True Freedom

a Prison Pen Pal Program at Community of Mindful Living

Guidelines

- ◆ As practitioners in the tradition of Plum Village and the Community of Mindful Living we want to offer our time and energy to those in need. There are many incarcerated friends that aspire to practice mindfulness in order to find happiness, peace and freedom in the midst of their difficult situation. As a practitioner and pen pal we can offer our presence and experience in transformation and healing. In this way our aspiration to be engaged, to embrace and transform suffering can be nourished. We continue to grow our heart of love wider and deeper.
- In order to be skillful in our pen pal practice we need to study to understand the prison environment and the culture of inmates. The books on the book list below is a starting point in this learning. In our pen pal practice we want to be open, but we also need to be real and clear about our role for the communication to be helpful.
- ◆ As pen pal practitioners we will also share our experiences with other pen pals within the Community of Mindful Living, so we can continue to learn together how to skillfully serve. If we face challenges in our letter writing we will seek the support by other members of the pen pal Sangha. The coordination team of the True Freedom program will keep a list of active pen pals and will share the email addresses with the pen pals in the project.
- ◆ We aspire to bring joy, hope and relief into the hearts and minds of the incarcerated friends we communicate with.
- ◆ We will practice deep listening, to be there as a fellow human being. We will practice loving writing to water seeds of understanding and love.
- ◆ We will share clear, concrete and appropriate practices in the spirit of "I am home. I have arrived." and "Be Free Where You Are", that can be practiced right in the cell and during daily life in prison.
- ◆ We commit ourselves to the pen pal assignment for at least a couple of years. We will try our best to be regular in our letter writing, but not pressured to write when conditions are not sufficient.
- ♦ We will not share our life story, chit chat about this and that, but will bring the sharing back to the practice of mindfulness, concentration and insight. This aspect is important since the experience from other groups and within the Community of Mindful Living tells us that there might be attempts to manipulate and get things. We also want to help keep the relationship as friends on the path of practice clear by having men write to men and women write to women.
- ◆ We agree not to help in making telephone calls, sending stamps or money, delivering messages, helping in court cases and so on. Our aspiration is to support our friends in the

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practice of transformation and healing.

- ♦ When it comes to material such as the Mindfulness Bell, books and Cd's we take refuge in the support that the Mindfulness Bell, Parallax Press and the pen pal coordination team provide. As a pen pal we will only send letters. When a letter from a friend in prison comes to the Community of Mindful Living the first action the coordinator takes is to send the name and address of the person to David Percival (for a complementary subscription to the Mindfulness Bell) and to Parallax (for offering of damaged books).
- ◆ Our role as pen pal within this program in limited to letter writing while the friend is incarcerated. We will not continue our contact when the person is on probation or parole. We will not help in the transition upon release in other ways then sharing information about where and how they can continue their practice (local Sangha directory for example). These directions are based on experience from fellow practitioners and will help to set a clear boundary for the True Freedom Pen Pal program and for the individual pen pal.
- ◆ We communicate as a community, representing the Plum Village tradition. We will only use our first name and possibly last name first initial in communications and will use the following address as our return address in all letters we mail to inmates: *True Freedom at Community of Mindful Living: 2499 Melru Lane, Escondido, CA 92026.* The coordination team will forward the letters received on a regular basis.

In our own training to be a pen pal we want to read:

- Sitting Inside, by Scott Kobai (required reading)
- Be Free Where you Are, By Thich Nhat Hanh (required reading)
- Razor Wire Dharma, by Calvin Malone
- We are all doing time, by Bo Lozoff
- Dharma in Hell, by Fleet Maul