



## Developing sustainability through meditation

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### Abstract

Focusing on the Indian prison system, this research article presents two case studies to support the thesis that vipassanā meditation practiced by individuals can lead to sustainable outcomes at societal and global levels. The related literature was examined to glean confirmed benefits of vipassanā meditation. Two case studies clearly identify that the benefits of meditation can be manifested at societal and global levels. The research also refers to Burman (2009) to corroborate the benefits referred to in the literature, and to provide another example to indicate how the benefits can manifest at global levels.

**Keywords:** vipassana, prison, prison system, sustainability, Tihar Prison, Nakkhu Prison, Wat Rampoeng.

### Introduction

This research paper topic is within the broad context of innovation and sustainability. It posits that meditation as practiced by the individual, can lead to sustainability at the societal and wider levels, focusing in particular on several case studies within the prison system in India to exemplify how the benefits of individual meditation can lead to sustainability at societal, national and global levels.

First, some definitions are provided.



## Innovation

is described by the Cambridge dictionary as “A new idea or method, or the use of new ideas or methods. While meditation itself is not new, this research examines meditation as a relatively new innovative approach to dealing with societal problems, and specifically, within prison systems.

## Sustainability

This research adopts the most widely accepted definition of sustainability provided by the Brundtland Commission in 1987: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” In this regard, improving the prison systems is a massive step forward in dealing with one of society’s significant problems, truly leading to more sustainable societies. ‘Development’ in terms of meditation, is thus a process in which a person grows and becomes more advanced in their meditation. The case studies presented below exemplify the positive implications at societal, national and global levels.

Meditation is a practice that involves training the mind to focus and redirect the thoughts that arise. It is a technique that increases awareness and promotes calmness and relaxation. The focus is generally on the the breath, as is the case with vipassanā meditation, or can be a mantra (Transcendental Meditation (TM) or a bodily sensation.

## Vipassanā

The Vipassanā Research Institute website, (<https://www.dhamma.org/en/>) states that vipassanā, as taught by S.N. Goenka (in the tradition of his teacher, Sayagyi U Ba Khin), means ‘to see things as they really are’. It is one of India’s most ancient techniques of meditation, taught in India more than 2500 years ago as a universal remedy for universal ills, in what is described by the institute as an ‘Art of Living’.



To delve a little deeper into this term, the Vipassanā Research Institute refers to vipassanā as a meditative practice that involves observing the nature of reality through direct experience. It is about understanding the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of all phenomena. It focuses on the three characteristics of existence: impermanence (Pali: anicca), suffering (Pali: dukkha), and non-self (Pali: anatta). If there is such a thing as ‘a goal’ of meditation, a meditator seeks to purify the mind and eliminate defilements. If such a path is followed, it would lead to wisdom and liberation from suffering.

## **Benefits of Vipasana Meditation**

The benefits of meditation are well documented, see, for example, Pandey, (2022), whose research in Nakkhu Prison, Lalitpur, Nepal confirm that vipassanā meditation helps to develop positive and optimistic attitudes, reduce anger, irritation and anxiety; make self-correction of behaviour, improve physical and mental health and purify their mind and character. Pandey used a paired t-test (where the same subjects are measured twice, under different conditions or at different times) to compare the differences in means before and after vipassanā meditation of the prisoners, and the results showed a significant difference of mean in the seven areas.

## **Individual sustainability through meditation**

What is interesting as far as this research is concerned, is the individual focus of meditation, which leads to personal sustainability. First of all, meditation involves focusing on the present, reducing scattered thinking and promoting more thoughtful actions. The mind becomes calmer, so stress and anxiety is reduced. Personal choices become more conscious and less wasteful. This in turn leads to increased self-awareness; an increased understanding of personal habits and values which help to make sustainable lifestyle changes. According to Google Gemini, meditation also leads to a deeper appreciation for nature,



develops compassion and empathy, and builds resilience and adaptability. All of these qualities can be described as fostering more sustainable lifestyles for individuals.

In Burman S (2009), the research was carried out between 2004 and 2007 at Wat Rampoeng, an international vipassanā centre in northern Thailand, where the researcher was, and continues to be, a volunteer. Two meditation teachers, three meditation instructors, and 80 meditation students were each observed over 8 day-long sessions. Meditation teachers, meditation instructors and meditation students were also interviewed, both formally (using a pre-written questionnaire) and informally; and observations made of reporting sessions between foreign meditation students and their meditation teachers. She also observed herself as a participant self-observing retreatant at Wat Rampoeng. During the period between 2004 and 2007, she was also constantly in close contact with different vipassanā retreatants, and was thus able to identify significant subjective personal benefits they reported, which were corroborated by her own experiences as a participant observer on retreat.

What is interesting about this research is the ‘global spread’ of Vipassana - taking the benefits of individual Vipassana meditation to all corners of the globe with around 100 foreign retreatants per month. This is a clear example of how the benefits of individual meditation can quickly take on global proportions, taking with it massive steps to increased sustainability.

The benefits of meditation at the individual level are widely documented, and at the societal and global level the Tihar Prison case study demonstrates the wider benefits. The first case study of this research is based on an independent documentary film produced by Eilona Ariel in 1997 at Tihar Prison, a high security complex of 4 prison in New Delhi, India, which is one of the largest prisons in the world with 10,000 prisoners (1000 prisoners, 9000 awaiting trial in 1993). At this time, Kiran Bedi, the renowned Indian police officer, took charge of Tihar prison. She is credited with initiating significant prison reforms, of which the Vipassana program has provided a key part.



She invited the renowned vipassanā meditation teacher S.N. Goenka to teach the vipassanā meditation program at Tihar Prison. Under his guidance, the first vipassanā centre within a prison was established, and the first ten day course for 100 prisoners and staff took place in November 1993.

Eilona Ariel explains in the documentary that the idea of vipassanā meditation is to go inside the mind, and when you are quiet you can feel your sensations. Continuous awareness of physical sensations within without reacting is the core of the vipassanā practice. Every sound, vision, taste, smell - everything that contacts the body instantly produces some sensation. The technique focuses on natural physical sensations as the crucial link between the mind and body. This, he explains, is the link between mind and body - the key to understanding human behaviour. Through vipassanā, one realises that one's own attitudes and addictions, suffering and happiness are not caused by the outside world. It is the reaction to pleasant or unpleasant sensations the world evokes within the body that dictates one's actions and conditions the mind. By day four of the retreat, meditators observe all sensations and watch emotions come and go - pain, pleasure, and understand that nothing is permanent, whether hatred and greed or passion are not abstract any more. By watching the physical sensations accompanying these emotions, and by understanding their impermanent nature, one can actually start changing the habit of blind reaction through mere observation. A further five courses were held at Tihar for 1000 prisoners and staff, and as a result of its success they established a vipassanā centre with courses held twice a month.

So this is the massively key point and directly relates to improved sustainability at all levels: Vipassanā was used in a prison system with the ambitious aim to potentially reform large numbers of people. And if this showed results at the individual level then it could reform the whole prison system in the entire planet (quoted from the documentary).

Returning to the main thesis of this paper, the case study clearly demonstrates the benefits of meditation. Similar vipassanā centres were set up throughout the Indian prison system, and worldwide, leading to anecdotal



evidence and reports of positive transformation among prisoners. The film and the concept of using meditation for rehabilitation inspired a great deal of academic research. Studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of vipassanā in reducing recidivism (re-offending) rates and improving the overall wellbeing of prisoners (Rathi, 2021).

Many similar programs and initiatives that focus on mindfulness, meditation and rehabilitation within prisons were subsequently set up, with countries in Asia, Europe, and the Americas reporting positive outcomes. Such programs often draw inspiration from the success of vanā at Tihar prison.

The Tihar case study clearly demonstrates the strong link between individual meditation practice and how it can lead to positive changes at societal and even global levels. The film’s legacy continues to influence prison reform and rehabilitation efforts globally.

The documentary film reported on the overall success of the program in a prison environment, and as a result vipassanā has been implemented in many correction facilities throughout the world.

The second case study, referred to above, is that of Nakkhu Prison, in Lalitpur, Nepal (Pandey, 2022). In January 2022, the Nepalese government enabled the Nepalese Vipassanā Centre to hold vipassanā courses in a number of prisons. In 2022 Pandey reported that ‘Seeing the positive effects of vipassanā in prisoners, the ten day vipassanā course was adopted in other Indian prisons, including two permanent centres in Tihar, New Delhi, and Nasik, Maharashtra which continue vipassanā courses today.’ Pandey further reports that the vipassanā course was similarly introduced in 15 other countries.

Both case studies highlight the transformative potential of mindfulness and meditation in a prison environment. Several studies have indicated a correlation between vipassanā practice and lower recidivism rates (Rathi, 2021). This suggests that Vipasana programs can effectively help inmates reintegrate into society.



On an important note, vipassanā has been shown to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression among prisoners. It provides tools for emotional regulation and coping with challenging environments. It also fosters enhanced rehabilitation into society, through encouraging self-awareness, empathy, and discipline, which are essential for personal growth and rehabilitation.

## Challenges and Future Directions

As an aside, while the impact is undeniable, it is necessary to mention the fact that there are still various challenges to overcome. These include setting up a vipassanā centre in overcrowding situations; the need for highly effective staff training in both vipassanā and management of vipassanā retreatants. There is also a need for long term commitment and support, and community integration programs. (Google Gemini, accessed 16 August 2024)

Despite these challenges, the future of mindfulness and meditation in prisons is promising. As research continues to support its efficacy, it is likely that more correctional facilities will adopt similar programs.

## Suggestions for Future Research

The two case studies show overwhelming support for the thesis that vipassanā is a viable solution for some of the prison challenges, but in particular, can lead to sustainable outcomes at societal and global levels. Future research could pay closer attention to the incredibly complex issue of recidivism to help make vipassanā programs more streamlined to this goal. Other meditation techniques could be explored - especially mindfulness-based programs. Finally, there is insufficient research on meta-analysis - reviewing multiple studies on mindfulness and meditation in prisons and other correction facilities (especially juvenile detention centres) might provide a broader picture of potential benefits.



## Conclusion

This paper has explored and confirmed the thesis that Vipassana meditation practiced by individuals can lead to sustainable outcomes at societal and global levels. So what are the next steps? Those next steps are now already being taken in prison systems throughout the world. But prison systems are just one area that is benefitting by vipassanā programs. The next BIG steps clearly need to be that similar types of programs radiate to other areas of society. In recent years there has been a massive increase in interest in all kinds of meditation programs at the individual level, these programs could be introduced in just about any aspect of society and this is where the push for better and more sustainable societies should begin.

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