

Vipassana Prison Newsletter

VOLUME XXX • OCTOBER 2021

WORDS OF DHAMMA

Yo sahasam sahasena, sangāme mānuse jīne, ekañca jeyyamattānam sa ve sangāmajuttamo.

Though one may conquer a thousand times a thousand people in battle,
yet one indeed is the noblest victor who conquers oneself.

Dhammapada 10.103

HOW DO COURSES DIFFER INSIDE AND OUTSIDE PRISON?

Vipassana courses take place at several hundred sites around the world. Most courses happen at meditation centers; in more than 20 countries courses have also taken place in prison. How are prison and meditation center courses the same? How are they different? A Vipassana Prison Trust member who worked with some of the first prison courses in the US offers insights.

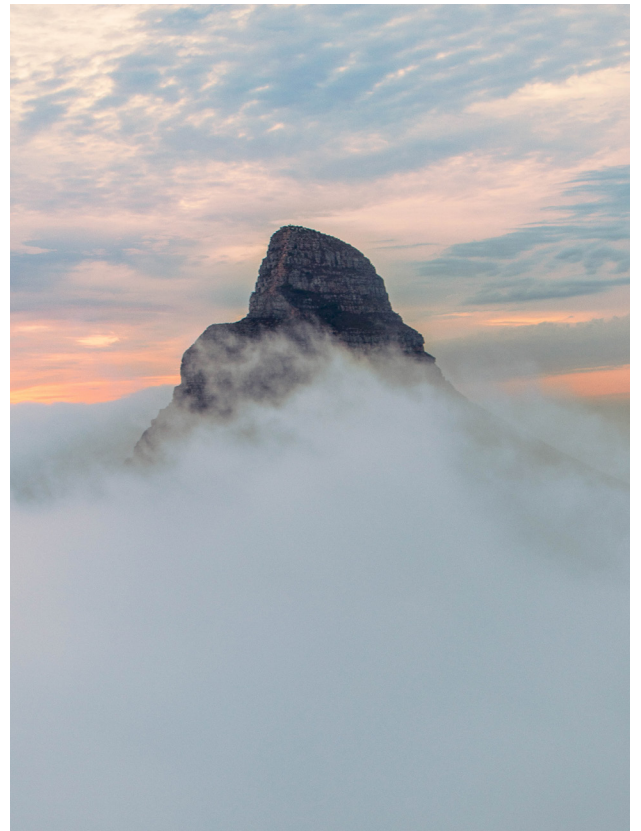
When the Vipassana Prison Trust first offered ten-day courses in North American jails and prisons, there were a lot of questions. Who are these people? What do they want? Why are they here? Is this a religion? A cult? So we started by showing the documentary “Doing Time, Doing Vipassana” followed by informational sessions with staff and inmates. We passed out applications and then we waited to see how many inmates would be willing and able to give this a try. That was the beginning.

At meditation centers, people come into our world. At prison courses, we partner with prison authorities and staff to create a world within the world of the prison. This requires mutual trust and support. In a world where trust is a rare commodity, we must be above reproach in the eyes of both inmates and staff. Central to that trust is the assurance that we are there to do one thing and one thing only: to provide 10-day Vipassana courses in the tradition of S.N. Goenka and Sayagyi U Ba Khin.

This 100 percent focus on the VPT mission underpins everything we do in a prison course. In addition to the usual code of conduct for course servers, prison course servers take an additional code of conduct. Post-course contact between VPT people and incarcerated students is absolutely forbidden. We have no contact with prisoners, their families, lawyers, or advocates. This allows us to maintain our impartiality as we continue to hold courses, showing no personal favor or bias. Our job is to go in, provide selfless service in our best tradition, and leave.

In “free-world” courses we have a brief orientation on the first day and the course begins almost immediately thereafter. In a prison course, we hold a series of orientations, sometimes weeks in advance. During these orientations we try to describe exactly what happens in a course – the schedule, the code of conduct, how the teachings will be presented, how and where students will sit, eat, and rest. We bring in meditation cushions so serious applicants can try sitting on a cushion on the floor while they listen to Anapana instructions. We try to be as clear and transparent as possible because in prisons there is an understandable lack of trust in outsiders. I remember during one orientation

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for female inmates, a young woman, suspicious of some possible deception, asked if she could see what was under the sheet that covered the teacher’s dais. So we went immediately into the Dhamma hall set up for the course and showed her.

At meditation centers we avoid any kind of decoration and use signage sparingly. After the first few jail courses, we realized that students were reluctant to ask about unfamiliar phrases and terms like “en masse” and “anicca,” so we added signs showing these words with their pronunciations and definitions. We made a change, too, by leaving on the decorative flourishes added by the secretary who typed up the signs. Almost 25 years later, the signage we use in prisons still has those colorful swirls.

In prison we put much more individual focus on students than meditation center courses do. For example, on a prison course the teacher holds frequent regular individual interviews with every student. At meditation centers, interviews are usually only by student request, when a student signs up to meet with the teacher. The first prison courses tried that, but no one wanted to be seen as the student who needed help from the teacher. So we started doing regular student-teacher interviews for all, and find that those are really helpful.

More individual attention is also provided by the course managers. At meditation centers there is one student manager, and the other course volunteers are called servers. Only the teacher and the student manager are allowed to interact with students. For the first few prison courses we followed that system, with a teacher, one manager, and a few servers who remained detached from the students. But we found that didn’t work in prison. The need for immediate feedback or assistance in a prison course was greater than in the highly protected and controlled environment of a center course.

So now in prison all VPT servers are called managers, and they can all talk to students when it is helpful. Servers are selected for their years of experience and maturity as meditators and servers. Everyone who comes to serve on a prison course is thoroughly screened, trained and prepared for this role.



One VPT manager has suggested that if prison-style courses were offered at meditation centers they would be hugely popular, especially with more serious students. A course where every student meets the teacher almost every day, where all students are always in the hall, and which offers the excellent, fresh pizza served on prison courses – lots of people would sign up!

We have changed some things around the edges – signage, orientations, etc. – but the core of every course is exactly the same, in prison or out. The point is to clear our minds of our worst stuff, and so become happier, better people. The kind of people we feel better being.



HATRED NEVER BRINGS AN END TO HATRED

Twenty years ago, in September 2001, two planes crashed into World Trade Center towers in New York, resulting in the deaths of more than 3,000 people. Following this S.N. Goenka published the following article in the International Vipassana Newsletter.

September’s tragic events have shaken us all. Our hearts go out to those who lost their lives or were injured; to their families, friends and colleagues; and to the millions who watched in helpless horror. This was an attack on the right of men and women to live in peace and safety, and to work toward a better future for themselves and their children. The tragedy occurred in a country that has opened its doors to the people of the world, that has championed the ideal that all human beings are equal, and that gives hope for a better future. We must not allow that hope to be dimmed in a time of darkness, we must bring light – the light of the Dhamma. Deep wounds caused by the darkness of ignorance can be healed by the wisdom that the light of Vipassana brings.

On September 11, within a few moments, ordinary superficial reality was stripped away and we saw the harsh truth: that suffering is inescapable, that everything we cling to is bound to pass away, that we have no real control over what happens. This vision may seem unbearable, but Vipassana teaches us how to bear it. By learning to observe within ourselves we can develop balance of mind – the balance that will enable us to face any situation and not be overwhelmed...

Certainly, now is the time to have a balanced mind, the time to generate goodwill and compassion for others. We have seen how great some people’s hatred is, and how dangerous and corrosive. If we can do anything to reduce the sum total of hatred in the world, we shall have achieved a significant victory. The Buddha said, “Never in this world is hatred quenched by hatred. By love alone is it quenched; this is an eternal law.” This law has nothing to do with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Sikhism, or any other “ism.” It is a universal law of nature.

Therefore we must develop metta (loving kindness) toward all who share in this tragedy. And our metta must extend even to those very deluded beings who perpetrate such attacks. They have thrown away their precious lives for a mistaken conception of religion, and in harming others they have much more seriously harmed themselves.

It would compound the tragedy to regard their distorted views as being representative of Islam. The holy Quran proclaims unequivocally that there can be no violence or compulsion in the name of religion. Those who truly follow the teachings of Islam are peace-loving, like all genuinely religious people. Now is the time for us to demonstrate solidarity with innumerable peace-loving Muslims and Arabs. Let not the cowardly acts of a few cloud our perception of one of the world’s great faiths. Good is bound to triumph over evil and all acts, good and evil, originate in the mind. The greatest good is to have a pure mind free of taints. With such a mind we can weather even the greatest vicissitudes of life. We can return goodwill for hatred. We can forestall hateful acts without provoking more hatred. We can live without fear, and in peace with all others.

The Dhamma gives us a way to repel evil within ourselves, which in turn will help to dispel hatred in the world. Let us be diligent in practicing the Dhamma, and let us bring the light of Dhamma to all those who are suffering or in sorrow.



KAY WAIN SHOWED US HOW TO LIVE – AND DIE

This article is from the October 2011 International Vipassana Newsletter.



Vipassana is often called the art of life; it is also about the art of dying. Many stories are told about Vipassana meditators who die not with fear, but calmly and happily.

Dr. Kay Wain, for example. Born in Myanmar in 1925, she became a doctor and tended mostly to poor patients. She often dispensed to them samples of medicine that she had received from pharmaceutical salesmen, or would give them money to buy the medicine they needed. Sometimes she even paid their cab fare to return home.

A divorced mother with three sons, she eventually emigrated to Australia, where one of her sons was already living. While in Australia Kay developed a yearly routine

of going to India for a long course. Goenkaji soon asked for her to help translate Burmese materials, starting with discourses of Sayagyi U Ba Khin. After he started appointing assistant teachers in the 1980s, Kay was an obvious choice. Initially she said that she was not ready, but eventually she agreed. She soon was given responsibility for Vipassana activities in Myanmar. Spending long periods there, she conducted courses and oversaw the establishment of many centers in different parts of the country. At the same time, she began devoting her time to a task that would occupy her for the rest of her life: translating course materials into Burmese and recording them. To this day it is Kay's voice that Burmese students hear on every Vipassana course.

In 1997, Kay collapsed while conducting a course. The diagnosis was lymphoma. Despite her fragile health, Kay did manage to continue serving. When the first Burmese-language course in Australia was organized in 1999, her lymphoma was flaring up but Kay would not hear of missing the occasion, and started the course. On Day 2, though, she had to be replaced and taken to the hospital.

Kay accepted all of this philosophically. When asked about her health, she would say that some days were better than others. Yet despite her frail appearance, she always had plenty of energy. As her granddaughter remarked, "This was stubbornness – not in the conventional sense, but a stubbornness to do the right thing, to serve others, to seek happiness through adversity, and to live life with optimism and faith in the goodwill of the people around her."

Kay was looking forward to November 2011, when she planned to attend the official opening of the newest Vipassana center in Myanmar. Her family did not want her to go because of health concerns, but Kay dismissed those worries. She went ahead and bought plane tickets, saying, "I have been living on borrowed time. I am prepared for anything." Meanwhile, in her last months, Kay carried on with her work of translating course material into Burmese. She was busy with this task until she had to be hospitalized, when she had literally days left to live. Only then did she stop. Even in the hospital, she was concerned about the work that remained pending. She kept serving right up to the end.

The plane tickets to Myanmar went unused; Kay had a different journey to make. Just weeks before her planned departure, her always fragile health started deteriorating rapidly. But her mind remained unshaken. In her last hours in the hospital, Kay was fully aware and seated on her bed, meditating. She died as she had lived, with humility, equanimity, determination and metta (loving kindness).