

Vipassana Meditation in Prisons

Introductory Information



European Vipassana Prison Courses Committee

Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka

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Vipassana Meditation

as taught by S. N. Goenka
in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin

Vipassana Meditation is one of the most ancient techniques of meditation. It was first taught in India more than 2500 years ago as a universal remedy for universal ills, i.e. an Art of Living. Today, many thousands of people participate each year at residential courses at Vipassana meditation centres worldwide.

The European Vipassana Trusts can offer 10-day courses in Vipassana meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka in the tradition of Sayagyi U Ba Khin at prisons and correctional facilities throughout Europe.

For inmates, Vipassana meditation provides a tool that helps reduce negative mental states such as anger and aggression, and gradually leads to inner peace. For corrections personnel the meditation practice can over time help make the prison environment less turbulent and easier to manage as more and more inmates incorporate meditation into their daily lives.

Vipassana meditation prison courses started in 1975 in India and Myanmar (Burma) and regular 10-day course programmes continue today and are permanent in some prisons here now.

The prison courses were later brought to Europe and North America. In Europe, courses have been held in the UK (Lancaster Castle Prison), Spain (Brian Prison), Israel (Hermon) and Ireland (Loughan House Prison).

In North America, several long-term 10-day course programs were conducted in low security (North Rehabilitation Facility/NRF, Seattle) as well as in maximum-security prisons (Donaldson Prison, Alabama). Since 1997, dozens of 10-day residential Vipassana meditation courses have been brought to hundreds of prison inmates at correctional facilities in Europe and North America.



The non-sectarian approach welcomes participants from any background regardless of religion or creed. European as well as American scientific research studies on the effects of Vipassana meditation on inmate recidivism (re-offending), substance abuse, general behaviour as well as psychological well-being have shown promising results.

As with all Vipassana meditation courses in this tradition, there are no charges for these meditation courses to the students or the corrections facility – not even to cover the cost of food and accommodation. Expenses are met primarily by donations from people who, having completed a course and experienced the benefits of Vipassana meditation, wish to give others the opportunity to also benefit.

Because of the focused and intense nature of these courses there are certain requirements that must be observed within the prison during the course and that require cooperation between the prison staff and the Vipassana volunteers.

It is also required that one or more personnel from the prison staff take a 10-day meditation course at one of our established meditation centres before a course can be conducted at that facility. This requirement is necessary so that there are responsible prison staff members who are directly familiar with what the inmates will experience in the course, and understand the reasons for the course requirements and its rules and regulations.

The European Vipassana Trusts offer corrections' professionals a unique and effective approach that compliments existing programmes for inmates. Many experiences demonstrate that Vipassana meditation can be integrated into existing programmes to achieve a general benefit for inmates as well as prison staff.

For additional information, prison officials are invited to contact the local representative of the European Vipassana Prison Courses Committee.

Please contact:

You may also visit: www.prison.dhamma.org or www.dhamma.org for further information on Vipassana meditation and the prison course programmes.

Frequently Asked Questions

Following are some commonly asked questions and their answers related to Vipassana meditation prison courses – based on previous experiences.

How is Vipassana meditation different from other meditation techniques?

There are many kinds of meditation practices, all of which have their own benefits. Vipassana meditation, as it is taught by S.N. Goenka is a practical and intensive way for the practitioner to face reality and to detoxify negative mental habits. One way to distinguish this practice from others is the requirement for a 10-day commitment, along with the policy of no remuneration for volunteers and course services.

Is Vipassana a religious practice?

Because of its ancient roots in the teachings of the historical Buddha, some people may be concerned that it promotes Buddhism. In fact, most people who practice Vipassana meditation do not identify themselves as Buddhists. Vipassana meditation 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 meditation courses will not conflict with facility policies regarding religious practices.

Why is the Vipassana meditation course 10 days long?

The 10-day meditation course provides an essential introduction and foundation to the technique and allows sufficient time to learn and practice how to make positive decisions. Ten days allows time for the mind to settle down and to work deeply. To develop in the meditation practice is a lifetime job.

How is Vipassana different from relaxation or stress-reduction techniques?

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

Is the meditation 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 some occasions, teachers may be unable to accommodate certain psychiatric or physical conditions.

How many inmates have completed Vipassana courses in prisons or jails?

More than 250 inmates have completed 10-day meditation courses at five correctional facilities in North America and at four prisons in Europe (UK, Spain, Israel and Ireland). Participation at courses has varied between 5 and 20 inmates on each course.

How did these inmate students respond to their meditation courses?

Overall, inmates have responded very enthusiastically to the courses. The positive

response to the programme has generated long waiting lists for future courses e.g. at Donaldson prison (Alabama, USA).

After each course was completed at North Rehabilitation Facility (Seattle, USA), closing day receptions were held. The jail staff, officials from other jails, inmates' families, other interested jail inmates, and local Seattle Vipassana meditators attended. Course participants had an opportunity to talk about their experience. They all expressed gratitude and appreciation for the tools that they were given to help them face their problems and addictions. They very often expressed great benefits, such as, "I never thought I could experience such peace."

This mirrors exactly the same experiences that can be observed in Indian and Asian prisons. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the effects of Vipassana meditation are the same regardless of the country, the culture, or the type of participants and his or her background. Different people with different personalities gain the same benefits.

Are there workers (volunteers) at these meditation courses?

Yes. All meditation courses are supported by volunteers, or 'Dhamma' workers. Two or three experienced Vipassana meditation students who volunteer to come in to serve each meditation course. They don't cook, but they serve food, clean, and support the students and the course in many ways.

On virtually every course there has been one prison's staff member who serves as a Dhamma worker also. A corrections staff member must take a 10-day course at a regular centre so that they can serve on the meditation course or be available at the facility during the course. These prison staff/Dhamma workers not only know the inmates well, but they are also trusted by both inmates and staff, and they function as security guards for the course, doing hourly head counts, etc..

Where do the volunteer (Dhamma) workers stay?

At Donaldson Prison (Alabama, USA), volunteer Dhamma workers stay in an office area above the gymnasium that is equipped with a sink and toilet. At Hamilton Prison (USA), the workers stay in the chapel. Dhamma workers use inmate showers in both facilities.

At Loughan House, in Ireland, the teacher and course servers stayed on the same wing as the students, in separate rooms. Other prisoners who were not sitting on the course moved to another wing for the duration of the meditation course so that this wing of the prison could be totally separated from the general prison population.

Do the inmates on a Vipassana course return to their cells each night?

During the course, inmates normally share small rooms or dorms with the other inmate students. For many Vipassana meditation courses, an entire wing of the jail is completely cleared and turned over to the course, and all participants remain on site for the entire course. At Donaldson, for example, the gymnasium is converted into a meditation hall. At Hamilton, the chapel area is used.

Is all the food on the Vipassana meditation course vegetarian?

Yes. Generally, the cooks at the facilities provide vegetarian menus, which they prepare just for the course. At times, it is necessary to bring in food from outside the prison to augment the prison diet. Extra provisions are also donated by Vipassana meditators, including staff who have completed their own 10-day courses.

Have prison staff and authorities been supportive of meditation courses?

Yes, very much so. Initially there has been some hesitation, some concern about whether the Vipassana meditation courses (especially the requirement for volunteer staff to be housed within the facility for 10 days) would conflict with jail security and routine.

Some staff at Donaldson initially were concerned about the programme's codes, regimen, and programme requirements. But a Dhamma worker familiar with the programme works collaboratively with facility staff to address issues of security, medical and mental health needs, inmate rights, and other potential problems. This way, the staff are reassured that their concerns are addressed proactively.

Facility personnel often make special efforts to accommodate Vipassana meditation courses. For example, at North Rehabilitation Facility (Seattle, USA), several counselling staff had to vacate their offices for two weeks, and move to temporary spaces in another part of the jail. There were many other changes and inconveniences too. But the staff was generally very supportive and cooperative.

Have corrections' staff noticed changes in the meditation students?

Yes. Staff enthusiasm and support generally increase after seeing the results of the first course. They say that the students are more settled, participate more in other prison programmes, get along better with each other and with staff, follow rules better and with less resistance, and have better relationships with their families.

How are inmates different from students at a "regular" Vipassana course?

There are far more similarities than differences. However, and this is a generalization, jail inmates tend to be highly motivated. They know the First Noble Truth; they know that they are suffering. They sincerely want a tool and a path to help them make changes.

However, some do have more difficulty with impulsiveness, attention, following noble silence and in general following rules and regulations.

Has there been follow-up with inmates who complete a 10-day course?

A formal study published by the University of Washington in 2006 involving inmates at the North Rehabilitation Facility (Seattle, USA) found that inmates who participated in the Vipassana meditation courses reported significantly lower use of drugs and alcohol, improved psychosocial functioning, lower levels of psychiatric symptoms, and greater optimism.

A formal long-term study – which was financially supported by the Swiss government of Justice – observed addicts who took part at a stationary rehabilitation and therapy programme instead of going into prison. This Swiss drug-therapy programme (abstinence oriented) works with Anapana meditation (observation of incoming/ outgoing breath) to prepare clients to take part at Vipassana meditation courses along with a dedicated unique therapeutic approach.

It was found that clients who took part at the programme instead of going into prison had the same success rates compared to clients who took part of their own free will.

Based on statistical analyses, it was found that Vipassana meditation was an important tool to inhibit severe relapse in crisis which helped clients to abstain from heavy drug consumption, as well as from criminal activities along with the consumption of hard drugs. The research study was published in 1998 and reported a success rate (conservative criterion) of about 2 out of 3 participants (~66%).

Overall Requirements for Correctional Institutions

Before any 10-day Vipassana course is held in a prison, a senior staff member, and as many other facility staff as possible, must attend a 10-day course at a Vipassana meditation centre. This is an essential prerequisite. This will enable key staff members to better understand, through direct experience, the value and relevance of Vipassana meditation to their particular correctional facility. By participating in a course, one will understand more fully how to implement a 10-day meditation course within the institution, and the reasons for the course rules and regulations.

(To apply for a course see the Vipassana Meditation website: www.dhamma.org)

The structure and organization of a 10-day Vipassana meditation course in a correctional institution is essentially the same as at any Vipassana meditation centre. The timetable, meditation instructions, discourses, and overall rules of conduct for participants are virtually identical.

Like other courses in this tradition, there is no payment to the Teacher or anyone else, and no charge to either the participants or the facility for the meditation course. The facility need only provide food and housing for the inmates, as well as for the Vipassana volunteers who conduct and manage the course.

Specific Basic Requirements

Each course will require a facility staff member who has previously completed a 10-day course at a Vipassana Meditation Centre to act as facility coordinator and liaison to Vipassana Trust personnel before and during the course.

A separate area of the correction facility should be selected for the Vipassana meditation course. The basic requirements are: A quiet room (sometimes a large classroom, auditorium, chapel or gymnasium) secluded from non-participating inmates, to be used for group meditation for all the participants and for course personnel.

Dormitories and/or cells for the participants with adequate bath and toilet facilities, also with sight and sound separation from inmates not involved with the course.

A separate room with attached bath and toilet facilities (if possible) for the Teacher(s) conducting the course. Also, a room with adequate accommodation, with bath and toilet facilities, for Vipassana course personnel.

Dining facilities separate from other inmates.

A sufficient walking area segregated from other inmates.

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

Provision should be made after the course for a place for students to meditate in order to continue the practice. Continuity of practice is important to maintain and increase the benefits of this technique.

Security and Boundary Issues

The European Vipassana Trusts recognize that security in the correctional facility is of utmost importance. Course personnel and participants must prioritize complete

adherence to all security requirements.

During the course, inmates will not have any contact with visitors, prisoners outside of the course site, and as much as possible facility staff who are not on duty at the course.

Inmates should be free to participate in the meditation course from 4:00 a.m. To 9:30 p.m. After those hours inmates should still have access to meditation course personnel if the need arises during the night.

There shall be frequent contact between the course Teachers, the designated facility meditation course coordinator/liaison, and on-duty facility staff to resolve problems and ensure the smooth functioning of the course.

Food

Simple vegetarian food should be served.

Teachers and Vipassana servers will have the same food as the inmate/students.

Medical Requisites

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.

Most medications do not interfere with course participation. However, use of certain drugs is not compatible with intense meditation.

Whenever possible inmates should have sufficient medication with them for the 10 days. When this is not possible, medical staff can dispense medication during the course.

Discipline for Participants

All participants must agree to follow this code of discipline during the course: Participants will forego all contact with the outside world during the course, including visits, phone calls, mail, commissary, and writing and reading materials.

The Vipassana Course Code of Discipline includes abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, all sexual activity and all intoxicants. Tobacco is not allowed in a course.

Inmates are required to put aside all rites and rituals and other meditation practices during the course.

For the first nine days there will be complete silence among the participants with each other. They should not communicate verbally, nor by notes, gestures or eye contact. Participants may speak to the Teacher for guidance at any time, and to the other meditation course personnel for any material needs.

Selection of Inmates

During the pre-course preparation and planning, it is important for Vipassana Trust personnel and the course Teacher to have informal introductory talks and meetings with potential inmate/students, to review aspects of the meditation course. It's important that these include adequate time for questions.

These meetings also help build rapport and the beginnings of a working relationship between facility staff, Vipassana Trust representatives and inmates. A typical introductory meeting might involve showing a video introduction of Vipassana meditation to inmates, followed by a question and answer session.

A selection of participants will be made after the introductory meetings, through an application process conducted by appropriate facility staff, with guidelines from the

VPT representatives. Every participant will fill out a course application and student data form.

It is essential that participation in the course be completely voluntary. It is important that there be no special incentives offered for participation (such as reduced sentencing, visits, etc.) nor any disincentives (such as loss of jobs, room space, etc.). This will ensure that the participant has the proper motivation to benefit from the technique and the hard work involved.

After the initial selection process by facility staff, designated Vipassana Trust personnel will interview each participant to assess suitability and readiness to undertake the course.

Facility staff will ensure that each participant is free to attend the complete 10-day course, and will not be called out for hearings, visits, medical appointments, etc..



Student Code of Discipline for Prison Vipassana Meditation Courses

The Precepts (Rules)

Everyone who attends a Vipassana meditation course must agree to refrain from:

- 1.Killing
- 2.Stealing
- 3.Sexual activity
- 4.Speaking lies
- 5.Intoxicants, including smoking.

Acceptance of the Teacher and the Technique

Students must agree to follow the rules of the course and the instructions of the teacher.

Other Techniques, Rites, and Forms of Worship

During the course students may not use other forms of prayer, worship, or religious ceremony.

Interviews with the Teacher

Problems or questions regarding the meditation should be brought only to the teacher. Students should not talk among themselves. The time between 12 noon and 1 p.m. each day is set aside for private interviews and there is also opportunity for questions after 9:00 p.m. each night.

Noble Silence

Noble Silence means no communication with other students by speech, body language, sign language, eye contact or written notes. Students should discuss any questions or problems with the appointed Vipassana course manager or teacher.

Physical Contact

There is no physical contact during the course.

Exercise

Students may exercise during rest periods by walking in the areas provided.

Intoxicants and Drugs

No drugs, alcohol, or other intoxicants are allowed.

Tobacco

No cigarettes, chewing tobacco, or snuff are allowed during the course.

Food

Simple vegetarian food will be served during the course. There will be an evening snack of tea and fruit.

Outside Contacts

Students must stay within the course boundaries during the entire 10-day course. They may leave only with permission of the course Teacher and facility security personnel. There will be no letters, phone calls, or visitors during the course.

Reading and Writing

No reading or writing materials may be brought to the course.

Summary

Do not disturb anyone during the course.

Do not pay any attention to anyone else who might disturb you.

Your progress in Vipassana meditation depends on your own good qualities and personal development and on how hard you work. The more effort you put into your own meditation practice, the more you will benefit from the course.

We wish you peace and happiness from your experience of Vipassana.

Course Timetable

- 4:00 a.m. Morning wake-up bell
- 4:30 – 6:30 a.m. Meditate in the meditation hall
- 6:30 – 8:00 a.m. Breakfast break
- 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. Group meditation in the hall
- 9:00 – 11:00 a.m. Meditate in the hall according to the teacher's instructions
- 11:00 – 12 noon Lunch break
- 12:00 – 1:00 p.m. Rest and interviews with the Teacher
- 1:00 – 2:30 p.m. Meditate in the hall
- 2:30 – 3:30 p.m. Group meditation in the hall
- 3:30 – 5:00 p.m. Meditate in the hall according to the Teacher's instructions
- 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. Tea break
- 6:00 – 7:00 p.m. Group meditation in the hall
- 7:00 – 8:15 p.m. Teacher's discourse in the hall
- 8:15 – 9:00 p.m. Group meditation in the hall
- 9:00 – 9:30 p.m. Question time in the hall
- 9:30 p.m. Retire for the night. Lights out.

Research Studies on Vipassana and its Effects on Inmates and Prisons¹

Vipassana meditation in prison and/or social rehabilitation is an important research subject that claims to help people, through self-practice, to change deep-rooted negative and dysfunctional mental-somatic habits towards more positive behaviour. Vipassana in prison provides the opportunity for offenders to realize the potential for deep structural life change. It also highlights the challenges and struggles they face in attempting to live a more harmonious, less harmful life. Common to all studies is that participants have a criminal record of some sort and are at a difficult/transitional stage, looking to begin new life situations. Prisons are difficult places in which to live – negative outlooks and hostile behaviour can be present much of the time – drug usage, violence, sexual assault, oppression and depression may also be prevalent factors. In many cases, inmates have already experienced dramatic situations prior to their incarceration.

There have been several research studies carried out that are presented in the following text together with their main discoveries:

1. The Tihar studies on psychological effects (Khurana & Dhar, 2000; Chandiramani, Verma & Dhar, 1998; Chandiramani et al., 1995a, 1995b),
2. The 'start again' long-term study on substance abuse and social rehabilitation (Studer, 1998; for a follow-up see also Gürtler, Studer & Scholz, 2010, 2011),
3. The Ming-Te Branch Prison study in Taiwan (Studer, 1997),
4. The NRF studies split into recidivism and substance abuse (Bowen et al., 2006), and
5. The Donaldson study on psychological and social functioning (Perelman et al., 2012).

¹ The cited papers and journal articles – if not marked as available online – can be retrieved from the European Prison contact in electronic format. The text of this summary contains several parts that are directly taken and copied from the cited papers.



The Tihar Studies

Tihar prison (near Delhi, India) is one of the largest prisons worldwide with more than 10,000 inmates but a regular capacity of only 5,000-6,000. The first Vipassana course took place here in 1993, followed by several further courses. In April 1994, a course was conducted by S.N. Goenka and his assistant teachers, in which more than 1,000 inmates took part. Subsequently, a permanent Vipassana centre was opened in Tihar jail with an ongoing course program. Prior to the onset of these courses, staff members were encouraged to attend ten-day courses themselves at Vipassana centres so they could experience the benefits first-hand.

The following research study was documented over several courses. The majority of crimes committed by the participants were as severe as murder, armed robbery, rape, drug abuse, bride burning, and other equally serious crimes. The first course was attended by 119 inmates and 23 staff members. Approximately 334 attended the second course, the majority of whom were under trial at the time and had been imprisoned for alleged crimes. The third course was attended by 1004 males, and the fourth course by 49 females. Several different research studies were carried out due to the large population taking a course. The following shows selected excerpts from the main findings of these investigations.

The study of Khurana & Dhar (2000) formulated the following hypotheses:

1. There will be a significant positive effect of Vipassana meditation on the quality of life of inmates of Tihar jail.
2. Vipassana meditation will have a positive and significant effect on subjective well-being of inmates.
3. Criminal propensity of inmates will decrease significantly after attending the Vipassana meditation course.
4. There will be significant difference in subjective well-being and criminal propensity of experimental (Vipassana) group and control (non-Vipassana)

group.

5. Male and female inmates will differ significantly in subjective well-being and criminal propensity, as a result of Vipassana meditation.

The authors report the following areas of investigation (dependent variables) to better understand the effects of Vipassana on quality of life, subjective well-being, and criminal propensity. For each variable a questionnaire (scale approach) was used to collect data. Data was analyzed statistically for group differences.

The sample consisted of 262 prisoners (232 males, 30 females). Five studies were conducted along with pre- and post-tests. In order to obtain a wider, more balanced view within the results, a control-group was also formed. The results show the following:

1. The first hypothesis was not completed as expected. The questionnaire was difficult for the prisoners to understand, and hence was dropped from later studies.
2. The second and third hypotheses were accepted due to the reduction in levels of criminal propensity and the rise of subjective well-being after the inmates attended the Vipassana meditation courses.
3. The fourth hypothesis was also accepted- it showed that in groups of male inmates, criminal propensity within experimental groups (Vipassana) decreased and subjective well-being increased significantly in comparison with control (non-Vipassana) groups.
4. Vipassana meditation seems to have similar effect on subjective well-being and criminal propensity of participants irrespective of their gender.
5. Thus, the fifth hypothesis was not accepted as the male and female inmates did not differ significantly in subjective well-being and criminal propensity, as a result of Vipassana meditation.

The authors conclude that the hypotheses were confirmed to a large extent. Although some variables lack statistical significance, they show results in the right and expected direction. Subjective well-being was increased and criminal propensity was reduced to a substantial degree.

In another study of Chandiramani, Verma & Dhar (1998), the authors focused on the psychological effects of Vipassana in five fields: (1) psychiatric illnesses, (2) positive aspects of mental health (e.g. hopefulness, ...), (3) hostility and feelings of helplessness, (4) impact of anomie and attitude to law, and (5) impact on personality functioning and psychopathy.

Two studies were conducted in 1994 with randomly chosen subjects from a sample group who volunteered to learn Vipassana. The first sample group consisted of 120 males, the second of 85 with a control group of 65. All data was collected with questionnaires (scale approach) and analysed statistically.

The authors report a substantial improvement in the functioning of inmates following a Vipassana course. Neurotic predisposition was reduced along with the feelings of hostility, helplessness, and anomie. A sense of hope and well-being increased. Differences were found between male and female participants. Although female participants scored higher than controls on (non-significant) subjective well-being, they also scored higher than controls on criminal propensity, it seems that females in one way or another gained

less benefit than males. Reasons can be that they did not fully understand the core meaning of Vipassana and technical details of how to practice properly. Some female inmates complained about a shortage of space (not enough distance from each other, therefore encouraging more implicit communication, which should be avoided totally during a course). However, generally females reported enhanced positive feelings after doing a ten-day course.

The authors note, as their work covered several years, that a 20-day course was also held for very serious meditators (prisoners) who practiced regularly for several years and who met the stringent requirements for such a long course. In addition to successfully taking part in this 20-day course, participants subsequently acted as social role models, motivating others to try Vipassana courses for themselves.

Several restrictions limited the significance of the results:

1. there had been little stringent control over physical and social environment;
2. there was a lack of reports about prisoners' general behavior in prison prior to taking courses;
3. there had been problems with information organization;
4. not all subjects completed all forms and items.
5. and, due to the high rate of inmates released, a long-term follow-up investigation was not possible.

The authors also remark that after applying the 'usual methodology' of questionnaires, the finer aspects of human behavioral and mental change cannot be understood fully. This chosen methodology can be another restriction in understanding the deeper aspects of the effects of Vipassana on an incarcerated population. However, the following approach from Switzerland, carried out within drug addiction and prison research facilities, tries to avoid exactly that and addresses the problem directly.

The Start Again Long-Term Study

In 1998, funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Justice, a research study was published that covers not only Vipassana as a single factor treatment, but Vipassana as part of a dedicated professional drug addiction rehabilitation and therapeutic approach. The approach is described in Studer (1998) along with its main findings. A more recent development of the underlying therapeutic model is described in Gürtler, Studer & Scholz (2010, 2011). It covers systemic individual as well as family therapy and counselling, biographic work, self-help groups, education and bodily health – and meditation (Anapana-sati and Vipassana meditation). For Anapana-sati, clients learn directly from a Vipassana teacher within the 'Start Again' program. If a student shows to be substantially stable in mental-somatic function, they are allowed to take part in a ten-day Vipassana course outside the 'Start Again' program at a regular Vipassana centre.

The study was conducted between 1992 and 1997 during which time there were 145 participants. It was crucial to the courses that participants either participated willingly, or were introduced via an approach entitled "therapy instead of prison" whereby addicts

chose to take part at the addiction therapy centre instead of staying in prison to serve their sentences.

A conservative criterion for success (recovery from addiction) was defined. It required not only to:

1. Abstain from drugs, but also
2. to actively work on one's own addiction in one way or another (e.g. practice Vipassana meditation, attend self-help groups, etc.),
3. to cope actively with life (e.g. searching for a job),
4. no further criminal record, and
5. positive shaping of social relationships

The results calculated by Bayesian statistics for small sample size groups show clearly that the overall program was effective for about 2/3 (62%) of participants based on the conservative criterion outlined above. Taking a less conservative criterion, a total of 82% can be seen as fully recovered. 40% of all clients completed the program, with 35% cancelling early on in the program, and 25% cancelling at a later stage.

During the post-treatment period, Vipassana itself was identified as a crucial factor in inhibiting serious relapse. Though Vipassana was not a predictor of success; in the case of a crisis, it was an important source of strength by which to master crises better than one would be able to without. In case of drug addiction this can mean the difference between life and death. Men as well as women gained the same level of benefit. No real differences were found between voluntary participants and 'therapy instead of prison' addicts. This is a very important finding, because a percentage of these clients were attending as a result of their sentences rather than their willingness to sit a course. Due to these sentences, prisoners were able to stay and practice Vipassana for longer periods of time. Having additional time to concentrate, prisoners needing longer to grasp the benefits of such a practice, were able to experience the necessity for life change. Over a longer period it was possible for them to experience a reliable social relationship with therapists, other addicts and the program itself. More time allowed more chances for these people. These statistical findings are supplemented and contrasted by qualitative case reconstructions to better understand the ways that lead to severe addiction, its behavioral consequences (e.g. criminal records) and the typical characteristics of addicts (family, biography, problem areas, resilience factors, etc.).

A follow-up study conducted by Gürtler, Studer & Scholz (2010, 2011) reconstructed the life experiences of former addicts after their therapy in Start Again. Several interviews were done with five former addicts to understand the principles of recovery from addiction – specifically considering the influence of Vipassana on the addiction therapy program as a whole. The authors conclude that there are three steps leading to a recovery from addiction:

1. small steps lead to small changes if done properly and continuously
2. vulnerabilities can be transformed (converted) to valuable resources and resilience factors for critical life incidents in future
3. subjective important aspects can be dissolved completely (either vulnerabilities or resilience factors), so that people are really independent and free from these. However, practically none of the interviewees attained such a high stage.

The results demonstrate that Vipassana integrates well into a professional therapeutic approach and that it really supports the whole program. Based on statistical methods,

it can be concluded that Vipassana is very effective. But not only this – Vipassana can be integrated into a professional approach even though it is a unique and very ancient tradition. An English summary of the study was published by Studer (2001).

The Taiwan Prison Study

In 1996 a prison course was held in Ming-Te Branch Prison in Taiwan. Twenty four inmates participated, while a separate group of twenty four were considered as non-participating inmates for the purposes of the study. The incarcerated population had all been sentenced exclusively for the consumption or possession of addictive drugs. Control subjects were chosen randomly among the non-participating inmates whilst inmates who sat the course chose freely to take part in the study. One difference between the groups was that participants had longer sentences, having to remain in prison over a year longer than non-participants.

From a methodological perspective, the Taiwan prison study was compared with the Tihar prison study (Studer, 1997). Both analyses complement each other. Whilst the Tihar approach works on a quantitative base with questionnaires, the Taiwan inquiry focuses exclusively on qualitative data. It is a more participatory study, being sense-reconstruction oriented and providing analyses of behavioural changes as a consequence of practicing Vipassana.

Different data was collected: Journals written before and after the course, and interviews with all volunteers as well as non-volunteers within two weeks after the course. The aim was to precisely reconstruct the relevant and characteristic dimensions in relation to the ten-day course by those who had experienced it directly.

One of the main findings was an increase in interest from non-participants in the jail after the course. It seemed that positive social effects, triggered by the meditators who had sat the course, acted as a role-model for other inmates in the prison. Therefore, it proved essential for prison staff to also experience directly the effects of meditation by participating in a course. All twenty four volunteers almost exclusively report positive changes as a consequence of the course. 75% of the volunteers expressed a wish to join a Vipassana course again. The remaining 25% expressed a general positive interest to participate in another course though, for varying reasons, not immediately. 92% of the volunteers reported changes within themselves and within others implicitly or explicitly. Almost 50% reported an increase in mental calmness to the time before the course. This meant an enhanced level of inner peace and coping strategies. Between 21% and 33% (depending on the source of data) showed a certain level of empathy, a decrease of one's own ego perspective, and more responsibility for one's own actions. Moral judgments played a more important role and self-control was increased.

Studer concludes in his summary, that the findings are very similar to the ones found in Europe in the Swiss drug therapy centre. He proposes five main areas of positive effects that play a dominant role:

- social behaviour
- somatic and psychosomatic effects
- self-observation, self-control, and coping
- depth-psychodynamic nature, and

- wisdom gained by a step-by-step approach of continuously penetrating and understanding one's own inner reality at an experiential level.

Finally, Studer concludes that there is scientific evidence that Vipassana has a real substantial effect on the change of deep somato-mental models that are responsible for human actions.

The NRF Studies

Between November 1997 and December 1999 eight Vipassana ten-day courses (4 male, 4 female courses) took place in the North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF) / King County Jail in Seattle. The NRF is a low-level security facility. A total of 75 inmates participated (47 male, 28 female). The only treatment investigated was the participation of a ten-day Vipassana meditation course and the opportunity to practice meditation afterwards to become established in the technique. The courses and its effects on inmates were researched by the University of Washington.

The results show that approximately 55%² of Vipassana inmates were re-booked into the King County Jail within 2 years post-program with no significant difference between female Vipassana inmates (54% re-booked) and male Vipassana inmates (57% re-booked). Other evaluation studies indicate that 75%* of NRF inmates are re-booked into the King County Jail within 2 years. Overall, Vipassana inmates were 20% less likely to return to the King County Jail than general population inmates who did not complete a course. The average number of bookings for Vipassana inmates declined by nearly half during the study from 2.9 pre-program to 1.5 post-program. Finally, no significant difference was found in the number of jail days pre-program (45.2) vs. post-program (50.2). This is due to the fact that those subjects who re-offend received, for the most part, longer court-ordered jail sentences, making up the difference.

In another study, Bowen et al. (2006) investigated inmates with self-measurement scales. 305 inmates filled out the baseline assessment (63 volunteers for Vipassana, 242 for treatment-as-usual). For post-course assessment, the numbers are 173 (total), 57 (Vipassana), 116 (treatment-as-usual). The 3-month post-release-from-NRF period was filled out by 87 (total), 29 (Vipassana), and 58 (treatment-as-usual). Further 78 participants (27 Vipassana, 51 treatment-as-usual) filled out the 6-month follow-up. Thus, to some extent, a long-term study was possible. Self-reports were used at the following time-point baselines: 3-month post, and 6-month follow-up to the 10-day course participation. A Daily Drinking Questionnaire, a Daily Drug-Taking Questionnaire, and a Short Inventory of Problems were given. The latter measured impulse control, social responsibility, physical interpersonal, and intrapersonal consequences within 3 months. The Drinking-related Locus of Control scale was used to measure perceived control over alcohol. The White Bear Suppression Inventory assessed thought suppression, and the Brief Symptom Inventory collected data about psychiatric symptoms and a global severity index. The last instrument, the Life Orientation Test, offered the opportunity to measure optimism.

The results showed that participants of a Vipassana course showed significant less usage of alcohol, marijuana, and crack cocaine compared to a treatment-as-usual control group. On a psychological level, increased levels of positive social outcomes and decreased alcohol-related problems and psychiatric symptoms can be reported

² About 20% of these re-bookings involve old charges or warrants (e.g., Failure to Appear, Failure to Comply, Probation Violation).

for meditators compared to non-meditator prisoners. On a scientific level, the authors report a (multivariate) path-model showing the effects of Vipassana on the different usage of drugs (tobacco, crack cocaine, drinking, ...) within the 3-month period. This represents an omnibus test of the relationship of Vipassana course participation and post-incarceration substance use.

Summarizing the results, there is a significant relationship between taking a Vipassana 10-day course and post-incarceration substance use. Meditator prisoners reported less use and substantially fewer alcohol-related negative consequences during a 3-month post-course period after release from NRF.



The Donaldson Study

The Donaldson longitudinal study (Perelman et al., 2012) is a continuing research study that began with the first course within a maximum security prison in Alabama (USA) in 2002. The study was conducted by the University of Alabama in which 60 (retreat group) as well as 67 (comparison group with alternative treatment: "Houses of Healing") male inmates took part. This adds up to a total of 127 inmates. Different clinical methods (self-reports) were used as research instruments. Different factors that were monitored were mindfulness (cognitive, affective), anger, emotional intelligence, and mood states. This was enhanced by recording negative behavioural indicators such as prison infractions, segregation time, and health visits. The study covered a one-year period with three time points: pre, post, and follow-up. After an initial and successful course in 2002, no course was held for several years, before the program was re-initiated at the Alabama prison in 2007. The prison currently offers retreats on a quarterly basis with space for up to 25 inmates. At least 430 inmates have now participated in at least one 10-day Vipassana course. One third of all participants had a medical diagnosis (e.g. hypertension, diabetes), less than half were smokers at baseline, and ~13% had a substance use diagnosis.

The two groups were quite comparable on most demographic indices, but not on race: More Vipassana participants identified themselves as "other" (not African, Caucasian, etc.) compared to the control group. More than 80% were incarcerated for violence,

~27% served a life sentence, and ~28% were sentenced to life without parole. Here, the Vipassana group had served significantly more time on their sentence than controls.

On the level of data analysis, linear mixed models were calculated. Results showed that Vipassana participants (group effect) had higher scores overall. Time itself was not able to predict the results and neither was the interaction of time by group. There were no changes in the control group over time. This means that only the main effect of participating a Vipassana course had an influence on the results (i.e. higher scores overall) on the level of statistics. Scores did not change due to time itself (i.e. by doing nothing) nor revealed the interaction of time and group (i.e. different influence of time on the different groups) any influence on the dependent variable. Vipassana participants (pairwise comparison) had a significant increase in mindfulness (pre to post, CAMS-R scale) but not from pre to follow-up or post to follow-up. This means that although Vipassana participants achieved greater levels of mindfulness (compared to control group), the effects were not that long-lasting. This illustrates the challenge of integrating the experiences of a single course into the daily life of a tough prison, where it is difficult to maintain the daily practice of Vipassana and create a personal shelter to protect oneself against the aggressive environment.

For TMSS scores (emotional intelligence), none of the independent variables was significant. However, pairwise comparisons revealed that Vipassana participants showed a significant increase between pre and follow-up and this increase over time remained for all participants. Those changes were not observed for controls.

For NAI-25 scale (anger), no statistical significant effect was to be found for any of the independent variables. This means the retreat had no effect, or no clear effect on situational anger.

For POMS-SF scale (mood states), the analysis showed significant differences between the control and participant groups. Here, Vipassana participants showed significantly lower scores than controls. These differences were quite stable over time, but time itself had no effect. This means Vipassana participants experienced less mood distress compared to controls, although their mood states did not change much across data collection time points.

Reviewing institutional data (infractions, segregation), both groups did not differ at baseline. After a 1-year follow-up, for both groups behavioural incidents can be reported. Both groups were quite comparable at follow-up. The same is true for medical data and records.

At the end, on a subjective level, Vipassana participants were asked for their anonymous opinion in relation to the 10-day course. About 50% completed the questionnaire. Of those, all stated that they valued the course experience either “quite a bit” or “very”. Almost all reported that they learned “quite a bit” or “a lot”, and about 2/3 reported it was “very likely” they would continue to practice the technique.

In summary, results showed that upon completion of the course, participants were able to increase their level of mindfulness over a longer period of time. However, the course showed little effect on situational anger and behavioral incidents – compared to controls – over the same time-period.

These results reflect the findings from Studer (1998, s.a.), who states that it is the whole program of the drug-therapy center (“therapy instead of prison) over a long period of time, that shows an effect and it is not just the isolated factor (i.e. predictor in the statistical sense) of completing a 10-day course once. For the prison, this means that the effects of Vipassana will be much stronger if inmates continue their daily practice and if the prison undergoes also a process of organizational change. This should lead

to changes at all levels of hierarchy in order to establish an alternate mental attitude based on mindfulness. Real wholesome changes in life require time and hard work (i.e. practice) – and an environment which fosters these factors. However, we should not forget that this sample consisted of people with about 55% of them serving a life-sentence (with or without parole). Therefore, the changes are remarkable.

Discussion

The cited scientific studies demonstrate clearly that Vipassana meditation has a substantial effect on an incarcerated population. Positive emotions and intentions are increased, whereas negative mental states, attitudes, and behavioural patterns are decreased. However, not all results are conclusive and it surely requires further investigation and replication of results.

Various methodological instruments were used to investigate Vipassana meditation. Statistical methods of analysis as well as qualitative methods to measure behavioural and mental states point all in the same positive direction. They support the view that the technique of Vipassana is a valuable instrument to help people come out of addictive behaviour, to realize one's own responsibility in relation to criminal acts, and to learn step by step to lead a better life that is no longer characterized by anti-social behavior. This is true especially in the area of drug-taking, which is a very well-researched field of interest now. There is proof that the practice of Vipassana really helps people to dissolve gradually and step by step their destructive life patterns that often lead to anti-social activities.

Men as well as women gain roughly the same benefit from the technique. There is no difference between “therapy-instead-of-prison” clients as well as non-prisoners in the study of Studer (1998). This also demonstrates that Vipassana – although it is rooted in an ancient tradition that reaches back to the Buddha – can be integrated into a modern therapy program that is carefully designed to support the various aspects of social rehabilitation. But even if Vipassana is not that deeply integrated into the social-rehabilitative program, its effects are remarkable. This is demonstrated in the NRF, Tihar, and Donaldson studies.

However, taking a course in Vipassana meditation is an act of free will. Course participation is always a personal choice to gain benefit and help oneself. On the one hand this is a limitation, as it cannot be applied as a simple treatment for all regardless of their willingness to participate. On the other hand, it is able to reveal the potential of practitioners and to activate their hidden resources. From the ‘start again’ study, we can see that ‘therapy instead of prison’ is another interesting gestalt to shape social rehabilitation programmes. Additionally, further research should focus more on recidivism rates and on understanding how they evolve and what influences are predominant. Real behavioural changes might be better shown by means such as: Reports collected from prison staff as to whether they perceive any long-term positive changes in the behaviour of inmates who have taken a course. These could then be compared with self-reports completed by the same inmates, in order to see how prison staff observations match their subjective experiences.

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Radio Interview Transcription

The following article was recorded from the radio show
'As it Happens' with Mary Hynes and Barbara Budd.

[I]: If you were looking for a place to work on your meditation technique, you could do a lot worse than jail. You'd have lots of time on your hands, lots of opportunity for inward reflection. Now a prison in Seattle is helping its inmates get their lives back on track with a rigorous form of mediation called Vipassana. It's considered a boot camp form of meditation because the meditators have to sit for as long as ten hours a day. They also give up all worldly diversions - the little elements of freedom that make the minimum security prison called North Rehabilitation Facility so attractive in the first place. Lucia Meijer is the facility administrator, she's in Seattle.

[I]: Ms Meijer, I understand you've been through the Vipassana course yourself. Tell me what it's like...

[LM]: Oh, it's very hard to describe to somebody who hasn't taken the course - I can tell you a little bit about what it might look like to an outsider.

[I]: Okay...

[LM]: You go to a meditation centre, which is a place that's specially designed for this purpose, and for 10 days you basically cut off communication between yourself and the outside world - and the reason for that is so that you can focus on what's going on inside of yourself. The first three days you are taught a meditation technique that helps you focus and concentrate your mind - to kind of turn down the volume and all the jumbled thoughts, and then on the 4th day they teach you the Vipassana meditation which focuses on all of your bodily sensations. You do this in what they call noble silence, which means no communication not only between yourself and the outside world, but between yourself and the other students. But you are free to communicate with the

instructors and the people who are there to serve the course, the other Vipassana staff...

[I]: And this is up to ten hours a day is it?

[LM]:...well your day starts at about 4.30 in the morning and lights out is at about 9 or 9.30 and in between times you have breaks, but most of the time that you spend, you spend meditating although they do allow ample time for you to eat, shower, wash your clothes, take a walk, rest.. so it's not that gruelling.

[I]: Why bring Vipassana to prison? Why did you think it might help the inmates of your facility?

[LM]: For a lot of reasons. I think that for anyone to change deeply rooted negative habits - especially the negative thinking habits - they need a time and a place and a way to sit and learn about themselves in a very real, authentic immediate manner. And this provides that opportunity. So many of the people who are here are grasping for things outside of themselves, and that only gets them so far, and at some point if they're going to get better, they have to look inward and they have to gain some control over themselves, and they have to start to change those habitual ways of thinking and reacting.

[I]: Do you think inmates are particularly well suited to meditation?

[LM]: I don't know that they are well suited except in this respect - a lot of people don't approach something like this as openly as our residents did because they have more of a philosophical interest - may be they meditated in some other ways or they've tried other kinds of experiences to enhance their spirituality or whatever..

[I]: They're just dabbling in it...

[LM]: right, they have a more intellectual or philosophical interest, whereas, our residents approach it from the point of view of 'I'm suffering, you know, 'I'm desperate', 'I'm suffering', and they really put their heart and soul in to it and they're not over-intellectualising or analysing, they're just having the experience, and I think that to that extent they are very well suited for Vipassana.

[I]: Is it working? Are you seeing changes in the inmates who've practiced the meditation?

[LM]: Yes! It's very interesting to me now - we still need to do more study on the long-term effects, but in the short term, one of the first things you see when the students come out of the course, here now they have been for ten days without all of the things that they basically come to this facility for. They can't smoke, they can't watch television, they can't make phone calls, they can't get mail, they can't have any visiting, they can't listen to the radio, they can't read, they can't write. They come out of this ten day ordeal and instead of saying, 'Oh I'm so glad it's over, I'm glad I made it, I'm such a great person', they turn to you and they say, 'Thank you for this wonderful opportunity.' So you know that something important has happened.

[I]: Tell me some of their stories, are there particular inmates who have been changed?

[LM]: Yes, they do appear to be changed, we have one fellow who went through the men's course which was the first course that was offered here, and he was one of our

chronic recidivists, he had been through this facility time and time again on the same kind of thing. He got out of this facility, he went immediately to the meditation centre that is here in Washington, took another ten day course, has since volunteered to help out, or what they call 'serve' other courses, one of which was a course that his mother attended. He's shown a total change, not only in how he thinks, but his attitude - he's hopeful, he's focused, he's goal oriented, and he's demonstrating a wonderful ability to get along with other people and to be helpful, to be giving, and that's remarkable for somebody who's been taking all this time.

[I]: Well, it's remarkable in a ten-day programme - is it that potent?

[LM]: I think it depends on the readiness of the individual. We have a lot of programmes here and this is one of them, and some people do better than other in various programmes depending on how ready they are for that change and whether or not the programme really addresses their needs. So, this may not work for everybody, but, when it does work the change is very noticeable.

[I]: Now what about you, have you kept up the Vipassana meditation?

[LM]: Yes, I have

[I]: Have you? What are you getting out of it?

[LM]: Oh, hopefully the same thing that our residents here are getting out of it - a greater clarity of thought, more choice about how I'm going to react to various situations, more insight in to myself, more compassion for others, it really does improve ones quality of life, I have to say - and I'm a skeptic, I'm not a joiner.

[I]: Ms Meijer, Thank you

[LM]: You're welcome

[I]: Goodbye

[LM]: Thank you, Bye-bye.

[I]: Lucia Meijer is an administrator at the King County North Rehabilitation Facility; she spoke to us from Seattle.

Experiences of Meditators - Irish prison course at Loughan House

August 2015

"I really did not know what to expect from this practice. It was brought to my attention from a member of prison staff who has been practicing this meditation for some time. I was shown a film about a Vipassana course in an Indian prison and made my mind up to try for myself. The first 2-4 days of the course I was more or less waiting for something to happen, I thought this practice would do everything and put things into perspective.

Soon I realised that I had to work with it, really get to the depth of my mind and deal with things that I was not aware were there. The help of the Assistant Teacher gave me moral support, answered my questions and helped me stay on the path.

I think it is too early after the course to see any difference in me, but I know it has changed my mentality and outlook of life. I do look forward to the near future, so I can keep my practice going on a daily basis and stay on the path to a peaceful and happy life to which I have been pointed towards." VK

"Amazing experience, a lot of ups and downs but it has truly changed my life for the better. I would recommend it to anyone, the benefits are unbelievable, its really difficult to put into words the experience. You have to try it for yourself, you will not be sorry." KK

"There is no magic formula to find out the meaning of life. It's the simple things in life that matter. And it starts with the simplest: Your own breath. Vipassana Meditation gives you the path to your own inner truth and peace." JM

“I sat the Vipassana Meditation course in Loughan House prison in August 2015 and it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done and I would recommend anyone who gets the chance to do this course to grab it with both hands and work really hard.

In the last 10 days I learned a lot about myself and how to deal with emotions which I had always just put aside.

I am now grateful for what I have and love the people around me with more passion and the future looks brighter. Vipassana will make my life happy and I am sure it will help anyone who takes part.” SD

“Challenging and fulfilling: I never knew myself inside until these last 10 days, I am aged 29. I feel complete and fully ready for the ups and down of the outside world. The whole thought process has changed at the root level. I really and truly felt I was a happy go lucky person, because the ignorance wouldn’t let me see all the want and ME ME ME. I have been in prison for 2.5 years and I wish I had done it on the first week. It helps so much to accept a NO.” JR

“Jail”

by Albert May

PRISIÓN

Las rejas se van abriendo ante mí,
y cerrando
tras mis pasos.

Universo de llaves, cancelas,
cadenas, hierro, cemento y ladrillo.

Una cámara controla mis movimientos
en silencio.

Los muros se yerguen ante mí, e
infranqueables, me aprisionan el alma.

Apenas me dejan ver un cacho de cielo,
si miro hacia arriba tengo vértigo.

Un pino se asoma sobre el muro
recordándome de dónde vengo.

Los pájaros llegan hasta el patio,
donde encuentran las migas que
les dejo.

Paseo por el patio con un andar decidido
y rápido,
como si quisiera empujar el tiempo.

Uno, dos tres, ...veinticinco, cien,...
mi paso se convierte en la unidad de
tiempo.

Estoy preso en la cárcel de mi ego,
cumpliendo una condena dictada por
mí mismo, el juez más severo.

Sin embargo, ahora sé que la libertad
está también en mi interior.

JAIL

The bars are opening in front of me,
and closing
after my steps.

Universe of keys, gates,
chains, iron cement and brick.

A camera controls my movements
in silence.

The walls stand in front of me, and
impassible, they oppress my soul.

They barely leave a bit of sky to see,
if I look up, I have vertigo.

A pine tree protudes over the wall
reminding me where I come from.

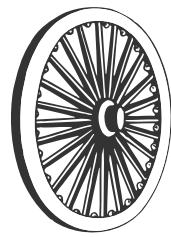
The birds arrive in the yard,
where they find the crumbs that
I leave for them.

I stride around the yard with steadfast and
firm pace,
as if I wanted to push time.

One, two, three, ...twenty five, ...one hun-
dred, ...
my step is transformed into a unit of time.

I'm a prisioner in the jail of my ego,
serving a sentence set
by myself, the most strict judge.

However, now I know that the freedom
is also within me.



May all beings be happy