

The Vipassana Meditation Program for Inmates

Q&A: Logistics of organising and conducting a 10-day Vipassana Meditation course for inmates

When a correctional facility is first introduced to the 10-day Vipassana Meditation course as a potential rehabilitation program for inmates, several questions often arise regarding the elements of the course and the unique requirements and logistics involved in holding this course in a prison. Following are some of the common questions and answers.

What are the major requirements in conducting a Vipassana Meditation Course within a prison?

Please refer to the document “**Guidelines for Vipassana Courses Held Within Correctional Facilities**”. However, in summary the major requirements are as follows:

1. **Key personnel to complete a course:** At least one person in a management or senior management role must complete a 10-day course. Ideally one person from either programs/treatments, psychology, counselling or mental health; and at least one Custodial Officer or Disciplinary Officer should also complete the course.

One of these people will need to be appointed as project manager, responsible for making course arrangements and liaising between senior management, course personnel and facility personnel. This liaison should be seen as credible and trustworthy by management as well as inmates and line staff. Ideally this person will also act as a full-time manager during the course.

2. **Facilities required:** The course will require an area segregated at all times from other inmates which will house students and volunteer personnel 24 hours a day, throughout the entire duration of the course. This area should include a space suitable for meditation, sleeping quarters for inmates, separate sleeping quarters for the servers and the course instructor, at least one interview room (for midday and other personal interviews) a dining room, and an exercise area.
3. **Meals:** Vegetarian meals are to be provided to the inmates during the course. This involves breakfast at 6.30am, lunch at 11am and only two pieces of fruit and tea at 5pm. Experienced volunteer workers are available to assist in cooking and preparing the inmate’s meals if necessary.

Why is it important that key personnel complete a course, prior to it being held within a prison?

There are two major reasons. Firstly, there are questions or concerns that naturally arise about the content and nature of the Vipassana course, because it is so unique. There also may be some scepticism or doubts regarding the effectiveness of the course for inmates. The best way for senior staff to fully understand the course in detail, to remove all doubts and scepticism and to be totally confident that this course will be of benefit to the inmates, staff and the facility as a whole, is for at least one senior staff member to complete the course.

Secondly, for the Vipassana course to be effective and for the inmates to gain the maximum benefit from the 10-day program, it is absolutely essential that the rules, requirements and conditions of the course not only be met, but also be respected. Staff who have participated in the course will therefore

not only appreciate but also protect the rules and ensure that the conditions are as ideal as possible so that the inmates participating in the course have no significant interference or disruptions from the rest of the prison and therefore are more likely to attain the maximum benefit from the course and demonstrate the changes expected.

What are the major rules and requirements for the inmates participating in the course?

Please refer to the “**Code of Discipline for Prison Courses**” for detailed requirements. However in summary, these are:

1. To observe a basic moral code involving five precepts.
2. To remain in the course until it ends on the morning of Day 11 of the course.
3. To observe strict “Noble Silence”. This means absolutely no communication whatsoever with other inmates for the first nine days of the course. They are however, able to talk to the course instructor about the technique, individual problems or for clarification if necessary. They are also able to talk to one of the course managers if they need anything on a material level. On the morning of Day 10, Noble Silence ends and inmates are able to share their experiences with each other.
4. To abstain from all contact with the outside world: this means no visits, letters or telephone calls are permitted for the full duration of the course;
5. To abstain from sexual activity and all sense pleasures such as reading, writing, radio, television, music, etc.

Why is “Noble Silence” so important on all Vipassana courses?

An important element of the Vipassana course is to calm and concentrate the mind prior to learning Vipassana, which involves examining the link between mind and body and understanding and reducing the process of blind reaction that occurs in the subconscious mind. This process of calming and concentrating the mind cannot take place if the mind is agitated and talking will inevitably agitate the mind. For this reason, all communication with fellow students/inmates is suspended.

What is the daily schedule for inmates?

Please also refer to the “**Code of Discipline for Prison Courses**” for the full daily schedule. In summary, this consists of around 11 hours of sitting meditation each day. Every day begins with a wake up bell at 4am, the meditation commences at 4.30am and the schedule consists of one-hour meditation periods, interspersed with regular breaks, meal periods and rest time throughout the day. Each evening at 7pm the inmates watch and listen to a one-hour recorded discourse by the principal teacher, who explains in detail the theory of the technique. This discourse provides the inmates or students with enormous support and motivation and helps them to intellectually understand the process. However, as the teacher explains, it is their own experience in the meditation each day that provides the real insight and of course the process for real change. A copy of the “Discourse Summaries” is available if required. Each day ends at 9pm, with lockdown taking place between 9.00 and 9.30pm.

A separate Operations Plan would also show a detailed timetable with all sessions and all movements during the course for security purposes.

What is the basic structure of the course?

On the first evening of the course, students or inmates are taught the technique of *Anapana* meditation. This involves focussing the entire attention on the breath, in order to calm and concentrate the mind. Participants quickly begin to realise how little control of their mind they actually have and how challenging this process really is. By the third day, however, most students begin to experience the effects of a more concentrated mind.

On the fourth day, Vipassana is taught. This involves observing physical bodily sensations and the link between mind and body. Through this process of observation, without reaction, old blind reactions are removed and the mind is retrained not to react. Self awareness, equanimity or a balanced mind, insight and compassion are the major results of this process.

On the tenth day the students learn *metta*, which involves sharing what they have gained with kindness and compassion for all. This final stage is all the more effective after spending nine days of removing or at least reducing blind reactions of anger, hatred, greed and fear from the mind. After *metta* is taught, Noble Silence is lifted and the students, with a great sense of achievement, share their experiences of the significant journey they have just undertaken.

The course ends on the morning of Day 11. For prison courses, inmates normally attend a “Graduation Ceremony” on Day 11 so that they can be acknowledged for their efforts and share their experiences with interested staff and management.

How are inmates informed about the Vipassana course?

The process of informing inmates about the course normally occurs via the screening of at least one of the Vipassana prison documentaries. It is ideal if those inmates seriously interested in the Vipassana course have the opportunity to watch all three documentaries as these films provide an excellent exposition of the nature and details of the course.

How do inmates apply for the course and what is involved in the screening process?

After showing the documentaries, a talk is normally given to interested inmates about the details of the course. Inmates who are then seriously interested in participating in the course are asked to read the Code of Discipline and then complete an application form. In addition to basic personal details, this application form asks the inmate to provide details of:

- i) Physical health problems, medical conditions or diseases, including dates, symptoms, duration, treatment, present condition;
- ii) Mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, panic attacks, manic depression, schizophrenia, etc;
- iii) Any alcohol or drug use, including marijuana, amphetamines, barbiturates, cocaine, heroine, or any other intoxicants;
- iv) Any current or previous prescribed medication, including dates, types, dosage and current use.

These application forms are then reviewed by the selection committee, along with other relevant information provided by prison staff, relating to each inmate’s available history while incarcerated.

For Vipassana courses held for the general public, a similar application process occurs. Within a correctional facility however, a detailed history of each inmate is normally available, including the nature, personality and behaviour of the inmate, along with details of drug and alcohol use and the use

of any prescribed medication. This means that the screening process within a prison is more detailed and therefore more reliable.

Please refer to the “Application Form for Prison Courses”.

Who should be on the selection committee for Vipassana course participants?

At the very least: 1) a staff psychologist, 2) the staff member coordinating and overseeing the program; and 3) the Vipassana instructor who will be conducting the program. A manager (non-staff member and Vipassana volunteer who is experienced in managing Vipassana courses) may also be involved. According to the individual facility or prison, other staff members such as a councillor, mental health nurse or other custodial or support staff may be involved as required, depending on the size of the course.

What is the detailed screening process?

Following is an indication of the details of the screening process; however this may vary slightly according to each individual prison:

1. Inmates who have watched at least two of the Vipassana documentaries, who have expressed serious interest in participating in the Vipassana course, have read the Code of Discipline for Prison Courses and who understand the strict rules and requirements of the course, are asked to complete a Prison Course Application Form.
2. One copy of each of these forms is sent to the Prison Psychologist, one copy is sent to the Vipassana instructor or teacher conducting the course and one copy is given to the Custodial Officer responsible for the course and who will also be managing the course. If necessary, a copy is also given to the Operations Manager.
3. The Prison Psychologist, Custodial Officer and Operations Manager may then wish to make an initial examination of the forms to remove any applications that they consider are not suitable for the course. A short-list of inmates is chosen.
4. A Vipassana volunteer may visit the prison and interview each inmate on this short list on a one-on-one basis to ensure they fully understand: i) the challenging and serious nature of the course; ii) the rules and requirements of the course; iii) especially the rule of Noble Silence; and iv) provide any feedback to the conducting Teacher about their personality, attitude or characteristics that might be relevant.
5. The Prison Psychologist, Custodial Officer and the conducting Vipassana teacher would then discuss and evaluate each individual inmate and application form from this list. While each inmate’s crime and sentence is not relevant, their behaviour, personality, mental attitude, progress of previous rehabilitation and any medication history are all relevant to the teacher.
6. The inmates are chosen for the course.
7. Participating inmates are notified far enough in advance so that the prison can make the necessary plans for the course.

What type of inmate is best suited to this course?

Those inmates who fully understand the disciplined, structured and challenging nature of the course, the rules and requirements of the program and who are fully motivated to work according to these rules and requirements and to complete the course, without causing disruption to any other student/inmate.

What type of inmate would not be suited to this course?

Anyone with significant presenting emotional difficulties, on psychotropic medication, significant physical limitations, lowered IQ (FS<70 on the WAIS-III or approximating the mentally retarded range), impulse disordered, or those with psychotic or sociopathic tendencies would not be suited. All applicants should therefore be screened by a prison psychologist.

If an inmate is experiencing problems during the course, who would assist him?

It is normal for students or inmates to experience problems of some kind during the course. For this reason, regular daily contact is made between the course instructor and the inmates throughout the course. This contact occurs when inmates sit with the instructor who will start by asking them straightforward questions to ascertain what they are experiencing and make sure that they have understood the simple instructions of meditation that have been given according to the particular stage of the course. This normally takes a few minutes and is followed by a short period of meditation with the instructor. This one-on-one attention throughout the course is very effective.

At other times inmates are encouraged to approach the instructor for more personal guidance, support or clarification if necessary. This can occur when an individual inmate simply approaches the instructor at the front of the room. If any inmate requires more time, the instructor is available for individual interviews between 12 midday and 1pm. During these personal interviews, the inmates are asked to limit their conversation to their own experiences and problems that they may be having in their meditation.

If the instructor senses that a particular inmate may need some additional guidance, support or clarification, he will ask the inmate via the managers to see him at midday. This is a common occurrence on all courses.

If an inmate continues to have problems (not obeying the rules, not maintaining Noble Silence, interfering with other inmates, personal conflicts, etc) the instructor may need to terminate the inmate from the program. Trying to work with an unwilling inmate may only cause further disruption, annoy other inmates and interfere with their progress in the program. There is generally no problem in removing a troublesome inmate from the course and doing so clearly demonstrates to other inmates that the course is very serious and that the rules must be adhered to. Removing inmates from the course however is a rare occurrence as most inmates who participate in the Vipassana course clearly understand the challenging and serious nature of the course and the need to comply with these rules. Those inmates completing the course often express their gratitude for removing a problematic inmate.

Vipassana course instructors and volunteers have many years of experience supporting students as they go through 'storms' during a 10-day course and thousands of incarcerated individuals have attended and completed the Vipassana course around the world without incident. In the event that any inmates become overwhelmed, Vipassana staff can support them accordingly or dismiss them from the course if necessary. It is also important for prison staff and management to understand that the meditation environment is a safe and conducive place for these very issues to surface and become resolved, probably for the first time in an inmate's life. The outcome will be more manageable inmates for the correctional officers; inmates who have more motivation for their own personal change, more motivation in other programs and a greater desire to help make the prison a better place.

Should an inmate drop out of the course and then have difficulties coping with his thoughts or emotions, what assistance can be provided and who would be best suited to assist him?

In these cases the inmate should be referred to the staff psychologist. Also, the staff member overseeing or coordinating the program could be available to further explain to the inmate how Vipassana works. Experiencing unpleasant thoughts is all part of the process.

Is there specific counselling during and after the Vipassana course?

A group orientation normally occurs before the program begins to clearly explain the rules and requirement in detail, along with expectations, the daily schedule, and a basic overview of how Vipassana works is very beneficial. This gives participating inmates a good opportunity to express their fears, concerns and to ask any questions that they may have.

After the course, a “Graduation Ceremony” is normally held, where the inmates are able to tell the group about their experiences. Examples of these graduation ceremonies can be seen in the documentaries “Changing from Inside” and “The Dhamma Brothers”.

Otherwise, there is no traditional “counselling” as such provided during the course itself, rather the instructor has regular contact with each inmate and helps them to focus on and return to the technique itself. This focus on the technique will help the inmates themselves to work through their difficulties and to gain a much deeper insight into their own behaviour and their own negative mental reactions.

Are inmates taking prescribed medication such as antidepressants able to participate in the Vipassana course?

There are cases where students taking prescribed medication such as antidepressants are able to participate in regular 10-day courses; however the participation of inmates taking such medication will depend on the selection committee.

Would the arrival of the Medic Trolley, for inmates on medication hinder the course?

The Medic Trolley should be scheduled at the entrance of the segregated meditation area at times in between hourly sittings or meal breaks and this should be handled discreetly so as not to disturb the inmates participating in the course. An Officer who is managing the course would normally inform individual inmates to approach the Medic Trolley, one at a time, and he would supervise this process to verify ingestion of the respective medications by each inmate. It is important that medical staff involved in administering medication understand the rule and importance of Noble Silence. This process should occur with minimal disruption.

What are the benefits to the inmates who successfully complete a Vipassana course?

There are no extrinsic incentives offered for completing the Vipassana program, other than that the inmates may receive a certificate of completion to be filed in his record, similar to any other certificate for completing a mental health workshop. The benefits are intrinsic in nature, firstly fostering a sense of accomplishment for completing a rigorous course, but most of all for learning a skill, process or technique that directly helps them better handle their emotional expression, control their own mind and behaviour, take more responsibility and feel more balanced and harmonious. The immediate benefit is that the inmate learns to better conduct himself and foster institutional adjustment that will continue if the technique and the practice is maintained.

What are the benefits to the families and friends of inmates who successfully complete a Vipassana course?

Hopefully, an inmate completing the course will be less driven to meet his narcissistic needs at the expense of family and friends. At the very least, it is most likely that the inmate would be more pleasant during visits and telephone calls and have a better tone in correspondence (letters). It is not uncommon for family members to naturally want to do a Vipassana course when they witness the changes made by the inmates.

What are the benefits to the staff who complete a Vipassana course?

For prison staff who complete a Vipassana course, the benefits are the same as those in the outside world. The individual becomes more mindful, is better able to recognise their inner conflicts, takes more responsibility, and learns to observe, rather than being reactive. Also, for those staff who smoke or drink alcohol, going ten days without drinking or smoking, and maintaining the course discipline has its own rewards.

These benefits should manifest in the staff member's work, helping them to be more balanced and less reactive to the inmates and to the typically challenging and stressful environment of a correctional facility.

What are the benefits to the inmates, staff and facility when an inmate successfully completes a Vipassana course?

An inmate who continues to practice Vipassana will decrease his involvement in antisocial activities. Inmates completing the course strive to make the facility a better place in which to live. In turn, the facility becomes a safer place to work for staff. This is clearly evident in prisons and correctional facilities where Vipassana has been implemented as a regular program.

What are the benefits to the community when an inmate successfully completes a Vipassana course?

When an inmate becomes more mindful, less reactive, better able to conduct himself, and endeavours to live responsibly, he not only improves in his functioning, but society directly benefits through reduced recidivism rates.

What are the benefits of an inmate successfully participating in a Vipassana course, prior to commencing a more conventional correctional/rehabilitation programs? (e.g. Managing Addiction Relapse Program, Think First Cognitive Skills Program, Sexual Offending Program, etc).

Inmates are likely to have a better understanding that perseverance leads to completion, which in turn, leads to accomplishment. Inmates are also likely to take other traditional programs and content more seriously and glean useful information to incorporate into practice after completing the Vipassana program. (e.g please refer to the Vipassana courses held at Te Ihi Tu for Maori inmates)

When an inmate has successfully completed a Vipassana course and is attending other traditional rehabilitation programs, what are the potential benefits to Facilitators and other inmates?

The inmates having completed a Vipassana course generally have a more serious attitude, are more attentive, more willing to engage, ask more relevant questions, and set the tone to be more open to learning and participating in other programs. In essence, the inmate becomes a role model to others in the class.

Facilitators are often appreciated more by the inmates for conducting rehabilitation programs in these difficult settings.

What materials and costs are involved in holding a Vipassana course?

There is no charge whatsoever for any Vipassana course, either for the general public or for a course held within a correctional facility. All regular courses held for the general public are funded purely by donation. All course teachers/instructors, course management and those working or serving on a course, or helping to organise a course, do so completely voluntarily.

There may however, be several costs associated with a prison course. These costs might include:

- i) Materials such as mats and cushions for the inmates to sit on. As an approximate guide, mats and cushions may cost around \$40/\$50 per inmate, however this is a one-off cost as these can be used for any future courses. Shawls may also be needed, depending on the time of year, at an approximate cost of \$10 per inmate.
- ii) Audio/visual equipment for the daily instructions. The audio instructions that are used throughout each day are normally played on mini-disk format. It would therefore be ideal if the prison is willing to purchase a new mini-disk player for this purpose. Currently these are available for around \$450. If this is too onerous a cost, the instructions are still available on audio cassette; however this is obviously not an ideal format. A mini-disk player and any other audio equipment (although speakers and amplifier are normally available within a prison) would also be a one-off cost and could be used again in the future.

The evening discourse is played on DVD format, therefore a television and DVD player can normally be sourced from within the prison for the duration of the course, without the need to buy new equipment.

- iii) The potential cost of transporting a teacher/instructor to the city where the course is being held, if an instructor is not available in that city already;
- iv) The cost of sending relevant staff to complete a Vipassana course to satisfy the “key personnel” requirements;
- v) Overtime for Custodial Officers who may have to be on post for normal security reasons during a prison course or other staff involved directly in the course;
- vi) Other incidental costs.

How is a student or inmate expected to sit during the course?

It is ideal if students on regular courses and also inmates on prison courses sit on a soft mat and cushion(s) on the floor, either in a cross-legged, sitting or kneeling position. This is normally

challenging at first for most people, even those who have previously learnt to sit in this manner or who consider themselves supple due to exercise or other regular practices such as yoga or stretching. Nevertheless, this way of sitting is ideal to learn this technique of meditation and after a few days most students are capable of sitting this way. Gradually the discomforts abate and the mind is able to be more focussed on the meditation.

Some students however, due to past injuries or other difficulties, may need additional support in the form of meditation stools, back rests or low chairs when necessary.

How many prison staff and Vipassana volunteers are needed for each course?

The number of prison staff and Vipassana volunteers needed will depend on the size of a course. As a guide, a course of between 10 and 20 inmates would normally require one instructor and at least two full time managers – one of these should be a prison officer or staff member who has completed at least one 10-day course and one a Vipassana volunteer. It would be ideal if both of these people have had experience in managing a regular Vipassana course, however at least the Vipassana volunteer should have this experience.

What are the duties and activities of the course teacher/instructor and the two managers?

The course teacher or instructor conducts, oversees and is responsible for the entire course. The instructor ensures that the students understand the teaching and provides support, guidance and clarification as far as the technique is concerned. The instructor sits at the front of the meditation hall and plays the recorded instructions throughout the day and the discourse in the evening; interviews the inmates each day; and is available for questions throughout the day and especially between 12 midday and 1pm. The instructor is present meditating with the inmates throughout most of each day according to the daily schedule.

The two managers are there to assist the instructor, to ensure that the inmates are present for all meditation sessions and to assist the inmates with any material needs. The two managers also meditate at all times with the inmates, according to the daily schedule.

What happens after a course? Are inmates expected to continue meditating?

Inmates are not expected, but are encouraged to continue meditating after their first 10-day course. This, however, is totally up to them. While benefits and changes should be evident in individuals after just one course, it is the regular practice in daily life that will result in deeper and more profound personal changes. In the case of major prisons worldwide where Vipassana courses have been held, many inmates experience such deep insights into their own behaviour during the course and see the benefits of the meditation and regular practice that they naturally want to keep sitting or meditating on a daily or regular basis. Having learnt the technique in an intensive course, inmates are able to do this independently, in their own time and in their own cell.

Depending on the correctional facility and security requirements, it is also ideal if inmates are able to meet for supervised one-hour “group sittings” each week. These group sittings will help them to become more established in the technique and to make further progress in their own personal development and rehabilitation. These group meditations could be organised and managed by the officer who manages and participates in the course. If permitted by the prison, approved old students from outside the prison may also be available to facilitate a weekly group sitting with inmates or just meditate with them as encouragement.

If courses are repeated within a prison, inmates having previously completed a course are able and encouraged to sit another course in order to become more established in the technique and attain a

deeper level of self-awareness, equanimity and insight and therefore effect more personal change. As 'old students', these inmates provide silent yet valuable support to the 'new students'.

Is there any form of post-course evaluation conducted?

A written qualitative-based questionnaire is available for inmates to complete after their course if they wish. This asks basic questions about the value of their experience and how they believe the course will impact on their life both inside and outside prison. A follow-up questionnaire, several weeks or months later, could also be developed.

Could a research program on post-course inmates be organized in the future if required?

In the event that Vipassana courses are continued on a regular basis within a prison, if the particular prison and DCS are interested, it should be possible to organize a detailed research program, conducted by one of the major Australian universities in accordance with international research standards and methodology. This study would be similar to the research program conducted by the University of Washington on inmates at the North Rehabilitation Facility in Seattle and also the research program currently being conducted by the University of Alabama on inmates at the W.E. Donaldson Prison in Alabama.

In conducting a Vipassana program for inmates, some basic areas to address also include:

1. Administration needs to be supportive of the program; that is, allowing the Vipassana instructor and managers to stay in the program area for the duration of the course, ideally granting Administrative Leave (in work status) for selective staff to take a Vipassana course, and providing a dedicated area for the program.
2. Officer(s) assigned to the program need to be on permanent post for the duration of the course.
3. Pill call needs to take place in the course area, rather than inmates going to the infirmary.
4. Inmates need to inform family and friends that there will be no visitation during the course.
5. The mailroom needs to hold all mail for those while in the program.
6. Inmates are not allowed to submit or receive store draws.
7. Routine Doctor and Chronic Care Clinic appointments need to be rescheduled.
8. Meals should be prepared in the facility's kitchen to minimise disruptions from the outside.
9. Inmate helpers should be cleared to assist with meals and other errands.
10. Inmates whose physical and/or mental health needs pose limitations should not participate in the course.
11. Inmate(s) should bring personal property with them for safe keeping.
12. Inmate bed assignments must remain the same during the course to minimise disruption.
13. Clothes should be cleaned before the program as use of laundry is not allowed.