

# History of Vipassana Meditation Courses for Correctional Facilities in Brazil 2006-2023



## 2018 and 2019 - First courses for inmates in Brazil

In April 2018 the first Vipassana course in a Correctional Facility in Brazil was held at the Ribeirão das Neves Correctional Facility, located in the State of Minas Gerais.

Ribeirão das Neves is a mixed public-private institution on the outskirts of the city Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais in the central region in Brazil.

The participants received white trousers and t-shirts to wear instead of their usual red prison uniforms. Their daily routine was changed for 10 days and, in silence, they worked to purify their minds by observing the breath coming in and out and their own normal, natural physical sensations.

The first course took place after the prison director himself, Rodrigo Gaiga, attended a 10-day course in 2017 and realised that Vipassana could be a powerful rehabilitation tool. He convinced his superiors to allow the course, with all the necessary conditions: a separate prison wing destined for the course, preparation of vegetarian meals, and acquisition of meditation cushions, among others details



*Meditation hall in Brazil's first correctional facility course (April 2018), in Ribeirão das Neves, Minas Gerais.*



*Rodrigo Gaiga, head of "Gestores Prisionais Associados" (GPA) and administrator of correctional complex Ribeirão das Neves, attended a 10-day Vipassana Meditation course in 2017 and realised that the technique could be of great help in the process of re-socialisation and interaction of inmates.*



*2018 course in Ribeirão das Neves, Minas Gerais, MG.*



*Students and Vipassana servers from the 2018 course in Ribeirão das Neves, MG, with assistant teacher Robson. In total, 21 male students completed the course.*



*Metta Day - 2018 course in Ribeirão das Neves, MG.*



*Metta Day - 2018 course in Ribeirão das Neves, MG.*



*Metta Day - 2018 course in Ribeirão das Neves, MG. On this day the inmates participate in a ceremony with the correctional authorities and family members. Their heartfelt testimonies added to everyone's emotional experience.*

One of the students commented:

“What we faced here was a battle, but it was worth it. I learnt how to deal with my problems and manage anxiety, physical pain.”

Another said:

“I continue to meditate every day in my cell. I have learnt that all suffering is caused by attachment and that nothing remains as it is. I am in jail now, but that will change. I started to feel comfortable enough to reflect, and that calms me down.”

One of the servers of the first course explained:

“The walls are not the jail’s. The real bondage is inside the mind. And so is liberation.”

The teacher said:

“This whole process of observing reality, of keeping the mind pure, of allowing impurities to rise to the surface and disappear – this whole process leads to four qualities manifesting in people. And these qualities are love, compassion, joy and equanimity.”

After the first course, several 1-day courses were held once a month in Ribeirão das Neves, as long as it was possible for old students living in the area to offer this follow-up.

In May 2019, Ribeirão das Neves hosted its second 10-day course.

## 2018 – São Paulo

Meanwhile, in the state of São Paulo, a 10-day course was being planned at the Potim Correctional Facility II, a state-run unit where a Vipassana student was a volunteer and had a close acquaintance with Dr Sueli Zeraik de Oliveira Armani, Judge of Law, Court of Justice of the state of São Paulo. Potim was chosen for having the right conditions for the course and also for the welcoming reaction of its director, Dr Gustavo Testa Fernandes, as well as the support of Dr Sueli who, from the first contact on, welcomed the programme as something capable of bringing much hope and immense benefits to the inmates.



*Prior to these courses, the Committee for Vipassana Courses in Prisons, consisting of old students and some teachers, conducted a series of visits to give Vipassana introductions to the inmates.*

After several weeks of preparation, with the screening of documentaries "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" and " The Dhamma Brothers", talks with the inmates with question-and-answer sessions, Anapana meditation sessions, and the installation of informational banners about courses in prisons around the world, the first course in São Paulo was held between 22 August and 02 September 2018, with 19 inmates, 18 of which completed the course.

There was a lot of goodwill and collaboration from the side of the correctional organisation, which even painted the walls and helped to prepare the site where the course was to be held.

From the 18 inmates who completed the course in Potim, one was released at the end of the course, which was announced by the judge at the closing ceremony. The other 17 remained in jail serving their sentences. A further 12 inmates moved to the semi-open regime (Potim is a closed regime prison) in the location where the course was held (School 2, inside the penitentiary). The prison management also encouraged these 12 semi-open regime inmates to go to the meditation space to practise for two hours a day.

A group of servers committed to going once a month to support one-day Vipassana courses as hosts. Three months later, 12 of the inmates were still meditating two hours a day and 1-day courses were being held once a month or more. But the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the courses and the servers' monthly visits.



After the first course, a second one was held between 01 and 11 October 2019. Both courses were conducted by Vipassana Assistant Teacher Robson Almeida, from Caeté, Minas Gerais.



*Meditation hall at the 2018 course in Potim I. After the course, 12 inmates were transferred to semi-open regime and continued to practise two hours daily in this location.*



*Second course in Potim I, São Paulo (2019)*



*Students and servers of the 2nd course in Potim I, São Paulo (2019).*



*Some of the authorities who took part in the course completion ceremony.*



*Closing ceremony of the 2019 course in Potim, SP.*



*Dr Gustavo Testa and Dr Sueli Zeraik de Oliveira Armani, at the closing ceremony of the 2019 course in Potim, SP.*

The first course in Potim was documented in the film "Silence Island", directed by Germán Perez (Dipa Audiovisual). This documentary film invites us to know, through the words of the participants and those involved in the course, the profound changes of consciousness that they experienced during the ten days of silence and introspection. It

also shows us what it is like to experience a meditation course in a maximum security prison. This documentary is available on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/398280866> (in Portuguese with English subtitles).

## 2022 - Course in the Northeast of Brazil (Pará)

From 22 February to 05 March, a 10-day course was held at the Benevides unit of the Foundation for Socio-Educational Assistance of Pará (FASEPA), located in the metropolitan region of Belém. Initially, 7 young social-education participants signed up to take part in the course, but only 5 were considered suitable by the management. Of these, 1 dropped out before the end, but 4 young people successfully completed the course and demonstrated that they benefited from the experience.



*Cell in FASEPA, Benevides unit, 2022 (Fundação de Atendimento Socioeducativo do Pará)*

The story of this realisation begins on the Metta day of the first 10-day Vipassana course held in Pará. On the occasion, one of the students, after finishing the course, put the course organisers in touch with Dr. Sandoval Alves da Silva, creator and main person in charge of the project Writing and Rewriting Our History (PERNOH). This project is an initiative of the Public Ministry of Labour of the State of Pará, which aims to build an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional exchange on the social inclusion and professional qualification of people in vulnerable situations, former inmates of the prison system and those serving social-educational measures.

A series of virtual meetings was held to clarify the importance of spreading the Vipassana meditation technique to this audience, and also to present the basic criteria and conditions for a course within the prison or social-educational system to be made possible.

FASEPA has thus made available to the employees of its only unit working with young adults (18 to 21 years old) the possibility of release from their work duties for a period of 11 days. Of these, two FASEPA employees attended a 10-day course. They were able to see for themselves the benefits that the access to the technique could provide to the public served by their institution.

The course was conducted by the Assistant Teacher Mário Márcio Ferreira da Silva.



*FASEPA meditation hall, Benevides Unit, 2022*



*Students, staff and civil servers of FASEPA, Benevides unit, 2022*



*On the Metta day of the course held at FASEPA, one of the young students who completed the course, inspired by an image he had seen in one of the books on exhibition for consulting, drew a picture of a Buddha meditating on the wall of his cell.*

## 2023 - First course at Igarassu Correctional Facility, Pernambuco, Brazil



*Igarassu Correctional Facility, Pernambuco (PE)*

In March 2018, the first contacts were made at Igarassu Penitentiary, in the greater Recife, state of Pernambuco (PE), and parts of the film “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana” were screened. On the second visit several presentations were made as there were more interested parties than could fit in the room, so weekly visits with mini-Anapana sessions were organised. From April 2018 a local server started to conduct these sessions. After 5 years, the result was a 10-day Vipassana course in this penitentiary.

In January 2023, Mr. Charles invited us to return to weekly activities at the Igarassu Penitentiary. He told us about the significant improvement that was observed in the behaviour of the inmates after the regular mini-Anapana sessions. He said that he hoped the new buildings would be enough for the first course to take place. He introduced us to Mr Carlos Henrique, who accompanied the resumption of the meetings. After a

preliminary form had been filled in by 15 interested applicants, it was agreed with the penitentiary management that the course would take place from 20 June to 01 August.



*Servers and students, Igarassu 2023.*





*Servers and students, Igarassu 2023.*

One of the newly built areas was perfect to accommodate 14 students. The space chosen for the meditation hall was the same where the mini-Anapana meetings were held weekly. The cafeteria was located in the computer room, where it was just necessary to remove the computers. For the dormitory, individual separations for each student were created in a gym area with a dressing room. The separate servers' dormitory was at the back of the gym, with a door separating the spaces. A separate toilet was provided for the servers.

The course started on 20 June with the attendance of 11 students, 1 teacher, 4 internal servers, and 1 server for external support. For the food preparation, one cook and one kitchen assistant were provided by the penitentiary. Administrative and security staff were also assigned by the penitentiary, along with a radio communicator.

At 5 pm the director Charles, and Carlos Henrique, responsible for the course welcoming, were present with the students to give encouragement and congratulate

everyone for choosing to attend the meditation course. Carlos Henrique was always available to support whatever was needed during the course.

The course was conducted by assistant teacher Robson Almeida.



*Meditation hall and dining hall, Igarassu 2023.*

# Dhamma Seeds Planted in Prisons (National-Level Proposals)

2006 - All Started in Foz do Iguaçu, Paraná, Brazil



## Penitenciária Estadual de Foz do Iguaçu - PEF I

To make those courses possible, the seeds had been planted many years before. The work began in Foz de Iguaçu around 2006. A meditator working in the federal police force successfully invited colleagues from the Foz do Iguaçu State Penitentiary (PEF I) to sit a 10-day course in Caaguazú, Paraguay. Teacher Macarena was conducting this course and was invited to visit the prison together with a group of servers, and the police student made the arrangements. Together they visited the facilities which, at first sight, were suitable for running a course.

Dr Alexandre Calixto da Silva, director of this state-owned and privately managed prison, in spite of having no direct experience with Vipassana, opened the doors to this initiative with enthusiasm. With the help of the psychologists and social workers of the house, direct contacts were initiated with the penitentiary agents, the film "Doing Time,

Doing Vipassana" was screened to them, and conversations about the experience were held with the participation of old students and the teacher.

These meetings resulted in one prison officer attending a 10-day course at Dhamma Santi (Vipassana meditation centre in RJ) and three other officers, one of whom was female, attending a 10-day course in Caaguazú, Paraguay.

The conditions for a course, although approved by the prison director, were disapproved by the Chief of Security because he could not guarantee the safety of the teacher and students inside the prison. In order for the course to be viable, there would have to be military police available throughout the 11 days to accompany the course, which would not be possible. This made the course unviable.

## 2007 – 2008 – Rio de Janeiro

The Prisons Committee has been in contact with representatives of the judiciary and with correctional administrators to organise courses in the prison system in the state of Rio de Janeiro too. In a meeting with Dr Márcio da Silva Rocha, Undersecretary of Penitentiary Treatment (part of the Secretariat of Penitentiary Administration, SEAP), articulated by the Director of Japeri Prison, Mr Humelino, their interest in sitting a 10-day course was expressed. They also confirmed Mr Humelino's interest in organising a 10-day course in the prison institution he runs. Dr Márcio visited Dhamma Santi on 22 June 2008 and reiterated his support for holding the courses in prisons.

On another occasion, in 2007, a group of servers together with Professor Daniel Mayer visited a provisional correctional facility in Rio de Janeiro, where the conditions for the realisation of a course were not considered adequate, because there were too many prisoners in each cell, which would create problems for running the course. There were talks with the person in charge, who explained that some religious groups visited the prison.

The next place visited was Japeri jail, RJ, where there was more space and perhaps conditions to host a course. But the noise in the jail, due to the inmates' code communication through shouting, was a decisive factor for the team's realisation that it would not run a course there.

Email sent by Director Humelino to a member of the Prison Committee:

"Mrs Renata, I have not discarded the proposal that you made to us, I just have to manage some conflicts and problems that the system imposes on us. I take this opportunity to invite you, together with that enlightened team that honoured us with a simple but very significant visit, to participate in the inauguration of the Sector of Attendance to visitors and relatives of inmates, to be held on December 12, 2007, at 10am. I would be very honoured by your presence [...]

Humelino [...]

Cotrim Neto House of Custody in Japeri"

Another visited site in Rio de Janeiro was the Talavera Bruce women's correctional facility, where the Director made clear that inmates were unlikely to be interested, partly due to the fact that most of them work in the unit's diapers factory, which entitles them to a sentence reduction (a Vipassana course never offers this benefit). The physical conditions of the place were also not adequate, because there was no space to isolate those who would be sitting the course from the other inmates. The large evangelical presence would also be an obstacle. Still in Rio de Janeiro, the Anacleto school was visited, which operates in the Evaristo de Moraes prison (male, maximum security) where "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" was screened for teachers and a small group of students/inmates. While they were watching the film and afterward talking about it, the other inmates around us shouted and shook the bars of their cells. One of the students/inmates commented:

"All I wanted now was ten days of silence."

## 2008 – Meeting in Brasilia

In Brasilia, the Prison Committee had the opportunity to give a presentation to the Ministry of Justice on May 26, 2008 in a meeting at the Ministry of Justice of the National Council for Criminal and Penitentiary Policies (CNPCCP), formed by judges and prosecutors representing each state of the federation for the construction of a national plan for the penitentiary system. Following the presentation, some counsellors expressed interest in holding the courses in their respective states (MG, AM, PE and BA). The coordinator of the Penitentiary System Centre of the Public Defender's Office of the

State of Rio de Janeiro, Eduardo Quintanilha Telles de Menezes, was not present at this ordinary meeting but he was the one who provided the committee with the opportunity with the CNPCP.

During the above-mentioned session at the Ministry of Justice, informative leaflets were distributed to the authorities of the prison system and the film "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" was screened. A few years later, one of these judges, serving in the Human Rights Secretariat of Salvador, approved the proposal (presented by an Argentinean meditator then living in Bahia) to hold a 10-day course in a Bahian prison. Prison officers even applied to sit a 10-day course in Dhamma Santi but, at the last minute, cancelled their participation. The project was not given a continuation.

## 2015 – Minas Gerais

In Minas Gerais, in 2015, members of the Prisons Committee, and teachers Valéria and Robson, visited private prison units run by the group "Minas for Peace". The books "The art of living" and "Prince Siddhartha, the story of the Buddha" were distributed and a mini-Anapana session was held. Two staff members even attended a 10-day course in MG, but then found it went against their beliefs and did not recommend the course to the prison units.

## 2018 - Visit to the Prison Complex in Taubaté, SP

In São Paulo, a women's correctional facility with a semi-open detention regime was visited. Due to the characteristics of the physical structure, it was clear that it was not feasible to hold a 10-day Vipassana meditation course there. In addition, the semi-open regime allowed many of the inmates to be working, studying or with the possibility of release at any time.



*Visit to Taubaté prison complex, SP (2018)*

## 2023 - Visit to Sant'Ana Women's Penitentiary (São Paulo, SP)



Discussions have been initiated with the management of this prison, who is very enthusiastic to attend a 10-day course.

A first visit was made on 28 July 2023 to see the facilities and give a presentation to the staff in the morning, and another after lunch to the inmates. Here is a report written by Dhamma servers who participated in this visit:

Upcoming First Vipassana Course in a Women's Prison in Brazil

"'Every walk begins with a single step', the Buddha said.

In April this year a new Prison Committee was created in São Paulo and visits have been made to some correctional facilities: in Sorocaba, two male facilities, in Votorantim, a female facility, and in São Paulo, in the neighbourhood of Sant'Ana, a female facility.

The proposal is to bring Vipassana courses to people who are in two prisons: one is their own mind, and the other is the grids and walls of a correctional facility.

On 28 July a group of vipassana servers, together with Teacher Macarena, were received by the director Dr. Oswaldo and his team directors, Raquel and Jorge, at the Sant'Ana penitentiary. We are very grateful for the opportunity and the receptivity of all. Lectures were given to the



penitentiary staff, as well as to a group of 30 inmates. They were bestowed with the call of the Dhamma, and filled application forms.

Seeds have been thrown and are being watered with lots of metta. Thus, in the Sant'Ana penitentiary in São Paulo it is already possible to see the signs of the new plants springing up.

The management of Sant'Ana Penitentiary has confirmed that the first Vipassana course will be held in a women's prison in Brazil planned to take place between October and December this year [of 2023].

The work now is to prepare the land to receive the Dhamma, then weekly meetings with Anapana meditation will be held for prison staff and inmates until the date of the course begins.

Jorge has informed that according to the director, an area is being reformed to carry out this and other Vipassana courses in Sant'Ana penitentiary.

We continue on the path of the Dhamma, confident that all is prepared for the traveller to begin their journey and free themselves from suffering.

With Vipassana Meditation it is possible to free oneself from this prison and be happy.

Metta.”



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*Updated on Aug 20, 2023*