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CONTACT

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DIACT

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FEATURE STORY

Stillness Inside: Meditation At Millhaven Institution

The room is still and peaceful.

Twelve men sit in silence, their hands folded in their laps, their eyes looking downward or completely shut. A voice softly reminds them to focus on the relaxed flow of their breathing, not urgently but gently - to let any other thoughts go and to return to the breath.

The men are inmates at Millhaven Institution in Ontario and they spend about one hour each week in a meditation class at the institution's chapel. The voice is that of Kelsang Thekchen, a Buddhist monk in the Kadampa tradition of Mahayana Buddhism, making the centuries-old practice of meditation available to the prisoners.

Using Meditation To Help In Everyday Situations

Kadampa Buddhists strive to use Buddhist teachings as practical methods for transforming daily activities into a path to enlightenment and to integrate their meditation practice into everyday life.

As the men arrive at the chapel and settle in the chairs for the meditation class, Thekchen greets them and speaks of the goals of the practice of meditation.

"For 15 minutes we need peace, clarity and focus," he says to the men of the time spent practicing silent meditation. "Meditation is quite a specific thing - it is training the mind, strengthening an inner mental muscle."

At the age of 32, Thekchen is the same age as some of the men. While they are all dressed in the familiar jeans and t-shirts of an institution, Thekchen wears the maroon and yellow robes of a Tibetan monk.

Born Darren Prout in Toronto, he studied Kadampa Buddhism as taught by the Tibetan meditation master Geshe Kelsang Gyatso. In 1998, after much study, Darren became a

monk and was given the monastic name Kelsang Thekchen. Since then, he has been living and teaching in the Kuluta Buddhist Centre in Kingston.

Bringing Meditation To Millhaven Institution

He became interested in teaching at Millhaven Institution through a Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) staff member who attended his classes.

“Brandy May, a parole officer at Millhaven Institution,” he remembers, “had been coming to classes and workshops at the Kuluta Centre for a couple of years and we would often talk about how beneficial it would be for the guys at Millhaven, especially the assessment group, to have meditation classes.”

The stress experienced by newly arrived inmates at the Millhaven Assessment Unit (MAU) can be very great. They arrive at the MAU after sentencing and are assessed there before being transported to their assigned institutions.

“They need meditation, Brandy would often say,” Thekchen recalls. So he offered his services. Brandy May approached Assistant Warden Cathy Gainer and Chaplain Gloria Lecomte who were both very interested in helping to alleviate the stress in assessment and very supportive of the idea of meditation classes for MAU inmates. After working out an appropriate schedule and completing the paperwork, the meditation class began.

“It is important to have a meditative cool in every situation.”

“There are now about 12 guys who attend regularly and are happy to have an opportunity to find some peace and talk about ideas such as developing love and overcoming anger,” says Thekchen.

In the meditation class, Thekchen speaks to the men about some of the difficulties they face and how meditation is about “getting the mind under control so that, no matter what happens, you stay in control.” Through this control, he says, it is possible to transform adverse conditions, though he adds “transformation is difficult when guys are right in your face.”

“Every situation offers an opportunity for training the mind and developing inner peace,” Thekchen says. “Make a strong determination to develop this peace.”

“It’s important,” he tells the class, “to have a meditative cool in every situation.” In their interactions with others he urges the men to “become aware of your own faults and of the good qualities of others.”

“Observe your state.”

As the class ends, an inmate tells Thekchen of his interaction with a new cellmate, saying how he warned the man not to turn on his TV too loudly in the early morning.

"I warned him once and I warned him twice and I wasn't going to warn him a third time," the inmate said, suggesting an image of a smashed TV and a serious altercation.

"But then I tried to look at his good qualities and I saw that he had no family, like I do, and I really felt for the guy. So he's okay – I don't mind him anymore."

Bringing Meditation To Maximum Security

Thekchen recently began teaching another meditation class at the Maximum Security Unit of Millhaven Institution, or "J" Unit as it is informally called.

"My initial fear," says Parole Officer Brandy May of the offenders incarcerated in "J" Unit, "was that they would shy away from meditation, thinking that it might be perceived as weakness by predatory types."

"So I broached the idea privately with a lifer whose opinion and instincts I trust. He 'canvassed the troops' and suggested that we proceed."

Even with this informal go-ahead from a long-time inmate and the complete support of the institution's administration, it was difficult to judge how the maximum security inmates at Millhaven Institution would react to being told to sit silently and concentrate on their breathing by a young Buddhist monk. At first Thekchen found the volatile men of "J" Unit to be a bit more difficult to reach.

"It took them a while to settle and there was a bit a snickering," says Thekchen of the first meditation class with them, "but they soon saw that training the mind was like training a muscle with weights – unless you work at it, you have no control. Then they settled down."

Thekchen continues to offer a weekly meditation class to the men incarcerated in the MAU as well as to those in "J" unit.

"We're all equal," he says. "We're all just trying to find ways to stop the suffering."

*

This article was prepared with the invaluable assistance of Parole Officer Brandy May and Assistant Warden Cathy Gainer of Millhaven Institution, as well as that of Kelsang Thekchen and the inmates of Millhaven Institution.

For further information, e-mail: contesc@netscape.net

ACROSS THE SERVICE

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

Solicitor General Honours CSC Volunteers

- On April 26, in a special ceremony on Parliament Hill as part of the International Year of Volunteers, the Department of the Solicitor General of Canada and CSC recognized those who contribute to public safety by volunteering in the field of criminal justice.
- "Ours is a stronger and richer organization because of their generosity and their efforts," said Pierre Allard, CSC's Assistant Commissioner, Community Engagement.
- Darelene Rempel from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Marie Beemans of Deux Montagnes, Quebec and Marjorie White of New Westminster, British Columbia were honoured as representatives of the more than 10,000 people who volunteer with CSC.

International Women's Day and the NHQ Women's Committee

- March 8 marked International Women's Day, a day to commemorate the achievements and successes of women across the globe. A team of hard-working individuals pulled together to help celebrate this day.
- The theme for 2001 was "Canadian Women: Raising Our Diverse Voices for Positive Change." The NHQ Women's Committee, the Women Offender Sector and the Human Rights Division decided it was important to recognize this event with a number of activities that took place throughout the day.
- The Deputy Commissioner for Women, Nancy Stableforth, kicked off the event by discussing accomplishments women have made throughout the years and, particularly, within CSC. She introduced representatives from three safe houses and one shelter for women that operate in the Outaouais region.
- Thanks to the generosity of NHQ staff, a total of \$1772 was raised through the sale of raffle tickets. Each organization was presented with a cheque for \$443.
- The activities continued over the lunch hour, with Denyse Plante, Director General, Learning and Development, welcoming participants and handing out door prizes. Two comedians from Yuk Yuk's Comedy Club provided entertainment prior to the afternoon workshops.
- Staff reported being very satisfied with the event. It proved to be a wonderful way to celebrate International Women's Day.
- If you'd like to know more about the NHQ Women's Committee activities, please contact Julie Fournier, Communications Director for the Committee at (613) 947-3562 or via email at: fournierju@csc-scc.gc.ca

ATLANTIC REGION

Volunteer Appreciation Evening at Westmorland Institution (WI)

- Each year the offenders at WI benefit from time given freely by volunteers. On March 24, WI hosted an evening to honour the volunteers who participate in offenders' personal growth.

- These volunteers provide a number of services including escorting, competing in sports activities and providing a link to the community. Without these volunteers, many activities would not be possible. As Warden Mike Corbett said, the most perfect gift one person can give to another is his or her time.
- The evening included presentations of awards, speeches, entertainment, social interaction and fine dining. Approximately 150 volunteers were invited to attend. Offenders directly involved with volunteers were also welcome to attend the presentations and speeches.
- All volunteers were given specially created coffee mugs with CSC's crest, WI on one side and The International Year of the Volunteer Crest on the other. Awards were given to volunteers who have been involved on a long-term basis, including: Siegfried Janzen of WI's Citizens' Advisory Committee; Mike Gillespie, a staff member who volunteers with various offender groups; Bert Johnson, a volunteer coordinator; Aline and Vince Farrell, volunteers with WI's Black Brotherhood Association; Ron Johnson, a volunteer with the older offenders; Howard White, a volunteer with the chaplaincy group; the Mount Allison University student volunteers who play weekly volleyball games with the offenders; and WI's Inmate Committee, that had presented a \$5000 cheque towards the construction of Mountain Top House.

Case Management Workshop Focuses On Information Sharing

- On March 28-29, a case management workshop in Moncton, New Brunswick welcomed approximately 60 staff members, as well as staff and National Parole Board (NPB) members managing offender cases in institutions and in the community.
- The workshop focused on information sharing between CSC and NPB and the Statutory Release Residency special condition. It also included a brief presentation by the programs division of RHQ on the role of case management in program management.
- Participants called the workshop beneficial and said that it provided an opportunity to discuss important issues and to hear the various perspectives of CSC and NPB staff as well.

QUEBEC REGION

Local Police and a Swiss Delegation Visit and Learn

- Two groups of twelve police officers from the municipality of Ile Perrot recently visited the Regional Reception Centre on visits organized by Jules Bourque, a parole officer from the Ville-Marie Parole Office in the Montréal Métropolitan District.
- The goal of the tours was to create a better understanding among the police of the penal system and of life inside a penitentiary.
- The visitors greatly appreciated this opportunity and were particularly impressed by the quality of work done by CSC personnel, by the organization of daily activities, the cleanliness of the institution and the warm welcome they received from the institution's staff and management.

- On May 3, a 29-member delegation from Switzerland, made up principally of wardens of Swiss correctional facilities, were welcomed to Joliette Institution by Warden Marie-Andrée Cyrenne and her staff.
- The guests saw the video *Creating Choices*, toured the institution and, during a buffet lunch, compared approaches and procedures. The Swiss visitors were very impressed with the dynamism of the institutional staff and the quality of the programs and services offered to federally-sentenced women in Quebec and in the rest of Canada.

Daffodil Day Raises Funds to Fight Cancer at Port-Cartier Institution

- On April 4-5, staff at Port-Cartier Institution purchased daffodils as part of a Canadian Cancer Society fund-raising campaign. Correctional Officer Jean-Marie Thériault organized the sale that raised \$446.
- The President of the Canadian Cancer Society thanked the institution's employees for their efforts and generosity.

Montée St-Francois Institution (EMSF) Holds a Volunteer Appreciation Day

- During this United Nations designated International Year of the Volunteer, on March 29, EMSF held a volunteer appreciation day that recognized and thanked 43 volunteers for their many and varied efforts throughout the year.
- The volunteers signed a gold book, received certificates, gifts and shared a great meal with institution staff.

Archambault Institution Inmates Put Together a Collection of Poetry

- On April 12, a book launch was held at Archambault Institution to mark the release of a 450-page collection of poetry by eight inmates/authors who are students at the institution's school.
- Approximately 100 inmates and staff listened as authors read from the collection. The success of the collection has inspired teachers and students at the school to repeat the experience in the future.

PRAIRIE REGION

Prison Ministry Group Raises Funds for Residence

- On April 14, Bowden Institution Chaplain Hardy Engler escorted Shane Munroe, an offender at Bowden Institution, to Acme, Alberta where he performed with *The Gospel Troubadours*, a prison ministry group that raise their own funds through gospel music concerts.
- The event went well, with about 300 people attending. The group is setting up a temporary residency for ex-offenders.

MYTH OF THE MONTH

Myth: Strangers commit most sexual assaults against women.

Reality: In 1999, strangers committed 23 per cent of sexual assaults on females. In that year, 32 per cent were victimized by a casual acquaintance, and 24 per cent by a family member.

Source: Ottawa Policing Services Program, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000.

This and other facts are available in the CSC publication *Myths and Realities* on CSC's Web site at www.csc-scc.gc.ca, under Publications and Myths and Realities.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- Family Day at Kent Institution,
Agassiz, British Columbia, June 2
- Public Day at Kent Institution
Agassiz, British Columbia, June 9
For more information, contact: David S. Dick, A/Assistant Warden Management Services, Kent Institution at 604-796-4404, e-mail: dickds@csc-scc.gc.ca
- Federation of Canadian Municipalities 64th Annual Conference
Banff, Alberta, May 25 - 28
Contact: Troy Demers at (613) 947-4635, email: demerstm@csc-scc.gc.ca
- Restorative Justice Symposium, St. John's, Newfoundland, June 2
Contact Chantal Albert at: (506) 851-7635 or e-mail: albertch@csc-scc.gc.ca
- Fraser Valley Parole District Open House, June 9
Sumas Centre, Abbotsford, British Columbia
Contact: Ron Parson at (604) 870-2735

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