

# First 10-day Vipassana course at Sant'Ana Women's Penitentiary, São Paulo

*Written in Portuguese and translated to English in December/2023*

Joy and emotion marked the Sant'ana Women's Penitentiary at the beginning of December 2023. Nineteen women completed the first 10-day Vipassana course, as taught by S. N. Goenka, held in a women's prison in Brazil.

We feel enormous gratitude to all those meditators who contributed their labor and money so that this course could be held. Without their help, the Dhamma would not have been delivered to these women who appreciated the teaching and made a real internal change.

The discipline maintained by the students during the 10-day course drew the attention of both servers and prison guards, who could see the silence maintained during the course, which contrasted with all the other noises in the environment (work in progress, conversations shouting, television on, etc.). Within the chaos of the prison, it was clear that the practice of meditation helped with self-control, facilitated tranquility, and promoted silence and introspection.

During the course, some students commented that they no longer felt trapped and that they had found within themselves a space of true peace and also an understanding of how they had erred and the harm they had done, along with a strong resolve to act according to the Dhamma in the future, seeking to uphold the five precepts (not stealing, not killing, not lying, proper sexual conduct and abstaining from consuming intoxicating substances).

Right after the course, on December 1st, 2023, a ceremony was held where the students were presented with certificates for having completed the course. Only the Dhamma could make it possible for the inmates (some of whom were accused of serious crimes), their families, the prison guards and directors, a

journalist, lawyers and Dhamma servers to socialize together at a time when there was no fear, and joy and love flooded everything. After handing out the certificates, we went on to celebrate with a buffet that the lovely kitchen servers had been preparing for more than three days. Wonderful!

Two students testified to the experience with gratitude and a lot of inspiration. One of them said:

"It was a very remarkable experience for us, we lived 10 days of overcoming, accepting the mistakes we made and rejoicing."

Copies of the book *For the Benefit of Many* were given to the former students as support for their practice, and the book *The Art of Living* was given to the authorities.

At the end of such a significant stage in the lives of these inmates, the impression we had was that there had never been a celebration of this nature, with no distinction between the hierarchies established within a prison. It was really beautiful, emotional, a moment of great gratitude to the Dhamma and to all the people involved in carrying out this project.

During the course, the whole service was very intense, but very, very rewarding. The teacher, tireless and with a dhammic, loving and compassionate strength, full of metta, led the course with mastery, making it possible for us to reach its conclusion, as we faced many unforeseen events and challenges.

The course was documented by a Dhamma server, a filmmaker, who with her sensitive eye was able to record images that we are sure will surprise us. We also had the collaboration of another server, a photographer, who has been following all the work with great dedication.

The first step towards this course was taken by a student who, on leaving his first executive course, felt called to be part of the prison committee, and set

himself the goal of holding the first Vipassana course in a women's penitentiary in Brazil by December 2023. While touring the network of penitentiaries in the state of São Paulo, he met through friends people in the management of the Sant'Ana Penitentiary, and then the first conversations that would give rise to this course began.

Throughout the months leading up to the course, weekly visits were made to the prison, with talks and Anapana practice, which was fundamental in establishing a Dhamma atmosphere.

There were intense months of preparations that lasted until November 20, 2023 (Day 0 of the course). The space was a hospital built at the beginning of the 20th century, which had been closed for many years, and was partially renovated to make it suitable for a 10-day course. Among the renovations, we painted the walls, made a new cement floor, and carried out electrical and plumbing installations, with new sinks, toilets, eating tables and showers. We also bought equipment to set up a kitchen and fans and mosquito nets for the comfort of the people who would be living there for 10 days. The renovations were supported by labor provided by the prison and weekly task forces with Dhamma servers.

In the week before the course began, some of the servers moved into an apartment near the prison. This pre-course period was very important, with days dedicated to interviews between the teacher and potential future students, meetings with the directors of various sectors (education, prison and custody), bureaucratic matters and finalizing pending issues; evenings were spent reviewing files and organizing the entire structure of internal work.

Despite the obstacles, we always had the firm determination to finish this first course. There is still much to be done and evaluated on our journey, and we hope to continue spreading the seed of Dhamma left behind in this place where hopelessness, sadness and helplessness have given way to joy, peace and hope.

The practice they had acquired could be seen on their faces, which were no longer marked by suffering, but by softness, lightness and dhammic optimism. Even with all the setbacks, it was infinitely worth the effort when we witnessed it.

According to the teacher, there is now the possibility of holding 3-day, 2-day and 1-day courses with the old students, as well as weekly group meditation practices inside the prison with the presence of servers from São Paulo. At this "post-course" stage, there is an urgent need for us to be present and give the support that is necessary for the practice to continue, because unfortunately, the environment is not favorable and we would like to accept the students' request for them to continue cultivating the Dhamma.

Thanks to everyone's generosity, we were able to cover all the costs of the construction work, the purchase of equipment, food and accommodation for the course, and still have a cash surplus of 3,300.00 BRL which will serve as the basis for future courses in Sant'Ana.

We hope that the site will become a permanent space for regular courses for women inmates. At the moment, we are enthusiastically evaluating this possibility with the prison authorities.

May they continue to grow and shine in the Dhamma!





*View from one of the windows of the prison where the course was held*



*Day 0 - students being led to the course area by a server*



*Day 0 - student joining the course*



*Day 0 - students settling into their room*



*Course area seen from the outside*



*Group meditation session*



*Kitchen service day*

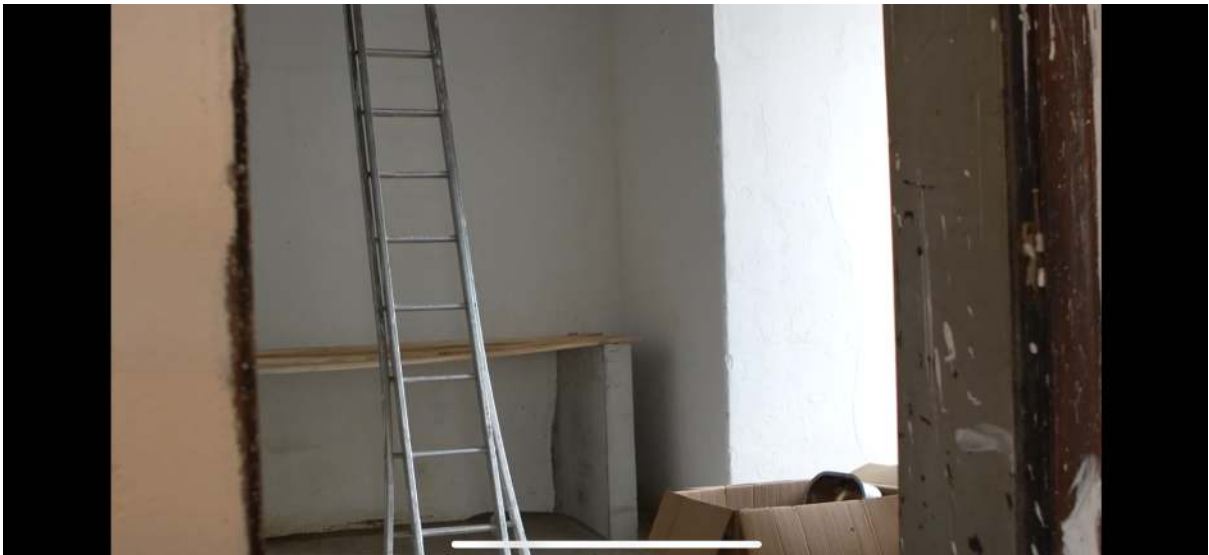


*Refectory eating benches*





*Servers working together to prepare for the course*



*Renovations*



*Renovations*



*Renovations*



*Renovations*



*Renovations*



*Servers bringing food*



*Kitchen still being organized*



*Certificate awarding ceremony*



*Certificate awarding ceremony*



*Students after the course*

