
Guidelines for Vipassana Meditation Courses within Correctional Facilities

The technique of Vipassana is a simple, practical way to achieve real peace of mind. It leads to the eradication of mental negativities which are responsible for human suffering. The nonsectarian practice of Vipassana can bring about a major transformation in the attitude and behavioral patterns of an individual. Those who practice it remove, little by little, the root causes of their suffering and begin to lead happy, healthy, productive lives.

Experiences In Jails & Prisons

A striking example of this transformation is the ongoing series of Vipassana courses being conducted in Asian prisons. In 1993, a program of ten-day courses was introduced in one of the world's largest prisons, Tihar Penitentiary, New Delhi. At the conclusion of a course for over 1,000 inmates, a permanent center for Vipassana meditation was established in the prison. As a result of further experience with this program, the Indian government has recommended implementing a program of Vipassana courses in all its prisons.

This development was the culmination of experiments started in 1975. In that year Mr. S.N. Goenka conducted a Vipassana course for 120 inmates at the Central Jail in Jaipur, the first such experiment in Indian penal history. Subsequent courses were conducted for life-term convicts, senior police officers, and correction officials. These courses were the subject of sociological studies conducted by the Gujarat Department of Education and the University of Rajasthan. The research studies indicated definite positive changes of attitude and behavior in the inmates, and demonstrated that Vipassana enables criminals to become wholesome, productive members of society.

Recently, Taiwan authorities brought Vipassana meditation to a rehabilitation center for 182 drug-addicted criminals. In the United States, Vipassana is being introduced to justice and correction officials in California, Washington, and Massachusetts. A jail in Washington State has established an ongoing program of Vipassana courses given four times a year within the facility.

How Vipassana is Taught

To learn Vipassana meditation it is necessary to take a ten-day residential course under the guidance

of a qualified teacher. Students follow a demanding daily schedule, which includes approximately ten hours of sitting meditation, with numerous breaks interspersed throughout the day. They also maintain silence, not communicating with each other.

There are three steps to the training. First, students practice abstaining from actions which cause harm. They undertake five moral precepts: refraining from killing any being, stealing, lying, all sexual activity and the use of intoxicants. These precepts, as well as observing silence, allow the mind to calm down sufficiently to perform the task of self-observation.

In the second step, students develop a more stable and concentrated mind by focusing the attention on the natural breath.

The third step is to develop insight by understanding the direct link between body and mind through the observation of bodily sensations. By developing a balanced mind and learning not to react to these sensations, mental negativities are gradually eliminated. This direct experience has a profound, purifying effect on the mind.

Pre-Course Preparation

Before any course is held in a prison, a senior correctional staff member, and as many other staff as possible must attend a ten-day course at a Vipassana meditation center. This is an essential prerequisite. This will enable these officials to better understand through direct experience the value and relevance of Vipassana meditation to their particular correction facility. By participating in a course, one will understand more fully how to implement a course within their own facility. (To apply for a course see the Vipassana website: www.dhamma.org)

Meditation Facility Requirements

A separate area of the correction facility, should be selected for the Vipassana course.

The basic requirements are:

1. A quiet room secluded from other nonparticipating inmates, for group meditation for all the participants and course workers.

2. Dormitories and/or cells with adequate bath and toilet facilities for the participants separate from inmates not involved with the course.
3. A separate room with attached bath and toilet facilities for the teachers conducting the course.
4. Adequate accommodation with bath and toilet facilities for staff workers serving the course.
5. Dining facilities separate from other inmates.
6. A sufficient walking area segregated from other inmates.
7. There should be provision after the course for a place for students to meditate twice a day to continue the practice. Continuity of practice is important to maintain and increase the benefits of this technique.
8. There should be separate courses for male and female inmates.
9. Correction officials who have previously completed a course should be assigned to staff the course, when possible.

Each correctional facility is laid out differently, so adjustments may need to be made in individual cases.

Security

1. Security in the correctional facility is of utmost importance. Course staff and participants should adhere to all security requirements.
2. During the course, all the participants are under the supervision of the teacher and within the security constraints of the correctional facility.
3. During the course, inmates will not have any contact with prisoners outside of the course site, with prison staff who are not on duty at the course, or with visitors.
4. Inmates should be free to participate in the program from 4:00 am to 9:30 PM. After those hours, they may be racked back, but should still have access to meditation course staff if the need arises during the night.
5. There shall be frequent contact between the course teachers, prison officials and the prison staff on duty to resolve problems and ensure the smooth functioning of the course.

Food

1. Simple, wholesome, vegetarian food should be served.
2. Teachers and Vipassana servers will have the same food as the inmates.

Medical Requisites

1. Medical staff must be available in case any medical problem arises during the course. When possible, medical problems should be handled on-site, with as little contact with non-course staff as possible.
2. Most medications do not interfere with course participation. Certain drugs with psychoactive properties are not compatible with intense meditation however, so these cases will need to be reviewed by Vipassana staff well before the beginning of the course.

Discipline for Participants

1. All participants shall agree to follow the Code of Discipline during the course.
2. Participants will forego all contact with the outer world during the course, including visits, phone calls, mail, commissary (except required hygiene items), and reading materials.
3. The Code of Discipline includes abstaining from killing any being, stealing, lying, all sexual activity and intoxicants, including abstinence from tobacco.
4. Inmates are required to put aside all rites and rituals and other meditation practices during the course.
5. For the first nine days there will be complete silence among the participants; they should not communicate verbally, nor by notes or gestures. Participants may speak to the teachers for guidance at any time and to the managing staff for any material needs.

Selection of Inmates

1. As pre-course preparation, it has been useful to have a series of informal classes to review different aspects of the course and give adequate time for various questions and issues to be raised

with Vipassana staff. These meetings also help build rapport and trust between staff and inmates, and the beginnings of a working relationship. Videos introducing Vipassana are available and may be presented to inmates, followed by a question and answer session. Basic informational literature, including the Code of Discipline and The Art of Living, will be distributed.

2. A selection of participants will be made after the introductory talks through an application process conducted by prison authorities and the assistant teachers. Every participant will fill out a course application and student data form.
3. It is essential that participation in the course be completely voluntary. It is important that there be neither any secondary gains acquired for participation (such as reduced sentencing, visits, etc.) or any disincentives, such as loss of jobs, room space, etc. This will ensure that the participant's motivation is purely to benefit from the technique.
4. Applications will be carefully reviewed, after which Vipassana staff will interview each participant for suitability and readiness to undertake the course.
5. Corrections staff will ensure that each participant is free to attend the complete course and will not be called out for hearings, visits, medical appointments, etc.
6. After the above steps have been taken, a final list of participants should be prepared with the following details: name, age, education, profession, and duration of sentence. This information should be prepared by the corrections staff and a copy given to the teacher prior to the course.

Further Information

For more information about the North American Vipassana prison program, the following may be contacted by prison personnel:

Vipassana Prison Website:

www.prison.dhamma.org

Vipassana general website:

www.dhamma.org.

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Two documentary videos are available from Pariyatti Book Service: www.pariyatti.com or 800/829-2748. "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" shows the challenge and results of introducing Vipassana in a large Indian jail. "Changing From Inside" documents a Vipassana course for women at Seattle's NRF.

These course are taught under the auspices of S.N. Goenka, in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin.