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Vipassana meditation courses have been held in North American correctional facilities since 1997, with measurable success in lowering recidivism rates and improving inmate behavior and coping skills. Vipassana is a non-sectarian technique of mental training and ethical conduct. This systematic process of self-observation leads to increased awareness, self-control and inner balance. As a result, Vipassana meditation can actually change how inmates make decisions.

Vipassana is presented in 10-day courses by experienced, volunteer teachers and course assistants, and is completely free of charge or compensation of any kind. The benefits of Vipassana are immediate, observable and significant, but will require a serious effort by both the inmate and the institution.

“While I was here... I was not happy and did not want to be here, obviously. But now I can look back on it with nothing but gratitude... It has totally changed my life.”

*—former inmate,
North Rehabilitation Facility
King County, Washington*

“I had been drunk all my life before taking the first Vipassana course at NRF in 1997. Since then, I have not had a fight, not a drink. I have a family life. My family appreciates it so much.”

*—former inmate,
North Rehabilitation Facility
King County, Washington*

“I’m able to deal with situations more calmly than before because now, I can see everything in a better perspective... Vipassana can make such a difference in the collective minds of the men here.”

*—inmate,
W.E. Donaldson Correctional
Facility, Alabama*

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For more information visit the
Vipassana Prison Website at
www.prison.dhamma.org

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Vipassana Meditation Prison Trust

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Morality
Discipline
Self-Knowledge



“My study of the Vipassana Meditation Program revealed that the inmates who completed a Vipassana course were 20% less likely to return to jail than other inmates. These results are truly extraordinary given such a brief, albeit intense, intervention. Moreover, the Vipassana Meditation Program changed the very fabric of the facility literally from within, for inmates and staff alike.”

*—Dave Murphy, former Program Manager,
King County North Rehabilitation Facility
(NRF) in Washington.*

The inmate must commit to a course of ten continuous days during which time he or she must:

- Observe basic moral principles to refrain from killing, lying, stealing, sexual misconduct and use of intoxicants. This effort is the foundation of self-control and balance necessary to succeed in a course.
- Observe the course schedule beginning at 4 am and ending at 9 pm each day with a daily routine of instruction, continuous practice and an evening explanatory talk by the teacher.
- Observe a code of discipline that requires students to refrain from talking or communicating in any way with anyone except the teacher and course personnel (except with correctional staff as necessary for security or emergency reasons). This means that inmates must forgo visits, mail, reading, writing, television, radio, music, vigorous exercise, or any other activity that could be distracting.

The institutional commitment is also significant; Vipassana courses in correctional settings require:

- A self-contained space to house inmate students, volunteer course personnel, and course activities.
- Access to inmates for volunteers to provide pre-course informational sessions and screening activities
- Administrative and organizational support necessary to implement this intensive ten-day program in a correctional setting.
- A commitment by at least one staff member at the management level to complete a ten-day course (locations for these are in communities in many states). Managers who have completed the Vipassana program will have direct knowledge of its requirements and benefits, and will be in the best possible position to support Vipassana programming for inmates.

The Vipassana Prison Trust is a volunteer organization that offers correctional managers and policy makers a way to access this practical method to increase positive, pro-social inmate functioning.

Services include:

- Readily accessible information and materials about Vipassana meditation and courses offered within institutions as well as in the community including:
- Doing Time Doing Vipassana, a film documenting the introduction of Vipassana courses to inmates in a large prison in New Delhi.
- Changing from Inside, a film documenting a Vipassana course for female inmates in a Seattle Washington area detention facility.
- Introduction to Vipassana flyer and other written materials.
- Information about research studies on the effects and outcomes of Vipassana courses held in jails and prisons.
- Consultation and technical assistance for managers interested in introducing Vipassana courses into their institutional programming.
- Experienced Vipassana teachers and course assistants who are trained to prepare, conduct and staff in-custody courses working closely with correctional personnel.

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How is this practice different from other meditation techniques offered for prisoners?

There are many kinds of meditation practices, all of which have their own benefits. Vipassana as it is taught by S.N. Goenka is a highly practical and intensive way for the individual to face reality and detoxify habitual mental negativities. One way to distinguish this practice from others is the requirement for a ten-day commitment, and the policy of no remuneration for volunteers and course services.

Is this a religious practice?

Because of its ancient roots in the teachings of the historical Buddha, some individuals may be concerned that it promotes Buddhism. In fact, most people who practice Vipassana do not identify themselves as Buddhists. Vipassana in this tradition is practiced by people from all walks of life and religious beliefs. In working with inmates and institutional personnel, volunteers take great care to assure that the introduction of Vipassana courses will not conflict with facility policies regarding religious practices.

Why is the course ten days long?

Actually, the ten-day course is the minimum; it provides an essential introduction and foundation to the technique and allows sufficient time to learn and practice how to make positive decisions/choices. Ten days allows time for the mind to settle down and to work deeply. To develop in the practice is a lifetime job.

How is this different from relaxation and stress reduction techniques?

Reduced stress is certainly one outcome of this practice but it is not the primary focus. People practice Vipassana to rid themselves of mental negativities that can be toxic to themselves and society. In this sense, Vipassana can be seen as a kind of detoxification—a sometimes difficult process but one which leaves the individual in a more wholesome and balanced state.

Is the course open to anyone in custody?

Anyone can apply subject to the guidelines of the institution. All applicants are screened and interviewed by course personnel and on rare occasions, teachers may be unable to accommodate certain psychiatric or physical conditions.

FAQ