

# The Use of a Meditation Programme for Institutionalized Juvenile Delinquents

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## Abstract

The study applied intensive - seven consecutive days meditation programme in 101 late adolescent male delinquents in Upekkha Detention Centre. All of the boys completed the programme and answered the questionnaires. All of them felt that the meditation practice had been beneficial. 70 per cent of the subjects described feelings of contentment and calm, 53 per cent requested the programme to be repeated, 52 per cent of the subjects declared a clearer understanding in the doctrine of Karma, 44 per cent referred to improved concentration and awareness, 36 per cent felt less impulsive, 22 per cent had flashbacks of their criminal behavior and their victims.

In conclusion, the boys in Upekkha Detention Centre had the willing to join and complete the intensive meditation programme. Their self assessment reports showed a positive attitude to the programme. It is possible to develop a meditation programme as an adjunctive therapy for institutionalized juvenile delinquents.

**Key word :** Meditation, Juvenile Delinquents

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In recent years there has been a growth of interest in the use of meditation as an adjunct to psychotherapy in mental health practice(1,2). Hitherto there have been few reports concerning its use in the treatment of juvenile delinquents. This

paper describes a pilot programme of this nature in a young offenders' centre in Thailand.

Buddhism is at the heart of Thai culture and 95 per cent of the population are of this persuasion. Its principles, practices and potential for promoting

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mental health are recognized by Thai psychologists, psychiatrists and others working in the field of human behaviour such as magistrates. Indeed, the impetus for this programme came from a senior magistrate in the family court and her husband Dr. Udomsil Srisang - nam, at that time Vice Minister in the Ministry of Public Health (with responsibility for Mental Health). Their concern was the lack of rehabilitative enterprise in Thailand's detention centres. They approached five psychiatric hospitals and a child guidance centre for help and the result of this initiation was a one year project, based on one detention centre, to consider the possible value of psychotherapy in this field. One component in this complex exercise was a seven day meditation course organised by the first author.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

### Upekkha Detention Centre and the Participants

This centre has places for 100-120 late adolescents male delinquents most of whom have committed serious crimes such as robbery, drug dealing, murder and sex offences. The average length of stay is 17 months. There are three buildings and a football pitch on a 3 1/2 acre area. As it is the smallest centre in Thailand and has the highest staff ratio it receives boys found to be unmanageable in other centres. Occupational therapy and physical training are provided - but little else. At night almost all the boys sleep in the same room.

Most of the boys, 101 altogether, were included in the programme. Their mean age was 16.8 years. The only exceptions being 9 boys due for release and 6 Muslims who felt uneasy on religious grounds. These 15 boys were used by the staff for routine centre tasks such as cooking and cleaning.

### The Meditation Leaders

Eight leaders were selected ; all had wide experience of meditation and were qualified teachers in the Young Buddhist Society of Thailand (YBST), a national organisation of considerable standing that promotes Buddhism and meditation in particular. They were a heterogeneous group : two senior police officers, two army officers, two academic psychologists (one female), a YBST officer (female) and a child psychiatrist (C.W.). The inclusion of leaders with a police/army background was a precautionary measure given the nature and the size of the delinquent group. On the course, six leaders were deemed necessary on a daily basis. One leader was present

at each session. In fact, all eight leaders stayed on the premises throughout the course.

### The Programme

The Programme was intensive-seven consecutive days beginning at 4 am and finishing at 9 pm. The programme for the second day is set forth below as an example.

#### 2nd Day

04.00 am.	Wake up
04.30 am.	Meditation practice
06.00 am.	Pray and perform morning chanting Dhamma disquisition
07.00 am.	Breakfast
08.00 am.	Meditation practice
10.00 am.	Dhamma disquisition
11.30 am.	Lunch
12.30 am.	Meditation practice
02.30 pm.	Break for snack
03.00 pm.	Small group discussion
04.00 pm.	Meditation practice
04.30 pm.	Break for a bath and rest
05.30 pm.	Dinner
06.30 pm.	Pray and perform evening chanting Dhamma disquisition
07.30 pm.	Meditation practice
09.00 pm.	Rest

Meditation practice, the core activity of the course took place five times a day, three sessions of 90 minutes and two of 120 minutes. The 90 minute sessions were divided into 45 minutes of 'sitting' and 45 minutes of 'walking' meditation. 'Sitting' meditation (Anapanasati) is also called Mindfulness of Breathing meditation. The practitioner sits comfortably with hands resting on lap or legs, back, neck and legs should be straight. Eyes are closed and then attention is focussed on the breathing processes. When attention wanders it is gently returned. Finishing meditation, attention is taken off the breathing processes and slowly the eyes are allowed to open and a return to the ordinary alert state is effected. 'Walking' meditation refers to walking mindfully (Jongrom). Herein, the practitioner walks for a set distance, turns, walks back, turns and so on. Attention focusses on the minutiae of the walking process. Thinking is concentrated on the step being taken, not the last nor the next. As in Anapanasati attention is brought back when mental drifting occurs.

Dhamma disquisitions led by different teachers were held three times a day each lasting an hour. Dhamma is a practical approach to the wisdom of Buddhism. The way of the Dhamma is one of observing nature and harmonising human life with natural forces. Topics covered in these sessions included the Buddhist life experiences of several of the leaders, Buddhist practice, self awareness, mindfulness and moral conduct.

At the commencement of the course the participants were encouraged to talk as little as possible and to be mindful of their actions, thoughts and feelings throughout their waking hours.

## RESULTS

On the seventh (final) day, all 101 boys completed a questionnaire. All of them felt that meditation practice had been beneficial. 53 per cent requested the programme to be repeated. 70 per cent described feelings of contentment and calm. 44 per cent referred to improved concentration and awareness. 36 per cent felt less impulsive. 52 per cent declared a clearer understanding of the doctrine of Karma which states that one's next existence is partly determined by the character of one's behaviour in this. 23 per cent found the early meditation practices painful and disheartening. 22 per cent had flashbacks of their criminal behaviour and their victims. 30 per cent wanted to regain their parents' acceptance. Only 4 per cent enjoyed the Dhamma disquisitions.

## DISCUSSION

The positive attitude to meditation manifested by the delinquents has to be considered in the

light of their situation in a penal institute where they may have felt a need to respond in a manner satisfying to the authorities. Even so, a careful examination of the questionnaire responses strongly suggests that the experience was meaningful to many of them, particularly so in the areas of the deviant behaviours which brought them in conflict with the society-impulsivity, lack of self-awareness, failure to recognize the consequences of their actions for others, tension and irritability.

It is unlikely a project of this kind would be feasible in a Western setting. Buddhism, however, is deeply embedded in Thai culture and many male Thai adolescents take time out from their everyday lives, attach themselves to temples and experience ascetic life<sup>(3)</sup>. This goes some way towards explaining the acceptability of the project to both offenders and the staff.

Traditional psychotherapeutic programmes for institutionalised juvenile delinquents are rarely successful<sup>(4)</sup>. On the other hand, Childs (1974)<sup>(5)</sup> found that the use of transcendental meditation with juvenile offenders was associated with self-actualisation, decreased anxiety, drug use, improvements in behaviours and interpersonal relationships. Shapiro and Zifferblatt (1976)<sup>(6)</sup> compared Zen meditation with Western self-control strategies. They pointed out that in addition to relaxation and refocussing of attention, meditation involves self-observation and desensitisation to thoughts, fears and worries.

There are grounds for further consideration of meditation as a tool in the rehabilitation of juvenile delinquents. Further projects linking the resources of a child psychiatric department and Buddhist teachers are under discussion in Thailand.

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## การใช้โปรแกรมวิปัสสนากรรมฐานกับเยาวชนในสถานพินิจ

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ได้ศึกษาการใช้โปรแกรมวิปัสสนากรรมฐานเข้มข้นร่วมในการบำบัดพื้นฟูจิตใจเยาวชนชายในสถานพินิจบ้านอุเบกษาจำนวน 101 คน ระยะเวลา 7 วัน ประเมินผลโดยใช้แบบสอบถามประเมินตนเอง ผลการศึกษา พบว่าทั้ง 101 คน สามารถร่วมกิจกรรมได้ตั้งแต่ 0-100% รายงานว่าโปรแกรมนี้มีประโยชน์กับตนเอง 70% รู้สึกสงบและมีความสุข 53% ต้องการเข้าร่วมโปรแกรมอีก 52% คิดว่าเข้าใจกุญแจ กรรมมากขึ้น 44% รู้สึกมีสติและสามารถมากขึ้น 36% รู้สึกว่าทุนทันลดลง 22% เห็นภาพการกระทำผิดของตนเองในอดีตขณะนั้นมากขึ้น สรุปได้ว่า เยาวชนในสถานพินิจบ้านอุเบกษามีศักยภาพที่จะเข้าโปรแกรมวิปัสสนากรรมฐานเข้มข้น โดยผลการประเมินตนเอง เยาวชนรู้สึกพึงพอใจและคิดว่าเกิดประโยชน์ต่ออารมณ์ จิตใจ ของตนในรูปแบบต่าง ๆ จึงมีความเป็นไปได้ที่จะพัฒนาโปรแกรมวิปัสสนากรรมฐานเพื่อใช้เป็นส่วนหนึ่งของกระบวนการบำบัดพื้นฟูเยาวชนในสถานพินิจ

คำสำคัญ : วิปัสสนากรรมฐาน, เยาวชน, สถานพินิจ

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