widely used.
- There is no human contact between inmates, inmates and staff or inmates and visitors
- Each time an inmate is removed from her cell, a correctional officer places her hands and legs in restraints through a security door.
- Inmates are strip-searched when leaving and returning to cells.

“Are we releasing walking time bombs into society?”

Psychological Concerns

The effects of long-term solitary confinement, lack of human contact, living conditions and lack of transitional programs for reintroduction into the general prison population and society are paramount concerns. Are we releasing walking time bombs into society?

The pain and psychological damage that supermax confinement inflicts depends in part on each inmate’s character and psychological makeup. However, the length of time to which a person is exposed to these conditions indisputably aggravates the suffering. In most instances, confinement to a supermax is for an indefinite period. Long-term confinement can have devastating psychological effects.

In psychological studies on sensory deprivation, Harvard professor Dr. Stuart Grassian coined the term “SHU Syndrome”. Its symptoms are:

- Depression
- Increased paranoia
- Difficulty with concentration and memory
- Manic activity
- Agitation
- Hyper-responsiveness to external stimuli
- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Florid psychotic illness
- Suicide

Grassian estimates that as many as one-third of all supermax inmates are suffering from some kind of psychiatric trouble. Most of this goes undiagnosed since prisoners are given mental-health attention only if their guards – hardly experts in such matters – deem their behavior strange enough to warrant an examination.

In response to the evidence of the effect of sensory deprivation, supermax prisons have installed television sets in the hallways.

Most of the prisoners, locked in the solitude of supermaxes and SHUs will one day, be released. They will return to the midst of society – some of them angrier, more impulsive and more unbalanced than ever.

Rationale

According to prison officials, isolation of inmates makes prison populations easier to control. Removing the most dangerous prisoners, from the general prison population is an effective method of eliminating violent disruptions and avoiding the influence of “toughing” the overcrowded prison population. Officials also argue that this removal deters gang activity and enhances staff safety. However, there is little or no hard data to support that super-maxes reduce assaults on inmates or staff and there are a great many questions regarding their use.

Due to the absence of a legislative mandated oversight committee, or a civilian review board, there are no established standards of procedure or placement criteria. As a result, super-maxes are currently housing non-violent prisoners such as the:

- Mentally ill
- The HIV positive
- Those who have filed suits against the prison system
- Women who have reported rape by guards
- Prisoners who are purely rumored to have gang involvement.
- 85% African-American and Latinos

(This is disproportionate to the 65% of African-Americans and Hispanic within the general prison population. These statistics leave open the question of racial segregation within the system.)

In response to recent criticism and lawsuits filed by Human Rights Watch (HRW), Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union’s National Prison Project, supermaxes have simply closed their doors to outside scrutiny.

In the face of this closed door policy the number of prisoners who are held in super maxes and SHUs can only be estimated. This number ranges between 25,000 and 100,000 prisoners.⁴⁰ The lack of an agreed upon standard for defining exactly what constitutes a supermax or SHU, in addition to official’s refusal to open prison records, leaves us with no clear understanding of how many offenders meet the criteria of “the-worst-of-the-worst.”

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by Kobai Scott Whitney

Scott Whitney is a long-time student of Buddhism—and one-time inmate. The book has two audiences: prison inmates who want to start practicing Buddhism and volunteers from American sanghas who want to work with prison dharma groups. The book discusses the basics of meditation, compassion and precept practice within the correctional facility context. Whitney discusses some of the history of Buddhist involvement in American prisons as well as the history of constitutional interpretations of religious freedom as applied to inmates. The book is meant to be as practical as possible and it emphasizes Buddhism in action—through the precepts, peacemaking and sangha building inside and out.

Dharma in Hell: The Prison Writings of Fleet Maull

by Fleet Maull – Forward by Bo Lozoff

“In the charnel ground that is America’s prisons, Fleet Maull lived a life of vows and service for 15 years. These writings are proof and testament to his personal strength, determination and courage in the face of indescribable despair, as well as to his power as a committed dharma practitioner to bring compassion and transformation into truly hellish realism. Fleet Maull is an indomitable spirit.”

~ Roshi Bernie Glassman & Roshi Eve Marko

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Documentaries

Scared Straight! (1978)

Peter Falk hosts this groundbreaking documentary that won an Oscar and eight Emmys in 1978. The film follows 17 juvenile delinquents who are taken inside a maximum-security prison and brought face to face with the “Lifers,” a group of hardened convicts who describe their nightmarish prison life in gruesome detail in an attempt to scare the teen lawbreakers into going straight

The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison

Excellent documentary exploring life in prison in Louisiana. Winner of Academy Award.

A Place to Stand (2002)

Is it ever too late to turn your life around? For Jimmy Santiago Baca, it seemed every day was his point of no return. Before he could even learn to read, he was abandoned by family, swept into a life of crime, and shipped away to Arizona State Prison. At every turn, Jimmy was alone... until one kind act changed the way he saw the world, and himself. *A Place to Stand* is the amazing true story of how Jimmy Santiago Baca —a man with seemingly no future— became a celebrated teacher, poet, novelist, and screenwriter. Based on the memoir of the same name, *A Place to Stand* takes viewers into Jimmy’s past and present to uncover how the power of the written word lifted him from the violence and pain that had defined his early life. With powerful revelations from family, friends, and fellow inmates, as well as incredible insight into the early writings that first captured Jimmy’s imagination, audiences learn why it’s never too late to turn your life around – as long as you have a place to stand.

What I Want My Words to Do to You (2003)

Female inmates at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women try to determine whether redemption is really possible after committing a crime. Proctored by playwright Eve Ensler, the convicts (including two former members of the Weather Underground) perform a series of writing exercises and discussions that could lead to healing. The

film culminates in a prison performance of the women's writings by Glenn Close, Marisa Tomei and Rosie Perez.

13th (2016)

The film begins with the idea that 25 percent of the people in the world who are incarcerated are incarcerated in the U.S. Although the U.S. has just 5% of the world's population. "13th" charts the explosive growth in America's prison population; in 1970, there were about 200,000 prisoners; today, the prison population is more than 2 million. The documentary touches on chattel slavery; D. W. Griffith's film "The Birth of a Nation"; Emmett Till; the civil rights movement; the Civil Rights Act of 1964; Richard M. Nixon; and Ronald Reagan's declaration of the war on drugs and much more.

Prison Films

American Me (1992)

A life of violence is traced from the Zoot Suit riots of the 1940s to the bloody streets of East Los Angeles in the 1990s. Three homeboys, Santana, Mundo and JD, born in a crucible of poverty, create the capitalist dream in their own way as powerful gang members. Jailed in their youth, they still control the streets from the cellblock. But after his release, Santana wavers between his old lifestyle and a fresh beginning with a new love.

Animal Factory (2000)

After receiving a sentence for drug trafficking, Ron Decker must learn to cope with life on the inside. Luckily, he befriends Earl, an ex-gang leader who protects Ron and shows him the ways of prison life.

Dead Man Walking (1995)

Scheduled to be put to death for brutally slaying two teens, Matthew Poncelet seeks the aid of activist nun Helen Prejean, a death-penalty opponent. She becomes Matthew's spiritual adviser and tries to halt the execution. Academy Award winner.

The Hurricane (1999)

Denzel Washington lands a knockout punch as Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who — at the zenith of his boxing career — finds himself wrongly convicted of a triple New Jersey homicide and sentenced to three life terms. While in prison, Carter pens his autobiography, which inspires Brooklyn teen Lesra Martin and a trio of Canadian advocates to help prove Carter's innocence.

Levity (2003)

Haunted by a newspaper clipping picturing the teenager he killed in a botched robbery 22 years earlier, incarcerated felon Manuel is surprised when he's released from prison after serving 19 years. Thrust back into society, Jordan seeks redemption from a minister and his victim's sister.

Monster's Ball (2001)

Death row in the Louisiana State Penitentiary is the hothouse backdrop for this drama about racist prison guard Billy Bob Thornton, who falls in love with the wife of a condemned man he helped execute.

Prison Song (2001)

The American dream is at odds with the justice system in this story about the deterioration of the soul of one inner-city African-American male. Raised primarily in group homes, Elijah lifts himself up through art and education — but when a full college scholarship is revoked, frustration and anger cause him to accidentally kill another teen.

Convicted and jailed, Elijah once again attempts to free his broken spirit through art.

Return to Paradise (1998)

Americans Lewis, Sheriff and Tony spend a carefree summer together on the beaches of Malaysia. Two years later, a lawyer tells Sheriff and Tony that Lewis has been sentenced to death for drug trafficking. If both go back to claim their share of the drugs, each will go to prison for three years; if only one goes, he'll be jailed for six years. If both refuse, Lewis will die.

Slam (1998)

This is a "coming to life," story about a street pharmacist/ rapper who finds salvation in his rhymes. Ray Joshua gets sucked into the criminal justice system, but finds truth in himself and his craft to rise above his circumstances. Sundance Film Festival Award Winner.

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Correspondence

PMI no longer runs a pen pal program, but this is good information for those who correspond with prisoners, so we've included it as a reference.

Correspondence with Prisoners

Some individuals find it meaningful to become pen pals with prisoners. These guidelines may help you do so. In the context of sharing mindfulness, pen pal mentors should be experienced practitioners of a contemplative path. We recommend the main subject of your correspondence be the prisoner's path of transformation through contemplative practice, although becoming friends is vital. We recommend you not use your home address or give your phone number. Perhaps use the address of your Meditation Center or a PO Box. On the envelope be sure that the Department of Corrections number (prisoner number) is clearly visible. The letter will most likely be returned to you if the number is missing.

Books & Magazines

Each prison has different rules governing how prisoners may receive books. The prisoners will advise you as to the rules. Sometimes prisons require that books come directly from the publisher or a bookstore, although we generally are able to send books to prisoners directly from Prison Mindfulness Institute, so it's possible we may be able to send books for you (depending on availability).

Books

PMI sends books and meditation resources to all prisoners who write us requesting them. Topics in books read provide a helpful way to begin communication. You could suggest that the prisoner read certain chapters in books available, perhaps asking a few questions. Then you would have an opportunity to clarify understanding in a reply.

Meditation Shrines, Cushions & Materials

Prisoners are usually limited as to what they are allowed to own. You could send the prisoner a postcard or a greeting card with a picture of a meditative image on it. Cushions are generally not allowed but a rolled up blanket works fine.

Frequency of Correspondence

Please appreciate that a pen pal mentor may be an individual prisoner's only connection to the outside world. Therefore, it is our responsibility to not fall away from a regular correspondence. If you are due to write a letter but don't have time, it is good to write a short "touch in" note and promise a longer letter soon. Please do not let too much time elapse between letters. Prisoners look forward to letters and appreciate knowing they are not forgotten.

Prisoners are often starved for contact. It is good to convey our kind intentions right at the beginning. You should not deceive people by unclearly representing your intention (or by not having clear intentions in the first place). It is common for a prisoner to write back to a volunteer very quickly. An untimely response can provoke disappointment and negativity. On the other hand, the volunteer should not feel emotionally blackmailed by the prisoner's urgency. You can work out a balance in terms of timing together. Modulating frequency of response is a mutual learning process.

Requests

A prisoner may ask you to intervene with the Chaplain or his prison for his "religious or legal rights." We suggest you respond that you are sympathetic, and would like to help, but are unable to. PMI does not offer any legal support, however, in our Resource Guide (available online), there

are resources for legal aid listed. A prisoner may request other things such as money, help when they are released, etc. Please use your own discretion with requests and avoid enabling dependency or manipulative behaviors. It's important to focus on empowering interactions ... better to teach a person to fish ...

Post Release

Please realize that you are forming a relationship with a person who may consider you to be a great support. Many of these prisoners will be released. Before you begin this relationship please reflect on how you will respond if and when a prisoner wants to meet you upon his or her release.

Suggestions For "Free Persons"

Below is an almost verbatim copy of "Some Perspectives about a Prison Pen Relationship" by the Human Kindness Foundation and edited by the Insight Prison Project. We thank them for letting us use it, and making a few changes. We hope it deepens your understanding of one another, and allows both of you to bring meaning to each other's lives.

Guidelines for Letter Writing

The following suggestions are written in an effort to facilitate your friendships. It takes into account the unusual situation of this relationship, being that one of you is in prison. A pen-pal relationship between a prisoner and a "free person" is an exploration of friendship. A spiritual friend is your ally in your quest to awaken to what is true. This is a rare opportunity to develop a relationship that is entirely based on choosing to communicate what is true. Please let this be an essential aspect in all that you share. As in many relationships, the depth and meaning of your connection is mainly established by how genuinely interested you are in hearing one another. To practice this listening is perhaps the greatest gift of any friendship. Do not assume that you're now in the role of the spiritual teacher of your prison friend. You both have much to learn from one another. He or she may face situations daily you can hardly imagine, so please respect that and yet don't be intimidated by it.

On the other hand, you are not the loyal side-kick of a larger-than-life "outlaw". Your pen-pal is a life-sized person, no bigger and no smaller, who has positive and negative parts to their personality. The challenge of a spiritual friendship is to be fully loving without supporting or reinforcing each other's self-delusions and vanities.

If you feel sexual or romantic vibes which make you uncomfortable, then do not allow them to build. Please be kind and clear about your intentions and ask for respect. If the situation continues, discontinue your contact.

If your pen-pal asks for material favors that you feel are inappropriate, please in a clear and respectful manner let them know that you will only send items that relate directly to their spiritual needs. In addition, you are NOT in a position to forward items, contact lawyers, or run errands.

Don't ever be manipulated into suspicious activity such as anything to do with government checks, money orders, forwarding money or mail from your return address, smuggling anything into prison, or lying in any way to anyone. You can bring serious trouble into your life in that way. If your pen-pal respects and loves you, he or she won't put you in that position.

Don't be frightened by your friends or family's panic about possible danger by writing to prisoners. They are human just like you. Use your common sense, and if you listen honestly to your gut feelings and conscience, you may find that this becomes one of the most remarkable relationships in your life. Prison is a challenging environment which can give rise to courage and wisdom.

These guidelines are meant to inspire some clarity for your correspondence. Please do not feel intimidated by them; it is our fear that separates us, not our clarity. Conversely, when we open our hearts, we free each other, and ourselves.

Guidelines for Telephone Conversations

If you choose to talk with your pen pal over the phone, clear boundaries must be established on what can and cannot be discussed over the phone and in written correspondence. Please remember most phone conversations are taped and letters are often read by the authorities.

Suggestions For Prisoners

(copy this if you wish and send to your prisoner pen pal)

Your pen-pal is neither your guru nor your disciple, but a potential friend. Remember that friendship is a two-way street. This is a chance for you to really get to know yourself through connecting with another human being. There is no need to lie, impress or seek approval. Are you really interested in his or her life, instead of just using them as a sounding board for your complaints or grand philosophies? Your pen pal wants to know you, not be impressed by you. We all get dealt a hand of cards in this lifetime and only a few chances to put them on the table. Enjoy the gift of it all; friendship, spiritual growth and an opportunity to study the connection between true freedom and self knowledge. Almost everyone in prison is broke, and almost everyone has material needs that aren't being met. But that's not what your pen-pal relationship is about. If you try to make it that, you will probably lose a good friend. Which will do you more good in the long run--twenty bucks for a radio--or a life-long friend? Your pen-pal may be a little nervous about various aspects of your life and current situation. You don't have to pamper them or hide your reality, but please try to understand their difficulties and help address them. Remember that everyone in the free world has problems too. It really is true 'we are all doing time' one way or another, so both of you can try to help each other see and dismantle those prisons of the mind, which are far more limiting than any prison of concrete and steel. Take time to listen deeply to what is communicated, and let your response come from a place of reflection, not reaction.

Do not disclose to your outside friend any knowledge of the illegal activities of yourself or anyone you know, outside or in. Your outside friend could legally be held responsible if they are privy to such information. Please respect this.

Do not engage in sexual banter or repartee. Your outside friend is committed to helping you on the path of dharma and to being your friend. If you are seeking a romantic pen pal there are numerous organizations that might connect you with such a person, please check online.