

# Vipassana Meditation

## *A ten-day course of self discovery for inmates at HMP Lancaster*

During November 1998, a ten-day Vipassana Meditation course was run by Officers **Chris Berry** and **Paul Bevan** for inmates at Lancaster Prison. The following two articles are insights into the course from both staff and inmate perspectives

During November 1998, the first course in Vipassana Meditation ever to be held in a prison in Europe took place at HMP Lancaster Castle.

The ten-day course was conducted by the Vipassana Trust, which is an Education Charity. Eight inmates and two officers, along with the Meditation Teacher and two volunteers from the charity, made up the Vipassana course. These courses are very demanding with the students expected to remain at the course venue for the entire ten days.

The day of meditation begins at 4.30 in the morning and continues until 9.00 in the evening. Each day consists largely of meditation with sessions of one to two hours duration. Short breaks are taken between sessions with longer breaks for breakfast, lunch and tea. Finally, there is a video discourse in the evening. For the entire course, the participants are expected to observe complete silence amongst themselves.

The course was made possible by the effective isolation of the students (inmates) from the rest of the prison. The prison provided two classrooms and a small exercise courtyard for the duration of the course. The students were accommodated in a group of cells off the courtyard with the facilitators in rooms nearby. Without this isolation, the operational running of the prison would have had an impact on the intentional intensity of the course.

### **What Is Vipassana Meditation and why is it being made available in prisons?**

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Vipassana Meditation was a technique practised and taught by the Buddha over 2500 years ago. After the technique was lost in India, it was maintained in Burma by a dedicated chain of teachers until the 1960's when one of those teachers, S. N. Goenka, took the technique back to India. Since then, Vipassana has been learnt by many sections of Indian society and courses are being held in many other countries. Meditation is non-sectarian and participants include members of all religions as well as those with no particular faith.

There is no such thing as a typical student. At the Vipassana Meditation Centre in Herefordshire, doctors, teachers, housewives, policemen, students, prison officers, the unemployed and indeed people from all walks of life come to do courses. It is for this reason that Vipassana is being introduced into prisons: not because the courses are designed especially for inmates, but because Vipassana Meditation can benefit members of all sections of society and inmates are no exception.

Prison courses started in India when prison Governors first started learning the technique out of their own interest, appreciated the benefits and decided to make it available to the inmates. In April 1994, Dr Kiran Bedi, the Inspector General of Tihar jail in New Delhi (which, with over 9,000 inmates, is the country's largest prison), requested that a larger course for 1,000 inmates be conducted there. Following the success of that course, a permanent Vipassana

Meditation Centre was established in a wing of Tihar jail and the Indian Government request that Vipassana Meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka, be introduced to every prison in the country. Programmes of Vipassana courses are now being held in Taiwan and the US with other countries expressing an interest.

The course at Lancaster Castle happened after two officers started learning Vipassana and encouraged by their own experience, and the beneficial impact of Vipassana in prisons elsewhere, decided to explore the possibility of running a course in HMP Lancaster. In fact, it is an important feature of the introduction of Vipassana to prisons that Officers have tried the technique themselves first. Only then can the prison understand what the course involves and the experience that the inmates are going through.

There were obviously practical hurdles to be surmounted, but the course was implemented with minimal disturbance to the normal running of the prison. Having volunteered to do the course, the applicants had to complete a form and agree to a code of discipline. There was then an exhaustive series of interviews to assess the commitment and suitability of the students before they were confirmed.

The aim of the course is to teach the participant the technique of Vipassana Meditation so that they can begin to develop self-awareness and a sense of self-worth, as well as a sense of consideration for others. A tall order by any standards, but the results speak for themselves.

The 12th of November was upon us and finally, after months of preparation, the course began. Eight inmates walked into the Meditation Hall for the first time. All were to successfully complete the rigorous programmes of Vipassana Meditation.

It became apparent during and after the course that a change had taken place with each student. Their expressions had changed and all had a glint in their eyes. I remember how good it felt to be surrounded by inmates in such a positive state of mind, a real feeling of support and, dare I say, affection.

After the course, all the students received a visit from their family or friends. The apprehension of the build up to the course, the arduous mental journeys whilst meditating for ten long days and finally contact with loved ones, resulted in some students being quite overcome at this time. The free exchange of emotions and feelings was a powerful and extremely meaningful experience.

- All this was fine, but other people talked of evaluation and in some way trying to measure the students' experience. I found this may have been too personal, after all, tears were often shed during and after meditation. My fears were unfounded. All eight students gave a very frank report on their mind-state before and after the course. It was obvious after reading the reports, there had been a change. A very positive change!

One student wrote 'I felt like I had met a new person

within myself'. He remarked on how different he felt.

This theme of inner change was echoed in all the post-course evaluation sheets. Entries included; 'I had a short fuse, but I am now a calmer person', 'I've been given a tool for life, for my own spiritual growth'.

Staff feedback on their observation of the students after the course were also very positive. An officer remarked that 'the light had been switched on inside them, they shone out as different people on the landing'.

Education Department staff noted that there was a marked change for the better in personal discipline, willingness to learn and quality of output from students who had attended the course.

One student shared with me his feeling of achievement some time after the course, after he had proved himself drug free after several MDT results,

Results speak for themselves. It is not for me to sell or thrust this technique at people for my own self-motivated reasons. I have been involved in Drug and Alcohol work, Problem Solving and Men and Violence courses, all in their own right, good and favourable programmes. But for me, without downgrading other projects and their results, Vipassana Meditation really brings people back to themselves. Here is a technique to eradicate suffering. It is universal. I would be failing in my duty if being aware of this I do not give people the opportunity we have had, Vipassana means 'The art of Living' and maybe it's a lifetime's Journey!

I would like to thank all the people who gave their time and used their resources to make this programme a success at Lancaster Castle. The support and encouragement given to us all was commendable. I would also like to thank the Prison Service for embracing what they see as a radical departure from what is often precluded as the norm, and having the courage to try something 'new'.

## *Vipassana - an inmate's experience*

**Brian Worthington, Lancaster Prison**

I am a recovering alcoholic. At the age of 12, I was placed in care for reasons unknown to me. After three days, I was raped and abused. I am now 33 and for 21 years, I've been in and out of prison and other forms of institutions.

In 1997, I was sentenced to four years for burglary. I knew then that I had to do something about my life. I had to change my ways. I didn't want to come to prison for the rest of my life or break into other people's houses again.

I started to sort myself out. First I attended the Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Then I started to study psychology to try to understand how the mind works. I attended other courses in Alcohol Awareness, Relapse Prevention and so on. I learned a great deal, but still felt that there was something missing, I still had a lot of hatred and suppressed feelings which I just couldn't get rid of. Talking about them seemed fine at first, but after a couple of days, the feelings returned which was very depressing.

Sometime in August 1998, I heard about a Meditation Vipassana Course that was going to start in the prison. Ten days meditation, no smoking, no talking, no visits or letters. Up at 4.30 in the morning until 9.00 at night. The art of living they called it.

I asked around and got as much information as I could. The more I heard about Vipassana, the more I knew it was for me, I didn't really know what it was, but somehow I just knew I had to do it. I put my name down and finally, on 12 November, the course started.

## **Life After Vipassana**

I got so much out of the Vipassana Course that I would find it hard to describe everything. I feel as if I'm a totally different person with a wonderful future ahead of me. Gone are all the negative thoughts. I feel so calm within myself and can see things for what they really are.

I tend not to dwell on the past anymore and through meditation, have somehow released all the suppressed ill feelings I've had, some dating back 20 years. It's enabled me to move on and get on with my life.

I am very aware that there will be ups and downs in my life, as in everyone's. I feel as if I can cope with each day as it dawns and not dwell on difficulties, but deal with them as they arise.

I am much more aware of what is happening around me. I feel that I've found the root of my problems.

My relationship with my partner and children is getting much better. We are able to communicate in a much better way. We understand our feelings and know what we all want for the future.

Situations have come up since I've done Vipassana. Before Vipassana, I know I would have dealt with them in a confrontational way. Now I feel much calmer within myself and for the first time in my life, am able to deal with difficulties in a civil, understanding way.

I recommend that Vipassana Meditation should be available to every prisoner in the system, be they male or female. No-one can undertake it without gaining something from the experience.

An individual has got to want to do it, it's not easy! However, the rewards are very great.

From my own personal experience, I know there are people like me in the system who want and need help. They are sick of the cycle of drinking, drugs, violence and crime, but it's been a part of

their lives for so long that they just can't see a way out of it.

Vipassana can give them a different direction. A step in the right direction. Inner leadership so to speak.

When a man/woman comes into prison, they are offered help. Courses in AA, counselling and so on are available. These are good, but don't always get to the root of the problem, Vipassana in this situation can help. It clears the mind and helps with self-discipline, cravings and inner turmoil.

The good thing is Vipassana costs nothing! Just think how much money it will save the taxman over the coming years if it can help inmates like me to be calmer and more focused on a positive future, both during our sentence and after release.

American and Indian prisons have had good successes with Vipassana, I hope it enjoys the same in our system. Vipassana has changed my life massively for the better and I hope others will find similar benefit through it.

May all beings be happy!