

Afternoon Visits Inside San Quentin Prison

by HENRY FRUMMER

Someone calls out, “Gate!” There is a loud clang as the sally port door opens. We walk into the ten-foot-long entry room with barred doors at each end. We show our IDs to the guard behind bulletproof glass, and the same call marks the opening of the second sally port door so that we can exit. We then walk through a medieval-looking solid metal door and enter a large, pleasant, well-landscaped courtyard bounded on four sides by very different buildings. Behind us is an admin building containing the “Captain’s Porch,” in front of us is a remodeled hospital, to the right are Catholic and Protestant chapels, and to our left is the Orwellian-named “Adjustment Center,” aka solitary. We are heading to a low, rectangular rec room inside. It is transformed regularly into a mosque, a Jewish temple, a zendo, and a yoga studio. But first

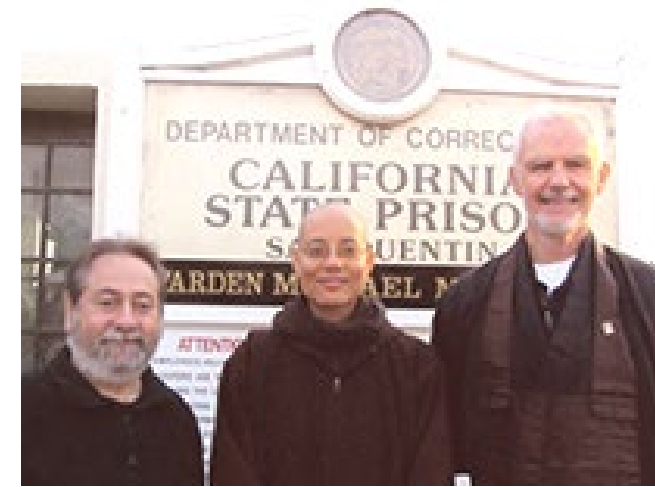
we have to sign the group in at “Four Post,” the third place we must sign in before starting our day. From here, the inmates are notified that our program is ready to start.

As the inmates arrive, we transform the plain, linoleum-floored room into the familiar zendo. The inmates set up a beautiful rolling altar made in the prison’s furniture shop, adorned with statues of the Buddha carved by one of the men. In the room, the men (we often refer to the inmates in that way) are relaxed and happy to see us. In that room, they are people and not prisoners. There is an openness created by the feeling of people meeting people just to connect that is quite refreshing. They are just themselves. I often reflect that their life is much like life in a monastery: They all wear the

same clothes, eat the same food, and sleep in small cells. They have limited choice of how to spend the day. They have to be selfless in many of their activities. They have little personal power over the administration or other inmates. They have to exercise caution and self-control every day. They find themselves sharing a tiny cell with another inmate whom they might not really like for years at a time. They have to negotiate that small space just big enough for a bunk bed, a sink, and a toilet every day.

The Buddhist group was started in 1999 by several inmates who were meditating together on the yard. They approached the warden requesting a Buddhist program. They then contacted the San Francisco Zen Center and asked if a priest would come and lead a group. Lee

deBarros, with other help from the Zen Center, created the Buddhadharma Sangha of San Quentin. He has been coming ever since. He recently retired and turned over the group to his main student, Jiryu, a Dharma heir living at Green Gulch Farm. Since the group’s founding, it has met on Sundays with a typical small-group schedule. There are periods for meditation, service, and dharma talk. Recently, a new program has been added, which is a discussion group in the afternoon that meets for 2½ hours on various Buddhist topics. This new program has become extremely popular with the men, as it gives them a chance to talk about their lives and how Buddhism has affected their lives. Most of these men have had arduous journeys from being violent criminals to acquiring a deep desire for the Bodhisattva ideal (the desire to save all beings). It is a spiritual transformation that most religious seekers only dream about.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Resident Henry Frummer, visiting Thich Nhat Hanh teacher Sister Jewel, and Jiryu of Green Gulch Farm outside San Quentin California State Prison after an afternoon meeting with inmates of the Buddhadharma Sangha of San Quentin.

insight. Their take on Buddhist teachings is often deeply insightful. These are stories of broken childhoods, drug addiction, gang memberships, abandonment, betrayal, bad choices, hope, joy, forgiveness, and love. Often a stretch in solitary can be the place where people wake up — the place where they find there is no one left to blame. One inmate found a copy of a Buddhist book tucked away in an otherwise empty cell; another had a Buddhist magazine land in front of his cell that was swept down from an upper tier. Most were invited to attend the Buddhist group by a fellow inmate who appreciated the quiet meditation and relaxed

teaching that was free of any pitch to join.

There is some sort of magic created in our zendo. One volunteer who was asked to give a presentation on a topic reported being nervous until she realized that being in that room is in fact a safe place to share one’s feelings. There is a

level of acceptance of volunteers not often found on the outside. It’s not that the men put us on a pedestal, but it’s odd to feel complete appreciation just for showing up; it seems out of place. They have spent most of their lives having to read people, having to be alert at all times, yet they are all different, and the volunteers’ interactions with them are all unique. We seek out the people we best communicate with. Personally, I try to find a way to connect with each of the men in a significant way. Sometimes it takes patience. I don’t judge them; I’m glad I’m not put in a position to do that. I can simply meet the person in front of me, just as he is. ■

