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VIPASSANA IN PRISONS

Raja. M



Vipassana Research Institute
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Vipassana Research Institute
Dhammagiri
Igatpuri 422 403, Maharashtra, India
Phone: (91-2553) 244076, 244086 Fax: (91-2553) 244176
E-mail: info@vri.dhamma.org
Website: <http://www.vri.dhamma.org>

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*'In this world
Animosity has never dispelled animosity.
It is only dispelled by compassionate love.
This is the law,
Ancient and inexhaustible.'*

-The Dhammapada

1975. Central Jail, Jaipur, Rajasthan

"..Mr. Goenka was allowed to stay in the jail in a makeshift room in the jail dispensary. At that time, ankle locks and handcuffs were used for hardened criminals. Four such hardened prisoners were brought into the meditation hall bound in these iron handcuffs and ankle locks. When he saw this, Mr Goenka was amazed. I told him these were hardened criminals. He exclaimed, 'How can people in chains be put before me? This cannot happen. Remove the chains!'"

Mr. Ram Singh, Vipassana teacher, then the Home Secretary of the State of Rajasthan, narrated this as witness to an historic moment in the annals of prison reform. After millennia, the mind-purification technique of Vipassana had, at last, reached one of the most miserable sections of society. Convicts, undertrials, hardened criminals who participated in that Vipassana course received the key to liberation from chains even more shackling than those around their limbs- the chain of the habit pattern of the mind to generate negativities like anger, hatred and ill-will.

"Jails are actually meant to bring people out of their misery, out of their mistakes", explains Principal Vipassana Teacher, Mr. S.N. Goenka. "I am glad that Vipassana has started working in prisons. This will certainly be a great example for the entire world - how prisons should be maintained, and how the prison inmates get rehabilitated, so that when they come out, they will become an asset to society and not a liability. And Vipassana works here because Vipassana works and purifies at the root level of the mind, where the habit-pattern for criminal, anti-social behaviour is formed".

1994, Tihar Jail, New Delhi

Two Vipassana students from Israel - well-known film-makers Ayelet Menahemi and Eilona Ariel - became the first media personnel to be given access to maximum-security zones in one of the world's largest prisons. Their documentary film, 'Doing Time, Doing Vipassana' is an eloquent story of how deeply Vipassana had made beneficial

in-roads into even the most condemned of human beings - murderers, terrorists, rapists, ruthless gangsters.

By now Tihar Jail has established a Vipassana centre within its very imposing walls. Thanks to the great efforts by the then Inspector-General of Prisons, Ms Kiran Bedi, her colleagues and successors, the centre called 'Dhamma Tihar', now regularly conducts two Vipassana courses a month for jail inmates. Voluntary workers (Dhamma servers) for the courses are inmates who have done a Vipassana course and now serve to enable fellow-prisoners to get the same opportunity they received.

In the nine years since the historic first course in Jaipur, Vipassana had spread like a quiet wild fire to prisons across the country - the States of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka.

Bihar and Haryana followed Rajasthan and Delhi. In a New Delhi meeting of Inspector-Generals of Prisons in India, it was recommended that Vipassana be introduced as a prison reform measure in jails throughout the land. This decision was influenced by hearing innumerable personal accounts of the transformation in mental attitudes, not only amongst prisoners but also jail officials, after undertaking a Vipassana course.

There were many like Arvind Sanghavi, a criminal of 30 years notoriety, who did a Vipassana course and after his release astonished prison officials by going straightaway to 'Dhamma Thali' - the Jaipur Vipassana centre, to offer to serve voluntarily in Vipassana courses.

There are even more touching instances like that of Babu Bhaya, a hardened criminal convicted for killing three people in five minutes. After his Vipassana course in Baroda Jail, Babu Bhaya was so filled with remorse that he pleaded for forgiveness from his victims' families. In 1992, on the day of 'Raksha Bandhan' (an Indian festival to strengthen bonds between a brother and sister), the wife and sister of a man he killed came to the Jail and tied the scared 'Rākhi' string around Bhaya's wrist. They had accepted him as their brother.

Says Babu Bhaya: "I only had hatred for people and had always had feelings of anger, of revenge. But after the Vipassana course, I have changed. Now all I feel is feelings of compassion, of sympathy for people."

Such a dramatic change in mental attitudes amongst prisoners inspired extraordinary courses like the retreat for more than 1,000 inmates in Tihar Jail. This course in 1994, conducted by Mr. Goenka himself, is the largest single Vipassana course to be held in modern times.

A study conducted under the aegis of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), New Delhi, on Vipassana students inside Tihar Jail, reports, "the statistical analysis has revealed significant improvement in the functioning of inmates on most psychological parameters studied. There has been considerable reduction in the neurotic predisposition, hostility and feelings of helplessness reported by the prisoners; while the sense of hope and well-being were enhanced following Vipassana courses."

These beneficial results were obviously not the product of some miracle or the effect of some supernatural power. Inmates who worked hard in practising Vipassana correctly and ardently benefited like any other Vipassana student outside the prison walls. As Mustafa, an African student inside Tihar Jail puts it, "Change does not come the easy way. Change takes time... I'm not telling you I did a Vipassana course and Bam! - anger, my quick temper completely went out at one time. It's still subsiding, subsiding, subsiding..."

1996, Central Jail, Nashik, Maharashtra

In the eleven years since the first prison course, Vipassana has taken a firm root in Indian prisons. After a visit to Nashik prison, the Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mr. Gopinath Munde, declared that every prison in the State conduct Vipassana courses.

Soon afterwards, Nashik Central Jail was officially declared a Dhamma centre like Tihar Jail. Two courses are held there every month.

The notorious Yerwada prison in the city of Pune too, shortly followed suit. A special course was organized for foreign inmates of the prison. The course was conducted by foreign Vipassana assistant teachers and served by foreign Dhamma servers. After the course, Josef, a Czech inmate convicted for 20 years on drug charges, said: "I had been practising many forms of meditation techniques. But none of them took me to the depths of my mind like Vipassana does. With Vipassana, prisons need no longer be called the 'University of Crime'."

Great care is taken to see that both prison and Vipassana rules are strictly followed during courses in prisons. A set of careful guidelines for Vipassana courses in prisons has been established. The prison authorities set aside a self-contained area of the prison for the Vipassana course, and this area is insulated from the rest of the prison for the entire duration of the course. While the local Vipassana trust provides the teachers, teaching material and Dhamma servers, the prison authorities provide the necessities for the prisoners. As with Vipassana courses outside prisons, absolutely no fee is charged for undertaking a Vipassana course.

On the tenth day of the course, the mettā day, when the vow of noble silence is broken, a special function is sometimes arranged in the afternoon within the jail premises. Other prisoners, prison officials, local dignitaries and the media gather to hear the experiences of inmates who have just finished the Vipassana course. This is usually a very emotional and moving experience.

"It actually changed people", says Ms. Kiran Bedi, "It made prisoners weep. It made them cry. They had realized what life actually could be. They had looked within. And within themselves they had seen the feeling of revenge, anger, the disrespect and hurt they had caused to parents and society; and they wept. And they wanted to be different".

On this day when the silence is broken, one of the most fervent requests from inmates who had just finished the course, is that the jail authorities provide them with the facility to enable them to continue practising Vipassana daily. This daily, regular practice and segregation from other still-hardened fellow prisoners has been found to be essential for the mental rehabilitation of inmates.

The Vipassana seeds of profound change within the prisons of the world have been sown. Those from within the same walls are the first to recognize the deep significance of Vipassana courses in jails. David, a Canadian inmate of Tihar Jail and a Vipassana student, is quoted in the film, 'Doing Time, Doing Vipassana': "This is history in the making, you know...this is the first chance where Vipassana is being used in a prison system to possibly reform people...this could reform the whole prison system in the entire planet..."

At present over 50 Vipassana courses are being conducted annually within Indian prisons. A special Vipassana course was recently held for drug addicts within Tihar Jail. Requests for Vipassana courses from prison authorities across the country are increasing. Work is in progress to conduct Vipassana courses in jails in other countries also.

May all beings be liberated!

Tarsem Kumar

Criminologists, psychologists, sociologists and law-makers all over the world have long been storming their brains to find out ways and means to transform the criminals and to transform the prisons from being houses of punishment into temples of rehabilitation. Imprisonment, whether of short or long duration is always associated with social stigma. To the offender, imprisonment is a reminder of his crime and of his past and implies punishment in terms of separation from his family and society.

The Vipassana meditation practice has an important role to play in making the person able to keep mental equilibrium.

I have seen many a prisoner coming to jail and going out, and I can very well establish that those who had done four or more ten-day Vipassana Meditation Courses are a changed lot. Their family members have also testified their permanent reformation.

The main objective of modern penology is to rehabilitate and reintegrate prisoners as responsible members of the society and Vipassana has come out to be a powerful tool in reforming them.

Most crimes originate from a diseased and disturbed mind. The criminals seldom find an opportunity in the prison to get relief from these tensions and, throughout their incarceration, they continue to be under constant stress and strain. Vipassana Meditation Course was first organised at Central Jail No. 2, Tihar in 1993 with the keen initiative of Ms. Kiran Bedi, the then I.G. (Prisons), to give the inmates an opportunity to find a way to free themselves from the tension and to involve them in constructive activities, to make them useful citizens of their motherland.

Encouraged by the positive results of the first meditation course and rising demand from the prisoners to organise more such meditation courses; five courses were organised in 1994 in all the four jails. The remarkable change in prison inmates and their enthusiasm for more courses led to establishment of permanent Vipassana centre in Tihar Jail in Ashram No. 4. Goenkaji named it "Dhamma Tihar". Two Vipassana courses a month are being held in Dhamma Tihar. Many 10-courses for the women prisoners have also been organised.

Not only prisoners but staff members have also benefited from the Vipassana meditation course and Tihar Jail sends its security staff and officers to attend course in Delhi and Jaipur regularly.

The feeling among Prison inmates for taking revenge and violence has lessened, their frequency and intensity of anger has reduced, their urge for smoking and chewing tobacco has considerably reduced. Many of them have even quit smoking completely. The staff members who have undergone the course have also been more cordial in dealing with the prisoners and are having more compassion for inmates.

I have also undergone 10-day meditation course in Jaipur along with my wife Alpana and have experienced inner peace and equanimity.

The present I.G. (Prisons) Shri R.S. Gupta has also shown a keen interest in continuation of Vipassana Meditation. The first ever 10-days Vipassana meditation course for detoxified prisoners in Jail No.3 in November 1996 and a course for women prisoners in Jail No.1 in the month of August 1997 showed his concern for using Vipassana meditation as a tool in reforming the prisoners.

I hope Dhamma Tihar continues to benefit the prison inmates for a long, long time.