

Exploring Vipassana Meditation in Prisons: A Ray of Hope for a Better Future

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ABSTRACT

The inmate population has soared to about 11 million in the world due to an increase in organized crimes, political instability, and uncertainties about the future. The hyper masculinity, violent, emotionally depriving and dangerous nature of prison can have severe implications on the mental health of prisoners. Traumatized inmates and those with mental health disorders suffer more. Numerous prisons and correctional facilities have moved away from the norm of seeing prison only as a place of punishment. They also serve as a place to restructure life, indulge in self-reflection, and grow. There is an increasing need of transforming the individuals in these facilities into better humans- both who will be liberated eventually and those who will never be. Mindfulness-based meditation and spiritual practices are transcendent and effective approaches to accomplishing this goal. Vipassana meditation, one of the oldest Indian-Buddhist practice seems like a viable and promising choice for bringing about change. This paper explores the research studies conducted on Vipassana mediation courses in prisons and correctional facilities across the globe and the psychological impact of the intervention. It has become extremely crucial to focus on the mental health of the inmate population to reduce the probability of them committing future crimes, the safety of communities in which prisoners will be released, and the well-being of prison staff and other inmates.

Keywords: *Vipassana, Prison, Meditation, Vipassana for prison, Mindfulness meditation*

According to the 12th World Prison Population List, there are over 10.74 million people held in penal institutions across the world. Since 2000, the global prison population has increased by 24%, which is approximately the same as the increase in the world's general population. (Walmsley, 2018). While India's total population increased by nearly 30% between 2000 and 2019, the country's prison population nearly doubled (Gowda et al., 2021). In India, the suicide rates in jail have doubled in the last 20 years and were 2.3 times greater than the general population in 2019. (Gowda et al., 2019). Incarcerations of criminals cannot be avoided; it is something they have to accept and cope with. There are many stressors in the prison culture such as loneliness, being away from their family and friends, restricted movements, and so on which significantly impact the mental health of prisoners and indirectly the prison staff.

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The atmospheres in correctional institutions operate as criminogenic factors, causing convicts to develop violent and antagonistic behaviors, which could lead to more criminal conduct. (Haney, 2006). For those convicts who will be released one day, prison can and should transform them into better individuals who would become assets to society and not dangerous. One of the most significant goals of the prison administration is to rehabilitate convicts. In the United States, the Department of Jails has been renamed the Department of Correction. As a result, inmates are receiving increasingly advanced educational, vocational, recreational, and spiritual training (Suneetha K, n.d.). To reduce post-release crime and recidivism, prisons and correctional facilities may need to develop more effective rehabilitation approaches. (Himelstein, 2010).

One way to go about this reformation is to incorporate spiritual practices in the correctional settings. Alexander (1982), a developmental psychologist who studied the prison population, discovered that inmates' natural psychological development is hindered prematurely and that applying particular spiritual practices can correct this. Spiritual disciplines such as yoga and meditation are part of the Indian subcontinent's indigenous wisdom. They are fundamental to Indian philosophical traditions. Its therapeutic properties are widely described in ancient treatises. There is significant evidence that people who have greater spiritual involvement tend to have low levels of hostility, and high levels of hope and optimism. (Koenig, 2001).

Vipassana meditation is one form of spiritual practice that was rediscovered and reintroduced by Gautama Buddha around 2500 years ago. There is evidence on the effectiveness of Vipassana meditation on prisoners and the aim of this paper is to collate all the different implications and explore the scope for future studies.

About Vipassana Meditation

Vipassana means seeing into reality as it is. Vipassana meditation works with the actual truth which can be experienced by every individual and follows the principles of Dhamma (the universal law of nature). It entails traveling the noble eight-fold path, which can be divided into three categories: morality, concentration, and wisdom (Vipassana Research Institute).

Students in a Vipassana course practice breath-focused meditation first, which helps them establish focused attention (Hart, 1987). The next stage entails scanning the body from head to toes, noting whatever feelings or experiences come with detachment, and building tranquility and non-reactivity to those sensations. The last day introduces loving-kindness meditation, which is thinking kind thoughts toward oneself and others (Szekeres et al., 2014).

According to Goenka Ji, individuals who practice Vipassana progress as human beings, regardless of their socioeconomic status or religious views. Vipassana is an iterative method of objectively observing what is going on inside your body in the form of sensations. This self-observation allows the practitioner to cultivate the ability to quiet the mind by breaking free from compulsive thought patterns. This makes the mind more awake and attentive to what is going on in the current moment, allowing it to fully experience it (Pradhan S et al., 2017). Acceptance, non-judgment, and non-reaction to feelings, thoughts, and sensations are highlighted in mindfulness-based strategies (Bowen et al., 2007).

Vipassana meditation is taught in the setting of a 10-day residential retreat. All retreat participants commit to the following five moral precepts: no violence, lying, stealing, sexual

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misbehavior, or intoxicants. Participants must also maintain noble silence for the whole 10-day period. For the length of the retreat, they are not permitted to speak with any other attendees. (Modak, 1995).

The atmosphere in prisons

Men who are incarcerated live in an atmosphere that is filled with hardship, subordination, and danger. They are stripped of all external, worldly trappings of position and power, and are confronted with everyday realities of degradation and humiliation that can lead to paralyzing shame. Many people believe they have nothing left to lose except their manhood. Extreme displays of manhood, such as emotional "hardening" and acts of violence, are aided by the constrained male role and an ever-present sense of danger (Philips and Hopper, 2015).

Suicide rates in prisons are three times higher in males and nine times higher in women than in the general population throughout the world. (Fazel S et al., 2017). In a focused group study conducted by Nurse J and colleagues, inmates reported that long periods of solitude with no mental stimulation contributed to poor mental health and resulted in extreme sentiments of anxiety, frustration, and anger. Prisoners said that they utilized narcotics to get over the long hours of boredom. (Nurse J et al., 2003).

How can Vipassana help?

The Vipassana technique is a route that alleviates all suffering; it eliminates the desire, aversion, and ignorance that are at the root of all our problems. Those who practice it gradually erase the fundamental reasons for their pain, gradually emerging from the shadows of previous tensions to live happy, prosperous, and productive lives (Global Vipassana Pagoda).

Vipassana develops self-awareness, fosters subjective experience integration, and facilitates tolerance and understanding, all of which help to alleviate physical and psychological pain (Fleischman, 1999). Inmates might use spiritual activities to reflect on and reconstruct their life scripts, reformulate a new sense of self, embrace jail life, and find inner peace. Welfare and reformation programs also assist inmates in coping with crime, incarceration, and the resulting emotional anguish. Simultaneously, it assists them in discovering their potential, giving them hope for the future. (Bohet et al., 2008)

There are numerous benefits of Vipassana listed by Roy and Colleagues (2020), such as the practice of instilling gratitude and appreciation in one's heart, decreasing greed, wrath, and vanity. Vipassana practitioners are easily managed and do not cause problems for their peers or society at large. In addition to that, Vipassana causes people to be compassionate toward one another, caring, sensitive, joyful, and appreciative of the labor of others and reduces the feelings of jealousy and envy.

EFFECTIVENESS OF VIPASSANA MEDITATION IN PRISON AND CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

In 1975, Goenka Ji led a course for 120 offenders at Jaipur's Central Jail, the first of its kind in Indian prison history. The Jaipur Central Jail hosted a second course in 1977. Several sociological studies were undertaken on these courses by the University of Rajasthan. Another training was held in the Jaipur Central Jail in 1990, with forty life-sentenced inmates and ten jail personnel taking part, with favorable outcomes. On these early courses, no systematic study was done (Vipassana Research Institute).

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Chandiramani et al. (1995) examined the effect of a 10-day Vipassana meditation retreat on convicts in India's largest prison, Tihar Jail. Two studies were conducted to obtain data on inmates who took part in the program. The initial study was conducted in January 1994 with a total of 120 participants (Chandiramani et al., 1995). The Hamilton Anxiety and Montgomery Depressive Inventories showed a substantial drop in scores ($p < .01$) following the Vipassana retreat, suggesting that Vipassana meditation may help people feel less anxious and depressed. Another interesting observation obtained from the study was on hope and well-being. The inmates who attended the meditation retreat felt more hopeful generally in daily life ($p < .001$) and possibly had an overall better sense of well-being than before the retreat ($p < .001$). Before and after the retreat, participants were given a 15-item hostility scale and a 51-item Hostility and Direction of Hostility Questionnaire (Chandiramani et al., 1995, p. 11). Self-criticism, guilt, acting out hostility, criticism of others, and delusional projection of hostility were all observed to diminish in the period following the retreat. However, no concrete evidence could be established to determine the impact of Vipassana mediation on the psychopathology of inmates. (Chandiramani et al., 1995). There were several shortcomings of this study as standardized questionnaires were not used, a control group was absent to compare the outcomes of the practice and the data was collected mostly by Vipassana trainees.

Vipassana meditation in prison was popularized by the documentary titled "Doing Time, Doing Vipassana" made by filmmakers Avelet Menahemi and Eilona Ariel. The documentary tells the narrative of Kiran Bedi, a dynamic woman who served as the previous Inspector General of Prisons in New Delhi and worked to transform the dreaded Tihar Prison into a haven of tranquility. The focal point of the film is the narrative of convicts who have undergone significant transformations and have recognized that jail is not the end, but rather a new beginning toward a better and more positive life. Their achievement has been so remarkable that the Indian government has decided to implement Vipassana meditation in jails across India. Other nations are taking an interest as well. The filmmakers spent roughly two weeks in New Delhi's Tihar Central Prison and Baroda Jail in Gujarat, India. They conducted interviews with detainees and jail authorities, as well as filmed in locations that are rarely accessible to film teams.

The second research was undertaken at Tihar Jail in April 1994. The study had 150 convicts, with 85 being allocated to a treatment group and 65 being assigned to a control group who were not engaging in the Vipassana retreat. Anomie, attitude toward law, personality, and psychiatric illness were all assessed. The PGIHQ-N1 was administered to all 150 participants before the retreat. 35 Vipassana participants and 9 control group participants were found to have a psychiatric condition as determined by the aforesaid assessment. Inmates with psychiatric conditions were given the Hamilton Anxiety Scale and the Beck Depression Inventory before and after the program. Pre- to post-treatment anxiety and depression scores decreased in the Vipassana group ($p < .001$), while there was no significant change in the control group (Chandiramani et al., 1995). This shows that participants in the Vipassana group with psychiatric illnesses may have had some symptomatic improvement. All participants completed Srole's measure of anomie before and after the 10-day retreat. Although there were no immediate changes in anomie, post-test scores at three and six months revealed a significant difference between groups ($p < .001$), with anomie decreasing in the Vipassana group but not in the control group.

The study mentioned above has some severe flaws as well. Because it's unclear how "psychiatric illness" was defined, the findings for this component can't be applied to all

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psychiatric conditions. Furthermore, only 35 people in the Vipassana group and 9 people in the control group had psychiatric symptoms. The population isn't a large enough sample size to assess for statistical significance. Although this study had a control group, it was unclear if individuals were assigned to intervention or control groups at random (Himmelstein, 2010). Perelman et al. (2012) conducted a study in a maximum-security jail that looked at the psychological and behavioral impacts of an intense 10-day Vipassana Meditation retreat. The study included three retreat cohorts and one alternative treatment comparison group. Before the retreat, factors such as mindfulness, anger, emotional intelligence, and mood states were measured. In comparison to the control group, VM participants exhibited elevated levels of mindfulness and emotional intelligence, as well as less mood disturbance. An exploratory study was conducted on the male inmates of Baroda Central prison by Roy et al. (2020) on improving interpersonal communication skills with the aid of Vipassana Meditation. The inmates were subjected to a 10-day Vipassana meditation program. The post-test findings show a considerable improvement in the scores for providing clear communications. It signifies that Vipassana meditation assisted the convicts in better communicating their ideas, feelings, and emotions to others. The findings of the study also reported that Vipassana meditation improved listening skills, and helped the inmates in handling emotional interaction.

The findings of Ronel et al. (2011)'s research study give insight into the influence of volunteers on the participating convicts. A 10-day Vipassana course led by volunteers in prison drew a total of 22 male inmates. Participants were interviewed in-depth before, shortly after, and 3 to 4 months following the training. The volunteers in the course were carefully selected Vipassana practitioners who could serve as positive role models for the inmates and who were viewed as truly kind and altruistic by the participants. The dramatic improvement in the offenders' interactions with prison officials, as well as the favorable social milieu, can be understood as manifestations of the mindfulness and awareness that are central to Vipassana teachings. Inside the inmate population, the participants formed a subgroup that aimed to represent Vipassana values within the prison's values. This Vipassana-based subgroup, which persisted beyond the training, assisted the inmates in maintaining their Vipassana insights and applying them to prison life. Vipassana is a difficult ordeal with minimal sensory enjoyment, and completing it became an empowering feat that the prisoners reported as highly meaningful. To overcome the challenging 10 silent days without cigarettes while concentrating solely on their inner world corresponds with the self-observation of the Vipassana. The demands of Vipassana succeeded in channeling the desire for self-respect into a positive path of overcoming weakness and gaining self-control. The course gave them a chance and motivated them to use their strength to overcome impulsivity, which can be viewed as the first step toward self-transformation.

A research study conducted in 2011 by M. W. Jayasundara gives detailed insights into the inmates' perceptions of changes in behavior and attitudes as a result of practicing Vipassana meditation. The data was collected by interviewing 48 inmates at the Bogambara prison in Kandy, Sri Lanka. After practicing meditation, the majority of inmates reported being able to sleep well without nightmares or bodily aches, as well as having an enhanced appetite. Meditation also assisted inmates in overcoming their addictions to smoking, drugs, and alcohol, improving their discipline, gaining a spiritual experience and behavioral changes, giving up anger and retribution, and becoming vegetarians.

Studies published in peer-reviewed journals looked into the impact of Vipassana retreats on substance abuse among inmates. Bowen et al. (2006) undertook a Vipassana meditation

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study with inmates at Seattle's North Rehabilitation Facility. The effects of Vipassana meditation on substance usage in the jail population were investigated in this study. At first, 350 offenders volunteered to take the 10-day Vipassana meditation course. 173 individuals who took part in the study completed post-treatment assessments. Before participating in the Vipassana course, a variety of assessments were used to assess daily drinking and drug usage, impulse control, thought suppression, psychiatric symptoms, and optimism. Three months after the 10-day course ended, follow-up examinations were completed. At the 3-month follow-up examination, there was a decrease in the use of alcohol, marijuana, and crack cocaine ($p < .05$). Furthermore, reductions in psychiatric symptoms, as well as increases in optimism and internal locus of control, were associated with alcohol intake ($p < .05$; Bowen et al., 2006).

A 10-day Vipassana course was also held in the North Rehabilitation Facility by Simpson et al. (2007). Only 88 of the original 302 convicts returned for the 3-month follow-up examinations. Before and three months following the course, participants were evaluated for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms as well as daily alcohol and drug usage. Participants in the Vipassana course demonstrated substantial changes that did not appear in the control groups. The 10-day Vipassana course may be useful in lowering substance use in prison populations, as evidenced by decreases in alcohol ($p < .001$) and drug usage ($p < .001$) three months following course completion. On PTSD symptom assessments, there were no significant changes between the Vipassana and control groups.

The unusually high attrition rate from pre-test to post-test is a problem worth addressing that restricts the validity of the preceding investigations. The follow-up examination was not completed by a considerable number of people (132 in Bowen et al., 2006, and 88 in Simpson et al., 2007). In addition, neither study used a randomized, controlled methodology (Himelstein, 2010).

In an investigation carried out by Win et al. (2010), the social and behavioral consequences of Vipassana meditation sessions on convicts in Yangon's Insein Prison were studied. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 offenders, who had completed a meditation program, and shared the same criminal history. Five members of the jail staff were interviewed as key informants. According to the respondents, meditation had transformed them in numerous ways, including cognitively, socially, and physically, resulting in a clear and positive future view. They noticed that meditation had a greater impact on their mental viewpoint than on their social or physical adjustments. They also saw that the staff's behaviors and attitudes toward them had changed for the better. When they would be released from prison, every responder stated that their way of thinking and living will be altered. They intended to practice meditation for the rest of their lives. All of the responders mentioned the need of scheduling regular meditation sessions for both inmates and staff.

CONCLUSION

While prisons can be harsh, and often violent environments for traumatized inmates (and staff), they can also be places where poignant yearnings for inner freedom and powerful undertakings to self-transformation can emerge. A prison can be an effective location for implementing a brief, intensive, and potentially transformative mental health intervention. The 10-day Vipassana meditation practice, which has been employed in various across the globe has begun to yield empirical proof of its potential advantages. Other techniques and abilities are needed to supplement rigorous conventional meditation practice since not every

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inmate is willing to participate in such intense contemplative activity. However, for those who are capable, it appears that Vipassana retreats can help with trauma healing, including memory processing and integration, which is often seen as too dangerous in today's prison situations. The Vipassana meditation course should be encouraged in prisons far and wide and sophisticated research should be carried out to better understand and document the power of this practice.

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Conflict of Interest

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