

Being a Source *By Sensei Fleet Maull*

In prison, we often get used to people doing things for us--making decisions for us, providing programs, meals, medical services, laundry, etc. This might encourage us to fall into a somewhat dependent and consumerist mentality. Of course, the same thing happens on the outside, as witnessed by the consumerism dominating modern society. We are conditioned from childhood to become consumers. Some of us become creators and providers as well; but essentially we are all conditioned to be consumers.

The Buddhadharma, or the path of the Buddha, isn't about being dependent, or being good consumers. Walking the path of the Buddha we learn to stand on our own feet and to be more concerned with providing for others than with fulfilling our own desires (the driving force of consumerism). At first glance, it may seem difficult to follow the Buddhist path in prison. We often have trouble getting books, liturgies, meditation and supplies. Buddhist prison ministry is still in its infancy. Many prisoners still have little or no access to outside dharma teachers and guides. What are we to do--wait for someone on the outside to get it together and bring a dharma program to our prison? With that approach, we could wait a long time.

The Buddha encouraged us to cultivate and depend on our own resources and to work with what we have. I do not believe the dharma will be established in our prisons by outside volunteers. I believe that it will be established and cultivated by us--men and women behind bars, thirsting for truth and a path to true freedom.

One way to divide any population is to identify the creators and the consumers. Most of us are consumers, taking advantage of things provided by others. Look at the programs you have in your prison--recovery meetings, chapel groups, educational and athletic programs. Who creates those programs? Who is there every week, setting up the space, creating a beneficial situation for others? In some cases, it is the prison staff. In other cases, your fellow prisoners are carrying the load, being the source for the program you enjoy.

If you have made a connection with the dharma, why not become the person who establishes it as an available spiritual path at your institution? You don't have to have experience. By contacting organizations like Prison Dharma Network, you can acquire basic dharma books from Tibetan, Zen, Vipassana or other traditions. You could organize a study group or simply gather with like-minded fellow prisoners to study and practice together. By reaching out to PDN and other dharma organizations you can acquire written meditation instructions, so that on your own, or preferably as a group you can begin to practice sitting meditation, the core practice of Buddhism.

As you work with your fellow prisoners and the prison authorities, chaplains, etc., never portray yourself as more than you are, just a student, gathering with others to study and practice together. In all likelihood, if you establish a group, outside resources and teachers will appear. There is a famous spiritual saying: "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." Some of us have encountered negative attitudes or ignorance when dealing with our prison chaplains. Don't let this discourage you or allow you to be drawn into a confrontation. In working to establish the dharma, it is essential to model the Buddhist teachings we hope to learn and make available to others--principles like gentleness, equanimity, and compassion. With patience, friendliness, and good humor we can gradually educate chaplains about the dharma. If they see good qualities manifesting in our behavior, even in the face of resistance they will be impressed and gradually become more open to the transformational quality of the dharma.

While incarcerated, I sourced a prison dharma group in a federal prison for 13 years. Twice a week I arrived at the chapel early to set up the altar and put out the meditation cushions. I worked with the chaplains to assure we had a space and time to meet and resources like incense and candles, meditation cushions for practice, and books and videos for study. In all those years, there were only a handful of prisoners who joined me in supporting the group. Hundreds more just came, made use of what we had to offer, and went on their way. In my experience, it was those few who really got involved in "being at source" for the group that really connected with the dharma. Several went on to establish groups at other prisons, and most of them are now committed practitioners and contributing members of outside *sanghas* (Buddhist communities). If you are genuinely interested in the Buddhist path, I strongly encourage you to move beyond the "program consumer's" approach and find a way to "be at source" for establishing the dharma in your institution. In doing so you will benefit many and surely encounter the true dharma.

PDN exists to support prisoners and prison volunteers in making the dharma available behind bars. We depend on prisoners like you to help us facilitate our mission. We work through you. We cannot do it for you, but we can share some resources. Please feel free to contact us. We will do what we can to assist you with the resources we have.

Yours in the Dharma, Sensei Fleet Shinryu Maull

Fleet Maull, a long time student of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and an ordained dharma holder in the Zen Peacemaker Order, founded both the Prison Dharma Network and the National Prison Hospice Association while serving 14 years in federal prison. Fleet is the author of *Dharma in Hell: The Prison Writings of Fleet Maull*. Fleet has written numerous articles on prison dharma in publications such as the Shambhala Sun, Tikkun, Hospice Journal and Turning Wheel. Fleet's story was written about in Roshi Bernie Glassman's book *Bearing Witness*.

