

VIPASSANA MEDITATION AT THE NORTH REHABILITATION FACILITY

King County Jail, Seattle

by: Lucia Meijer, NRF Administrator

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The first Vipassana course in a North American correctional facility was conducted at the North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF) in Seattle, Washington from October 28 to November 8, 1997. Since that time, five additional ten-day courses have been conducted in the facility, the most recent from June 1-12, 1999. A total of fifty-five inmates have completed the entire ten days.

The North Rehabilitation Facility is a minimum security jail with an inmate population of just under 300 adult men and women. NRF is classified as a "special detention facility" and is administered and staffed entirely by the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health in close collaboration with the Department of Adult Detention. Since its inception in 1981, the facility has addressed the high incidence of substance abuse and other correlates of criminal behavior through a daily regimen of treatment, education and work programs. Inmates placed at this facility include misdemeanants and felons many of whom are frequent recidivists with histories of alcoholism and drug addiction, mental illness and/or learning disabilities. The facility excludes those with current violent felony charges, sex offenses, and high risk escape profiles.

Vipassana meditation is a mental discipline and ethical practice taught over 2,000 years ago by the historical Buddha. Although Vipassana contains the core of what later has been called Buddhism, it is not an organized religion, requires no conversion and is practiced by people of many different faiths and nationalities. The word 'Vipassana' means insight, to see things as they really are. It is proposed that this discipline provides a natural and rational way for people to live in peace with themselves and others.

Vipassana courses are typically held at centers where students, teachers and volunteer staff live for a period of ten days and eleven nights. The daily schedule begins at 4:30 a.m. and ends at 9:30 p.m. During that time, students receive instruction and sit in silent meditation for approximately eleven hours per day with ten-minute breaks about every hour or so, and longer breaks for breakfast and lunch. Dinner for first time students consists of tea and fruit. Second or third time returning students do not eat any solid food after the 11:00 a.m. meal.

The course includes a code of moral conduct that requires students to agree that during the course they will not kill, steal, lie, engage in sexual misconduct or use intoxicants. All institutional rules and regulations continue to apply during Vipassana courses. The Vipassana disciplinary code is designed to assure that students are able to work properly and includes the following:

- ◆ No talking or other forms of communication except with the teacher regarding the practice of Vipassana, or with the volunteer staff regarding accommodations.
- ◆ No smoking, reading, writing, telephone, television, radio, music or other entertainments or distractions;
- ◆ No food except what is supplied. This includes two vegetarian meals, breakfast and lunch with a 5:00 p.m. snack of fruit and tea for first time students.

During the first three days, students are taught how to concentrate on their breathing so that eventually, the mind becomes calm and focused. On the fourth day, they are taught Vipassana which trains the mind to

systematically observe, without reacting, the ever changing physical and mental phenomenon of the mind and body. In doing so, students learn to experience both pleasant and unpleasant sensations, thoughts and feelings without clinging or craving, without fear or aversion.

The idea of conducting a Vipassana meditation course for NRF inmates was introduced by Ben Turner, a jail health nurse practitioner who practices and teaches Vipassana. The administrator of the facility, Lucia Meijer, and a cross-section of NRF personnel were shown a documentary about prison courses in India called "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana". Over the course of several meetings between NRF staff, Ben Turner and Vipassana instructor, Rick Crutcher, it was agreed that an effort would be made to hold a Vipassana course for inmates at NRF.

The general inmate population was shown the "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" documentary and given an opportunity to meet with Vipassana instructors. The course code of discipline and moral conduct was explained. Further, it was made clear that there would be no rewards or incentives for those inmates who chose to take the course and no punishments or disincentives for those who chose not to. No one at NRF believed that a single inmate would volunteer. When sixteen men did, no one believed that a single one would finish the course. When eleven men did, the next inmate course was scheduled.

So far, there have been six Vipassana courses at NRF. Over a period of about eighteen months, fifty men and twenty one women inmates have begun a Vipassana course at NRF including four who took two courses. (Men and women are strictly segregated at NRF and same gender teachers and servers are mandatory.) Of the seventy one inmates who started a course, sixteen (22.5%) dropped out before the completion of the course. Of the fifty-five who completed their courses, all but six have been released as of July 1999. Only five of those released have returned to NRF on new charges or violations (10%). Another was reclassified back to NRF from Work Release. This could be significant considering the fact that at any given time at least half of the inmates classified to NRF are NRF recidivists. Most significant to NRF personnel has been the impact of Vipassana courses on inmate behavior. Staff have found that, in general, those individuals who complete a course are more cooperative, get along better with other inmates and are more likely to participate successfully in other program activities.

A careful study of results over time will tell whether or not Vipassana has an impact on recidivism or other measures of post-release success. It is noteworthy that of the five residents who returned to NRF on new charges or violations, three were women. Another female was transferred back to NRF from work release. At this time, it is not known how many other individuals who completed Vipassana at NRF may have been rearrested without being reincarcerated, or how many may have been reincarcerated in other detention facilities. These and other data are yet to be collected and examined.

Staff at all levels have been involved in the decisions that shaped this project including security personnel, maintenance, program staff and cooks. It was also necessary to work with classification and court personnel to confirm that no inmate taking the course would be released, reclassified, or called out on court business until the course was over. Program personnel assisted inmate participants to contact family members, attorneys and others to let them know that they would be unable to communicate except for emergencies, for a period of ten days and eleven nights. Background checks were completed on all volunteer staff and they were given an intensive orientation to security protocols.

Finding a suitable area for the course within the facility was problematic. The course needed to be completely isolated from the rest of the facility with its own dining room, bathrooms, showers and sleeping quarters. The North Rehabilitation Facility is housed in deteriorated pre World War II Navy hospital barracks. It was decided that courses could be held in the half of a wing in use as office space and classrooms for the treatment program. Treatment staff graciously agreed to vacate their offices and space was made for them in other areas of the facility. With some refitting, the area was made operational as a residence: a wall with a door was built to separate the wing into two halves; old showers were reactivated and hot water heaters installed; an unused hallway was converted into a dining hall with access to an enclosed outdoor yard; a large classroom was converted into a meditation hall simply by removing the chairs and putting fabric over the windows; offices were converted into sleeping quarters for Vipassana volunteers; and two classrooms became dormitories for inmate-students.

Using inmate labor and surplus and donated materials, the start-up cost for this project was less than \$1,500. This was paid for out of the inmate benefit fund which is supported through NRF jail industries.

With help from a volunteer, the head cook undertook the vegetarian menu with great success. The overall food costs for Vipassana courses at NRF are below the average, and special materials needed for the course (e.g. signage, cushions, window coverings, etc.) were all donated. The only ongoing cost for courses is the shift backfill for the NRF security employee working in the course.

The relative isolation of the Vipassana course from the rest of the facility made it necessary to have a security presence in the course on a 24 hour basis. Fortunately, two NRF security staff who have themselves taken Vipassana courses, volunteered to alternate this assignment (one male and one female). Staff assignment to an inmate Vipassana course is voluntary and does not entail extra pay. This type of volunteerism is consistent with Vipassana philosophy and all Vipassana instructors and servers give their time without any compensation. NRF personnel working in the course are equipped with standard radios and perform routine headcounts during the day. On duty security staff come into the wing to do headcounts between 10:00 p.m. and 4:00 a.m.

Inmates who have taken Vipassana courses represent a cross-section of the general jail population at NRF with criminal charges ranging from driving offenses to felony property and drug crimes, and including individuals with histories of assault and domestic violence. Many of those taking courses are longtime recidivists, including one severely alcoholic male who had been incarcerated at NRF on about thirty different occasions. Like any jail, severe alcohol and other drug problems are common as are a variety of economic, social and educational deficits. Inmates with mental health problems including depression, bipolar depression and attention disorders have taken Vipassana courses successfully at NRF. Inmates with prior disciplinary infractions and with no prior interest in NRF programs and services have also successfully completed courses. Inmates from all ethnic and age groups have been well represented. One female who spoke no English was provided with taped instructions in Spanish and a volunteer interpreter.

After completing a course, students are encouraged to meditate daily, and efforts are made to house inmates who have taken Vipassana courses in the same dorms and if possible, in the same rooms. A Vipassana instructor comes weekly to provide additional support. Based on staff availability to serve these courses, a new course is offered about every three to four months.

After cost and security considerations, NRF's primary concerns were focused the credibility of the practice itself. Six characteristics of Vipassana were most persuasive:

1. **It is a discipline, not an escape.** The purpose of Vipassana is to make life better, not easier. It has been characterized as a "mental detox"—a process that can be acutely uncomfortable, but that leaves the individual in a more wholesome state.
2. **It is an ethical practice.** A simple, moral code of conduct is integral to the practice of Vipassana. This is a necessary component for any investment in offender rehabilitation.
3. **It is pragmatic.** The practice focuses on the direct experience of cause and effect. There are no requirements for blind faith, rituals or subservience to any teaching or teacher. Vipassana volunteers demonstrate a strong practical approach to their work and do not digress into efforts to "save" the individual or "fix" the system.
4. **It can be taught in ten days.** This is critical in a jail setting where there is rapid turnover. Vipassana provides a way to impact offender behavior and thinking in a very concentrated period of time.
5. **It is free.** Vipassana is taught and supported through volunteers and donations. The remaining institutional costs are minimal relative to the benefits.
6. **It has immediate benefits.** Although the long-term outcomes remain to be seen, the short-term effects are that inmates are easier to manage and more likely to participate successfully in other program activities. These benefits alone are sufficient to warrant continued Vipassana courses at NRF.

Regular Vipassana courses were held at the North Rehabilitation Centre between 1997 and 2003, when the centre was closed by the Seattle State Government. For more information about Vipassana courses that were conducted at the North Rehabilitation Facility contact: Lucia Meijer, (Former) NRF Administrator: info@prison.dhamma.org