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Day of Mindfulness

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On Monday, Feb. 16, '09, amidst heavy rain and strong wind, the fifth annual "Day of Mindfulness" was held in the Buddhadharm Sangha at San Quentin State Prison in California.

Inside the 50-by-20 foot room located at the Garden Chapel area on the prison grounds, 14 inmates and 14 visitors from the "Community of Mindful Living" of Northern California celebrated the day with sitting meditation, walking meditation and Dharma talks (Buddhist teachings).

The event was made possible by the coordinated efforts of the members of the "Community of Mindful Living" and the inmates of the Buddhadharm Sangha.

The group shared a mindful lunch together, eating in silence, while sitting on chairs, *zafu* (sitting cushions) and *Zabuton* (meditation mats). Inmate Lindsey, from the prison Sangha, solemnly walked to the altar, offered the Buddha a portion of his lunch and later said to the group, "I am completely overwhelmed. Today is a very beautiful day."

Mindful living, the practice of complete awareness, is based from the teaching of Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who has founded several 'Mindful Living' communities located around the world.

"Mindfulness gives us the tools to live our lives in peace in the midst of prison chaos," inmate Russo said about the practice. "Although this event was a Buddhist Religious program, the corner stone of our practice has always been, 'we

are here for anyone, of any belief,'" Russo added.

Most of the visitors are involved in Mindfulness and Meditation programs in various jails, prisons or community centers in Northern California. They are proactive in their practice which radiates into the community.

The Buddhadharm Sangha, was established almost 10 years ago. Five inmates spent a year, rain or shine, sitting in meditation on the lower-yard. On Sept. 5, 1999, in the midst of a partial lock-down in the prison, the Sangha held its first service under Zen Priest, Roshi Seido Lee de Barros, from Green Gulch Farm in Marin County.

The prison Sangha, with volunteers from San Francisco Zen Center, Berkeley Zen Center, Green Gulch Farm and about 30 inmates, meet on Sundays at 5:20 to 8:00 p.m., practicing and studying the Buddha's teachings in the Soto Zen tradition. It also offers, from its library, a wide selection of books on all Buddhist traditions.

The Sangha held a *Jukai* (lay ordination) ceremony last year and in 2006 had completed the first intensive Zen training period held in an institutional setting with one inmate selected as *Shuso* (head student/monk).

At the end of the day, as the rain and gusty wind momentarily subsided, the group gathered in a circle and shared in a song together amid tears and the feeling of gratitude experienced throughout the day. "I fully understand now why you all come here," said inmate Thao, on his second day with the Sangha, as he walked back to the housing units with the other inmates.