

# Vipassana Meditation

## An Inmate Rehabilitation Program for the Australian Correctional System

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## **Introduction: What is Vipassana?**

The word Vipassana literally means “insight” or “to see things the way they really are”. Vipassana meditation is a universal, scientific and non-sectarian technique of mental training and ethical conduct. It is a systematic process of deep self-observation which leads to increased self-awareness, self-control and inner balance.

With the practice of Vipassana, the real underlying causes of all mental reactions, and therefore all human suffering, can be observed, understood and progressively eradicated. Mental reactions of anger, hatred, frustration, fear, lust and greed – also the major underlying causes of all criminal and immoral actions – are gradually replaced by peace, harmony and goodwill for oneself and for others.

Vipassana meditation helps one to dissolve the tensions and unravel the knots within and to lead a more positive, balanced and happy life.

Vipassana meditation is taught in a continuous, residential 10-day course, under the guidance of a qualified and experienced teacher. Ten days of sustained practice is the minimum time needed to learn the practice of Vipassana. During the course, participants must remain within the course site, or the segregated area of the prison, without any contact with the outside world. They must follow a very disciplined timetable of around 10 hours sitting meditation each day, from 4:30am to 9:00pm. Detailed audio instructions are provided throughout each day and a one-hour video discourse is provided each night, explaining the theory of the technique and the practice. Students or inmates must agree to abide by a set of strict rules, including no communication whatsoever with fellow students, no reading, writing, music or television. However they are able to talk with the teacher if they have any questions or problems. They must also agree to abstain from all intoxicants and sexual activity, as well as cigarettes, for the entire duration of the course.

The course begins with a number of moral vows, basically to avoid harming oneself or others. On the first night the students or inmates learn a technique of meditation that helps them to concentrate the mind with the help of the breath. This practice continues for the first three days of the course. On the fourth day they learn Vipassana itself: the observation of physical sensations throughout the body. Here they begin to see and understand that the mind is continually reacting blindly to physical sensations and that this blind reaction ultimately manifests as anger, hatred, fear, greed, depression, lust etc, which in turn can result in immoral and harmful actions. This process of deep observation results in a profound experiential understanding of the changing, impermanent nature of these pleasant and unpleasant sensations. This in turn enables the development of a balanced state of mind, free from reaction.

The benefits of Vipassana are immediate, observable and significant, but the Vipassana course is challenging and requires a serious and determined effort by both the inmate and the correctional facility. The experience of many courses within the correctional system worldwide has shown that Vipassana has measurable success in lowering recidivism rates and improving inmate behaviour.

Most of all, Vipassana meditation can help inmates to change their lives.

## **Vipassana in major prisons around the world**

The first Vipassana course in a prison took place at the Jaipur Central Jail, India, in 1975 for 120 inmates. However, it was nearly 20 years later that Vipassana established itself as a tool for social and prison reform.

In 1993 the first 10-day course was held at the massive Tihar Prison in Delhi, India (more than 10,000 inmates). The impact and change that this brought about in the inmates was a turning point. After a course, for 1,004 inmates in 1994, the Vipassana course was introduced as a regular program. Other prisons in India also began organising courses for inmates.

Subsequent courses were conducted for life-term convicts, senior police officers, and correction officials. These courses were the subject of sociological studies conducted by the Gujarat Department of Education and the University of Rajasthan. The research studies indicated definite positive changes of attitude and behavior in the inmates, and demonstrated that Vipassana enables criminals to become wholesome, productive members of society

As a result of further experience with this program, the Indian government has recommended implementing a program of Vipassana courses in all its prisons.

Today, Vipassana is not just confined to India. Its non-sectarian and universal application is being recognised in major correctional facilities around the world, especially North America, where Vipassana has had the same positive effects on the prison inmates.

Courses have now been held in prisons in India, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Israel, Spain, Thailand, Taiwan, Mexico, Argentina and Mongolia. Apart from empirical evidence and a host of personal accounts from inmates and prison staff, these courses have provided a valuable opportunity for ongoing study and research on the effects of Vipassana on inmates, as a powerful technique for rehabilitation and the reduction of recidivism. Many police officers and prison staff – both custodial and non-custodial – have also completed the Vipassana course.

**In 1996**, Taiwan authorities brought Vipassana meditation to a rehabilitation center for 182 drug addicted criminals.

**In November 1997** the first Vipassana course was held in the **United States** at the minimum-security North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF) of the King County jail system in Seattle. With a recidivism rate of around 75 to 80 per cent, NRF specialised in chronic alcohol and substance abuse offenders. A total of 20 courses were held at NRF over five years until this dilapidated and asbestos-ridden facility was demolished in 2003.

**In November 1998** the first 10-day course was held at the medium-security Lancaster Prison in **England** for eight men.

**In September 1999**, the first of 14 courses was held in **New Zealand** at Te Ihi Tu Trust, a prison rehabilitation centre in Taranaki that runs three 13-week rehabilitation programs each year.

**In February 2001**, the medium-security San Francisco County Jail No. 3 in San Bruno, California held its first 10-day Vipassana course.

**In January 2002** the first ten-day Vipassana course was held in a **maximum-security** state prison in the US for 20 inmates at the W.E. Donaldson Correctional Facility in Bessemer, Alabama. All 20 inmates completed the course. A second course for 18 inmates was held at Donaldson in May 2002.

In 2005 the first course in a federal prison was held at the Federal Medical Centre (FMC) in Devens, Massachusetts, for 18 inmates.

**In January 2006**, the Alabama Department of Corrections introduced the Vipassana courses as a **regular treatment program into the Donaldson Prison**, with two 10-day courses held there each year. A total of 76 inmates have completed the 10-day course so far (as at June 2008). The Alabama DoC are also considering introducing Vipassana into other major prisons in the state.

Due to the success of Vipassana, especially in Seattle and Alabama, various state prison and county jail facilities in several states throughout America have recently expressed interest in trialling or introducing Vipassana as a rehabilitation program.

### **Criminogenic needs: Why Vipassana is so effective**

While traditionally recognised criminogenic needs are closely associated or directly related to the great majority of offenders, they are only consequences of a deeper set of mental phenomena, rather than the underlying cause of crime. The ultimate underlying causes of all immoral and unlawful actions are the mental reactions of craving and aversion that begin deep within the subconscious mind. In order to bring about real, meaningful and lasting change in all offenders, including and especially high-risk and high-needs offenders, it is therefore necessary to work with these deep mental reactions at the point where they begin, and to find a way to reverse this process of blind reaction.

Vipassana focuses on physical sensations, the crucial link between mind and body and the point where all negative mental reactions, and all anti-social and immoral actions, begin. Through Vipassana, one realises that one's own attitudes, reactions, addictions and suffering or happiness, are not in fact caused by the outside world. It is the habitual blind reaction to pleasant or unpleasant sensations that the outside world invokes within the body that dictates one's actions and conditions the mind. Mental reactions of anger, hatred, sadness, fear, lust and greed are simply manifestations of these underlying subconscious reactions to physical sensations.

By practising Vipassana inmates develop insight into themselves. In a practical experiential way they begin to understand their own behaviour patterns, and to purify their own minds of underlying negativities at the deepest level. Vipassana equips inmates with the inner strength to face the vicissitudes of life in a calm and balanced manner and to gain mastery over their own mind.

Vipassana is a straightforward and completely scientific way for inmates to achieve peace of mind and to live a happy, useful life.

### **Offender risk/needs matching and responsivity**

The 10-day Vipassana course held within a prison must be offered to inmates on a completely voluntary basis. Vipassana is not suitable for all inmates. Nevertheless, as Vipassana works at the depth of the mind, where mental reactions begin that result in all immoral and unlawful actions, it is ideal for most types of offenders, including high-risk, high-needs offenders.

Vipassana works directly with the ultimate underlying cause of high-risk offences such as violence, sex and drug-related offences. It works directly with the ultimate underlying cause of drug and alcohol addiction. It works directly with the underlying cause of other repeat offences such as theft and robbery.

Many Vipassana courses held in more than 100 centres around the world and also in major prisons around the world have demonstrated that inmates or offenders in particular, because of their intense experience of suffering, are often the most determined and hard-working students in the Vipassana courses held. Inmates therefore often demonstrate the highest responsivity to the Vipassana course.

### **The cost of the 10-day course**

There is no charge or compensation of any kind for the Vipassana course. All 10-day courses for the general public are funded purely by donation, only from those who have completed a course, experienced the benefits and wish to give others the same opportunity. Similarly, there is no cost for Vipassana prison courses. The teacher, or the volunteers working on the course or assisting prison staff to organise a course, do not receive any remuneration whatsoever. Vipassana is therefore offered free from any commercial interest.

### **Course structure and facilities required**

The Vipassana course involves a very strict, disciplined and rigorous timetable of around 10 to 11 hours of meditation each day. (Please refer to the *Code of Conduct for Prison Courses* or *Guidelines for a Prison Course* for the detailed course timetable). Detailed audio instructions are given to inmates regularly throughout each day and a one-hour video discourse is used each night.

The course must be held in an area segregated from the general population of the correctional facility, so that there is no possible distraction for the inmates undertaking the course and to maximise the benefit of the course.

The course teacher and managers (prison staff and volunteers) must reside within the correctional facility for the full duration of the course. A simple vegetarian menu is provided to the inmates, consisting of breakfast at 6.30am; lunch at 11.00am; and two pieces of fruit with tea at 6.00pm. No other evening meal is served.

While the rule of 'noble silence' (complete silence with fellow inmates) is of *utmost* importance, the inmates are able to ask questions or discuss any problems with the teacher. Between 12 midday and 1pm, individual inmates are able to meet with the teacher for this purpose; therefore it is ideal if a separate office or area is available for this purpose.

## Major research studies

Several research studies have been conducted on the affect of Vipassana on inmates worldwide:

### UNITED STATES

1. Vipassana Recidivism Study on Inmates at the North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF). (Murphy 2002)

This study included data from the first eight Vipassana courses held at NRF, involving 75 inmates who completed the course. The study consisted of a two-year criminal history pre-program review and a **two-year recidivism post-program review**. It revealed that 56% (54% women and 57% men) of inmates completing just one Vipassana course recidivated, compared to a recidivism rate of 75% in NRF's General Population Study of 437 inmates. (Murphy 2002). This represents a 25% reduction in recidivism in the two years following just one Vipassana course.

David Murphy, former Program Manager at NRF, stated that "these results are truly extraordinary given such a brief, albeit intense, intervention. Moreover, the Vipassana Meditation Program changed the very fabric of the facility literally from within, for inmates and staff alike."

2. University of Washington/NRF Research Study

The results of the above NRF study on recidivism led to the US Government, via the National Institute of Health, awarding a grant to the University of Washington (UOW) to study the effects of the Vipassana meditation program at NRF on alcohol and drug relapse, psychosocial functioning and recidivism.

A team of researchers at UOW (Alan Marlatt, PhD., principal investigator) studied a total of 88 inmates in the first nine Vipassana courses at NRF. This included 29 inmates who completed the Vipassana course and 59 inmates who participated in Training as Usual (TAU), comprising traditional programs such as chemical dependency treatment, alcohol and drug addiction education, cognitive behavioural programs, acupuncture, housing case management and other general and vocational programs.

The study involved: i) a pre-course assessment, based on their drug/alcohol use in the 90 days prior to their current incarceration; ii) a post-course assessment; iii) a 3-month assessment; iv) a 6-month assessment. Results of the study at the 3-month stage showed that the Vipassana group experienced a significant reduction in marijuana, cocaine, alcohol and tobacco use, significantly fewer alcohol-related problems and higher levels of optimism. (For more details please see the related article appearing in *American Jails Magazine*, July/August 2003)

3. University of Alabama study on inmates at the W.E. Donaldson Prison, Alabama (preliminary findings only)

The University of Alabama is continuing a study of inmates completing the Vipassana courses at the Donaldson Prison. Of 60 inmates included in this preliminary study, 37 comprised the control group (aged 24 to 63) and 23 completed a Vipassana course in October 2007 (aged 22 to 54).

The psychological measures used for the study included:

- Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised (CAMS-R): self-report of awareness of mental, emotional, and sensory experiences;
- Novaco Anger Inventory-Short Form (NAI-25): Measures the degree of provocation or anger a person would feel if placed in a given situation;
- Profile of Mood States-Short Form (POMS): A measure of mood disturbances such as tension-anxiety, depression, anger-hostility, fatigue, vigor-activity, and confusion;
- Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS): A measure of emotional intelligence, which refers to an ability to recognize and manage one's emotions and the emotions of others.

Amongst the Vipassana group, 91% rated their value of the retreat experience as "quite a bit" or "very valued"; 86% reported being "quite a bit" or "very much" engaged and invested in the retreat; 95% stated that they learned "quite a bit" or "a lot" from the retreat, and; 82% reported that it was "very likely" they would continue to practice Vipassana meditation.

## **INDIA**

In 2002 Dr Amulya Khurana and Professor P.L. Dhar from the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi conducted research into inmates at Tihar Prison. Their study is titled: "The Effect of Vipassana Meditation on Quality of Life, Subjective Well-Being and Criminal Propensity among Inmates of Tihar Jail, Delhi".

The total sample comprised 262 inmates (male = 232, female = 30). A series of five studies were conducted using both before-and-after as well as control group experimental designs. The results of this study showed that Vipassana meditation resulted in: a significant reduction in hostility and anger; increased positive behaviour; increased cooperation with prison staff; a reduction in psychopathological symptoms, and; reduced recidivism.

Research from Tihar Prison in 1994 (n = 48, mostly murderers) shows a 92% improvement in somatic complaints; an 83% improvement in sleep disturbance; and a 90% improvement in behaviour patterns. More than 90% of these inmates reported mental peace and positive social attitude after undertaking a Vipassana course.

## **NEW ZEALAND**

The main focus of the Te Ihi Tu Trust rehabilitation centre is to reduce recidivism and improve hostile and aggressive behaviour amongst the disproportionate number of incarcerated Maori inmates. No more than ten inmates were allowed to attend the 13 week program at once, so the Vipassana courses were small – ranging from four to eight inmates along with program and prison staff who often participated in the course with the inmates. The Vipassana course was held at the commencement of client intake, before the inmates continued their normal rehabilitation program.

A total of 14 Vipassana courses were held at or for Te Ihi Tu between 1999 and 2004. While no official research was conducted, of the 46 inmates who completed the course between 1999 and 2001, 29 had reoffended within the first 12 months. This equates to a recidivism rate of 63%.

In reference to the inmates who completed the 10-day Vipassana course, it was stated that "We have found that our clients focus and awareness becomes more attuned and receptive to their own needs and are able to participate more honestly and successfully throughout the remainder of the programme and on returning to their families are able to implement into their personal lives the necessary changes needed to improve their quality of life."

## **Australian Program Standards & Clinical Governance**

The 10-day Vipassana meditation course is consistent with the Accreditation Criteria for Australian Offender Program Standards and Clinical Governance. The course is also consistent with:

- "Offender Program Documentation Requirements" (DCS Western Australia): June 2007;
- "Offender Program Accreditation Criteria" (NSW DCS): June 2005;
- Offender Program Accreditation contained within the "Offender Program Administration Manual" (QLD DCS): October 2006;

The Vipassana program is quite different to other traditional and especially cognitive-based therapy (CBT) programs currently offered to offenders within the Australian correctional system. However the program's intensity, seriousness, strict set of rules and requirements, disciplined, rigorous and challenging timetable, and the highly-professional manner in which the course is organized and conducted with very experienced and qualified volunteer teachers and course assistants, all underlie and demonstrate the program's high integrity.

Above all, the scientific, practical and results-oriented technique of Vipassana itself, along with the dramatic results already achieved in many courses held in major prisons around the world (including maximum security prisons and offenders involved in serious violence, sex and drug-related offences), demonstrate that Vipassana is a very effective offender rehabilitation program worthy of trial in the Australian prison system.

## **Procedures for a Vipassana course to take place**

For details on the procedures required for a Vipassana course to take place in a prison or correctional facility, please refer to “**Guidelines for Prison Courses**” and “**Q&A: Logistics of organising and conducting a 10-day Vipassana Meditation course for inmates**”.

## **Inherent risk and the inmate selection process**

Participating in a Vipassana meditation course includes a number of inherent discomforts. For example, while sitting for long hours for meditation, the physical body naturally becomes stiff and one experiences various pains in the knees, back and other parts of the body from the sitting posture. The practice of this meditation itself also causes various mental phenomenon to manifest which again produces mental and physical discomfort. Of course both the mental and physical discomfort eases as the course progresses and students practise and learn not to react to discomfort or agitation. This is an essential and extremely important element of the course.

The principal risk in a Vipassana meditation course is inherent in the fact that Vipassana meditation in this tradition takes the student or inmate deeply into his own mind. Individuals who have in the past experienced serious mental, emotional and/or psychological disturbances may find that these disturbances again rise to the surface during the course of the meditation, creating problems for them. For this reason, inmates applying for a prison course are carefully screened, in close collaboration with prison staff, with a series of detailed questions about their psychological history, drug and medication history, in order to minimise the risks and ensure that participants are likely to be able to complete the entire course without any significant disturbance.

Please refer to “Q&A: Logistics of organising and conducting a 10-day Vipassana Meditation course for inmates” for more details about the inmate application and screening process.

## **Summary and conclusion**

Vipassana meditation is now being acknowledged as a profound tool for offender rehabilitation. By placing the responsibility of reform on the inmates themselves and equipping them with the tool to effect inner change, Vipassana has been remarkably successful in providing an alternative to external methods of prison reform and rehabilitation. Although at this stage only a handful of prisons in the United States have introduced Vipassana, its success and positive results are paving a path for it to help more and more inmates in the future. Vipassana has the capacity to transform the lives of inmates and correctional facilities worldwide.

## **Contacts**

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**For information about Vipassana for prisons in the United States, please contact:**

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**Reference material**

For additional material on Vipassana prison courses, please visit:

[www.prison.dhamma.org/au](http://www.prison.dhamma.org/au) (Australia)

[www.prison.dhamma.org](http://www.prison.dhamma.org) (International)

For details on the regular 10-day courses in Vipassana meditation, visit:

[www.au.dhamma.org](http://www.au.dhamma.org) (Australia)

[www.dhamma.org](http://www.dhamma.org) (International)

**Vipassana Prison Documentaries**

There are three award-winning Vipassana prison documentaries available:

“**Doing Time, Doing Vipassana**” takes viewers into India’s largest prison – known as one of the toughest in the world – and shows the dramatic change brought about by the introduction of Vipassana meditation. It is the story of the prison inmates who underwent profound change, and who realized that incarceration is not the end but possibly the beginning of a new life. (53 min)

“**Changing from Inside**” about inmates at the North Rehabilitation Facility near Seattle who undertake the Vipassana course, delving into themselves to understand the nature of their behavior and their own suffering. (43 min)

“**The Dhamma Brothers**” An overcrowded maximum-security prison is forever changed by the influence of an ancient meditation program. Donaldson Correctional Facility in Alabama, which holds 1,500 of the state’s most dangerous criminals, was the first maximum security prison in North America to hold a 10-day Vipassana retreat. (76 min) [www.dhammabrothers.com](http://www.dhammabrothers.com)

A book titled “**Letters from the Dhamma Brothers**” is also available, including background information about the Vipassana course, the story of how it was introduced into the Donaldson Prison and a series of letters from the inmates at Donaldson after the first two Vipassana courses were held.

**These documentaries and books are available from:**

Dhamma Books [www.dhammabooks.com](http://www.dhammabooks.com) Telephone: (02) 4787-5493

Pariyatti Book Service: [www.pariyatti.com](http://www.pariyatti.com)