



Vipassana participants at a course held at the North Rehabilitation Facility of the King County Jail, in Seattle, Washington. Photo courtesy of Rick Crutcher.

A ten-day course was also held in February 2001 in a medium-security San Francisco county jail in San Bruno, California, and a second course is being planned there this year. In an Alabama maximum-security state prison, a course was successfully launched and completed last January for 20 inmates, and another one is in the works next month. Correctional facilities in Vermont, Texas, New Mexico and Massachusetts have showed interest in making Vipassana part of their treatment programs.

Vipassana means "to see things as they really are." According to literature, its origin is Buddhist, but it is also a nonsectarian technique that may be practiced by anyone despite race, culture, religion, nationality and sexual orientation.

Practitioners say it is a way of transforming oneself based on "the objective observation of one's mind and body at the level of physical sensations." Ten days are spent penetrating the deepest levels of the unconscious mind and confronting compulsions and cravings that traditional therapies have failed to control. There is a caveat for those who have serious mental disorders that could only be addressed by medical professionals. "Our capacity as a nonprofessional volunteer organization makes it impossible to properly care for these people," according to information on the web site www.dhamma.org.

Implementing the course, however, takes the cooperation of both correctional facility personnel and inmates. The correctional facility must agree to a special space for the course apart from non-participants, which includes a quiet room. There should also be separate dormitories with bath and toilet facilities for both participants and teachers; dining facilities offering vegetarian meals; a walking area; and separate courses for male and female inmates. It is recommended that correctional officials who have previously gone through the course be assigned to the Vipassana staff. Correctional facilities must also agree to provide space for students to continue meditating after the course is over.

Senior correctional staff members are required to experience the program for themselves at a Vipassana meditation center. After completing the ten-day course, they are then ready to introduce it to inmates who are also pre-screened. In informal classes, potential participants have access to Vipassana staff and literature and are asked to fill out a course application and student data form. They are told that their participation will not reduce their sentences or increase any privileges.

They must also agree to stay for the entire period and adhere to various rules, which include no contact with the outside world; abstaining from vices, rites, rituals and other forms of meditation and exercise, with the exception of walking; and observing "noble silence" for nine consecutive days. Any kind of communication with other students is strictly prohibited. Speaking with teachers and correctional officials must also be kept to a minimum.

"As managers of correctional facility with a commitment both to public safety and health, we were attracted to the ethical and moral dimensions of the practice, the pragmatic and practical quality of the technique and its focus on personal responsibility and self-reliance," says administrator Meijer.

According to Crutcher, inmates actually found the silence welcoming and got used to the endless sitting on the third day. They even embraced the vegetarian diet. "Invariably, what they found uncomfortable were the mental cravings, the unpleasantness of the violence that they had inflicted on others, the waves of emotions and fears that came to the surface," he says.

Results from the program are apparently promising. Studies in 1995 at the All India Institute in Bombay found the Vipassana meditation has helped inmates control feelings of anger, tension, hostility, revenge and helplessness. Findings also show that drug addiction decreased among Vipassana participants, and inmates who were in the program were more willing to work, participate in other treatment programs, follow prison rules and cooperate with prison officials.

NRF has reported a 53 percent drop in the recidivism rate among inmates who completed a Vipassana course. Furthermore, 57 percent of women Vipassana students have not returned to the King County jail system. As a result of the NRF findings, the University of Washington is now conducting a federally-funded study on the program's effectiveness on addictive behaviors.

From all indications, Vipassana meditation appears to be a viable method of treatment that U.S. correctional facilities would be wise to pursue. Crutcher believes the only hurdle is authorities' compliance to the course's prerequisites. "But I believe once we get the results," he says, "they will be positive. There is a tremendous demand for this."