

Inmate's reentry into "Free" Sanghas COSA: Circle of Support and Accountability

THE EXPERIENCE OF BRINGING EX-FELONS INTO OUR SANGHAS HAS BEEN FRAUGHT WITH DIFFICULTIES. THERE ARE THREE REASONS FOR THIS:

1. Sanghas (as well as other spiritual institutions) tend to venerate the ex-offender, believing that their support and spiritual tradition has caused a miraculous redemption in saving this individual.
2. Sanghas often ignore the deeper issues, which caused the person to commit a crime. A good example is "Sangha X" which was instituted at the Zen Center when it welcomed ex-felons without properly addressing underlying issues.
3. The ex-felon will often ignore the underlying issues, which caused incarceration. This frequently is a result from the approach taken by prison system that punishes those who admit to any latent "tendencies." These can include addiction to drugs, sex, etc. and/or anger issues. This learned practice of denial is frequently taken into the sangha setting. Denial becomes further entrenched because the ex-felon does not want to disappoint his new group of supporters.

COSA takes a pro-active, hands-on management approach to the issue of bringing ex-felons into our sanghas. The program begins by looking at each ex-offender as an individual, not merely as a label, i.e. "drug addict", "sex-offender", "and murderer", etc.

HERE ARE THE INITIAL STEPS, WHICH NEED TO BE TAKEN WHEN BRINGING AN EX-FELON INTO THE SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY:

1. **SUPPORT GROUP.** Four people are picked to be part of the ex-felon's support group. These should be people who the ex-offender can call 24/7. Ideally they should include a family member, a good friend, a sangha representative and an AA/NA sponsor.
2. **THE AGREEMENT.** There is an agreement made between the support people. The agreement includes learning fully the issues involved regarding incarceration; any tendencies which promulgate behavior that led to criminal behavior; transparency among all involved about what is taking place while the support program is in place.
3. **HONESTY.** Honesty is emphasized in all interactions. If the urge to use drugs, or to cause harm in any way comes up, the ex-offender agrees to immediately call one of the four people involved in his support group.

SEX OFFENDERS

These are especially difficult situations for a sangha to contend with. However, in all sanghas, the conversation needs to take place. Consideration should be made that all sex-offenses are not the same. "Statutory rape" may include men or women who are involved in a mutual relationship where their partner was not of legal age. On the other hand, child molestation is an addiction that has to be managed like any other addiction since currently there is no cure. As mindfulness practitioners, we need to look honestly at our own response to this crime categorization. Based on the COSA system, sanghas need to provide support to sex offenders as well as provide safety for the sangha community.