EVERYONE MATTERS  
-Rev. Tonen O’Connor

I have been asked to present an overview of some of the practices that take American Soto Zen priests and lay members of their groups beyond the walls of their temples or zen centers to work in areas that promote the dignity and well-being of those outside the mainstream of our society, specifically those who are incarcerated, homeless or in hospice care. There are some 90 or so Soto Zen temples, centers and affiliated sitting groups in the U.S., and I obviously cannot speak for all of them. Therefore, I will draw on my personal experience at the Milwaukee Zen Center and the information that a dozen or so of my colleagues have been kind enough to share with me.

Perhaps the first question that must be asked is whether true Zen practice is limited to the memorial services and ceremonies offered to congregations in Japan or to the periods of zazen practice offered to both lay and ordained practitioners in the U.S. The answer, I believe, lies within one of the Buddha’s great teachings: the interdependence of all things. Our practice must acknowledge and respond to interdependence whenever an opportunity presents itself.

In *Busshô*, Dôgen goes even further to ask: “What is the essence of the World-honored One’s words, *All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha-nature?* It is his utterance of the Dharma teaching: ‘What is this that thus comes?’ Whether you speak of ‘living beings,’ ‘sentient beings,’ ‘all classes of living things,’ or ‘all varieties of living beings,’ it makes no difference. The words *entire being (shitsuu)* mean both sentient beings and all beings. In other words, *entire being is the Buddha-nature.*” (1)

The head teacher at the Heart Circle Sangha in New Jersey recently made a comment that resonates with Dôgen’s understanding: “As a matter of principle we see enlightenment as manifesting in the world, not in the zendo, if you know what I mean.” True enlightenment is the bodhisattva’s realization of the selflessness that includes all things, that expands beyond the individual ego-self’s quest for “enlightenment.”

Indeed, the best model for our practice of the Buddha Way in the world is that of the bodhisattva, who responds to all needs, feels compassion for all beings, and who needs no reward. *The Vimalakirti Sutra* offers one of the best possible portraits of the attributes and activities of the bodhisattva and quotations from *The Vimalakirti Sutra* will be inserted into this report whenever I find that they resonate with the topic at hand.

*All living beings are a part of Suchness, and all other things as well are part of Suchness; even you, Maitreya, are a part of Suchness. So if you have been given a prophecy of enlightenment, then all living beings should likewise be given such a prophecy.* - *Vimalakirti Sutra* (2)

Thus we view our practice of the Buddha Way as responding to the needs of others, but
immediately the question arises: “How do we choose?” Do we choose to help one particular group because we’ve heard others are doing it, or we have heard this sort of activity listed among approved “social services”? To make what I feel to be an appropriate choice, we must follow the first rule of compassion: **Find the greatest need close at hand.** This means a need that is staring one in the face in a real way, not as a theoretical matter. This means getting outside of the temple, the zendo and our immediate circle of Buddhist practitioners and taking a hard look at others with whom we share this world.

*If you do not descend into the vast ocean, you can never acquire a priceless pearl. In the same way, if you do not enter the great sea of earthly desires, you can never acquire the treasure of comprehensive wisdom.* – Vimalakirti Sutra (3)

The United States, to its shame, has a greater number of people incarcerated than any other country in the world. The U.S. has less than 5% of the world’s population. But it has almost a quarter of the world’s prisoners. And not only is the total number of prison inmates greater, the ratio of those incarcerated to the general population is also the highest in the world. 1 in 100 Americans live within the prison systems of federal, state and city governments. (See Appendix A.)

This means that the need is enormous and clearly apparent. A great many of the Soto Zen centers in the U.S. are connected to or offering programs at local prisons. Many other Buddhist traditions as well are participating in offering this huge prison population spiritual solace in the form of dharma teachings and meditation. To get a sense of the scope of this movement, those who can read English are encouraged to go the web site for the Prison Dharma Network, a non-sectarian, contemplative support organization for prisoners and prison dharma volunteers. PDN has over 2,500 members and annually supports over 3,000 prisoners with meditation materials and resources. Since its founding in 1989, PDN’s Book Behind Bars program has provided books on meditation and contemplative spirituality to over 25,000 prisoners in over 900 prisons around the world. Their web address is: [www.prisondharmanetwork.org/](http://www.prisondharmanetwork.org/)

**Once the need is identified, do we also set goals for “success” in meeting it?**

Here I would like to clarify my personal position with regards to entering this practice with the idea that one can quantify success and perhaps even set goals for its achievement.

I believe that success is exceedingly difficult to define. How do we quantify changes in the heart and mind? Are we trying to prove that the dharma we offer is merely a tool for creating socially viable beings? In the U.S., statistics reign, and we are constantly asked about our “success rate,” meaning of course the recidivism rate for those we have worked with. Yet the Dharma may have had the greatest impact upon those who will spend their lives within prison walls. One man with whom I worked during his time in prison has now been released, is married, has a family and a job. One man with whom I continue to work is in prison for life and as his practice grows, his positive impact on those around him is vividly apparent. Which example is more “successful”? 
Secondly, I think it is exceedingly difficult to work within the prisons if one must be constantly reassured by one’s “success.” The best way to approach the work is that of the bodhisattva. The Heart Sutra assures us that there is “nothing to attain. With nothing to attain, the bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita and thus the mind is without hindrance.” If our compassionate response is natural and direct, we have no need to worry about either success or failure.

He treats them with a compassion of tranquil extinction, for it results in no birth; treats them with a compassion unburning, for it is void of earthly desires; treats them with a compassion that is impartial, as the three existences of past, present, and future are impartial; treats them with a compassion free of contention, for nothing arises to oppose it; treats them with a compassion undualistic, for internal and external have no place in it; treats them with a compassion firm and durable, for the mind of the bodhisattva never flags; treats them with a compassion clean and pure, as the nature of all phenomena is pure; treats them with a compassion boundless, boundless as the empty sky. –Vimalakirti Sutra (4)

How does this work begin? A case study of one prison program.

How do these programs come into being, and what do they offer the prison inmates? To answer that question I will use the history of the Milwaukee Zen Center’s prison program as a case study that I hope will offer some insight into the genesis, value and challenges of such programs.

It did not begin as a “program.”

The contact with prison inmates that over ten years would grow into a program that involves 10 correctional institutions, 6 teachers and nearly 100 inmates, was not something mapped out in response to a theory about prison inmates. Rather, it began in 1998 as a letter to the Zen Center from an inmate at a maximum security institution requesting information about Buddhism. He had seen a television program about Bhutan and grown curious about the Buddha and his teachings.

I answered his questions as best I could and correspondence took place over the next several months. Then came the inevitable question: Would I come visit him? I had never even thought about what visiting a prison might be like, and this prison is 115 miles north of Milwaukee. My first visit was filled with tension and mistakes: mistakes in filling out the proper forms in the prison lobby, mistakes in filling out the proper forms in the prison lobby, mistakes about to whom the forms should be given once I entered the visitors’ room, tension about the man I was going to meet and what he would want from me. As it turned out, the correctional officers at the prison showed me how to indicate that I was making a pastoral visit as an ordained minister. The inmate wanted to talk about the dharma and what interdependence might mean.

It takes great patience.

That visit was the first of many to that inmate until finally he mentioned that he’d met someone in the prison food line who was Hmong and greatly interested in Buddhism, although he wasn’t sure what a Western woman might know about it. I began making
pastoral visits to this inmate and then he suggested that others were interested and that we should have a group meeting. Such meetings for religious services are allowed once a week under Wisconsin state law. I began to correspond with the prison chaplain and then the prison program supervisor to request that a Buddhist group meeting be permitted. The early answers were evasive and disinterested. The months ground by as I kept returning for pastoral visits and continuing to request a group meeting.

They will test your sincerity.
In the case of this first attempt to form a prison dharma group, the obstacle was the prison program supervisor, who knew nothing about Buddhism, feared that it was some sort of cult and that I would only cause trouble. Only repeated gentle reminders of the inmates’ legal right to religious services finally opened the doors.

But in any case, prison chaplains are often under assault by do-gooding groups intending to convert the inmates to their particular religious faith, and chaplains also must be wary of those who approach their first few contacts with prison inmates with high enthusiasm but then drift away, bored with the ongoing commitment. So patience is required to prove that you can be trusted.

In addition, there are issues of respect. I know of some prison volunteers who fall into the trap of developing sympathy for the woes of the inmates as victims (a tendency that inmates will readily play upon.) They then view all correctional officers as ogres intent on brutalizing inmates and treat these officers with disdain. It is certainly and bitterly true that brutality exists within our prison system, but it is also true that personnel are often merely ordinary people doing their job. So respect is due to those you encounter from the moment you enter the prison lobby and prepare to go through the security procedures.

The regulations cannot be ignored.
You must learn the necessary procedures for getting permission to bring in special items for group study, learn to sign and sign out, pay strict attention to regulations governing fraternization. (“You give the inmates nothing and receive nothing from them.”)

What about the program itself?
When I first began visiting Green Bay Correctional Institution, I had only a vague idea concerning what we might do in our permitted hour. Certainly zazen. But what else? Discussion? Readings? Following the lead of the inmates, I developed a format for these visits that is now used, with variations, in the ten institutions we serve. The hour or hour and a half allowed begins with zazen. This gives the men or women an opportunity to settle down, coalesce as a group, and find comfort in the silence. Prisons are never quiet. The level of noise is deafening – people shouting, weeping, swearing, arguing – and remains so 24 hours a day. As a result, there is a particularly profound silence that falls once the group is seated and zazen has begun. At first I thought I was imagining it, but I’ve come to believe that what I am feeling is the profound silence of relief.....relief from the pressures of maintaining a protective stance at all times in the vicious world of the prison. It is safe in our little room.
Zazen is followed by a service. I found that the men wanted some sense of religious ceremony, and most of the prisons now have a statue of the Buddha stored in the chapel for our use and in some of them we are allowed to light incense. (No more than two sticks!) The service itself is drawn from a number of Buddhist traditions, not just Soto Zen, for we do have members of our groups who are originally from Laos and Cambodia. You will find the complete service as Appendix B, but the elements are as follows: Three Refuges The Heart Sutra The Metta Sutta A selection from the Dhammapada Repentances and vows that I created The Four Great Vows in Japanese and then in English. (I thought the men might dislike the Japanese, but found that they like it very much and enjoy belting out: “Shujo muhen seigan do” etc.

Next I ask if anyone has any questions or thoughts to share. The inmates in our groups read voraciously and the Milwaukee Zen Center supplies free books to many of them. If there are no questions or comments, I usually read something I’ve brought as the basis for a small dharma talk, something from Dōgen or many other sources.

So, in essence, what we do is not so different from the practices at the Milwaukee Zen Center. There is another factor that makes these gatherings satisfying. The Wisconsin Department of Corrections requires that each inmate, upon entering the system, fill out a Religious Preference Form. And although they can change their designated preference every six months, during the time the form is in effect they can go to only religious practice in that particular faith. This guarantees that, although I may not have large numbers in my groups, I generally have people with a serious interest in the teachings of the Buddha. It is a great pleasure to teach people who want to learn.

How did the program spread?
Largely via word of mouth. Inmates are transferred frequently among the institutions in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections. As an example, someone from the group at Green Bay was transferred to Oshkosh Correctional Institution and the word spread that I might be available to meet with those interested in Buddhism. I have now worked with some members of the prison sangha in at least three institutions over periods of up to 9 or 10 years.

At most new prisons, the process was the same: security clearance, initial suspicion, patience, close adherence to regulations and final acceptance. Finally, as my work became known, I was asked to join a Buddhist chaplain from one prison and together we made a presentation on Buddhism to a gathering of all the chaplains in the system. As a result, chaplains began turning to me when they found they had Buddhist inmates, or were faced with questions about Buddhist practice. Eventually I was asked to serve on the Wisconsin Department of Corrections Religious Practices Advisory Committee (RPAC). This committee is made up of members representing a host of different faith
traditions: Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Native American, Jewish etc.

RPAC is merely advisory but over the years we have been able to foster slight improvements in the documents regulating religious practice within the DOC. For example, Spiritual Advisors and volunteers now have the right to correspond with inmates on religious matters. We have clarified what religious implements we may be allowed to have for various services, and what religious emblems inmates may be allowed to have. Issues regarding religious feasts and special diets have been clarified.

What is important?

“Identity-action” means non-difference. It is non-difference from self, non-difference from others....When we know identity-action, self and other are one.”

- Dôgen, Bodaisatta Shîsho-hô (5)

Respect is what we are offering all those with whom we come into contact, whether in prisons, homeless shelters or hospices. We do not see them as “other.” When I first began going into prisons, I had no training for the work nor any real idea of what I should do. Then one day I realized that no matter how skillful or unskillful my teaching might be, the most important single thing that I did was that I showed up. I respected my commitment. To this day, if for some reason I must cancel a visit to a prison, I send a postcard to each member of the group, explaining why.

Speaking specifically about prison inmates, I believe that the Buddha’s teaching on impermanence is a great gift to them, for it says that they can change. Whether they will be released or spend the rest of their life behind bars, they can become more the person they would wish to be.

To connect with the outside world.
Those who are incarcerated are forgotten and often powerless to have any kind of impact on the outside world. Generally speaking, prison institutions will welcome activities that foster positive impact. As an example, the entire Wisconsin system was open to participation in the Jizo Project developed by Great Vow Monastery in Oregon. The goal of the project was to create hundreds of thousands of images of Jizo Bodhisattva on 8 X 10 inch rectangles of cloth, with each cloth panel also bearing a message for peace and the name, age and location of the person who had created the panel. Banners made up of thousands of panels and messages of peace and hundreds of thousands of images of Jizo Bodhisattva were ultimately delivered to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a message of repentance and peace on the 60th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb. I’m happy to say that 1,500 images of Jizo were created by about 50 Wisconsin inmates who were thrilled to be able to participate in this project.

In fact, the title of this report, EVERYONE MATTERS, is the message created by an inmate in a medium-security prison. I found it more powerful than any words about peace, for if indeed “everyone matters” there will be no occasion for violence or war.
The dignity of self-expression.
So far, I have been speaking about outsiders like myself going into the prisons to teach the dharma. But, over time, the prison sangha itself has grown in knowledge of dharma and about two years ago an inmate who is incarcerated for life conceived the idea of editing and publishing a quarterly Newsletter featuring articles, poetry and artwork by members of the prison sangha. At the present time this Newsletter, Sôsaku, is distributed to a little over 100 members of the prison sangha, volunteers and chaplains. The quality of the thinking and writing is high. (See Appendix C) Other Zen centers are fostering the publication of similar newsletters to offer an opportunity for members of the prison dharma community to communicate their understanding of dharma with one another.

The present state of the program.
In the beginning, I was personally answering all calls to go to the various prisons and found myself making 9 prison visits every month. As my age advanced and my other responsibilities grew, others also began to appreciate the nature of this work. At the present time, our prison program offers bi-weekly or monthly Buddhist programs at ten state correctional institutions, serving around 80-90 prisoners. There are 6 teachers. I myself continue to make monthly visits to 3 prisons. The other members of our team are lay people, with the exception of one individual who has a form of ordination through Thich Nhat Hanh’s Order of Interbeing. These lay teachers all have a strong background in Zen practice – some as members of our sangha, some as Rinzai practitioners and one who practices within the Philip Kapleau hybrid Soto/Rinzai tradition. We are in close communication with one another to support our mutual efforts to bring the dharma inside prison walls. What began ten years ago as a query from an individual inmate has grown organically into a full-fledged “program.”

Other arenas for offering spiritual solace.
Pastoral visits to those who are hospitalized and hospice care for the dying are other ways in which American Zen centers respond to human need. On an individual basis, there is probably not a single American Soto Zen priest who has not been contacted at some time or other with a request from a hospital to come visit someone who is ill and seeking comfort. It goes without saying that we would do this for a member of our own group, but also are ready to respond to all who seek help. Most American hospitals have a chaplain on their staff who is charged with meeting the spiritual needs of all patients. Because we have such a diverse population, this will involve many different spiritual practices and there are relatively few chaplains who are themselves Buddhist or feel they have an adequate understanding of the teachings of the Buddha. In consequence, they call upon members of the Buddhist clergy in their community.

These visits are challenging because the priest does not know the person they will visit nor what sort of spiritual comfort they may be seeking. Also, since in the U.S. Buddhism is very much a minority religion without large numbers of ordained clergy from different sects, one may be called upon to help someone from another Buddhist tradition. As an example, I was recently called to make a visit to a young Laotian woman who had been diagnosed with a rare and probably fatal form of leukemia. In the early days of treatment the doctors had been forced to terminate a pregnancy that only she and her
fiancé were aware of. She could not express her grief to other family members. Although our traditions varied greatly, I was able to speak to her of the great compassion represented by Jizo Bodhisattva and leave with her a tiny Jizo medal as a symbol that the world cared for her loss. I did not hear from her again, and presume that she died. As in all this kind of work, we can never know if we have helped. A good friend of mine, the Venerable Gioi Huong, who is Abbess of the Phouc Hau Vietnamese Buddhist temple in Milwaukee, spoke with me recently about her sad frustration at being unable to bring a state of peaceful acceptance to a young woman destined to die within a few months.

Most of us are not specially trained to do this work, but must rely on what we hope will be the compassion of a bodhisattva. However, a few Soto Zen centers are beginning to offer training in hospice care, Notable in this regard is the Upaya Zen Center, whose Metta program serves dying people and caregivers locally and nationally through home visits, weekly meetings and refuge for those who are dying.

Counseling and Chaplaincy

This is a complex area and a great deal of discussion is currently taking place within the American Soto community concerning the appropriate relationship between counseling within the context of the student/teacher relationship in Zen and the use of Western psychological therapeutic techniques to ease emotional crises. Rev. Daijaku Kinst at the Ocean Gate Zen Center offers what I think is a useful differentiation between what she terms “pastoral counseling” and “spiritual direction”, with the latter akin to dokusan and issues of practice and the former taking place within the realm of counseling and chaplaincy.

There is a growing interest in chaplaincy as a way to take a mature Zen practice into the world. Chaplains must possess knowledge of the world’s many religions and understanding of their philosophy and practices. Rev. Kinst has been asked to teach a course in the coming year in Buddhist Pastoral Counseling at the Institute of Buddhist Studies at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA. There are chaplaincy training programs being offered at the Upaya Zen Center and the Village Zendo.

These programs signal not only the coming of age of our Zen practice, but also a growing recognition of Buddhism as a valuable component of the American religious landscape, although Buddhism represents a tiny minority of practitioners within a Christian country.

I would also like to make additional mention of an unusual program in which Western psychological techniques have been put in the service of Buddhist compassion. The Heart Circle Sangha has joined with Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka in an effort to bring psycho-spiritual relief to the survivors of the disastrous tsunami of 2004. Heart Circle Sangha has recruited a team of 8 psychotherapists who are specialists in grief and trauma. They are traveling to Sri Lanka in teams of two, four times a year to train Sarvodaya counselors in techniques for working with intense grief and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
The basics – hunger and the homeless
The activities I have mentioned so far are within the realm of offering spiritual solace and spiritual awakening. There are needs even more basic to human dignity— for food, for a place to sleep, for the basics of life. Some sanghas are creating personal survival kits (shaving gear, soap, tooth paste, tooth brushes, socks, face towel, deodorant) for homeless people, and delivering these care packages to people living on the streets.

Others are serving meals at community shelters for the homeless and working on food drives, often in conjunction with interfaith efforts.

Collaboration
One important characteristic of the social welfare work of Soto Zen centers in the U.S. is that they are often carried out in collaboration with other faith traditions or secular agencies. The Milwaukee chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship sponsored a March for Burma in which we were joined by Christians and Muslims. In the fall we will join a march against hunger sponsored by a Christian agency.

FINAL SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR JAPANESE COLLEAGUES

1. Identify real, immediate and local needs and respond to them. I and my colleagues from Brazil and Norway can share information about what we are doing, but the needs to which you respond must reflect contemporary Japan.
2. Respect those whom you seek to help and learn from them what their real needs are.
3. Help in an area with which you have a personal sense of affinity. The needs are myriad, and you will be more effective if you enjoy what you are doing.
4. Understand that whatever you do means a commitment over time.

“Beneficial action” is skillfully to benefit all classes of sentient beings, that is, to care about their distant and near future...”Beneficial action” is an act of oneness, benefiting self and others together.

-Dôgen, Bodaisatta Shisho-hô (6)

Notes:
(1) The Heart of Dôgen’s Shôbôgenzô, translated by Norman Waddell and Masao Abe, State University of New York Press
(2) The Vimalakirti Sutra, translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press
(3) op. cit.
(4) op. cit.
(5) Moon in a Dewdrop, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi, North Point Press
(6) op. cit.