

*"The Dhamma Brothers have taken their own passage to India and discovered a practice of meditation that guides them down their inner path to freedom."*

— John Lewis, U.S. Congressman

# The Dhamma Brothers



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# The Dhamma Brothers:

East Meets West in the Deep South

## Curriculum Guide

Educating for Global Understanding

[www.journeysinfilm.org](http://www.journeysinfilm.org)

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# Prologue



In January of 2002, while attending the Palm Springs International Film Festival, I experienced an epiphany. After spending the week completely immersed in other cultures through film, I felt that I had traveled the world. Each film,

itself a complete cultural learning package, presented a character or two who captivated my interest and evoked intense empathy. The films invited Hungarian orphans, tired Afghani workers struggling in Iran, sweet children living in Tehran, spunky Tokyo teenagers, savvy young Tibetan monks living in exile in India, a young boy in China, and a group of coming-of-age French teenagers as welcome guests into my heart. Their stories opened my mind, and I realized how little information or insight most young Americans have about people from other nations. I imagined how students would benefit from seeing these movies, especially while learning the history, geography, and culture of the country from which each film emerges.

Children seldom need to be coaxed into watching films, particularly if the story is good. Young students are visually attuned to cinematic images and enthusiastically respond to stories that expand an awareness of their world and teach them about cultures different from their own. With this in mind, I decided to establish *Journeys in Film* and began to search for dynamic foreign films and the expert educators and specialists who could design a substantial, comprehensive international education curriculum around them.

As a first generation American, I was always aware of the differences and similarities between myself and other kids in my

neighborhood. My parents, both Holocaust survivors, brought to the United States their Eastern European traditions and values, and I grew up crossing cultures daily. To understand my parents and their personal stories better, I read voraciously and visualized the land, the people, and the culture my parents came from. Eventually, films became an important source of my understanding about the vast diversity in our world. It was exciting for me to discover the world beyond my provincial hometown. I could reach out in my imagination and connect to countries so far beyond my own mental and physical boundaries, inspired by people so unlike me.

I believe students will experience this sense of living in another world, however temporarily, when offered the opportunity to study films and cultures of other children living in societies beyond their own neighborhoods. My hope is that the impressions and lessons from the films selected by *Journeys in Film* will continue to echo in their hearts and minds for years to come, inspiring today's students to become cross-culturally competent, productive, and compassionate adults.

I dedicate *Journeys in Film* to my brave parents, Maurice and Julia Strahl. They taught me that education is the greatest tool we have toward understanding and accepting people of all cultures and traditions so that no one should ever be persecuted for being different.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Joanne Strahl Ashe". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Joanne Strahl Ashe  
Founding Executive Director  
*Journeys in Film*

## About *Journeys in Film*

Founded in 2003, *Journeys in Film* operates on the belief that teaching with film has the power to prepare students to live and work more successfully in the 21st century as informed and globally competent citizens. Our core mission is dedicated to advancing global understanding among youth through the combination of age-appropriate films from around the world, interdisciplinary classroom materials, and teachers' professional-development offerings. This comprehensive curriculum model promotes widespread use of film as a window to the world to help students to mitigate existing attitudes of cultural bias, cultivate empathy, develop a richer understanding of global issues, and prepare for effective participation in an increasingly interdependent world. Our standards-based lesson plans support various learning styles, promote literacy, transport students across the globe, and foster learning that meets core academic objectives.

Selected films act as springboards for lesson plans in subjects ranging from math, science, language arts, and social studies to topics that have become critical for students to learn more about—like environmental sustainability, poverty and hunger, global health, diversity, and immigration. Our core team of prominent educators consults with filmmakers and cultural specialists in the creation of curriculum guides, each one dedicated to an in-depth exploration of the culture and issues depicted in a specific film. The guides merge effectively into teachers' existing lesson plans and mandated curricular requirements. They provide teachers an innovative way to fulfill their school districts' standards-based goals.

### **Why *The Dhamma Brothers*?**

*The Dhamma Brothers* film follows prison inmates at Donaldson Correctional Facility and documents not only their backgrounds, but also their intense experience during an extended meditation retreat. This emotionally and physically demanding program of silent meditation—"Vipassana"—a hundred hours over 10 days, becomes a dramatic tale of human potential and self-discovery. *Journeys in Film* leadership felt that this film offers insight into a culture unfamiliar to most students—to most citizens of any age, actually—the world of people serving long-term sentences, a situation that exists not only in the United States, but also in most other countries around the world. The transformation of the Dhamma Brothers, prisoners in modern Alabama, through this rigorous training in an ancient Indian tradition, provides students with the opportunity to develop empathy, a clearer insight into how an ancient tradition unfamiliar to most in Western culture can have value today, and a deeper understanding of our common humanity.

In partnership with the Freedom Behind Bars Foundation—the nonprofit organization supporting the award-winning documentary film *The Dhamma Brothers* and companion book, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers—Journeys in Film* has developed this comprehensive curriculum guide for high school and college classrooms. The curriculum promotes effective use of film in the classroom and advances conversations concerning global issues related to social justice. Lesson plans provide the tools to examine and dismantle stereotypes about men behind prison bars, reveal the historical and social obstacles to positive change in the prison system in the United States, and educate about the positive impact of meditation.

*Journeys in Film* is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and is a project of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, a nonpartisan research and public policy center that studies the social, political, economic, and cultural impact of entertainment on the world—and translates its findings into action.

## A Letter From Liam Neeson



In 1993, I performed the role of Oscar Schindler in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. This experience deepened my awareness of the Holocaust and the tragic consequences of intolerance and hatred. Ten years later, I met Joanne Ashe, who

acquainted me with a new educational program, ***Journeys in Film—Educating for Global Understanding***. I have served as its national spokesperson since its inception, and I clearly believe in its effectiveness as an educational tool for teaching our youth to value, appreciate, and respect the cultural diversity in our world.

*Journeys in Film* is a nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching cross-cultural understanding to students through the use of quality, age-appropriate films. Using films as a teaching tool is invaluable, and ***Journeys in Film*** has succeeded in creating the first and only film-based curriculum integrated into core academic subjects.

By using carefully selected films that depict life in other countries and cultures around the globe, combined with interdisciplinary curriculum to transform entertainment media into educational media, we can use the classroom to bring the world to each and every student. Our program dispels myths and misconceptions, enabling students to overcome biases; it connects the future leaders of the world with each other. We are laying a foundation for understanding, acceptance, trust, and peace.

Please share my vision of a more harmonious world where understanding and dialogue are key to a healthy and peaceful present and future. I encourage you to participate in the ***Journeys in Film*** program as a student, educator, film studio, or financial supporter.

Sincerely,



National Spokesperson  
***Journeys in Film***

# Introduction

## *The Dhamma Brothers: East Meets West*

### In the Deep South

Joseph Campbell, the path-breaking scholar of comparative mythology, explained many traditional legends in terms of the archetype of the Hero's Journey. The hero is a religious figure, a charismatic leader, even a warrior, who sets out on a journey from the ordinary world he has known. On this quest, usually aided by supernatural helpers, the hero separates himself from his known life and enters the unknown, where he is tested and must overcome fearsome challenges. As he does so, he is transformed, acquiring new powers and knowledge; upon his return to the ordinary world, he can use these powers to help others.

Campbell's studies in both Eastern and Western traditions and myth found such heroes in many traditional cultures. He also saw the founders of the world's great religions—including Jesus, the Buddha, and Muhammad—as heroes, men who had withdrawn from all they had known, and then met and overcame challenges. Inspired, they then returned to inspire others. This archetype informed George Lucas's *Star Wars* films, and literary critic Harold Bloom has traced it in *Beowulf*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Moby-Dick*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Cerylle Moffett and John Brown used the motif of the Hero's Journey as a model for teachers seeking to transform education. Campbell taught that all ordinary men and women could follow the path of the Hero's Journey in their own lives.

But how could the motif of a journey possibly be relevant to men for whom a journey is utterly impossible? For an inmate incarcerated for life, condemned to spend his entire

life within a circumscribed set of walls and cells, the concept seems ludicrous. And how could the word “hero” ever be applied to a man convicted of murder? The film *The Dhamma Brothers*, an exploration of the way that Vipassana meditation transformed prisoners' lives in an Alabama prison, points to a radical inner journey, one taken by men considered worse than worthless by their society, a journey that transforms their self-image, gives them power over their impulses, and enables them to give back to the prison community in which some of them must spend their remaining years.

Like the concept of the Hero's Journey, the film *The Dhamma Brothers* has the potential to transform viewers' lives as well. Rather than taking a Hobbesian view of inmates as prime examples of life that is, in Hobbes's words, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” the film sees the possibility of redemption, change, even heroism, among the men of Donaldson Correctional Facility near Birmingham, Alabama. Of the hundreds of inmates, a few respond to a challenge to undertake the strenuous exercises of Vipassana meditation. Like the potential hero setting out, they separate themselves from the world they have known, the prison population, and withdraw to a place apart, where they undergo the rigorous challenges of 10 days' meditation and interior struggle. Like the hero, they find helpers—two experienced Vipassana teachers who teach the methods of Vipassana while living, eating, and sleeping in the same retreat space. The inmates face challenges; one participant, Grady Bankhead, said it was harder than being on death

row. And they emerge transformed, taking responsibility for their past actions, managing their emotions better, and finding solace in the continued practice of meditation.

Vipassana meditation is an ancient technique that originated in India and was rediscovered by Gotama Buddha in the sixth century BCE; he taught it as a way of healing human suffering. In this disciplined and, at times, arduous form of meditation, the participant focuses on the physical sensations of the body as a way of experiencing a deep mind–body connection. He or she agrees to abstain during meditation from killing (which includes the eating of meat), stealing, sexual activity, lying, and the use of alcohol and drugs. Next the participant learns to pay attention to the movement of breath in and out of the nostrils. When the body and the brain, and especially circuitries of fear and seeking in the brain, have been calmed by days of concentrating on the breath, the participant moves on to becoming aware of other body sensations, experiencing them, learning how his or her brain reacts to them, and learning how to avoid getting lost in such reactions. At the end of the 10-day meditation training, through the practice of *metta* or the systematic cultivation of loving kindness, the participant learns how to extend his or her own inner peace and good will to others. The outcome is an increase in mindfulness and a decrease in stress and anger.

Jenny Phillips is a cultural anthropologist, writer, and therapist who for many years provided services in the mental health department of a large medical center in Concord, Mass.; she currently works in a small group practice in Concord. Her specialties include crisis intervention, family therapy, behavioral medicine, and hypnotherapy. In

1999 she began interviewing prisoners at the Donaldson Correctional Facility outside Birmingham, Alabama, after hearing that they were meditating using the same book she was using with prisoners in Massachusetts. After discovering Vipassana meditation, in collaboration with the Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, she organized the first Vipassana program at the Alabama prison and eventually made a film, *The Dhamma Brothers*, about the men who participated and were transformed by it.



**UNITED STATES, 2008 – RUNNING LENGTH:** 1 hour and 16 minutes

**DIRECTORS:** Jenny Phillips, Andrew Kukura, Anne Marie Stein

**PRODUCERS:** Jenny Phillips, Anne Marie Stein

**EDITOR:** Andrew Kukura

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS:** Jenny Phillips, Anne Marie Stein, Bestor Cram, Nicole Guillemet, Geralyn Dreyfous

**CO-PRODUCER:** Peter Broderick

**CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Wah Ho Chan, Jeremy Leach

**AWARDS:** Best Documentary – 2012 Universal Martial Arts Film Festival

Best Documentary – 2008 Western Psychological Association Film Festival

Honorable Mention, Best Documentary – 2008 Tri-State Defender

Best Documentary – San Francisco Frozen Film Festival

Best Documentary – Woods Hole Film Festival

Second Place, Best Documentary – Rhode Island International Film Festival

Nomination, 2009 Awards Program – The International Corrections and Prisons Association

2008 Winner, Prevention for a Safer Society – The National Council on Crime & Delinquency

2009 Community Hero Award – Community Resources for Justice

# Note From the Director



I had been teaching meditation in prisons for several years when I heard from Robin Casarjian, the director of The Lionheart Foundation, that a large and growing number of prisoners were learning to meditate inside

a maximum-security prison outside Birmingham, Alabama. When the prison psychologist, Dr. Ron Cavanaugh, invited me to visit and to interview some of the meditating prisoners, I packed my tape recorder and flew down.

That visit and the stories that I heard while there set my course over the next 10 years. Soon after that first trip to Alabama, I became aware of a meditation practice, Vipassana, which is taught in centers around the world and contains the elements that I had always thought were most needed in an effective prison program: the opportunity and techniques for significant introspection in a safe and supportive environment. With collaboration among Ron Cavanaugh, the Alabama Department of Corrections, The Lionheart Foundation, and the Vipassana Meditation Center in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, a Vipassana program was first brought into this Alabama prison in 2002.

After witnessing the remarkable convergence of an overcrowded, understaffed, maximum-security prison and an ancient, intensive meditation practice, I realized that this story needed to be documented and could only be fully told through film. Since its release into theaters in 2008, *The Dhamma Brothers* has received positive reviews, won awards, and galvanized viewers.

I continue to work on ensuring the widest distribution of *The Dhamma Brothers*, which has demonstrated an extraordinary potential to challenge narrow assumptions about the nature of prisons, long seen as solely places of punishment and warehousing, and the nature of prisoners, often seen as unredeemable and hopeless cases. It is my hope that the story of the Dhamma Brothers and the deeply rooted Vipassana program at Donaldson Correctional Facility can now serve as an example to other prisons, including those struggling with issues of overcrowding and lack of funding.

Suffering is universal. The men at Donaldson are learning, even as their bodies are imprisoned, to become free within. In a larger sense, *The Dhamma Brothers* suggests the possibility of freedom from that which imprisons us all. The Dhamma Brothers are leading the way.

—Jenny Phillips

Producer, Director, Writer, Anthropologist,  
Psychiatric Nurse

# Notes to the Teacher...

On the following pages, you will find eight lesson plans designed for older high school students, college students, film discussion groups, and religious and community groups, all of whom are appropriate audiences for the film *The Dhamma Brothers*. Each lesson can stand alone, or you may choose to do several or all, as time and inclination permit. Like other *Journeys in Film* units, the lessons may be delivered by a team of language arts, social studies, and other teachers, but the lessons are sufficiently clear and detailed for one teacher to present them all.

Lessons 1–3 are designed to help viewers become more attuned to the process of spiritual and psychological change documented by the film and by subsequent writings by the Dhamma Brothers. Lesson 1 asks the viewer to watch the film carefully, while following the story of one of the Dhamma Brothers in particular. Lesson 2 expands the viewer's understanding of prison life and the experience of meditation by using prison literature from Jenny Phillips's collection of Dhamma Brothers letters and other examples of prison literature. The next lesson in this group explores the Buddhist roots of Vipassana.

Lessons 4–6 use the film as a springboard for research and study in subjects of particular interest to social studies, criminal justice, sociology, and psychology classes; they are particularly useful for adult learners but can be of interest to high school students as well. In Lesson 4, students research issues in the contemporary prison system, including numbers of inmates, capital punishment, the costs of incarceration, and recidivism. Efforts to improve conditions and rehabilitate inmates for re-entry into society are the topic for research in Lesson 5. If you have a large class, you may wish to divide your students into two groups and let

each group research one of these topics. In that case, the PowerPoint presentations by the students doing Lesson 4 should be available to students doing the research in Lesson 5; conversely, the students who have researched prison issues can become the “jury” that evaluates the rehabilitation proposals of Lesson 5. If you have several classes and the logistics of scheduling permit, you could also assign Lesson 4 to one class and Lesson 5 to another, and then let them meet to share their findings. Lesson 6 deals with the difficult topic of disparities in sentencing and provides a historical overview of race-based inequity in the criminal justice system.

The final lessons are experiential, in which students learn the essential components of meditation. Although this particular type of meditation originated with Buddhism, it is not tied to any religion and does not conflict with any religious beliefs. Many religious groups use some form of meditation, and the practice can be useful in a purely secular context as well. The exercises in this lesson can be done sequentially, but would be more effective if integrated into other lessons, either as an opening or a closing for each class.

To purchase the film or to stream it for a minimal fee, visit [www.dhammabrothers.com/WatchNow](http://www.dhammabrothers.com/WatchNow).

Additional media resources you may wish to integrate into your lessons:

1. The trailer to the film *The Dhamma Brothers* at <http://www.dhammabrothers.com/Trailer.htm>.

A great two-minute scene setter to watch before the film. The trailer is followed by three clips from interviews with some of the Dhamma Brothers.

2. A variety of short videos on *The Dhamma Brothers*' YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/user/DhammaBrothers>.

Video clips not included in the film, audio clips from interviews of several Dhamma Brothers that Jenny Phillips conducted after the film was completed, and readings of selected letters from the Dhamma Brothers.

3. Jenny Phillips's TED talk at <http://tedxboston.org/speaker/phillips-ph-d>

A 12-minute summary of the story of the Dhamma Brothers.

4. A video produced for Oprah Winfrey in May 2012, at <http://www.oprah.com/own-supersoulsunday/blogs/Watch-an-Update-on-The-Dhamma-Brothers>.

This five-minute video provides good follow-up to what has happened at the prison since the making of the film.

5. An audio interview from the Bob Edwards Show, at <http://dhammabrothers.com/Press.htm>

There are four parts to this radio interview from Sirius XM Public Radio.

6. A webcast interview with Oprah Winfrey, Jenny Phillips, and two of the Dhamma Brothers at <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Jenny-Phillips-on-Oprahs-Soul-Series-Webcast>.

Watch or listen to this podcast as Oprah Winfrey reacts to the Dhamma Brothers' story.

7. A poem by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, "Call Me by My True Names."

This poem appears in many places on the Internet. As of the date of this publication, a video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6y-lk3HB6fQ> gives a brief introduction to the poem, as well. The poem is likely to arouse some controversy in the class.

8. A *Huffington Post* blog by Jenny Phillips about her experience at Donaldson at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jenny-phillips/meditation-in-prison\\_b\\_1469180.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jenny-phillips/meditation-in-prison_b_1469180.html).

# Meeting the Dhamma Brothers

## Enduring Understandings:

- Prisons are difficult places for people to endure for many reasons.
- Human beings, no matter what their history, are capable of change, even redemption.
- Vipassana meditation is one path to change, including moral and spiritual development.

## Essential Questions:

- What are some of the issues that create stress for incarcerated people?
- What is Vipassana meditation?
- How does meditation help to relieve stress and change people?
- How does one begin simple meditation?

## Notes to the Teacher:

Before teaching this lesson, download and read the material in the Introduction; it provides information about the making of the film *The Dhamma Brothers* and about Vipassana meditation. For a much more thorough resource, see Jenny Phillips's book, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*, or the new interactive eBook version of *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* available at Amazon or Pariyatti Press. Vipassana was first tried in a maximum-security prison in India, and that is the subject of another insightful documentary film, *Doing Time, Doing Vipassana*.

The Introduction also provides more information about anthropologist and mythologist Joseph Campbell's concept of the Hero's Journey. If you want more information about Joseph Campbell's ideas, summaries of his short book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* can be found at many different websites. A clear outline of his ideas appears at <http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/smc/journey/ref/summary.html>. You may wish to make copies of one of the readily available online graphics that outline the stages of the Hero's Journey. There is also a PBS series called *The Power of Myth*, in which Bill Moyers interviews Joseph Campbell; Episode 1, "The Hero's Adventure," provides an instructive discussion of this archetype.

Before the lesson, assign **HANDOUT 1: THE JOURNEY INSIDE** to be read and completed for homework. The lesson plan itself begins with a discussion of the handout and of stressful factors in a prison. Students brainstorm factors that would cause stress while you write them on the board. Be prepared for a student to bring up the subject of prison rape; record this sensitive subject as matter-of-factly as you did the others to discourage joking about it among students.

After a brief introduction to Vipassana meditation, students are asked to pay particular attention to one of the four Dhamma Brothers who are most closely profiled in the film, taking notes at intervals. Students then watch the film.

After viewing the film, students process it through a series of open-ended questions. For the discussion questions listed under the post-viewing activities, some possible answers have been provided, but be open to accepting other answers as well.

Next, students consider whether Campbell's idea of the Hero's Journey can be applied to the experience of the Dhamma Brothers. For a recent example that students can relate to, you may wish to supplement your discussion of the Hero's Journey by bringing up the section in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Frodo Baggins leaves his familiar setting and must take a dangerous journey. It would make great reading and discussion.

At the end of the lesson, students try a simple mindfulness technique based on breathing and then they record their reactions to the film, the discussion, and the exercise in their journals. **HANDOUT 4: WORKING DEEP WITHIN** may be distributed for students to read to refresh their memory of the film and deepen their understanding.

Before the session, make photocopies of the handouts for each participant. For **HANDOUTS 1** and **4**, make a photocopy for each student. For **HANDOUT 2**, you need to photocopy only enough to make a "card" for each student; for **HANDOUT 3**, you will need enough so that each participant receives the relevant two-page section. Have available a chalkboard or chart paper for recording answers.

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

#### LANGUAGE ARTS

#### STANDARD 9. USES VIEWING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES TO UNDERSTAND AND INTERPRET VISUAL MEDIA

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES: 9–12)

1. Uses a range of strategies to interpret visual media (e.g., draws conclusions, makes generalizations, synthesizes materials viewed, refers to images or information in visual media to support point of view, deconstructs media to determine the main idea)
2. Uses a variety of criteria (e.g., clarity, accuracy, effectiveness, bias, relevance of facts) to evaluate informational media (e.g., websites, documentaries, news programs)

## COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » READING: LITERATURE » GRADES 11–12

**RI.11-12.1.** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**RI.11-12.2.** Determine two or more central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.

**RI.11-12.3.** Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.

# Lesson 1 (FILM VIEWING)

## COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ART STANDARDS » SPEAKING AND LISTENING » GRADES 11–12

**SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**SL.11-12.1.B.** Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.

**SL.11-12.1.D.** Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

### Duration of the Lesson:

One or two class periods, plus time to view film and take notes. The run time of film is 76 minutes.

### Assessment:

Group discussion  
Journal entries

### Materials:

Film and method of projection  
Photocopies of **HANDOUT 1** for each student  
Photocopies of **HANDOUTS 2 and 3**  
(one card and section of **HANDOUT 3** per student)  
Photocopies of **HANDOUT 4**

## Procedure

### PART ONE: Pre-Viewing Activities

1. Ask students to look over their answers to **HANDOUT 1**, the homework assignment given before this lesson. Have each student share one element that he or she found to be striking or disturbing in the description of Donaldson. Ask how the students would feel if they were walking into such a place. How do they think Jenny Phillips felt?
2. Explain to students that they are about to view a film about men living in a maximum-security prison in Alabama and about a program the inmates undertook to improve their quality of life. Give background on the making of the film using information from the Introduction.
3. Ask students what they think would be most difficult to get used to for someone being incarcerated for the first time. Record answers on the chalkboard or on chart paper. (Students will probably mention lack of freedom; lack of privacy; following the same routine each day; having to share a cell with a stranger; prison food; separation from family and friends; boredom; the threat of violence; having to live with people who have committed violent crimes, even murder.) Ask students which items on the list would cause the most stress and suffering for them.



4. Explain to students that the film they are going to watch is about an ancient meditation practice that has been used successfully in prisons overseas to help inmates reduce their levels of stress, suffering, and harmful behaviors, and to increase their well-being and happiness. Tell them that the film takes approximately an hour and 15 minutes to view and that the people in the film are not actors—they are actually living the roles they represent: inmates, correctional officers, prison staff, and families.
5. Introduce students to the term *Vipassana* and write the word on the board. Explain this meditation technique using information from the Introduction.
6. Distribute “cards” from **HANDOUT 2** with the names and photos of specific men featured in the film. Ask each student to pay particular attention to the man whose name is on the card: his history, his struggles with Vipassana, and how he felt after the course.
7. Show the film. Point out each of the four Dhamma Brothers as he is introduced in the film. Stop the film occasionally to allow students to take brief notes about their assigned prisoners.

## **PART TWO:** Film Debriefing

1. Divide students into groups, each group based on the one person they were following, and give each group the appropriate pages from **HANDOUT 3**. Give them time to read the handouts and then ask them to discuss within their group the particular story of the individual they were following. (10–15 minutes)
2. Conduct a discussion of the film with the full class, using the following questions:
  - a. Why do you think the Dhamma Brothers were willing to undergo such a strenuous course to begin with? (Possible answers: desire for positive personal change, previous experience with meditation course, desire to get away from the main population, curiosity, boredom, a deep spiritual or religious longing.)
  - b. What preparations did the inmates have to make? (Possible answers: setting up the gymnasium, understanding and agreeing to the five precepts.) At this point, go over the five precepts. Most are obvious, but explain that “to refrain from killing” includes animals, so the meals during the course were vegetarian.
    - To refrain from killing
    - To refrain from stealing
    - To refrain from sexual activity
    - To refrain from false, harsh, and idle speech
    - To refrain from intoxicants that cloud the mind

## Lesson 1 (FILM VIEWING)

- c. What was so difficult about the course for these men? (Possible answers: physical and mental discipline of sitting for more than 10 hours a day; dealing with painful memories; accepting responsibility for past actions.)
- d. Did the teachers experience any difficulties? (Possible answers: getting permission to offer the course, arranging the logistics to make the course run smoothly, getting used to the lack of privacy, initial fear of the prisoners and of being locked up with them.)
- e. What benefits did the men get from taking the course? (Possible answers: New tools for coping with the stresses and suffering of incarceration; less anger; more self-understanding, compassion for others, sense of inner peace.)
- f. Do you think the men were sincere, or were they trying to “fake it till they make it” in the words of the warden? (Answers will vary. Require students to support their opinions with evidence from the film. You may wish to use the three video clips under the trailer at <http://dhammabrothers.com/Trailer.htm> to supplement this discussion.)

### PART THREE: The Archetype of the Hero’s Journey

1. Give students background information about Joseph Campbell and his concept of a fundamental monomyth, the Hero’s Journey, using information from the Introduction and your reading. (If you have made photocopies of one of the online graphic outlines, distribute them at this time; if you have the equipment available, you can also project it at this time.) Discuss with students how the stages of such a journey underlie a book or contemporary film such as *The Hobbit* or the Harry Potter series.
2. Ask students to write an answer to this question: What relevance might the concept of the Hero’s Journey have to the story of the Dhamma Brothers, who are never going to be able to travel anywhere and who are certainly not regarded as heroes by society? Give students five to 10 minutes to write and justify their answers.
3. Ask students to share their responses to the question.
4. Conclude the lesson by having students try a brief meditation. Give them the following directions:
  - a. Choose a comfortable position. (You may allow students to sit on the floor.) Just be sure to keep your back straight so that you stay alert.
  - b. Keep your eyes closed or partially closed.
  - c. Breathe naturally, through your nostrils, if possible.

- d. Notice the sensations of your breathing coming into and out of the tip of your nose, and above your upper lip. Try to keep all of your attention on your breathing. When your mind wanders to something else, gently bring it back to your breathing. Try not to get discouraged when you become distracted; just keep gently returning to concentrating on your breathing.
- e. As you practice, your distractions may start to decrease. You may feel a sense of calmness. Do not worry if you continue to feel distracted, or even become anxious. Accepting your experiences and observing them is the goal, not trying to control them. Try to stay in this state for a while, even if just for five or ten minutes. If you need to stop sooner, that is perfectly OK.

Suggest that students might want to find time to meditate daily, if possible; meditation has been proven to be a good way to deal with stress and anxiety. Research has shown that meditation can actually change the size and functioning of brain areas responsible for stress and anxiety and can promote feelings of safety and comfort in one's body.

- 5. For homework, have students write a one- to two-page journal entry reflecting on their reactions to the film, the discussion, and the meditation experience. To assist them, distribute **HANDOUT 4: WORKING DEEP WITHIN** and have students read it to refresh their memory of the film and its characters.

**Handout 1 ▶ P. 1**

# The Journey Inside

**Directions:**

Read the following excerpt from *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*. Then answer the questions at the end.

W. E. Donaldson Correctional Facility is set in the Alabama countryside south of Birmingham, in the midst of thick woodland, red clay soil and tangled kudzu vines. Wrapped around it on three sides, coiled like a snake as it flows south to the Gulf Coast, is the Black Warrior River. Donaldson's inmates live behind high security towers and a double row of barbed and electrified razor wire fences. The wire, capable of delivering a lethal charge, gleams and glints in the sunlight with disarming beauty. This is a place for those who may never be released back into society, inmates with the longest stays and the highest levels of crime. Many are sentenced to life without parole, virtually condemning them to a lifetime behind prison walls. Many others have life sentences, some for nonviolent crimes based on the "three-strikes-you're-out" policy instituted during the 1990s. The prison houses a population of inmates on death row and has a mental health unit for those with severe mental illness. Referred to by its residents as the "House of Pain," Donaldson is the prison where the most unmanageable and intransigent of Alabama's inmates are sent.

Although a small trickle of inmates is released back into the outside world, there is a distinct atmosphere within these prison walls of a separate, contained society. Once inside, inmates are stripped of their "free-world" identity and possessions, and henceforth must live on the paucity of standard prison-issue goods. Except for phone calls and occasional visits, they must rebuild their lives inside the prison, associating mainly with other inmates and letting go

of the outside world. They live lives of enforced simplicity and regimentation, a large number of people living in a small space on few resources.

I first visited Donaldson in the fall of 1999. Driving down the long, isolated road leading to the prison, there is a sense of having reached a border crossing into a foreign land. Suddenly the prison looms ahead, a long, low structure dotted with control towers. At the front office there is a check and search and a walk through a metal detector. Next, a door is buzzed open allowing passage into a metal cage with a gate on either end, both of which are electronically controlled by an armed guard in a tower. The first gate must be closed before the second one opens at the other end. This is followed by a short passage through a no man's land, a grassy lawn sandwiched between the exterior and interior prison walls, that brings one inside the prison. After passing the administrative offices, there is a final locked door. Once through this door, both the architectural and psychological landscapes change dramatically.

When one enters the building there is a distinct feeling of having left behind all that is familiar and taken for granted. The first person one meets inside is an inmate shining shoes at a stand. Wide corridors form a "V" stretching away from the stand to the east and west. Even though one is now "inside," there is a final metal gate that slowly slides open, traversing this corridor. As it slams shut, the visitor from the "free world" enters an alien place based on forced containment and control.

**Handout 1 ▶ P. 2**

## The Journey Inside

There is a stench of sweat and disinfectant and an aura of misery and suppressed violence. Painted in hues of brown, the corridors are long, dark, and dank. In hot weather, steam and mist rise and drip from the walls, and the floors are slippery with moisture. Inmates in white pants and shirts, with Alabama Department of Corrections emblazoned on their backs, continually move up and down the corridors. Everyone stays to the right, systematically marching along like ants in a colony. They seem to be going somewhere, but their range is sharply demarcated by the prison's physical boundaries. The stereotypical image of prisons is of inmates neatly locked away in cells, of quiet halls traveled by officers with keys. But these inmates are out and about. Much of the traffic consists of a flow to and from the dining hall. Men are also moving to school programs and prison-based jobs. The din and movement, however, is that of controlled activity. Moving among the inmates are staff and unarmed corrections officers carrying nightsticks and two-way radios.

All of the inmates are dressed in the stark, white prison-issue clothing with black stenciled lettering. Displayed prominently on the left front of each shirt is the identification number whose six digits become an inmate's primary identity. Similarly, each prisoner's address is essentially the location of a bed. Many live with another inmate or two in a small cell on a cellblock. One inmate referred to this living situation as "living in a closet with a stranger." Some prefer living in such cells because of the relative privacy they offer. While there is no sense of ownership or property, there is some control over this small space constructed of concrete blocks and metal bars.

By contrast, others live in open dormitories of more than a hundred beds separated by less than two feet of open space. This arrangement allows more freedom of movement and access to a large yard and track for exercising. But the trade-off is a total lack of privacy and control of personal space. A prisoner's home is reduced to a bunk and a locked box underneath containing his possessions. Most activities take place on or around this bunk. Life becomes reduced to its barest essentials. There is an open bathroom on one side of this room with a long, shared shower stall, an open urinal trough, and two or three toilets immediately next to each another. Men must sit side by side on these toilets, with no partition or screen for privacy. In this enormous room, all activities are communal and open to public view. The noise and activity are pervasive and never-ending. Two television sets blast their programs. Ceiling lights are on all day and much of the night. The smell of crowded bodies saturates the atmosphere.

—Jenny Phillips

*Letters from the Dhamma Brothers, pp. 5–7*

## The Journey Inside

1. What are three details in this description of Donaldson that you find most striking? Why?

2. How do you think Jenny Phillips felt when she entered the prison?

**Handout 2**

# The Journey Inside



**Grady Bankhead**



**Grady Bankhead**



**Edward Johnson**



**Edward Johnson**



**Benjamin "OB" Oryang**



**Benjamin "OB" Oryang**



**Rick Smith**



**Rick Smith**



**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**  
**Group A**

## Grady Bankhead



Grady Bankhead has a sentence of life without the possibility of parole. Now in his fifties, he has been incarcerated for more than 20 years, on death row for the first eight. His crime was to stand by and witness a murder.

Although Grady did not commit the crime, he drove the getaway car, leaving the scene with the murderers. Tried for a capital crime and sentenced to death in the electric chair, Grady narrowly escaped execution. In a retrial defended by Attorney Bryan Stevenson of Equal Justice Initiative, Grady was released from the death sentence and given life without parole.

Grady has struggled over the years to accept his fate while watching his family lose touch with him. “Life without parole means that you are to be warehoused until you die. It doesn’t mean that you are to be punished, or worked, or any of that. It means that they don’t want you back in society. What it meant to me was just a longer way to die than the electric chair. I thought the judge just wanted me to grow old and die. I wanted to get it over with because my family was suffering.”

When Grady was five years old, one day his mother dressed him and his three-year-old brother, Danny, in their best clothes, drove them out into the countryside and left them on the porch of an old abandoned house at the end of a long driveway. She instructed them to stay on the porch,

that Grady was to take care of Danny, and that she would be back to get them. After standing there all night Grady climbed down and found an old hubcap filled with rain-water. He also found a dead bird. These were the rations that kept the boys alive. Their mother never returned. In the days following their abandonment, Grady tried to care for Danny, who had a weak heart and had always been frail. But they were not found for several days. Danny later died, and Grady was filled with guilt about his death. Rather than blaming his mother, whom he didn’t see again until he got to death row, he always blamed himself.

In a similar way, Grady has blamed himself about the murder he witnessed. He has experienced tremendous anger and a sense of restlessness about his incarceration. The fear of fully facing and experiencing his anger made him reluctant to sign up for the Vipassana course. But during the course he was able to look at the crime in a deeper way, experience the underlying grief, and finally come to a sense of self-forgiveness. “Until then I had actually justified and excused myself for the crime. During Vipassana I just couldn’t get away from myself. I had to see it. And one of the things Vipassana teaches you is any negative behavior starts within. The misery starts in here. Then it carries somewhere else. So I’m guilty, even though I never hit the man. Now I don’t have to make excuses to myself anymore. I pulled some of my masks off. In my other treatments, I never have been able to do that.”

Grady says that the Vipassana program has helped him accept prison as his home. “So today, this is my home. They may transfer me to another prison, and then that is my home. But I’m all right living here.” This resolve to

## Lesson 1 (FILM VIEWING)



### Handout 3 ▶ P.2 Group A

## Grady Bankhead

make prison his home and to peacefully accept that reality was sorely tested last year. Grady found out from another inmate, who had seen the story on TV, that his daughter Brandy had been brutally murdered by a man in a motel room. The terrible details of this crime, coupled with his inability to respond to or seek solace from his family, were an incredible test of Grady's inner strength. But his inclusion in the Dhamma brotherhood and his reliance upon his Vipassana practice provided a source of support.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jenny Phillips, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* (Onalaska, Washington: Pariyatti Publishing, 2008), pp. 34–35

**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**  
**Group B**

## Edward Johnson



A large man in his thirties, Edward Johnson was sentenced to life for aiding and abetting a triple homicide. He had good reason to question the feasibility of signing up for the Vipassana program. The biggest problem he felt he had

to cope with was his own enormous storehouse of anger. He had received so many disciplinary reports he could “paper his cell walls” with them. He was always “scuffling” with corrections officers, going out of his way to subvert their authority over him. “I had a hatred of the administration,” he said. He had spent approximately six years in segregation, allowed out of his cell for only 45 minutes each day to walk outside. During those years Edward seethed with anger. The more isolated and restricted he was, the angrier he felt. “I didn’t know how to be with myself, how to deal with the monsters inside.”

When his six-year-old daughter died of a head injury after falling off a swing, he withdrew further, struggling to maintain the illusion that his daughter was not really dead....

The roots of Edward’s anger, he now realizes, extend back to his childhood resentment of his father’s absence from the family and his broken promises to come to Edward’s baseball and basketball games. As a child and young man, Edward tried to hold his family together. “I wanted that white picket fence,” he says, but instead remembers sitting in a house without heat or electricity. He was the “prodigal son.” His mother depended on his stability and help in raising his sib-

lings, but as a young teenager Edward began to drink alcohol. Soon he was missing team practices. At 19, while a junior in college on a baseball scholarship, Edward began selling cocaine. After this, he was increasingly drawn into criminal activities. When his mother realized he was being caught up in street gangs, she sent him to Chicago to live with a grandmother; however, the lure of the money from drug sales inexorably pulled Edward in deeper and deeper.

After years in solitary confinement, Edward was released back into the general prison population and he began to try to change. He told some of his associates that he didn’t want to participate in gang activities anymore. He took an anger-management course but felt it just made him suppress his anger. The more he pushed the anger down, the more frightened he became of it. He could sense the buildup of rage inside and didn’t know what he would do if he felt provoked. “I was scared. I didn’t know when the hell it was all going to come up.”

...Relying on his newly honed skills with Anapana and positive feedback from the three guides throughout the long, solitary hours of meditation, Edward began the practice of Vipassana, directing his awareness throughout his body. He was constantly visited by sensations of heat and feelings of urgency. At times he had an overpowering need to get away, to run anywhere and escape from himself.

...When he went back to bed, Edward was again visited by his daughter in a dream, telling him she was OK. The first person he saw in the morning was Bruce, one of the Vipassana teachers, sounding the meditation gong. When he told Bruce about his dream, not yet knowing how to respond to his fresh realization about his daughter’s death, he again received the same reassuring message not to be

**Handout 3 ▶ P.2**  
**Group B**

## Edward Johnson

afraid, that he was doing the right thing by letting the feelings rise to the surface. Buoyed with confidence, Edward felt safe to return to his meditation cushion and sit through the sensations of heat, itching, pain, and grief, knowing that this was exactly what he needed to do. By the eighth day of meditation, after 80 hours of sitting and observing his breath and feeling his sensations as they arose and passed away, Edward said, “I was straight. I had learned the process and let the monsters come on up out of me. Now I feel good, even though I am in prison. You can take all the rest of the prison courses and roll them into one, and they don’t equal Vipassana. I feel so much better. Now I can sit in my cell for hours, calm and peaceful.”

Edward exudes confidence and the resolve to stick to his Vipassana practice and not relapse to his former state—“Big Ed,” full of anger and not to be messed with. However, he realizes there are many hurdles ahead if he is to maintain this practice and all that entails. “I’ve pulled back from my gang activities and now I have to deal with those cats.”

...As Edward enjoys his freedom from bottled-up rage and his newfound self-confidence, he realizes he may be sorely tested in the future by calls or challenges to stand up and fight. There may be limits to his ability to smile and wink at provocations, and he has been mulling all this over and discussing it with his fellow Vipassana students. He is curious about how he will respond if “someone puts his hands on me.” A physical attack, as opposed to a verbal one, “would take it to another level.” As Edward ponders this possibility, his first thought is, “I’ve got to defend myself. No one can just put his hands on me. I don’t care about words; I can put words in my hand and crush them up

and throw them away. But if someone attacks me, I have got to defend myself. At that point, let’s just go in someone’s cell and fight.” On later reflection Edward begins to construct a possible new solution, one that he would never have entertained before the Vipassana course. “Now that I have changed my ways, if a cat hits me in my face, I’ve got to swallow that. I’m going to go in my cell and meditate and deal with my sensations. Let the feelings come out. I’m going to use Anapana to deal with myself.”

Edward has dropped out of active participation in gang life and the public displays of bravado and machismo inherent in fighting. He eschews his former reputation as “Big Ed.” He realizes this dramatic change has left a void in his former place in the gang and raised questions about his strength and manhood. He cried in front of the warden and many of his fellow inmates at the Vipassana graduation. All of this could leave him open to challenge or attack. Yet he maintains that he feels much better, and that he “can breathe again.” Unable to cry at his daughter’s funeral or at his own trial, he now feels and expresses his emotions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Phillips, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* (Onalaska, Washington: Pariyatti Publishing, 2008), pp. 42–47

**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**  
**Group C**

## Benjamin ‘OB’ Oryang



Benjamin Oryang, or OB, as he is called, is a tall young man serving a life sentence. Now in his thirties, OB was born in Uganda to a large, wealthy extended family. He is the youngest of nine children. His father also took another wife,

a normal practice in Uganda, and had seven children by this marriage. OB’s father worked as an engineer for the Ugandan government and also for the World Health Organization.

Throughout OB’s childhood, Uganda was ravaged by brutal tribal conflicts and civil war. He has vivid memories of atrocities he witnessed as a boy. One strong memory is of seeing a man, badly beaten and engulfed in flames from having been set afire by a mob, chasing after their car and screaming for help. “After that, I had nightmares. I would see his face as he ran towards my window.” There were many times that OB’s family sought refuge in the countryside in an effort to escape the violence.

In 1988, when OB was 16, his mother brought her three youngest children, OB and two sisters, to the United States seeking asylum from war-torn Uganda. When they arrived, OB found that his education had already prepared him for college here, and returning to high school would be a waste of time. “I was just lounging around waiting for my immigration status to change so I could go to college. I took some computer classes and a nursing course and several other courses at a junior college. I was accepted at Brigham Young University, but I was arrested before I had the opportunity to go there.”

OB remembers that, during those early years in the United States, he desperately wanted to be accepted. “I was a stupid kid. I wanted to fit in, to be looked up to by people. I wanted to be accepted in this society here.” He began smoking, drinking, and carrying a gun, driving around in the countryside with several friends. “I was wild in the partying sense. I had a friend whose mother had a lot of land in the countryside. We used to go out there and do target practice.” One night while driving around outside Montgomery, someone in his car shot a gun out the window. “One person got killed and one person got seriously injured. I was convicted of murder and have three life sentences plus 50 years. They are to be served consecutively.” The case received a lot of publicity in Alabama. “The media,” OB said, “portrayed me as a ruthless, mindless animal from Africa.”

During the years of his incarceration at Donaldson, OB established himself as a trustworthy and peaceful member of the prison community. As a runner, he was constantly on the go with errands for the administrative staff. He went on to cultivate advanced skills in mindfulness and conflict resolution. He devoted himself to teaching Houses of Healing classes and has led countless numbers of fellow inmates through this meditation-based program. “These classes have given me peace of mind and lots of tolerance. I stay out of trouble, and not everyone can stay out of trouble in here. It is not because I am obedient but because I have put so much effort into my personal development.” Members of the prison staff call for him when there is a threat of violence among inmates. During the Vipassana course he began to realize that he had kept himself busy with people and tasks to avoid slowing down and becoming more aware of his grief.

## Handout 3 ▶ P.2 Benjamin “OB” Oryang Group C

When he heard the early rumors of Vipassana coming to Donaldson, OB was eager to assist and participate. He remembers that it took three days of observing his breath to begin calming his mind and body. He built a throne of meditation cushions to prop himself up to avoid the pain of sitting. For two days he squirmed and fought his body and busy mind as he attempted to feel his breath. On the third day of Anapana his mind calmed down and he was able to focus on the breath. “I became so aware of everything; I was even aware of my breath in my sleep.”

In the middle of the course OB discovered that someone was tying his sandals together whenever he left them outside the meditation area, where no shoes are worn. As the days went by and the prank continued, he became increasingly uneasy. He wondered if he were being ridiculed by a fellow student. He couldn’t push it out of his mind. During the many hours on the meditation cushion, he finally began to meet his bottled-up anger and “the big image” of himself as a “macho man.”

On the eighth day he saw the culprit in the act of tying his sandals. “I found myself getting angry, but I couldn’t accept this. I am the guy who facilitates anger management groups. My image is that I am well-tempered, in control of everything. I wasn’t supposed to feel like this. I was so agitated it took at least 15 minutes on the mat to begin to calm down. Then I started laughing. I was laughing at the guy who did this. I was laughing at myself for taking it so seriously, because I always take things too seriously. Then I realized that maybe I need to learn to relax a little more. Then while I was still laughing, the tears started coming. I have never cried

in prison. Initially I didn’t know why I was crying, but then I began to realize how miserable and lonely I am. I realize now I have been holding on to grief instead of just letting things go. I have always tried to exercise self-control. With Vipassana, I didn’t try to escape from my emotions; I just stayed with them. I was shaking and crying, and tears were rolling down my cheeks. I just stayed there and accepted it for what it was. I know now that that is the reason I couldn’t stop crying. But I wasn’t embarrassed. And that seems so funny now because ordinarily I would be so embarrassed.”

Since that first course OB has maintained his individual practice, encouraged others to keep meditating and, whenever possible, arranged for a group meditation sitting with the Dhamma Brothers.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jenny Phillips, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* (Onalaska, Washington: Pariyatti Publishing, 2008), pp. 50–53



**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**  
**Group D**

## Rick Smith



Rick Smith is in his late forties and has been incarcerated at Donaldson for the past 25 years. He was convicted of capital murder and has a sentence of life without parole. Rick was born in a small town in Alabama. He dropped

out of high school at the age of 16 and worked in a series of construction jobs and in a chicken-processing plant. Always filled with a sense of insecurity about his father's disappearance from his life, Rick easily became involved in drugs and alcohol. He felt increasingly out of control and overwhelmed by his anger and low self-esteem. "The person that I was, was the accumulation of all that woundedness and hurt. I had a good mother, good family. But I had a window of perception that was wounded, which said the world was not treating me right. When you get angry enough, when you get to rage and you get detached, you really don't feel. You've got this place where things are not real." One day Rick walked into a small business and fatally stabbed the woman who was working behind the counter.

For all these years Rick has waged an unending battle to come to terms with what he did that day. He has participated in every available treatment program in prison and sought help from every possible resource. "I have practiced meditation for 22 years. I have a lot more life skills, leadership skills, and coping skills now." Along the way Rick discovered a natural ability for leading groups on men's issues, and he has

been a teacher in the drug recovery program at Donaldson for many years. His sense of humor and rich story-telling talents have given him great success as a teacher.

Still, Rick felt that he had not gone to the depth of the misery resulting from his crime. On the eve of the Vipassana program he fretted about what he would be facing on the mat. "Because of my remorse, I have always wanted to know more about what happened. In fact, my treatment has always centered around me making contact with what I've done. I think one of the things that will come up for me is that my mother and father divorced when I was one year old. I never knew the man. I am hoping Vipassana will help me uncover whole pockets of stuff that I never even got to examine before. I have examined so much about my crime. I don't know if there is more there. But I want to know; I want to make contact with things I never knew before."

During the course Rick confronted his physical and emotional pain. It was so difficult for him to stay still on the mat and not jump and run that he tied himself up with a bed sheet, wrapping it around his legs and back to stabilize himself and prevent shifting and fidgeting. Rick, with his typical humor, referred to this device as his "vipassanator." After the 10 days were over, he felt he had met some of his profound pain and survived with a sense of resolution. "I got down to the pain and loneliness under all the anger and hate. You hear that pain and suffering are two different words but, even though you understand it intellectually, it's not until you start to examine yourself inside that you realize that pain is a fact. The pain of my crime is with me daily; I can't get around it. I try to shake it. I've tried to do everything I know to do. When I sit and make contact



**Handout 3 ▶ P. 2**  
**Group D**

## Rick Smith

with it, I find the suffering part has to do with the meaning I attach to my situation, the things I get caught up in. I thought I knew what the word acceptance meant. During those 10 days I did a lot of moving. I felt like a mad hatter. But I learned a lot about acceptance and tolerance.”

Like many of the Dhamma Brothers, Rick has applied what he learned from Vipassana. At one point, wrongly accused of drug use and sent to solitary confinement, Rick fashioned his own 10-day Vipassana course. To his surprise, the period of imposed seclusion lasted exactly 10 days. The irony of this fact did not escape Rick. Using his daily meditation practice, Rick enriches the programs he teaches with the wisdom he has gained. Although he has health problems and his wife has severe health issues, he has faced these also with equanimity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jenny Phillips, *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* (Onalaska, Washington: Pariyatti Publishing, 2008), pp. 58–60

## Handout 4 ► P.1 Working Deep Within

On the first day of the course the men were awakened by a gong at 4:00 a.m. Throughout the 10 days, this gong, rung by Bruce or Jonathan, would punctuate the silence to announce the strictly timed routines of meditating, eating, taking breaks, and sleeping. That first morning, without a sound, the students filed to their assigned meditation cushions in the “meditation hall” at the far end of the gymnasium, separated from the sleeping area by suspended tarps. The basketball hoops had been covered with white cloth, and all indications of sports activities were hidden from sight. The transformation from gymnasium to monastery was complete. The students sat down to begin their journey inside....

Over the next three days, for 10 hours a day, all of the men were directed in the practice of Anapana meditation, the systematic observation of the breath as it enters and exits the nostrils. Wrapped in blankets, with white knitted prison caps atop their heads, the men sat as much as possible in absolute quiet and stillness. Outside the door to the refuge, normal prison activity swept and swirled up and down the halls. Sounds of shouting, banging, clanking, and jangling only distantly intruded into the cloistered atmosphere. The transformed gymnasium was imbued with an air of reverence and sober work. The students were struck by the unfamiliar silence and by their combined energies as they tried not to move. During those initial three days, they were making the transition from an externally focused, noisy, chaotic, dangerous world to their solitary uncharted worlds within.

Anapana, the ancient Pali word meaning awareness of respiration, is the first important skill taught in a Vipassana course. For three days the student sits and focuses on the area below the nostrils, above the upper lip, noticing the sensations of the breath as it moves in and out of the body. This is bare observation of the natural breath from moment to moment. It is not a technique to change the breath. No use is made of any mantras or visualizations or objects of focus that could soothe the emotions and simplify the task of developing concentration. As one sits, hour after hour, the mind may go wild with thoughts, feelings, and manufactured distractions. Students learn that the breath is an important bridge between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Anapana practice teaches the mind to become calm and sharply focused, and the body to become still. Using this breath observation, the student gradually develops an anchoring skill that can help him face the deeper emotional storms and passions that emerge later. Eventually, with persistence and guidance, the effects of Anapana are realized, and the student is ready to go deeper within.

For many, this was the first time in their lives that they had sat still for any length of time. In this society, sitting still is not a particularly valued skill unless it is in front of a TV or computer. It is even more unusual in a prison, where incessant stimuli—the sights, sounds, and stench—and strong emotions of fear, dread, loss, and grief rarely foster feelings of peace or calm. The men were now facing all their usual preferences and routines, squirming and struggling against their desire to move and escape. They ached for their normal habits and distractions, and many had thoughts of dropping out of the course. These are very common reactions experienced by students in all Vipassana courses.

## Handout 4 ▶ P.2 Working Deep Within

The presence of Rick, Bruce, and Jonathan, the Vipassana teachers, meditating on mats in front of them also helped to hold them there. The three experienced Vipassana practitioners were no longer seen as weird; they were just right there with them, doing exactly what they were instructing the students to do. Vipassana was not a “prisoners’ activity” being imposed on them by those in control. Instead, the three men were modeling and intimately sharing meditation with them, as is done for students in all courses. This ancient inner process was alive and tangible and unfolding right in front of and inside of them, and the students were curious and heartened by what they saw and felt. As time passed they became increasingly intrigued and committed to staying.

In the early days of the course, Anapana developed into a significant life tool for the students, one that they could use in the heat of the moment during a crisis or in a planned and systematic way during times of quiet reflection. It placed at their disposal a powerful link between inner and outer reality, and gave them a map for their inward journey.

On the fourth day, guided by audio instructions, the students started the practice of Vipassana meditation. They began to direct their sharpened awareness systematically throughout the entire body in a prescribed way, observing bodily sensations as they moved their awareness from head to toes and back again. After three days of focusing awareness on the breath in a limited area, this shift to the whole body can be liberating but can also uncover and release strong emotions.

According to Bruce, “With the practice of Vipassana, you begin to realize on an experiential level that there is no separation between the mind and the body. All the past conditioning that we carry with us is really locked in the body. As you observe the sensations, some very unpleasant memories and strong emotions begin to arise, along with a lot of aches and pains. The unlocking of these memories, physical sensations, and emotions produces what we refer to as storms, or waves of reactivity. We guide the student through these storms so they can discover experientially that, regardless of how deep and horrible and painful a storm might be, mentally, physically, and emotionally, everything is constantly changing, arising, and passing away.”

During this turbulent but ultimately healing journey, the student of Vipassana must sit tight and hold on with as much equanimity as possible through the wild unfolding of physical and emotional pain. The relationship between *dukkha*, the pervasive suffering and unsatisfactory nature of life, and *anicca*, the constantly changing, impermanent, ephemeral characteristic of life, is central to the teachings of the Buddha. Through Vipassana this dialectic becomes a personally experienced reality. When a storm passes and calm returns, the wisdom gained from experiencing it out in a more balanced way lends a fresh perspective about the origins of, and the solutions to, one’s own suffering.

In the long, solitary hours of meditation, the students discovered that there are times of bliss and peace when the body seems to dissolve into a mass of vibrations referred to as “free flow.” At other times, the body is wracked with physical and psychic pain. One student, Omar Rahman, recalled that on the fourth day, “I was sitting, wrestling with the pain in my body and trying to figure out a way to be at peace with it.

## Handout 4 ▶ P.3 Working Deep Within

All of a sudden I started shaking all over. This was totally different from my shaking during Anapana. I was sitting on a volcano, trying to ride it, and I refused to get off because I was going somewhere.” Today Omar believes that his powerful mind/body experience of pain was a breakthrough. “It was like I cleaned myself of something. Something deeply buried came up out of me, and now I feel so much better.” According to Jonathan, “After going through an emotional storm with Vipassana, you realize that there is no experience that is going to make you permanently happy. There is no experience that is going to make you permanently sad. Equanimity is achieving this wisdom and accepting everything just as it is from moment to moment.”

After beginning the practice of Vipassana meditation, many days of storms and struggles lay ahead for the students. Right from the start, it became clear to the teachers that these men were exceptional in the level of commitment and fortitude they brought to battle their demons, as well as in their collective desire to cultivate equanimity and wisdom. The three teachers agreed that in teaching and managing regular Vipassana courses, they had not come across more serious and determined students. The inmates seemed to work harder; in fact, they were at times told to back off and ease up on themselves. Many leaped into their meditation with such intensity and gusto that the three guides were concerned that they would become exhausted or overwhelmed, unable to finish the course. They wondered if it was the nature of the setting and situation that drove these students to dig so forcefully. Was a high-security prison more conducive to the training in self-wisdom than freer and more fortunate circumstances?

As the course unfolded, the teachers searched for reasons that explained why these students were so devoted to their new practice. They concluded that it was the students’ pre-existing level of suffering and their search for answers and solutions to the existential predicament of being in prison that led them so strongly into the inner work. In Bruce’s words, “These guys already knew suffering so profoundly and blatantly. They were under no illusion that they were happy. They knew from the start that they were miserable. But they didn’t yet know why they were miserable. Now, through meditation, they began to look at what really enslaved them. They learned to be in the present, to face the present moment at the level of sensations and to accept that moment. Vipassana gave them the tools to face, at a deep level, all that misery inside. And when you really face all that stuff, what is left after the storm is peace and equanimity.”

As the men rode out their storms, hour after hour, the teachers watched over them. At night from “the bridge” they could look down on the sleeping area, two rows of mattresses on the floor separated by bedsheets strung on wires. They could see at a glance whether everyone was asleep. Some men experienced insomnia or nightmares. Others had diarrhea as their intestinal systems adapted to the first fruit and dairy products they had had since entering prison years earlier. (Since inmates at Donaldson had at one time used fruit to manufacture “julep,” an alcoholic beverage, it was no longer allowed in the prison diet.) Others were initially constipated from the long hours of sitting. No matter what struggles arose, the three teachers found treatments and relief in order to comfort the students, thereby allowing them to devote their attention to the inner work.

## Handout 4 ► P.4 Working Deep Within

During the middle days of the course, as emotions and passions surface, ordinary events of daily life on the course can become saturated with significance. A simple object or occurrence can unlock waves of reactivity and reverberate throughout the hours and days of meditation. Usually this was privately played out on a solitary meditation cushion. If emotions became too strong to continue with the practice of Vipassana, the students were instructed to return to the more grounding Anapana meditation. At times other students and staff noticed sobs, grimaces, or a sudden flight from the meditation hall to the bathroom or sleeping area. Bruce or Jonathan sometimes needed to guide and encourage a distressed student back to the meditation mat with helpful reminders about the practice: “The process is working. Work with Anapana for some time. Welcome your stuff coming up.” Time after time these simple, whispered reassuring encounters reset the course for the students. They were told, in the heat and anguish of storms of feeling, that those same intense emotions that they had avoided and warded off over a lifetime were in fact the gateway to their peace and happiness. These gentle instructions became crystallized moments of learning that enabled them to sit still and persist in their work.

All 20 students have their own Vipassana stories, tales of storms and intense perseverance followed by individual resolution and realization. Woven through these tales are the common patterns and themes of the Vipassana process. Their personal experiences became odysseys of valor. Prison is an everyday battleground fraught with drama and high-stake quests. In Vipassana, the students were afforded a brief reprieve from the chaos and pandemonium of incarceration. Away from their usual external enemies, locked inside the gymnasium and seated on their meditation mats, they faced the most challenging battles of all.

Within this silent refuge there grew an intense shared devotion and collectivity that knit everyone together. Prison normally isolates and alienates one from another. Solidarity was a fresh experience for the students, strengthening their receptivity and dogged commitment to the course. Each individual was doing his own work alone in the crowd. Yet the group was a fraternity in the making, a brotherhood of experience, intensely individual as far as each man’s life and history went but shared at a deeper level by their mutual observation of the timeless and universal truths of impermanence and suffering.

—Jenny Phillips

*Letters from the Dhamma Brothers, pp. 25–31*

# Prison Writing

## Enduring Understandings:

- Writing by prisoners comes in many forms and is often used to persuade or inform.
- All individuals, no matter their situation, are able to contribute to our understanding of our society and its modes of expression.

## Essential Questions:

- What stereotypes do we have about prisoners and prisons? How did we come to develop these stereotypes?
- In what forms do prisoners choose to write?
- What do prisoners choose to write about?
- What is the larger purpose of prisoners' writings (and personal writing in general)?
- How do the writings of the Dhamma Brothers enhance students' understanding of the prisoners' experiences shown in the film?

## Notes to the Teacher:

Imprisoned writers provide a unique perspective to the world of literature. In the introduction to the book *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*, Lucia Meijer, a former administrator at the North Rehabilitation Facility in King County, Washington, says that the Dhamma Brothers' letters have shown "a newfound compassion toward fellow inmates, a motivation to participate constructively in a difficult environment, a desire to give, tolerance of harsh conditions and arbitrary rules, a willingness to face unbearable memories."

*The Dhamma Brothers* film shows the journey of this small group of prisoners. During and after their Vipassana course, they became deeply aware of their past, and were able to feel compassion both for themselves and for others. Filmmaker Jenny Phillips published a collection of their letters, and the letters stand as a testament to the men's newfound ability to reflect on their increased awareness of their position. Some of these letters have been grouped in this lesson, supplemented with writing from the PEN Prison Writing Contest and an excerpt from Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, written while he served time in Folsom State Prison in California.

In Part One, students write briefly about their prior conceptions of incarcerated individuals; this is an informal assignment meant to prepare the students for the discussion to follow. (Be prepared for the possibility that some students may, in fact, have had experience visiting a prison or even being incarcerated.) They then discuss the source of these ideas. You can lead students to think of shows and movies that depict life inside prisons. Cable television channels have introduced a number of fictional and reality television shows over the past few years (e.g., *Prison Break*, *Jail*, *Locked Up Abroad*, *Alcatraz*, *Lockdown*, *America's Hardest Prisons*).

Students next read and discuss a poem by one of the Dhamma Brothers in which he describes the experience of waking up each morning in prison. As a conclusion to the first activity, students read an essay about prison poets by José Boner and respond in a journal entry. The essay comes from the Prison Writing Project of the American PEN Center, the U.S. chapter of International PEN, an organization founded to encourage (and sometimes defend) writers in many different situations. You can locate a copy of this essay at the PEN Center site at <http://www.pen.org/nonfiction-essay/prison-poets>. You may wish to make photocopies or have students read the essay online.

For Part Two, you will use a modified literary circle approach with student groups. In forming the groups, consider the length of the various letters on **HANDOUT 2** and the reading and processing speeds of your students; Group A has the shortest letters, Group D the longest. The letters are also available in an audio version at the website for the film beginning at <http://dhammabrothers.com/LettersGrady.htm>; students can locate their letters under the author's name and click the audio button to listen to them. After each group has designated a discussion leader, two scribes, and two presenters, give discussion leaders a copy of **HANDOUT 3: GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS** to help them ask questions that appropriately steer their group's conversation. Each scribe will take notes on the discussion of one of the letters. (These notes should be collected after the session.) Each presenter will summarize the group's discussion of one of the letters. The activity concludes with a journal entry comparing the letters.

Parts Three and Four introduce students to additional prison writings from one of the Dhamma Brothers and from the activist Eldridge Cleaver (1935–1998). Cleaver studied the works of Karl Marx, Malcolm X, Thomas Paine, and others while in prison and became a committed revolutionary. He joined the Black Panthers and was charged with attempted murder in the late 1960s; he fled the country, eventually returned, and was tried for assault. His book *Soul on Ice* is both a prison memoir and a collection of essays on race relations in America. The concluding assignment and extension ideas give students the opportunity to develop their own reflective essays. Cleaver's essay can be found at <http://www.randomhouse.com/book/28698/soul-on-ice-by-eldridge-cleaver#excerpt>.

Note: Lesson 8 contains a number of hands-on meditation activities. You may wish to choose one of these as a conclusion to this lesson.



## STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

#### LANGUAGE ARTS

##### STANDARD 1. USES THE GENERAL SKILLS AND STRATEGIES OF THE WRITING PROCESS

###### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

8. Writes fictional, biographical, autobiographical, and observational narrative compositions (e.g., establishes a fluent progression of experiences or events; evaluates the significance of the incident; provides a specific setting for scenes and incidents; provides supporting descriptive detail [specific names for people, objects, and places; visual details of scenes, objects, and places; descriptions of sounds, smells, specific actions, movements, and gestures; the interior monologue or feelings of the characters]; paces the actions to accommodate time or mood changes; creates a unifying theme or tone; uses literary devices to enhance style and tone; provides a conclusion that reflects upon the progression and resolution of the narrative)

##### STANDARD 5. USES THE GENERAL SKILLS AND STRATEGIES OF THE READING PROCESS

###### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

4. Understands writing techniques used to influence the reader and accomplish an author's purpose (e.g., organizational patterns, figures of speech, tone, literary and technical language, formal and informal language, narrative perspective, rhetoric, refinement of key terms)
5. Understands influences on a reader's response to a text (e.g., personal experiences and values; perspective shaped by age, gender, class, or nationality)
6. Understands the philosophical assumptions and basic beliefs underlying an author's work (e.g., point of view, attitude, and values conveyed by specific language; clarity and consistency of political assumptions)

##### STANDARD 6. USES SKILLS AND STRATEGIES TO READ A VARIETY OF LITERARY TEXTS

###### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

1. Reads a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature)
8. Understands relationships between literature and its historical period, culture, and society (e.g., influence of historical context on form, style, and point of view; influence of literature on political events; social influences on author's description of characters, plot, and setting; how writer's represent and reveal their cultures and traditions)



**COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS »  
READING: LITERATURE » GRADES 11–12**

**RL.11–12.3.** Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

**RL.11–12.4.** Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

**RL.11–12.5.** Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

**RL.11–12.6.** Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

**COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS »  
WRITING » GRADES 11–12**

**W.11–12.2.** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**W.11–12.3.** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

**W.11–12.4.** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**Duration of the Lesson:**

Four 45–60 minute class sessions

**Assessment:**

Discussion  
Group discussion notes and presentation  
Journal entries  
Personal essay

**Materials:**

Student journals  
Pen and paper for each student  
**HANDOUT 1:** The Awakened Giant  
“Prison Poets,” by José Boner, at  
<http://www.pen.org/nonfiction-essay/prison-poets>  
**HANDOUT 2:** [Letters From the Dhamma Brothers]  
**HANDOUT 3:** Guidelines for Discussion Leaders  
**HANDOUT 4:** The Prison Rabbit

## Procedure

### PART ONE: Examining Our Stereotypes

1. Ask students to write for five minutes expressing their attitudes about prisoners before they viewed the film *The Dhamma Brothers*. What did they expect the prisoners to look like? To sound like? To say? Then ask a few students to share the ideas in their reflective writing.
2. After students share their writing, lead a discussion to consider their ideas further. Include some of the following questions:
  - a. Where do their stereotypes about prisoners originate?
  - b. Where do their concepts of prisons originate?
  - c. How are these individuals portrayed in popular culture?
  - d. How are the institutions portrayed in popular media?
  - e. How do the news media influence these images?
3. Explain to students that for the purposes of this discussion, “prison writing” will refer to writing by prisoners. Tell them that the power of suffering and the deprivations of imprisonment are the grist for the mill of prison writing. Many prison writers, as the students will see in the letters, have attained extraordinary wisdom. This is why the Dhamma Brothers’ deep inner work and their writings are so valuable and informative for all of us living in freedom.
4. From this discussion, transition into a discussion of students’ expectations about prison writing.
  - a. Why would prisoners write?
  - b. In what genre is this writing likely to fall?
  - c. Who do you think is the intended audience of imprisoned writers?
  - d. What sort of content would you expect in this writing?
5. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: THE AWAKENED GIANT**. Read it aloud once and then have the students read it through again silently and answer the questions that follow the poem. After they have had time to organize their ideas, conduct a class discussion about the poem using the questions as guidelines.

#### Suggested answers:

- a. The prison is huge, made of concrete and steel; like a giant, it swallows men. Its eyes are constantly shining fluorescent lights; its mouth is the megaphone that announces the start of the day.
- b. They are “desperate” and “broken,” feeling “pain and sorrow”; they are at the giant’s mercy.
- c. Students will have different choices; be sure they explain the impact of the words or images they choose.
- d. The tone is one of sadness and despair. The poet feels hopeless and trapped by the “giant.”

6. For homework, have students read the essay “Prison Poets” by José Boner (See Notes to the Teacher) and write a formal journal entry on this piece, answering any or all of the following questions:
  - a. In a single sentence, summarize Boner’s essay.
  - b. Which words or imagery of Boner’s do you find the most striking? Why?
  - c. Who do you think are Boner’s intended readers for this piece?
  - d. Based on Boner’s description of the prison poet, what would you expect such a poet to write about?
  - e. To what extent does Boner’s essay fit your expectations and the expectations of your classmates about prison writing?

#### **PART TWO:** Reading the Dhamma Brothers’ Letters

1. Split students into four groups. Give the members of each group copies of the appropriate section of **HANDOUT 2: LETTERS FROM THE DHAMMA BROTHERS**. Explain the roles of discussion leader, scribe, and presenters using information from Notes to the Teacher. Then instruct each group to designate a discussion leader, two scribes, and two presenters. (These roles can be combined if there are not enough students in each group.) Give each discussion leader a copy of **HANDOUT 3: GUIDELINES FOR DISCUSSION LEADERS** and give them time to look it over. Remind students that because these are letters transcribed verbatim, there may be occasional spelling or grammar errors that would not ordinarily appear in print. Explain to students that the writers of these highly personal letters gave Jenny Phillips permission to publish them and share them with others.

2. Have students read and discuss their assigned letters, one at a time, with the discussion leaders using the handout to facilitate discussion. At the end of the discussion, give each group five minutes to present the main points of both of their letters to the whole class.
3. Distribute **HANDOUT 4: THE PRISON RABBIT** and instruct students to read it in preparation for the next day’s discussion.

#### **PART THREE:** The Prison Rabbit

1. After students have read **HANDOUT 4: THE PRISON RABBIT**, lead them in a discussion comparing the text with the other readings. Some possible discussion questions:
  - a. Why does John describe the scene of the prison as a “continuous flux of noise” in the second paragraph?
  - b. What does John remember most about the first rabbit?
  - c. What evidence do you see of John’s meditation practices in his descriptions?
  - d. How does John’s description of the rabbit in the prison yard reflect his personal situation?
  - e. What does John mean by “a prisoner from ignorance of youth”?
  - f. How would John describe “the way things are”?
  - g. What do readers gain from John’s reflection at the end of the letter?
2. For homework, have students read the excerpt from Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* that is indicated in the Notes to the Teacher.

## PART FOUR: Evaluating Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*

1. After students have read the excerpt from *Soul on Ice*, have them answer some or all of the following questions in their journals:

- a. Reread Cleaver's opening three sentences.  
Describe the effect Cleaver's way of opening his essay has on the reader.
- b. Why does Cleaver include alternative openings for the essay in his second paragraph?
- c. In the fourth paragraph, Cleaver transitions from the first person singular to the first person plural to the second person. Why does he make these transitions?
- d. What role does sleep play in Cleaver's understanding?
- e. Do you agree with Cleaver's implication that a man is free if he is not in prison, the Army, a monastery, a hospital, a spaceship, or a submarine? Why, or why not?
- f. How does Cleaver's place in prison affect his feelings for his lawyer?
- g. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay "Self-Reliance," "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." Do you think Cleaver would agree with Emerson? Highlight or underline specific examples in Cleaver's essay that suggest he would or would not.

2. Lead a discussion in which students share their answers to some of these questions.
3. Next, ask students to compare Cleaver's writing to the letters they read from *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*.
4. Break students into small groups (or simply complete this as a class if you are pressed for time) and ask each group to write a list of characteristics of prison writing.
5. Have groups come together to compare their lists.

**ASSIGNMENT:** As a culminating assignment, students will write a personal essay that uses some of the techniques they have recently studied. The piece, like the prison writing they have read, should use a moment, object, or person from their experience to comment on themselves or their societies. Choose one of the following topics, or allow students to choose:

- a. Think of a specific experience with an item or person that had a great impact on your understanding of yourself or your place in the world. Write an essay that describes both this object and its impact (or the person and his or her effect).
- b. Writers serving a prison sentence obviously look at American society and its issues through a lens different from that of most other authors. Think of an issue on which you carry a unique perspective. In a personal essay, describe your unique position and its influence on your view of one specific aspect of society.

### Possible Extensions:

1. There are many texts that could supplement this lesson. The two most obvious—Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”— are particularly valuable but don’t appear in this lesson, simply because of the wealth of secondary sources readily available on each.
2. Have each student read the letters of the particular prisoner each followed throughout the film viewing. The full text of *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers* by Jenny Phillips provides letters from, and interviews with, many inmates.
3. Have students imagine a time when they couldn’t talk to someone they wanted to or didn’t say something to someone that they believe they should have said. Ask them to write a letter to that person addressing these topics.

Handout 1

# The Awakened Giant

**Directions:**

Read the following poem by Dhamma Brother Ricky Troy Bridges. Answer the questions below in preparation for a class discussion.

This prison—  
A concrete and steel giant  
Awakens early—rudely  
Each morning

When the giant blinks  
Its cruel eyes  
Fluorescent lights  
Ignite

Drowning the sweetness  
Of the night's dreams  
With the harsh reality  
Of light

Exposing desperate  
And broken men  
Quietly wrapped  
In pain and sorrow

The giant opens  
Its megaphone mouth  
And the words spill forth  
“Count Time!”

Caretakers dressed in blue  
Arrive in groups of three  
Radios cackling  
Their static garble

They count their charges  
In heaps where they lay  
And the awakened giant  
Begins another day.

- a. Explain the ways in which the prison seems like a giant to the author.
- b. How does he describe the men in the prison?
- c. What words or images do you find most effective? Why?
- d. What words could you use to describe the tone of this poem? How do you think the poet feels about living in prison?

**Handout 2 ▶ P.1**  
**Group A**

## Letter One

**Grady Bankhead**

February 14, 2005

Dear Jenny,

I know it's been a long time since you heard from me. I've meant to write several times, and I don't know why I haven't. Hope you know just because I haven't wrote doesn't mean that you are forgotten because that could never happen.

In the time that you haven't heard from me, life & death has gone on. I've had the rest of my family members pass away. My daughter Brandy in Mobile was murdered. I know how it feels on both sides now. One thing it did do was confirm my beliefs on capital punishment and excessive stays in prison. I haven't been nor am I now angry with the man that did it. So many people getting killed every day, it's a wonder that it hasn't touched myself or a loved one before now. When it happened, I was raw inside for a week or so and as it eased I was able to talk about it. So I'm okay -----

As to more pleasant things, still meditating. It really helped me to stay calm through all that has happened... So I'm surviving. Of course I'd love to have someone outside of here to share things with but as of now there's no one and I guess that's really all right for now. It doesn't cause the sadness that I used to feel.

I have friends in here that are like family to me and some that care that are out of here of which of course you're included. So I guess I have caught you up to date and I just keep trucking on but with a lot more calm in my life.

Hope to hear from you. Take care.

With love,  
Grady

**Handout 2 ▶ P.2**  
**Group A**

## Letter Two

**Benjamin “OB” Oryang**

June 26, 2002

Dear Jenny,

This evening I had some fun with a few of my dhamma brothers. During the sitting at about 3:00 p.m., something very heavy and cold landed on my arm. I opened my eyes in surprise, and got even more surprised to discover that the culprit was a regular looking fly. It continued to crawl across my bald head, face and arms through the sitting, and I was totally amazed at how heavy it seemed to be. To myself, I named the different body sensations I was experiencing at the time: heat sensations, sound sensations, fly sensations (very new to me) and several more. Immediately after the sitting, everyone started complaining, at the same time, about the fly: There was actually only one fly in the group room. As it turns out one fly had terrorized eight hardened prisoners for a whole hour. Even though we didn't kill it, we spoke of several things which could be done to it. We then started wondering about how a fly lands on a ceiling. Have you ever looked up on a ceiling and seen a fly perched upside down? How did it land there? Did it fly upside down in order to get there?

We discussed fly issues for over ten minutes. Afterwards, we began to question our own states of mind for wondering so much and taking the fly so seriously. We still couldn't figure out how flies land on ceilings.

With the fly and our craziness aside, things here are continuing about as would be expected. And even though the average number of Vipassana meditators coming to each sitting is down to five or six, all the guys (both old and new students) are very supportive of each other. I have tried not to take any lead role concerning the sittings, hoping that this would encourage the guys to get more involved, but it is now time I took some action to try and get all my dhamma brothers actively involved with the group sittings, etc. Of course, you were right to think it is difficult to maintain the practice without some outside help. There are quite a few things which Dr. Marshall is incapable of doing in her capacity as a staff psychologist here. Actually, it is left up to us guys to make things happen; you guys have all done your parts to the fullest.

By the way, the Houses of Healing class and all the other groups are going on pretty well. This keeps me so busy, but helps to pass the time constructively.

Your friend,  
OB



**Handout 2 ▶ P.3**  
**Group B**

## Letter One

**Michael Carpenter**

June 24, 2003

Jenny,

John told me you are going through your second Vipassana. I guess most people would wish you a wonderful experience. Having gone through it though, I know there's not much wonderful about it. It's hard, painful, and emotionally devastating. But after we see the results, we can realize how wonderful it was to be able to experience ourselves at the rawist. I remember my first day of actual Vipassana meditation. I started crying about 25 minutes in to it and had to stop and sit there crying until the sitting was over. As soon as it was, I jumped up and ran to my bed, pulling a blanket over me crying. A few seconds later, Bruce tapped me. I looked at him and he asked "Had a hard one?" I replied, "Yes" with a smile. Then he smiled and said "Good!" and walked away. It made me so angry. I felt how could someone show so little compassion. I cried for 3 days. But afterward I realized what Bruce meant and the next time I saw him I had to thank him.

So, I hope you have very hard sittings and hope you're able to get so much more out of it. I learned so much about myself in the one Vipassana I'm rather envious of you going into your second. I hope I have that chance soon.

Know you're in our thoughts, and we send you hope and metta to get through.

Love,  
Michael

Handout 2 ► P. 4  
Group B

## Letter Two

**John W. Johnson**

July 21, 2002

Dear Bruce,

Greetings to each of y'all—our precious Dhamma family. Within this mailing you will find a bookmark I made around three years ago. It is my wish for you to have it.

The items contained therein were collected at different times . . . from many different areas of the yard grounds at Donaldson. During my duties as a maintenance worker my job took me throughout many areas of this compound. As a meditator these items were part of the observations that sprang up to my attention. It was an awakening process to the natural beauty of nature that surrounded one even in a prison setting. It was the start for me seeking a cultivation of my meditation practice.

Over the years this book mark has been an aide to me. It has brought me to my simple awareness of nature. It has helped me mark a point of concentration . . . to the pages of some of the wonderful books I read over the years. Most of these books were written insights of people of the past who were on a path of awakening. These insights of people I read about, and their experiences, became a part of my consciousness. Of course these mental images were only a process obtained in my imagination. I have since come to understand it was like the saying, “counting the sheep of another’s herd.”

Now that I have a practice that offers a direct path to awakening myself and my other Dhamma brothers... [we] are realizing insight from our own experiential level of consciousness. We are greatly appreciative. We acknowledge your compassion.

The guidance offered by Goenkaji during the May visit still resonates. The following are a few areas of my practice:

I meditate at least twice a day. Since our loss of space to serve as Dhamma meditation hall, I practice at my living area. Sometimes three to four times a day. Going deep too.

As a community service I am servicing the ice machines. I no longer work maintenance, but saw a need to insure the compound had plenty of ice during the hot summer months. Ice brings happiness. It has been a rough experience.

I no longer support the prison contraband market. [This includes] food from the chow hall and any other stolen items from different departments, such as ink pens, soap, etc.

Last week I had an interesting dream about being around people I had never been around before. We meditated together.

**Handout 2 ▶ P.5**  
**Group B**

## Letter Two

Later I held my arms out and these people joined in with me shoulder to shoulder with our arms outstretched. I felt a sense of compassion. I think it was a metta experience in my dream stage of sleep. There were men and women in this sweet dream. I awoke very happy.

So this is an update. I guess some of the other Dhamma brothers here are keeping their practice going. I do not know for sure.

Do know that I will continue. “The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering,” the book by Bhikkhu Bodhi, has been very helpful.

Your letter in the newsletter made everyone come together for a while. This was good. Also, your letter to us later was handed out on the day we lost the privilege to meditate at a central location. Your compassion and insight helped us through a rough time. I want you to know this.

*John*

**Handout 2 ▶ P.6**  
**Group C**

## Letter One

**Willie Carroll**

April 27, 2005

“Vipassana For Me”

Having done almost 23 1/2 years in the Alabama Prison system—where each day I’ve lived not wanting to die but aware that my behavior was in fact a death sentence. I wanted rehabilitation over a whole lot of defects in my life. My attitude for one, my sense of respect for others was low—even though I sincerely believed in God—I still didn’t have what I needed to live peacefully regardless of conditions—(prison). I sought the help of Dr. Ron Cavanaugh who offered Mental Health classes along with Dr. Marshall. These classes offered me information that led me into drug treatment. I entered the Crime Bill Program around 1998 and has been involved since that time. I was invited to watch a Vipassana film shot over in one of the units in Drug treatment [*Changing from Inside*, actually filmed at NRF, Seattle]. Seeing the spiritual enchantment on lost souls such as I—crying and smiling—really brought a ray of hope within me—it also made me want to experience Vipassana.

In 2002 of May—I along with eighteen other prisoners—met Jenny, Rick, Bruce, and Jonathan—we (prisoners) was interviewed—we agreed to take on ten days of total silence in a gym here at the prison. At first I was feeling a little fear—I was scared for real. Day one, I spent trying to relax and get some inner strength together to avoid quitting. Day two was the same—Day three, I drifted back into my beginnings—childhood, teenage times—all that I’d avoided thinking of refused to go away—I even tried to dream—my thoughts refused to play the game I wanted it to play—this was going to happen no matter what. I was going to see me, deal with me, no matter what. Day four and five was spent in so much pain. My body sweated—my spirit became broken. I found myself seeking to be forgiven; my only desire was to have God help me away from so many painful memories. Meditating day in and out in seclusion—was something like standing before God telling him everything I’d done, and genuinely being sorry for it. All my past surfaced—the guilt—the shame, the love, the moments of anger—At times I really needed to talk to Jonathan or Bruce because I felt burdened so heavy that I’d break my silence.

**Handout 2 ▶ P.7**  
**Group C**

## Letter One

Though having people there for me to reach out to—nevertheless—I was alone. Day six, having learned to manage and accept my emotions for what they really was—I gained strength to face myself and to learn more of myself. Never before had I ever experienced anything like this. I’m still deeply impressed by Vipassana...My remaining days—seven to ten—I spent meditating—rehabilitating my total being. I entered Day one with an attitude of Superman and left feeling free—but afraid of hearing my past confront me. However, I’ve learned to work Vipassana meditation daily—it provides me serenity at the beginning and ending of my day. I’ve learned to greet life on simpler terms. Being an addict of drug usage—a “Recovery”ing Addict—with the twelve step program and practicing the teachings of meditation—I’m able to pray better—see Life better—and to Love Life on a higher level of respect—In all aspects...my experience I can’t explain enough to anyone—other than to say—I truly value that experience more than any ever that I’ve experienced before.

“The difference Vipassana has given me”

First off—taking the ten-day course was a great step taken for me. Never before had I attempted to become a participant in any meditation—especially not for ten days of total silence. Before entering the course, I could barely put up with anybody else’s attitude different from mines. To get my point across in my ill attempts for a solution if words couldn’t find peace, I’d force fights. Vipassana has provided me with the tool to endure a whole lot and then some. I can now talk to the worse of attitudes and still keep my composure—I can now be human to myself and others. I’m not cured of my lack of knowledge but this experience has allowed me room to grow and to respect my growth. “No matter where I go, there I am,” is one of the most profound discoveries about my being that I’ll ever realize. Never will I forget what I went through in those ten days—the teachings nor the pain of learning will I ever forget.

The experience was a very rewarding blessing that no words can express. The changes within me I witness daily in my dealings with others and myself. And they’re appreciated deeply—the difference Vipassana made was life instead of death to a dying man.

Willie Carroll Jr.

Handout 2 ▶ P.8  
Group C

## Letter Two

**John W. Johnson**

March 13, 2003

The Way it is—Doing Time Doing Vipassana

The little booklet “Guidelines for Practicing Vipassana Meditation” given to me after the course has been intensely utilized. The information is very practical and useful to me a new student to become an old, serious student.

The Frequently Used Terms section has often opened the path for me—even when I may be going through some form of hindrance.

An area of the booklet that I have spent a considerable amount of time contemplating is the three kinds of wisdom:

- Wisdom gained by listening to others
- Intellectual, analytical understanding
- Wisdom based on direct personal experience

What I do is, I remember how my life experience is in a constant flux of change. This is wonderful now that I can experience change without fear and am learning the power of well-being by observing letting go of defilements.

I have explored how *pañña* (wisdom) is a part of my day. I examine the way *pañña* has been a part of my personal experience on the direct spectrum. It is part of my questioning of what I apprehend to be my own experiential reality. Otherwise, why practice Vipassana . . . one could just continue as a blind being. I guess once the blind see, there is no going back.

One of the ways I do battle with rebellious cravings and gain *bhavana-maya pañña* (experiential wisdom) with my everyday walking around practice, is to face my ‘habitual attachments’ for what they are, when they arise.

Example: Food—Pleasure craving for sweet snack knowing I have in my locker box the object of my craving and not reacting by eating it. I have been doing this with *adhitthana* (strong determination) for the past year. This practice has also been useful with other cravings that arise too.

Another example: *dosa* (aversion)

At the five gallon coffee pot in our dorm we have a mop pail to catch the water drop-off. People have a habit of throwing waste in the pail; you know paper from sugar packs, soup tops, etc. No one wants to dump this pail because it looks horrifying with yucky stuff. Everyone complains about it—but no one wants to take charge to keep it empty of dirty water & junk. I even would wonder why no one would empty it before it fills the brim.

I finally thought . . . what am I doing?? Where is this aversion taking me?

Handout 2 ▶ P.9  
Group C

## Letter Two

Now each day I empty it. I watch other aversions that arise in my day and do what I [need to, to address each] mental defilement. This form of walking around practice has helped me experience liberation in many other situations that arise in my dorm.

Prisoners are greatly accustomed to certain patterns of behavior. This is where *moha* (ignorance) comes into play. Unconsciously, we prefer the familiarity of chaos and the suffering in our lives. Even after cutting through the intense, habitual and occupying attachments we saw at a ten-day course, peace still appears to be a part of uncertainty.

For me it has not been easy. What continues is I am a very curious person by nature. By being able to gain from a direct personal experience a deepening awareness of the Dhamma as truth to the way things are at this moment—keeps me willing to continue this Vipassana practice. I look at how this training is awakening me to being human.

After years of being a slave to likes & dislikes, it is very interesting flowing with Dhamma—even while doing life without parole.

John

**Handout 2 ▶ P. 10**  
**Group D**

## Letter One

**Omar Rahman**

[Undated]

Dear Jonathan,

There was a period in my life [when] I learned more about myself from Buddhist writers than I did from Islamic writers, specifically in regards to the emotional interior. I wanted a map of that place. Although Islamic thought places a major emphasis on human compassion, human kindness and love, this emphasis among the writers has appeared more doctrinal and intellectual. However, Buddhist writings on the same subject matter were more experiential in tone and substance in that, instead of just defining what compassion, kindness or forgiveness is, those writings describe what they feel like.

When talking about the emotional well being of a person, from Islamic writers I get a table of contents and from the Buddhist writers I learn what those contents feel like.

Although Islam has given me a positive in terms of how I perceive reality and how I perceive myself, yet there were emotional issues that were not being resolved that I wanted information about.

I wanted to know where all my anger was coming from. Why was I so irritated? Why were there long periods of emotional emptiness in my life? Why am I so hung up on this or crave that, obsessed with this or stuck on that? I wanted information that would show me where I was on the interior landscape, how I got there and how to navigate that landscape.

Islam does light a path through the interior landscape of the human experience; however, I have not encountered Islamic writers who illuminate the details of that landscape as [have] Buddhist writers. One other quality of Buddhist writers that has been a benefit to me is the inclusion of feeling as a faculty of how one can know and understand one's experience. This was important to me because knowing through rational thought alone had not taken me the final mile to where my issues were. But learning how to feel where I was, then learning how to identify what I was feeling and why I was feeling as I did paved the way for me being able to manage my life in a much more skillful way.

Heretofore I was without these bearings, markers, directions and insights. Most of my emotional sufferings have diminished or I know more about why I was suffering because of what I have learned through Buddhist teachings and practices.

Because of Vipassana I now see dimensions of Islam in ways I hadn't before. One example is metta. I was blown away by the "practice of feeling others, of caring about the suffering of others, and caring about the happiness of others." The idea of being able to enlarge this capacity within myself through practice had eluded me. What was so startling about it to me was that I'd been reading year in year out the same thing in my Qur'anic studies and studies on the



**Handout 2 ▶ P. 11**  
**Group D**

## Letter One

teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad. Case in point, there is a verse in the Qur'an that describes a sincere Muslim. It includes all the required religious practices, however these practices are mentioned after it is stated how important it is to care about the orphan, the indigent or the homeless people who are suffering. Throughout the Qur'an caring about those who are suffering is tied to identity. So while being taught metta I said to myself, "Whoa, your book has been telling you this for years, Omar, but you are just now getting it." Then there is the statement by Prophet Muhammad that a good Muslim desires for others what he desires for himself which echoed in my mind when I was sharing my love, my peace and my happiness with all beings. There was another time when a man asked Prophet Muhammad who among them was the best Muslim. He answered, "The best of you are those who are most kind to their wives." Not most knowledgeable mind you, nor most perfect in prayers or other religious acts, but who expressed the most kindness. What he was saying didn't fully touch me until Vipassana increased my awareness of the value of loving kindness. One night during the Vipassana course, before I fell asleep, I said to myself, "Omar, Buddha has made you a better Muslim."

During the Vipassana course, I was fortunate to be able to develop strong determination in my sitting meditation. As a consequence, I was able to develop strong determination in my observance of my prayers. I must admit that at the close of the Vipassana course, my observance in my meditation was keener than what my observance had been in my prayers. Realizing this, I began to bring that same quality of mindfulness and determination to my prayers.

As an Imam and having taken the Vipassana course, I began to emphasize the importance of being observant and attentive. For instance, the Qur'an constantly mentions the importance of being mindful and observant of what is in the heart. Prior to the Vipassana course, these were words of wisdom. After Vipassana these words became a practice. Also I constantly remind those I talk to how valuable and important it is to be able to direct our attention to what others are feeling and experiencing. I try to instill a sense of value on caring about others. Now, I am a much more tolerant, patient, and forgiving person in my relationships. I have shared what I have experienced in Vipassana with other Muslims. I have related how meaningful the experience is to me and how grateful I am for being able to have taken the course. I try to give other Muslims a "feel" of my experience and what I have learned so that they may have a reference to base their decision of whether they would like to take the course.

**Handout 2 ▶ P. 12**  
**Group D**

## Letter One

My devotion to Islam grew out of how Islam helped me to become conscious of how valuable I am as a person. I come out of a family and community that were beset with the mental and emotional conditionings and patterns of behavior that accompany low personal esteem and low personal worth. Vipassana directed my attention to the sense of basic goodness of all human beings and this resonated with the sense of value [that] Islam enlightened.

I believe there is a psycho-emotional state underlying the African-American experience that manifests a “something is wrong with me” condition. The Dhamma can be a source of healing for this condition. Dhamma teachers who are aware of this existing condition can be very effective by emphasizing those aspects of Dhamma that relate to personal worth.

Metta,  
Omar

**Handout 2 ▶ P. 13**  
**Group D**

## Letter Two

**Johnny Mack Young**

February 9, 2006

Dear Jenny,

I was watching Mrs. Martin Luther King's funeral and when her daughter Bernice spoke over her casket, a resident setting next to me asked what was wrong. It was only then that I noticed tears freely flowing down my cheeks. I told him that since I've been taking this class MAKING PEACE WITH YOUR PAST, I've become overly sensitive. I also told him that I was a little concerned over his sudden sense of empathy. Being in treatment over six years, I've acquired tools to dissect my behavior and recognized the tears as the product of emotional sickness.

I meditated for three plus hours and went deeper into myself than ever before. I experienced a vision where it was not Bernice standing in front of the casket but me. It was not Mrs. King in the casket but my mother. I couldn't stop the tears and had to stop my meditation.

I first went to prison in 1965 when I was fifteen years of age with a three-year sentence, during which I'd gotten stabbed twice and had stabbed seven people. I'd turned into a hard-core man-child in a violent world where a show of any sign of weakness and you became a victim.

My mother died in 1968, a couple of months before my release. I was allowed to go to the funeral, hands cuffed behind my back and legs shackled, with two white prison guards. The Alabama prison system was still racially segregated at the time and there were no blacks working in such

positions. If they had been allowed such jobs they would have had to guard white prisoners and that just wasn't going to happen in the segregated south. There I stood in front of the casket, looking at my mother's unsmiling face in an all Black church with two white guards standing behind me. I didn't know at the time, but it was anger that allowed me to show no emotions, only bitterness. As the years passed, I buried the emotional grief of my mother passing so deep and so quick that I've never felt anything. I kept piling stuff on top of my grief until death became my friend and I completely lost all to death—it was just something that happened. I'd locked myself in a prison worse than any other.

Anyway, I'm finally able to grieve over my mother's death and not be ashamed. I still have to remember "stuff" and deal with it, but I can say that I'm now equipped to deal my "stuff." We shall speak more of emotional healing and the adult child when next I see you. Sorry about the length of this letter, but you know we prisoners can be long winded at times when it comes to letter writing.

Yours,  
Johnny Mack

**Handout 3**

# Guidelines for Discussion Leaders

You are asked to guide your peers through a discussion of two letters written by members of the Dhamma Brothers. Please instruct your classmates to do the following:

1. Assign a scribe and a presenter to each letter. Ensure that each scribe takes notes about his or her assigned discussion.
2. Have your group read the first letter you were given. (You may choose to have the group read silently or aloud.)
3. Discuss the letter:
  - a. In a single word, what is the topic of this letter?
  - b. Describe the writer's view of this topic.
  - c. How does the writer's imprisonment affect his view of the topic?
4. Have each of your group members take a moment to underline his or her favorite sentence in the letter.
5. Briefly ask each group member to share his or her favorite sentence and briefly explain why the sentence is a favorite. Have the group identify any obvious literary techniques or interesting word choice made in each member's favorite sentence.
6. Ask the members of your group to think about what information a presentation on this letter should include. Have everyone brainstorm for the presentation and outline it using the scribe's notes as a guide.
7. Have your group read the second letter you were given. Again, ask each group member to note any interesting items or techniques that appear in the letter.
8. Ask your group members to decide the intended purpose of the letter.
9. Ask your group members to discuss the importance of each item to the author's purpose.
10. Again, have your group use the scribe's notes to decide what should be included in the presentation of the letter.
11. Tie up any loose ends. Ensure that your group is ready to present both letters to the class.

**Handout 4 ▶ P. 1**

# The Prison Rabbit

**John W. Johnson**

May 18, 2003

The Way it is—Doing Time Doing Vipassana.

It was one year ago, around the end of May. I was walking around inside the dorm, still vibrating with subtle sensation. After all, I had only been back for around one week from the second ten-day course at Donaldson.

In the continuous flux of noise that a prisoner who lives with 129 other convicts hears each day, I heard someone say, “Hey, there is a little rabbit outside the dorm. Let’s go outside and look at it.”

Fear swept into my mind. I was frightened for that little rabbit. I remember a few years ago that someone caught and tried to make one a pet. It died!! I remember that rabbit, and the fear it had in its eyes. Its heart beating so hard you could see his whole body moving. I felt so sorry for that rabbit and its panic in the hands of its captors. I surely did not want to see it now—not after the image of the last rabbit in my mind.

Someone said, “John!! Don’t you want to see the rabbit?” I said, “Thanks, but no thanks.” I did not tell them I was frightened. It was just stuff going on with me—inner voices of doubt & fear.

A few days later, one morning after our 5:00 a.m. group sitting—I was walking around the yard doing my job assignment, picking up litter. I love this job. I wear shower sandals and even sometimes walk around in the grass in my bare feet. It is always after the morning meditation.

It is a time when I become mindful of nature, of Dhamma.

Off at a distance in some grass that has not been cut for around two weeks, I saw a brown object . . . I was wondering what it could be. When it comes to litter in a prison yard you never know what you may find. So I walked in that direction. As I got closer I saw what looked to be a mixed brown color, kind of sandy, I guess.

When I got around fifteen feet away from the object I saw its ears—it was the rabbit. It was very still, I guess it thought it was hidden in the grass. I stood in amazement. I could not believe I was looking at a rabbit inside the prison compound.

People who were walking around the exercise path would walk past it not even noticing it. I asked one person, “Hey, look over there—it’s a little cottontail rabbit.” They said, “Yeah, we know, we have seen it before.” I stood in awe. To me this was a remarkable event. Inside this prison compound known as the “House of Pain” sat a little cottontail rabbit. I wondered how it got into this yard. I wondered if

**Handout 4 ▶ P.2**

## The Prison Rabbit

it would be able to get through the fence again. We have an electric fence to keep prisoners from escaping—how could a little rabbit be protected from being killed by the fence? The next day I went back to perform the duties of my prison job, that I never thought to be mundane, that is for sure, after all it was a job where I could walk bare foot to do my prison job. The Vipassana practice has opened up my mind to each moment of the day. The walking in nature, observing nature inside of me and outside of me has taken on much more depth. But now that I had seen this rabbit I wondered if I would see it again.

Well yes I did, in fact for around two weeks. I saw this rabbit grow from around five inches to about ten inches. I saw it sit inside a coil of razor wire. I thought that this young rabbit was a “silly rabbit.” It must have thought that coil of wire was brushes and it camouflaged him. One day I saw someone throw a stone at him. He hopped just enough to move away a little. He did not seem to put much concern into an insensitive human being trying to scare him away.

I wondered in my mind what would be the fate of this rabbit. Would it grow too big to make his way through the fence? He looked fat to me. Then one day I saw him stretch his body out long and go through the fence with ease. I was amazed and very happy to see the rabbit was not a prisoner from ignorance of youth and would not be trapped inside like we were—young people who grow old inside the prison fence. We were young once and made bad choices, only to become captive. Captive from desire.

I remember when I no longer saw the rabbit again. I knew in my heart that it was time for him to go. I thought about the fear that arose in me, in my confusion about nature I doubted that the rabbit would be o.k. In my past experience of a rabbit I thought it would meet the fate of being taken as a pet to the amusement of a convict wanting to grasp at holding it from being free—only to die in fear. I did not want this to happen again.

In retrospect, I see it was my own fear from a past conditioning. My internal dialogue—fear and anxiety—was adversely controlling my experience. Even after “thinking” I have two ten-day [Vipassana] courses now, and I am in a state of awareness to the “way things are.” In truth, I know nothing! Dhamma is continuously presenting awareness in a process. It is not a “state” to be in, with a “knowing.” Knowing only becomes “solid”—it was shown that my awareness had dissipated when I had fear for that rabbit—based upon a past experience.

I had become a “silly rabbit,” or “monkey minded,” by allowing fear to grip a hold with a subtle fluctuation from awareness of the way things are.

So from the Dhamma lesson with the guru rabbit, I see how easy it is to allow ego to blind awareness and remove insight from the process of just realizing the experience without attachment to the “process.”

Got to go it is getting late.

*John*

# Introduction to Buddhism and Meditation

## Enduring Understandings:

- Buddhism primarily consists of a set of practices for transforming our experience rather than a set of beliefs.
- Buddhism is focused on understanding suffering, and how to overcome it. Buddhism teaches that suffering has its causes within us, in our mental habits.
- Because the teachings of Buddhism are not tied to particular beliefs, it can be practiced by anyone, including those who practice other religions, to improve the quality of their lives.

## Essential Questions:

- Is Buddhism a religion, a psychology, or a philosophy? Does it require beliefs to follow?
- What are the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path?
- How did Siddhatta Gotama come to be the Buddha? (His name is often spelled Siddhartha Gautama.)
- How could Buddhist practice be useful in a place like Donaldson Correctional Facility?

## Notes to the Teacher:

One of the objections to the establishment of a Vipassana program in the Donaldson Correctional Facility was that the practice of meditation would draw many men away from their traditional Christian religion. Buddha himself was pragmatic and did not entertain theoretical discussion, but rather focused on what could help humans liberate themselves from their immediate pain and suffering. He explained his pragmatism with a story of a man shot with an arrow: Should he inquire into the arrow's material, the length of the arrow's shaft, the maker of the arrow, his background, etc.? Or should he focus on removing the arrow and healing the wound? (In fact, Buddha claimed that he found a cure to mankind's suffering, which was described by his teachings and embodied by his practices.) As you acquaint your students with the teachings of Buddhism, this lesson explores the question of whether these teachings and practices require anyone either to adopt new beliefs or to give up any existing ones.

Buddha set an example of traveling and teaching during the dry season and taking a retreat with his monks during the rainy season; they continued to follow this seasonal pattern after his death. The teachings spread in all directions, until the year 262 B.C.E. King Ashoka of India, tired of constant warfare, became a follower of the Buddha and sent out monks to teach the Dhamma—the teachings of the Buddha—purposefully and systematically. Then Buddhism spread rapidly throughout Asia, which is today predominantly Buddhist. Today there are anywhere from 350 million to a billion Buddhists in the world. For many, Buddhism is a religion, but Buddha did not set out to create a religion. In fact, he rejected the idea that freedom from

## Lesson 3 (WORLD HISTORY, WORLD RELIGIONS)



suffering could come from anyone outside of oneself, and did not look to gods or ritual. His followers in later generations created what we now identify as the religious dimensions of Buddhism. While retaining its central teachings, Buddhism adapted to each new culture, and the sensibilities of new populations with, for example, Confucianism in China, Shintoism in Japan, and the Bon religion in Tibet. In the West, Buddhism has been integrated largely through science, especially brain science, as well as mental health treatment and preventive medicine.

Buddhism came to America in a more widespread way in the 1950s and 1960s. Writers such as Alan Watts (*The Way of Zen*) and Jack Kerouac (*Dharma Bums*) brought Buddhist ideas and practices into mainstream awareness. Japanese teachers first brought Zen to the United States. In the 1970s, American students brought Vipassana from South Asia to the United States, and Tibetan monks in exile opened Buddhist centers in the West.

This lesson familiarizes students with the key concepts of Buddhism, known as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. After debating whether or not inmates in prison should receive special services, students will read and discuss the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, then consider the impact that following the Eightfold Path would have on their own lives. They will read the story of Siddhatta to understand the origin of Buddhism and study a map to see how Buddhism spread. Before the lesson, locate a map on the spread of Buddhism, which can be found at many websites, including [http://go.hrw.com/ndNSAPI.nd/gohrw\\_rls1/pKeywordResults?ST9%20Buddhism](http://go.hrw.com/ndNSAPI.nd/gohrw_rls1/pKeywordResults?ST9%20Buddhism).

In discussing the Eightfold Path, focus on the role of ethical practices (right speech, right livelihood, right action). These are for the cultivation of a level of mental serenity that enables one to calm the mind. They are not divine mandates, but are based on the observation that one cannot be calm enough to engage in meditation if one is practicing harmful behavior, and that this can be discovered in one's own experience. Though the principles are the same as in the Judeo-Christian traditions, the purpose differs from the purpose typical in those traditions. Ethical conduct is both a pragmatic step on the Eightfold Path and a natural consequence of genuine understanding. Buddhism was a reaction to the prevailing views that one is bound by fate (the Vedic view of karma), instead emphasizing that by direct understanding of how our experience is shaped by what we do (not only by our action and speech, but within our minds), we can attain freedom from suffering. In this way, Buddhism made genuine freedom available to all, not just the priestly classes.

Note: Lesson 8 contains a number of hands-on meditation activities. You may wish to choose one of these as a conclusion to this lesson.



#### STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

##### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

##### HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

##### STANDARD 2: UNDERSTANDS THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

##### LEVEL IV (GRADE 9–12)

2. Analyzes the influences specific ideas and beliefs had on a period of history and specifies how events might have been different in the absence of those ideas and beliefs

##### WORLD HISTORY

##### STANDARD 9. UNDERSTANDS HOW MAJOR RELIGIOUS AND LARGE-SCALE EMPIRES AROSE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN, CHINA, AND INDIA FROM 500 BCE TO 300 CE

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

4. Understands how Buddhism and Brahmanism influenced one another and Indian society (e.g., how Brahmanism responded to challenges posed by Buddhism and other reform movements; how Buddha's reforms contributed to the spread of Buddhism within and beyond India, how the Upanishad reflected Brahmanic teachings and how these compared with Buddhist teachings).

#### COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » READING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES 11–12

2. Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

#### Duration of the Lesson:

One or two periods

#### Assessment:

Class discussion

Journal entry

#### Materials:

**HANDOUTS 1, 2, and 3**

Pen or pencil

Journal or notebook

## Procedure

### PART ONE: The Dhamma (Teachings of the Buddha)

1. Remind students that the movie *The Dhamma Brothers* interviewed local residents who had opinions on whether or not prisoners should be helped. Ask the students to divide a sheet of paper into two columns. At the top of the first column, tell them to write: “Why prisoners should have counseling and rehabilitation services.” (Be sure that they understand the meanings of both terms. “Counseling” refers to individual or group discussions with a trained counselor or therapist; “rehabilitation services” include the opportunity to take high school or college classes, to receive training in career fields such as cooking or computer repair, and to participate in programs that assist inmates’ re-entry into society.) Give students time to brainstorm answers. (Examples: lowering rates of recidivism; creating incentives for good behavior; providing opportunities for personal change and growth; making society as a whole safer.)
2. Then have students head the second column “Why prisoners do not deserve special services.” Give them a few minutes to brainstorm as many reasons as possible. (Examples: Programs cost money, their effectiveness is unknown; the purpose of prison is to punish.)
3. Give students the opportunity to share and discuss their answers in both columns, allowing free-ranging debate.
4. Ask students why Dr. Cavanaugh, the prison psychologist, brought the meditation teachers inside the prison. (He was looking for deeper and more effective forms of treatment, for something to improve the lives of the prisoners.) Some prisons give up on prisoners, he said, and others look for ways to help them. He believed prisoners should have the chance to improve themselves, to receive treatment.
5. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: DHAMMA: TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA**. Read aloud the section on the Four Noble Truths. Give students an opportunity to comment or ask questions.
6. Remind students of the teacher’s statement in the movie that in some ways the Vipassana program is more difficult than prison life. Ask them to read through the Eightfold Path section of the handout. Point out to them that the Eightfold Path builds from views about the world (1 and 2) to moral behavior (3, 4, and 5) to practices of meditation and mindfulness (6, 7, and 8).
7. Ask students to examine the list of guidelines, and then encourage a free-flowing class discussion using a hypothetical typical student. Ask how a typical student’s daily life would change if he or she were to follow the Eightfold Path. When students have identified a number of changes, ask what aspect of the Eightfold Path the student would find most difficult. (Answers will vary.) [Right Speech is a very rich area for discussion, e.g., how much of your speech is gossip? Helpful or hurtful? True or false? You may also have students reflect on something they did that was hurtful, and recall what their inner state was at the time.]

## **PART TWO:** The Discovery of the Dhamma

1. Give students **HANDOUT 2: THE DISCOVERY OF THE DHAMMA** and read aloud as they follow along.
2. Ask students why Siddhatta left everything to discover the truth about life. (He was shocked by directly encountering disease and suffering in the world.)  
Why was this realization new to him at age 29? (He had not previously observed this in his sheltered life.)  
What problem was he trying to solve? (That we grow old and die; that everything is impermanent; that the way we respond to this situation is the cause of repeated suffering.)
3. Have students write in their journals about the teachings (Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path).
4. Do they agree with the First Noble Truth? Have them argue both sides of this question: Does it describe things as they are?
5. Is the First Noble Truth a belief required as a religious dogma? Does Buddhism make any sense if you don't believe in the Four Noble Truths? Why, or why not? (Answers will vary.)

## **PART THREE:** The Spread of Buddhism

1. Ask students how, in their knowledge of world history, these beliefs have spread. (By preaching, by trade routes, by the adoption of a religion by a ruler, by forcible conversion, through the peaceful acceptance of the teachings.)
2. Show students the map of the spread of Buddhism, and give them time to study it. Tell them about the spread of Buddhism, using information in Notes to the Teacher.
3. Discuss how Buddhism spread in Asia. Why did it attract so many followers? Why would it interest both kings and commoners alike? (It answers questions that are universal; it addresses the frustration, dissatisfaction, and longings of thoughtful people of any rank or station.)
4. Point out that in many countries, Buddhism was introduced and thrived alongside the existing religion (Hinduism in India, Taoism in China, Shinto in Japan). Ask students why this was possible for Buddhism. (Buddhism did not compete with a system of deities, even in its original home of India, and it could co-exist with other religious systems. It focused on paying attention to the mind, emotions, and sensations in order to escape clinging to transient things that cause suffering. Belief in God is tangential to its purposes, which are practical and based on direct experience.)



5. Point out that students now know about how Siddhatta's dissatisfaction with his own life and the world he lived in led him to leave home, search for the truth within himself rather than from others, and eventually discover the Dhamma. Ask them to compare his search to what they know about the searching of young people in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. What were these young people questioning in the culture and traditions they had grown up with? What would have appealed to them about Buddhist teachings?
6. Ask what they think will bring happiness today, and how well it is working. Have students consider, for example, the cultural emphasis on the possession and consumption of products and entertaining experiences,
7. Ask the students to consider how they think the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path could be helpful in their lives. For example, have they experienced dissatisfaction and suffering in their lives? How might the principles and practices of Buddhism be applied and be helpful to them? Because of the sensitive nature of this topic, ask only for volunteers who would like to address this topic, rather than requiring anyone to respond.
8. Assign the following journal entry for homework: "How could the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path be useful for the men incarcerated at Donaldson? What would they find most relevant to their lives? What would they find most difficult? What in prison culture may make it challenging for them even to try this?"

## Additional Resources

### A. PRINT MATERIALS: GENERAL WORKS ON BUDDHISM

- Armstrong, Karen. *Buddha*. (New York: Penguin, 2004)
- Humphreys, Christmas. *The Wisdom of Buddhism*. (London: Curzon Press, 1987)
- Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998)
- Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions* (New York, Harper Collins, 1991)
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama & Howard Cutler. *The Art of Happiness* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998)
- Hesse, Hermann. *Siddhartha* (New York: Penguin Classic, 2002) A Western novel about the quest for enlightenment.
- Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974)
- Watts, Alan. *The Way of Zen*. (New York: Vintage, 1999)

## **B. INTERNET RESOURCES**

<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboeree/buddhawise.html>

General introduction to Buddhism, by Professor C. George Boeree.

<http://www.buddhanet.net/index.html>

A clearinghouse of Buddhist information.

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world\\_religions/buddhism.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_religions/buddhism.shtml)

The BBC's guide to world religions.

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/lessons/06/g912/buddhism.html>

A National Geographic lesson on the spread of Buddhism using Buddhist art.

**Handout 1**

# The Dhamma (Teachings of the Buddha)

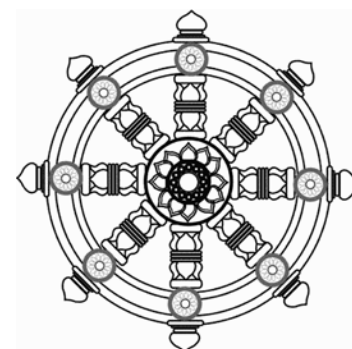
## The Four Noble Truths

1. **Suffering:** Our experience of life involves suffering. We experience suffering in response to physical pain, and we experience many forms of emotional suffering, such as sadness, anger, guilt, shame, etc. Even enjoyable things do not last, and we experience suffering when they end.
2. **The Cause of Suffering:** Our suffering is caused by desire, specifically by seeking happiness from things and experiences that cannot bring genuine happiness, and by attachment to things that are impermanent.
3. **The Ending of Suffering:** There is a way to end suffering.
4. **The Method to End Suffering:** The way to end suffering is to follow the Eightfold Path.

## The Eightfold Path

Note: The Eightfold Path refers to eight aspects of one's life that one needs to get "right" in order to be free from suffering. In Buddhism overall, "right" does not mean "supposed to" or "should," and is not a commandment. Rather, "right" refers to what is skillful and beneficial, and something that, ultimately, each person can *only discover for herself or himself, through direct experience*. Indeed, the Buddha encouraged people not to take what he said on faith, not to believe anything because it is written in a religious text, and not to follow his teachings because he is an authority.

1. **Right view:** Understanding and accepting the Four Noble Truths. This can only be done through direct experience.
2. **Right intent:** The intention to free oneself from suffering and its causes, particularly craving, aversion and ignorance.
3. **Right speech:** Honest and kind speech, not engaging in lying gossip and hurtful speech.



4. **Right conduct:** Following the five Buddhist precepts for everyday life:
  - a. Refrain from killing.
  - b. Refrain from stealing.
  - c. Refrain from lying.
  - d. Refrain from sexual misconduct.
  - e. Refrain from using intoxicants.
5. **Right livelihood.** Engaging in a profession that supports life, rather than destroys it.
6. **Right effort:** Exerting oneself to understand the truth, follow the moral code, and engage in mindfulness and meditation.
7. **Right mindfulness:** Awareness of one's current thoughts, feelings, and sensations.
8. **Right concentration:** Meditation.

**Handout 2 ▶ P.1**

# The Discovery of the Dhamma

In the 6th or 5th century B.C.E., in Kapilavattu, in what is now Nepal, north of India, a baby was born to one of the leading families. The child's name was Siddhatta Gotama. His father kept the boy always surrounded by luxuries and provided pleasant activities to entertain him. When he became a man, he married, and he and his wife had a son named Rāhula. One would think Siddhatta would be contented, but he was restless and felt trapped in his "perfect" existence. He decided to leave home to join the thousands of men living in the forests near the Ganges.

There are many legends that have been written to explain his decision; the historical record that survives is sparse. Here is a typical version of the story, written to fill in the gap of the historical record.

*One day Siddhatta saw four sights that he had never seen before. Some stories say these sights occurred on one trip he made outside the palace walls, and some say they took place over four separate trips. In any case, they made him unhappy with his life, unable to live as he had done before. This is how it is said to have occurred:*

*Siddhatta left with his charioteer Chandaka, and although his father had arranged for nothing unpleasant to come into his sight, he happened to see an old man. He was startled, for he had never before seen someone who was wrinkled or bent over. Siddhatta asked, "What is wrong with that man?"*

*Chandaka answered, "He is old. Time has wrinkled his skin and bent his back."*

*"Will that happen to me as well?" asked the prince.*

*"Old age happens to us all," replied Chandaka.*

*Next they came upon some people who were sick, and Siddhatta asked what made them like that. His charioteer explained that they were ill, and that all people get sick at least once in their life.*

The third sight was a corpse, ready for cremation. In India most people are still cremated upon a large, carefully stacked pile of wood. The family watches while the body burns and turns to ashes, which takes a while. This sight shocked Siddhatta, for he had also been sheltered from death. "Chandaka, what is this?"

*"This is death, my lord. This is what happens to all people when their body is through. Their body is laid down and turned to ashes, while their soul will go to another body." Siddhatta felt anguish over this man's death, and also over his rebirth, which would simply lead to another cycle of death. In the palace he had had no idea that this was the fate all people face. He could no longer enjoy his pleasure and luxury, knowing what life contained.*

*The fourth sight was of a monk who had left his home and family and possessions in order to reach enlightenment. Along with his robes, he wore a peaceful expression. Siddhatta then vowed to follow the path of a monk and seek enlightenment. His father tried to persuade him to stay, to think of his duties to his family and kingdom, but he felt a higher duty to relieve the suffering of all mankind. So in the middle of the night, he said goodbye to his sleeping wife and son and left the palace forever. At age 29, he set out on a quest to understand and overcome the suffering involved in being human.*

**Handout 2 ▶ P.2**

## The Discovery of the Dhamma

The story may be apocryphal, but it points to an essential truth of Buddhism: that one must not hide in a cocoon of safety and comfort, but must seek to understand the pain that all humans must endure.

Siddhatta spent the next six years searching, studying, and meditating. He learned from one teacher that during meditation he had to abandon the five prohibited actions of violence, lying, stealing, sexual activity, and intoxication, but that was not enough to bring him enlightenment. He moved on to spend time with a group of ascetics<sup>5</sup> who were extremely hard on their bodies. Siddhatta outdid them all, and they became his followers. But one day, he realized that, although he had nearly starved himself to death, he was not going to reach enlightenment by torturing his body. The path to enlightenment had to be somewhere between the extremes of luxury and hardship, pleasure and pain. His followers thought he was a traitor to their way of life, but he would eventually call his discovery The Middle Way.

He began to practice what he called “mindfulness,” that is, observing his feelings, his sensations, his bodily functions, and the ebb and flow of consciousness. He realized the impermanence of each of these sensations and feelings. He practiced yogic methods of sitting and breathing. He learned to transcend his own physical person to experience compassion toward every other living creature. The Four Noble Truths emerged as the foundation of his philosophy. He was now “Buddha” or “Awakened One,” for he had awoken from the dream that keeps us ignorant of things as they really are.

He found the ascetics he had practiced with, and told them of his new *Dhamma*, or teachings. They became his first followers, and then he gathered a larger following of monks, who formed the core of his *Sangha*, or community. He also attracted lay followers, people who listened to his teachings but continued their role in society. Eventually even his father, wife, and son came to hear him speak and were converted to his new understanding. For 45 more years he taught, maintained an order of monks, and traveled about the region. Due to his inner peace and wisdom, stories followed him that portrayed him as a god. But he never asked anyone to take anything he said on faith; he wanted his listeners to practice and attain their own freedom. He encouraged them to take responsibility for themselves, and his last words were: “Work out your own salvation with diligence.”

<sup>5</sup> An ascetic is a person who practices severe self-denial, usually for religious or spiritual reasons.



# U.S. Prisons Today

## Enduring Understandings:

- The United States has far more prisoners in correctional facilities and a much higher percentage of the general population incarcerated than any other country.
- The prison system in the United States raises complex issues deserving serious research and analysis.

## Essential Questions:

- What are some of the major challenges faced by today's prisons in the United States?
- What reforms should be enacted in the prison system to make it both just and effective?

## Notes to the Teacher:

Statistics can tell much about the state of prisons in the United States today. In this lesson, students will explore recent studies to understand such topics as the following:

- The relative size of the prison population in the United States compared with prison populations in other Western countries
- Living conditions in large prison institutions
- The availability of education for incarcerated individuals
- The cost of maintaining someone in prison
- The cost of upholding a death sentence versus life imprisonment
- The rate of recidivism
- The discovery of wrongful convictions
- Issues pertaining to women and juveniles in prison

The first activity is a pre-test designed to make students aware of the general lack of information about the prison system. In going over answers with them, you will convey statistics about the prison population in this country that are likely to be surprising. The first part of the lesson concludes by having students view a TED talk by attorney Bryan Stevenson, the lawyer for Grady Bankhead—one of the Dhamma Brothers—who founded the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) in Montgomery, Alabama. Students can be reminded that they have already seen Stevenson in the film *The Dhamma Brothers*. The EJI deals with the death penalty, the incarceration of children, the role of race and poverty in the justice system, and prison and sentencing reform. TED—an acronym for Technology, Entertainment, Design—is a nonprofit organization devoted, in their words, to “Ideas Worth Spreading.” They maintain an award-winning video site that features talks by leaders in

## Lesson 4 (SOCIAL STUDIES)

many fields and sponsor national and international conferences. You can find Stevenson's TED talk at [http://www.ted.com/talks/bryan\\_stevenson\\_we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_an\\_injustice.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice.html). (Jenny Phillips has also given a TED talk; see page 15, #3, for link.)

Students will then undertake group research projects on aspects of U.S. prisons. After doing preliminary research to familiarize themselves with a topic and identify resources, they complete and follow a research plan. As a concluding activity, students will research issues and reform efforts in prison facilities in their own communities.

Note: Lesson 8 contains a number of hands-on meditation activities. You may wish to choose one of these as a conclusion to this lesson.

### STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

#### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

#### LANGUAGE ARTS

#### STANDARD 4. GATHERS AND USES INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES

#### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

1. Uses appropriate research methodology (e.g., formulates questions and refines topics, develops a plan for research; organizes what is known about a topic; uses appropriate research methods, such as questionnaires, experiments, field studies; collects information to narrow and develop a topic and support a thesis)
2. Uses a variety of print and electronic sources to gather information for research topics (e.g., news sources such as magazines, radio, television, and newspapers; government publications and microfiche; library databases; field studies; speeches; technical documents; periodicals; Internet sources, such as websites, podcasts, blogs, and electronic bulletin boards)
3. Uses a variety of primary sources to gather information for research topics
4. Uses a variety of criteria to evaluate the validity, reliability, and usefulness of primary and secondary source information (e.g., the motives and perspectives of the author; credibility of author and sources; date of publication; use of logic, propaganda, bias, and language; comprehensiveness of evidence; strengths and limitations of the source relative to audience and purpose)
5. Synthesizes information from multiple sources to draw conclusions that go beyond those found in any of the individual sources

**COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS »  
READING FOR INFORMATIONAL TEXT» GRADES 11–12**

**RI.11–12.7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS »  
WRITING» GRADES 11–12**

**W.11–12.2.** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**W.11–12.6.** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

**W.11–12.7.** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**W.11–12.8.** Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

**W.11–12.9.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR LITERACY FOR OTHER  
SUBJECTS » READING FOR HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES »  
GRADES 11–12**

**RH.11–12.2.** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

**RH.11–12.7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**RH.11–12.9.** Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

## Lesson 4 (SOCIAL STUDIES)

### COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR LITERACY FOR OTHER SUBJECTS » WRITING FOR HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES, SCIENCE, AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS » GRADES 11–12

**WHST.11-12.6.** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

**WHST.11-12.7.** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**WHST.11-12.8.** Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

**WHST.11-12.9.** Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

### Duration of the Lesson:

Two class periods, plus time to research, design, and show PowerPoint presentations

### Assessment:

Pre-test

Group discussion

Journal entries

Research planning sheet

PowerPoint presentations

### Materials:

Photocopies of **HANDOUTS 1, 2, and 3** for each student.

Computer access for showing Stevenson video to class.

## Procedure

### PART ONE: Prison Statistics

1. Distribute **HANDOUT 1: WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT AMERICAN PRISONS?** Give students a few minutes to answer the questions. Then go over the quiz with them, providing the following information from the International Center for Prison Studies, the Death Penalty Information Center, and the Innocence Project.

Question	Answer
1	d. At the end of 2010, there were 2,266,832 people incarcerated in the United States.
2	b. Women account for 8.7 percent of the prison population.
3	a. The U.S. rate of imprisonment is 730 per 100,000 people, the highest rate in the world. In China, the rate is 121 per 100,000 people.
4	c. In 1992, there were 1,295,150 prisoners in the United States. The rate of incarceration at that time was 501 per 100,000. (See also the answer to question 1, above.)
5	c. The United States, with more than 2 million. China has 1,640,000 prisoners, Russia has 708,300, and Cuba has 57,337.

- 6 b. From 1976 to 2010, Texas executed 463, Virginia 108, and Oklahoma 91, with a total of 662.
7. c. No one really knows the number of innocent people in prison. Since 1989, 301 people have been exonerated by DNA evidence after their convictions. The average length of time they served in prison, despite their innocence, is 13.6 years. The Innocence Project estimates that between 2.3 percent and 5 percent of people serving time in prison are innocent.

2. Ask students which of these statistics surprised them. Why? Do we have stereotypes about prisons? Do we simply avoid thinking about prison issues?
3. Conclude the first part of the lesson by introducing Bryan Stevenson, using the information in Notes to the Teacher. Then have the class watch Stevenson's TED talk. For homework, have them respond to the video in a journal entry.

## Lesson 4 (SOCIAL STUDIES)



### PART TWO: The Research Project

1. Explain to students that they are going to investigate and prepare reports on the status of the U.S. prison system. Distribute **HANDOUT 2: THE U.S. PRISON SYSTEM: A RESEARCH PROJECT** and go over it with students so that they understand what each assignment entails. Allow students to form research teams based on interest or assign students to groups.
2. Allow students time to do preliminary research and to identify helpful resources. Then have student groups meet again to discuss specific questions to be answered, assign responsibilities, and set intermediate deadlines. Have them record their decisions on **HANDOUT 3: RESEARCH PLAN**. Give them a final deadline for the assignment and have them fill it in on the handout.
3. Collect the research plans and photocopy them, giving a relevant copy to each student in each group at the next class meeting.
4. At an appropriate time, have students show their PowerPoint presentations and narration. Hold students in the class responsible for taking notes on the main concepts each group presents.

**Handout 1**

# What Do You Know About American Prisons?

Circle the letter of the correct answer:

1. Approximately how many people are incarcerated in the United States today?
  - a. 200,000
  - b. 500,000
  - c. 1 million
  - d. More than 2 million
2. What percentage of the prison population is female?
  - a. About 2%
  - b. About 9%
  - c. About 25%
  - d. About 49%
3. Compared with the People's Republic of China, the United States imprisons people at
  - a. A higher rate than China
  - b. About the same rate as China
  - c. A lower rate than China
4. During the past two decades, the number of people in U.S. prisons has
  - a. Fallen significantly, due to fewer prosecutions and shorter sentences
  - b. Stayed about the same, in spite of a slight increase in population
  - c. Almost doubled in size
5. Which country leads the world today in the number of people in prison?
  - a. Russia
  - b. Cuba
  - c. United States
  - d. China
6. Which of the following groups of states accounts for more than half of all executions in the United States since 1976:
  - a. New York, New Jersey, Illinois
  - b. Texas, Virginia, Oklahoma
  - c. California, Texas, Illinois
  - d. Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana
7. Is any inmate in prison innocent?
  - a. Virtually no inmate in prison is innocent; they have all been convicted by a jury of their peers, and DNA testing is nearly infallible.
  - b. Experts estimate that about 10 percent of inmates in prison are innocent.
  - c. No one really knows.

**Handout 2**

# The U.S. Prison System: A Research Project

**Directions:**

Select one of the following topics to research, using the most recent sources you can find. If using Internet sources, evaluate them carefully to be sure that the research behind their statements is sound. When you have completed your research, prepare a PowerPoint presentation to show the class what you have found.

- Topic A Living conditions in large prison institutions. What is daily life like for an inmate? What does the day's routine look like?
- Topic B The availability of education for incarcerated individuals, e.g., the opportunity to finish a GED (high school equivalency), take college courses, or otherwise acquire skills that will be useful upon release. What percentage of prisoners has these opportunities? What percentage takes advantage of them?
- Topic C The costs (financial, social, human) of maintaining a young person as prisoner for one year versus the cost of one year of secondary school or college. In each case, what is the money spent on?
- Topic D The cost of upholding a death sentence versus life imprisonment. What does each alternative cost the taxpayer?
- Topic E The rate of recidivism. What percentage of formerly incarcerated people eventually returns to prison?
- Topic F The incidence of wrongful convictions, particularly in capital crimes. Why are some people wrongly convicted? What is the role of DNA evidence?
- Topic G How much does race (of both victim and accused) play a role in likelihood of conviction and length of sentence?
- Topic H What is the state of the juvenile justice system today? What causes the "school-to-prison pipeline"? How successful is this system in preparing young people to lead more productive lives?
- Topic I How is life for women in prison different from that for men? What additional issues do women prisoners face?
- Topic J What is prison labor? Who benefits from it? Are prisoners paid? What is its impact on the economy? Is it, as critics have charged, a form of slavery?



**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**

## Research Resources

The following is a partial list of resources to start your investigation. Add to it for your specific topic, but be sure to evaluate the validity of each source you use.

### **DEATH PENALTY INFORMATION CENTER**

<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/>

A nonprofit organization that reports on issues relating to capital punishment, including costs, deterrence, and the impact of race.

### **EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE (EJI)**

<http://eji.org/>

EJI litigates on behalf of condemned prisoners, people wrongly convicted, poor people who have not had effective representation, and people whose trials are marked by racial bias or prosecutorial misconduct. They also work on behalf of children sentenced to adult prisons. (Note: Bryan Stevenson, founder and director of EJI, was Grady Bankhead's lawyer and appears in several cameos in the film.)

### **FEDERAL BUREAU OF PRISONS**

<http://www.bop.gov/>

This division of the U.S. Department of Justice includes information on federal prisons and issues concerning inmates, including rehabilitation, counseling, and other programs available to them.

### **GLOBAL RESEARCH**

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/the-prison-industry-in-the-united-states-big-business-or-a-new-form-of-slavery/8289>

An article on the use of prison labor by businesses in the United States by a Canadian nonprofit research organization.

### **THE INNOCENCE NETWORK**

<http://www.innocencenetwork.org/>

Provides free legal counsel and investigative services to people attempting to prove their innocence. There is an affiliate in almost every state.

### **THE INNOCENCE PROJECT**

<http://www.innocenceproject.org/>

A nonprofit legal clinic, affiliated with the Cardozo School of Law, that handles cases of people thought to be wrongfully incarcerated. Part of the Innocence Network of law school clinics.

### **INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR PRISON STUDIES, LONDON**

<http://www.prisonstudies.org>

Maintains statistics on prison populations throughout the world and provides consulting services for international agencies and governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

### **NAACP CRIMINAL JUSTICE DEPARTMENT**

<http://www.naACP.org/programs/entry/justice>

This division of the NAACP deals with sentencing reform, the right for formerly incarcerated people to vote, crime survivors, and employment barriers for formerly incarcerated people.

Handout 3 ▶ P.2

## Research Resources

**NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE**

<http://nij.gov/topics/corrections/recidivism/welcome.htm>

Research on recidivism and its effect on the criminal justice system.

**BAUMGARTNER, FRANK R. "THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE DEATH PENALTY"**

<http://www.unc.edu/~fbaum/Innocence/NC/Baumgartner-geography-of-capital-punishment-oct-17-2010.pdf>

A breakdown of statistics on the number of executions by state and county since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976.

**ALEXANDER, MICHELLE. "MASS INCARCERATION IN THE UNITED STATES," THE FRANK GIESBER KEYNOTE LECTURE FOR THE 2012 KROST SYMPOSIUM**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8jGm1E7w1c>

**JEFFREY TOOBIN, "SANITY ON POT AND STOP-AND-FRISK"**

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2013/09/sanity-on-pot-and-stop-and-frisk.html>

## Handout 3 ► P.3      Research Planning Sheet

What are the questions that your group is planning to investigate? Who will be responsible for researching answers to these questions?

Question	Responsible Student(s)
<p><b>What resources have you found to be potentially useful in your research?</b></p>	

## Handout 3 ► P.4 Research Planning Sheet

In addition to the research, what other areas of responsibility will be needed to produce your PowerPoint presentation?  
(For example, writing and editing text on the slides, designing graphics, creating slides, providing commentary during the presentation.)

Area of responsibility	Responsible Student(s)
<p><b>What intermediate deadlines should be met?</b></p>	
<p><b>Final deadline:</b> _____</p>	

# Prison Programs for Rehabilitation and Treatment

## Enduring Understandings:

- Rehabilitation and treatment of convicted offenders should be an important part of prison life.
- There are many types of rehabilitation and treatment programs that could be implemented to assist prisoners in coping with life in prison and with re-entry into society.

## Essential Questions:

- What is meant by rehabilitation?
- What kinds of rehabilitation programs are most effective?
- What kinds of programs are available to incarcerated individuals in your state?

## Notes to the Teacher:

The purposes of imprisonment for those who have committed a crime are several: to remove offenders so that they cannot commit additional criminal acts; to exact retribution for committing a crime; to provide a deterrent to others who may consider committing a similar crime; and to give convicted persons an opportunity to be rehabilitated, so that they may resume their place in society in a more productive manner once the sentence has been completed. While the first three goals are probably the ones most commonly thought of, rehabilitation is key to avoiding a return to prison, the waste of a human life, and more harm to society. This lesson deals with rehabilitation programs that are common in prisons.

Rehabilitation programs can promote well-being and reduce crime, conflict, and violence among prisoners; reduce mental illness and behavioral disorders; and help with re-entry after the inmate's sentence is completed. (It is estimated that 98 percent of all prisoners are released back into society.) Types of rehabilitation programs include:

- Educational: GED (high school equivalency), college courses, literacy, English as a second language, adult continuing education, parenting classes, library services.
- Vocational: culinary, computer repair, electrical and plumbing skills, carpentry, and more.
- Psychological counseling, both individual and group, using a wide variety of prison-based treatment programs.
- Substance-abuse treatment for drug or alcohol addictions.
- Religious programs in a variety of faiths, with oversight by prison chaplains.
- Meditation, mindfulness, and yoga programs.

## Lesson 5 (SOCIAL STUDIES)

- Re-entry programs, including classes in resume-writing, job search techniques, and job retention skills; practice interviews and job fairs; and halfway houses.
- Programs for juveniles.

For homework before this lesson, distribute copies of **HANDOUT 1: CONCLUSION TO *LETTERS FROM THE DHAMMA BROTHERS***. Give students the assignment to read it for homework and write a letter to Jenny Phillips expressing their ideas about the points she makes.

During this lesson, students discuss the purposes and types of rehabilitation programs. They then form teams to research, write, and submit a proposal for a program to be implemented or improved at a local correctional facility—funded by a grant from a fictional reformed inmate. When the proposals are ready for submission, student groups will designate a speaker to present the proposal to you, the grant administrator. You may at that point make a decision yourself about the feasibility of the suggested program, or appoint individual students to a committee to make the decision. You may also distribute copies of an evaluation handout for students to use in making their decision about the viability of a proposal. The lesson ends with an attempt to achieve consensus on the most effective programs.

Before the lesson, identify the prison facility or facilities nearest your school. If possible, find out what type of rehabilitation programs are offered there for inmates. You may wish to invite a speaker from the institution to talk to your students about programs there. Alternatively, you could invite him or her to come to listen to the presentation of proposals.

Note: Lesson 8 contains a number of hands-on meditation activities. You may wish to choose one of these as a conclusion to this lesson.

### STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

#### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

#### LANGUAGE ARTS

#### STANDARD 4. GATHERS AND USES INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES

#### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

1. Uses appropriate research methodology (e.g., formulates questions and refines topics, develops a plan for research; organizes what is known about a topic; uses appropriate research methods, such as questionnaires, experiments, field studies; collects information to narrow and develop a topic and support a thesis)
2. Uses a variety of print and electronic sources to gather information for research topics (e.g., news sources such as magazines, radio, television, and newspapers; government publications and microfiche; library databases; field studies; speeches; technical documents; periodicals; Internet sources, such as websites, podcasts, blogs, and electronic bulletin boards)
3. Uses a variety of primary sources to gather information for research topics
4. Uses a variety of criteria to evaluate the validity, reliability, and usefulness of primary and secondary source information (e.g., the motives and perspectives of the author; credibility of author and sources; date of publication; use of logic, propaganda, bias, and language; comprehensiveness of evidence; strengths and limitations of the source relative to audience and purpose)
5. Synthesizes information from multiple sources to draw conclusions that go beyond those found in any of the individual sources

#### STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

##### LIFE SKILLS: THINKING AND REASONING

##### STANDARD 1. UNDERSTANDS AND APPLIES THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PRESENTING AN ARGUMENT

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

5. Uses a variety of strategies to construct an argument (e.g., facts, anecdotes, case studies, quotations, logical reasoning, tables, charts, graphs).
6. Evaluates the overall effectiveness of complex arguments.
7. Evaluates an argument objectively by considering all sides of an issue (e.g., using past experience, data, logical analysis).

##### LIFE SKILLS: WORKING WITH OTHERS

##### STANDARD 1. CONTRIBUTES TO THE OVERALL EFFORT OF A GROUP

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES K–12)

2. Works cooperatively within a group to complete tasks, achieve goals, and solve problems

#### COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » READING FOR INFORMATIONAL TEXT» GRADES 11–12

**RI.11–12.7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

#### COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » WRITING» GRADES 11–12

**W.11–12.2.** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

**W.11–12.6.** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

**W.11–12.7.** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**W.11–12.8.** Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

**W.11–12.9.** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

# Lesson 5 (SOCIAL STUDIES)

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR LITERACY FOR OTHER SUBJECTS » READING FOR HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES » GRADES 11–12

**RH.11-12.2.** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

**RH.11-12.7.** Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

**RH.11-12.9.** Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

## COMMON CORE STANDARDS FOR LITERACY FOR OTHER SUBJECTS » WRITING FOR HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES, SCIENCE, AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS » GRADES 11–12

**WHST.11-12.6.** Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products in response to ongoing feedback, including new arguments or information.

**WHST.11-12.7.** Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**WHST.11-12.8.** Gather relevant information from multiple authoritative print and digital sources, using advanced searches effectively; assess the strengths and limitations of each source in terms of the specific task, purpose, and audience; integrate information into the text selectively to maintain the flow of ideas, avoiding plagiarism and overreliance on any one source and following a standard format for citation.

**WHST.11-12.9.** Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.



**Duration of the Lesson:**

Two class periods, plus time for researching and writing proposals

**Assessment:**

Group proposal submissions

Presentations of proposals

Evaluation sheets

**Materials:**

Photocopies of **HANDOUTS 1, 2, and 3** for each student.

## Procedure

1. Collect letters that students have written in response to **HANDOUT 1: CONCLUSION TO LETTERS FROM THE DHAMMA BROTHERS**. (Assigned prior to lesson; see Notes to the Teacher.) Ask students how this reading and the letter that they wrote affected their understanding of the film.
2. Ask students to list as many goals as they can for locking up someone in a prison. Write the list on the board under the headings “Removal,” “Retribution,” “Deterrence,” and “Rehabilitation.” Discuss with students why the last goal is important. (To prevent additional harm to others, to save society the cost of continued or repeat incarceration, to help the former prisoner become a more responsible citizen.)
3. Ask students to brainstorm with a partner a list of programs that could help rehabilitate prisoners. Using information from Notes to the Teacher, conduct a discussion that identifies general types of rehabilitation programs.
4. Tell students that they are about to conduct a simulation on prison rehabilitation programs. Divide students into teams of four. Announce that there is a former inmate who served his sentence and then re-entered society successfully, has left a bequest in his will of \$100,000 to your nearby correctional facility to be used for rehabilitation programs. He left instructions that the money should be used in the way most likely to help inmates become useful members of society. Tell students that you, the teacher, are the executor of his will, and must decide how to use the money. Brief students about the programs the local correctional facility currently has in place.

5. Assign each team to research and write a proposal for one or more programs to be added to the current programs in place or to improve them. Distribute **HANDOUT 2: PRISON REHABILITATION PROPOSAL** and lead students through it, giving them a chance to ask questions and making sure they understand it. Discuss with them that the budget may be under \$100,000 to allow for other programs, but may not be over it.
6. Explain how the project proposal will be evaluated and the criteria you will use, drawing standards from **HANDOUT 3: EVALUATING PROPOSALS**; you may wish to give each student a copy of the handout at this point. Set a deadline for the proposals and give students time to work both with your assistance in class and independently.
7. Distribute **HANDOUT 4: RESEARCH RESOURCES**, but emphasize to students that these resources are only a starting point for their research and they should add other resources as well. Tell them that they can use programs in other states and localities as models if they wish. Remind them to evaluate each website they use carefully to be sure the information is reliable and unbiased.
8. On the day presentations are due, have designated student speakers present their ideas. If desired, you can have other students score them using the scoring sheet on **HANDOUT 3: EVALUATING PROPOSALS**. Conclude the lesson with a discussion in which the class tries to achieve consensus on the most effective way to use the bequest.

**Handout 1 ▶ P. 1**

## Conclusion to *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*

After witnessing the Dhamma Brothers' dedication to their personal and spiritual growth, it is clear to me that public policies that abandon prisoners to long-term incarceration without the benefit of serious rehabilitation—basically to sit and wait for either death or release—are indefensibly wasteful and shortsighted. Certainly there are inmates who are beyond being helped by programs due to lack of motivation and depth of psychopathological damage. However, there needs to be a means of identifying those numerous prisoners who have the potential and desire to change. A blanket policy of locking up all inmates and denying them any means for significant personal transformation is currently creating a huge, separate social system of pariahs and outcasts. Without effective treatment, the successful reintegration of released inmates back into society as healthy and productive individuals becomes increasingly remote. The social consequences of simply discarding society's damaged and dangerously truant members are profound and troubling, whether they are kept in prison or let back out on the street.

Unfortunately we have all heard of high-profile cases when prisoners are released without the benefit of treatment, and then dramatically reoffend. These occurrences understandably fuel fear of crime. In the eighties and nineties, politicians rushed to demonstrate their concern for public safety, and many supported reactive legislation such as "three strikes" laws. Offenders sentenced under these laws received much longer prison sentences than those convicted in the past of the same crimes. The "get-tough-on-crime" movement was largely based on the extreme cases and quick-fix solutions.

This in turn directly led to rapid growth in the prison industry generated by locking up many more nonviolent offenders, while crime rates overall remained relatively stable. By 2007 there were over 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States, the most in any country worldwide. Incredibly, this means that one in every 32 adult Americans is in prison or on supervised release. With only five percent of the world's population, we now house 25 percent of all prisoners. This rate of incarceration represents a 400-percent increase since 1980.

In 2000, while the incarceration rate remained very high, the rate of release also began to increase. Partially in response to the massive prison overcrowding that resulted from the "three strikes" laws, about 700,000 prisoners were released from prison in 2007. That's 1,900 per day across the country, and the release numbers are expected to increase annually over the years ahead. It is considered likely that as many as two-thirds could be rearrested within three years. This revolving-door policy of catch, warehouse, and release, without effective rehabilitation, only serves to create an extremely costly and hazardous erosion of public safety.

The solution is neither to hold people forever nor to release them prematurely, but to make good decisions about sentencing and treatability, use the most effective programs available, and then release those who are deemed to be rehabilitated. However, rehabilitation as a goal of imprisonment has been underfunded and weakened by the exorbitant costs of widespread prison expansion. This goal needs to be reestablished as a priority. In short, we need to start addressing the root causes of crime and recidivism rather than just treating the symptoms.

**Handout 1 ▶ P. 2**

## Conclusion to *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*

Judging from the early findings of the Vipassana prison program, it is clear that voluntary, nonsectarian spiritual training for prisoners can be enormously effective. The depth of inmates' misery and suffering throughout the length of their sentences makes them natural candidates for deep introspection. Although the lasting impact of offering this type of program in a prison environment needs to be examined further, there are already strong implications about what the best practices of 21st-century corrections could look like. The central questions to be explored include: why this program worked so well, why the men responded so positively to its opportunity for social and psychological change despite the tremendously challenging personal efforts required, and why it was so important to so many of them, even under the order to stop meditating together, to continue to practice individually under difficult circumstances.

One reason for the program's success is that it provides an alternative social system and thereby a different identity from that normally available to inmates. Quite intentionally, there is a nameless, faceless anonymity to prison life, with its labeled uniforms and numbered beds. It is a social system largely lacking in the array of associations and identities afforded in free society. Daily life inside is organized around social control, punishment, and the restriction of voluntary social groupings and affiliations. Vipassana, by contrast, constructs a temporary, separate living space and provides purposeful, therapeutic practices based on critically distinct values. Once inside the course environment, students experience a profound shift away from their deprived and stigmatized mass identity.

Vipassana precepts and guidelines respect the privacy and humanity of each student. The course guides are the very model of loving mentors. In this insulated social world within the larger prison system, all students are recognized as worthy individuals in the present, regardless of events in the past. This experience alone is uplifting.

Even more striking was the nurturing, protective role of the three corrections officers assigned to the program. Their strength of character and understanding of the course enabled them to unfailingly provide support to the students, their usual charges. Within this shielded cocoon, the spiritual development of each man could gradually emerge as part of a communal effort, drawing the men into a Vipassana brotherhood. The shared ordeal of meditating together during long hours, coupled with the separation and protection from the surrounding prison culture of forced control and danger, heightened and strengthened this new sense of community.

The brothers had voluntarily left behind an institutional mode of social organization to become part of this new, closely knit community. They lived dramatically apart from the world of anonymity and violence that lay outside the locked door of their refuge. After the retreat ended and Bruce, Rick, and Jonathan departed, the men returned to the general prison population and continued to adhere to their new identity. The group was now united by this intense, shared history. They began to turn to one another for support and guidance. Several men emerged as leaders of this ongoing Vipassana community by staying in close touch with the others and

**Handout 1 ▶ P. 3**

## Conclusion to *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*

encouraging everyone to attend the twice-daily group sittings that they had organized immediately after the first course. Some inmates went on to arrange and do their own retreats in their dorms or cells. All of this represented very considerable initiative on their part.

Prison normally either alienates inmates from one another or produces harmful gang behavior, so a wholesome solidarity was an important phenomenon for Donaldson. The group spirit lived on. The Dhamma Brothers reported that whenever they saw one another in the corridors or cell blocks, they felt like family and often embraced. This was highly unusual, since physical expressions of affection and intimacy are generally not welcomed by male prisoners. Yet, within the Vipassana community, these gestures of closeness and affection became acceptable. When a Vipassana student was sent to segregation after an incident, the Dhamma Brothers conveyed word that they all stood by him and looked forward to his return to their group sittings. Several who had previously participated in prison gang life now supported one another in their resolve to stay away from gang violence. It remains to be seen if the men will be able to maintain the social fabric of this Vipassana community over time. No matter how fervent their desire for it, the survival of their fledgling association will also depend upon the support of the broader Vipassana community outside, as well as the continued toleration of it by the correctional staff at hand.

The principal reason that the Vipassana program had such a profound effect on the participants was that it gave them an opportunity for significant introspection in a safe, supported environment. More common prison treatment programs are generally cognitive-behavioral, denoting the focus on reshaping and retraining of thoughts and behaviors. These target the dysfunctional attitudes, beliefs, and activities that condition criminal thinking. Programs such as assertiveness training, anger management, relaxation techniques, violence prevention, and substance abuse relapse prevention are frequently included in prison curricula. Their goals are to reduce recidivism and eliminate habitual criminal conduct.

With Vipassana, the participants go through a more profound process of awareness and nonsectarian spirituality than is usually thought possible or appropriate for inmates. They come away from the program having learned to objectively observe within themselves and to develop compassion for themselves and others. The men are also enabled, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to look back with vivid awareness at their traumatic childhood histories, their addictions, and even their crimes. From the depths of their collective desperation and misery, these inmate students sought nothing short of personal transformation. Adrift on the sea of their suffering, seated upon their cushions as if on life rafts, they rode out their storms together.

Handout 1 ► P. 4

## Conclusion to *Letters from the Dhamma Brothers*

The success of this dramatic tale of human potential and transformation might also be attributed to the preexisting subculture of meditation and personal growth that had been fostered among the inmates at Donaldson, starting with the first inmate-led meditation groups six years earlier. Several hundred inmates had attended the Houses of Healing course, and there was a growing cadre of inmate teachers for it. Many individuals were already meditating on a regular basis. Many were also familiar with various experiences of their own spirituality and the notion that within everyone is a purer underlying nature, no matter what one's history may be. The realization of their fundamental humanity, despite their status as prisoners, helped them to summon the courage and willingness to look deep inside and commit to the potential for more change.

The direct experience of revealed inner realities as engendered by the Vipassana course came as an enormous relief. It allowed the Donaldson students not only to take responsibility for their offenses and the issues that led to their criminal behaviors, but also to move on with the capacity to generate genuine empathy for everyone affected, including themselves.

These stories of the Dhamma Brothers challenge narrow assumptions about the nature of prisons as places of punishment rather than rehabilitation and transformation. While fairer sentencing and reformed parole systems would contribute to overall improvement, only by fostering deep personal change in inmates can there be a way out of this stunningly broken cycle. If we are going to succeed in revolutionizing a deadened prison system currently committed only to warehousing and punishment, we need a correctional policy that recognizes the capacity for psychological healing and growth and offers significant opportunities and skills for such change.

—Jenny Phillips

*Letters from The Dhamma Brothers*, pp. 199–204

# Prison Rehabilitation Proposal

**Authors**

**Title of proposal:**

**Description of program:**

**Specialists/personnel needed to implement program:**

**Materials needed to implement program:**

**Handout 2 ▶ P.2**      **Prison Rehabilitation Proposal**

**Length of time needed for implementation:**

**Target inmate group:**

**Rationale for targeting this group:**

**Estimated budget:**

**Fixed costs:**

**Recurring costs:**



**Handout 2 ▶ P.3**      **Prison Rehabilitation Proposal**

**Expected benefits of program:**

**Resources used in developing proposal:**

**People consulting:**

**Printed resources:**

**Internet resources:**

Handout 3

# Evaluating Proposals

Proposal \_\_\_\_\_

Team presenting \_\_\_\_\_

Criterion	Possible Points	Points Awarded
<b>TIME FRAME:</b> Can the proposal be implemented within a reasonable length of time?	<b>20</b>	
<b>PRACTICALITY:</b> Can the proposal be implemented with personnel and materials that can be easily found?	<b>20</b>	
<b>EXTENT:</b> Will the project reach a sufficient number of inmates to make it worthwhile?	<b>15</b>	
<b>EVALUATION:</b> Is there a way to test if the project is effective in accomplishing its goals?	<b>15</b>	
<b>FUNDING:</b> Do the costs of the project fit within the allotted budget? Are all costs accounted for?	<b>15</b>	
<b>APPEAL:</b> Are inmates likely to find the project useful and appealing? Will they take advantage of it?	<b>15</b>	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	
<b>Evaluator's comments:</b>		

**Handout 4**

## Research Resources

**FEDERAL BUREAU OF PRISONS**

[http://www.bop.gov/about/co/ind\\_ed\\_train.jsp](http://www.bop.gov/about/co/ind_ed_train.jsp)

The U.S. prison system education program.

**CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION (CEA)**

<http://www.ceanational.org/index2.htm>

Includes a link to a brochure from the CEA on peer literacy programs.

**DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION PAGE ON CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION**

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/correctional-education.html>

Includes links to papers about correctional education programs.

**COUNCIL OF STATE GOVERNMENTS REENTRY POLICY COUNCIL**

<http://www.reentrypolicy.org/Report/PartII/ChapterII-B/PolicyStatement15/ResearchHighlight15-3>

Research on educational and vocational programs in prisons.

**BYRON R. JOHNSON, ET AL., "RELIGIOUS PROGRAMS, INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENT, AND RECIDIVISM AMONG FORMER INMATES IN PRISON FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMS"**

<http://www.leaderu.com/humanities/johnson.html>

A study of the impact of religious studies on recidivism.

**THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE**

<http://www.pewforum.org/Government/religion-in-prisons.aspx>

Report on a 50-state survey of prison chaplains.

**U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR**

[http://www.doleta.gov/PRI/PDF/Mentoring\\_Ex\\_Prisoners\\_A\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.doleta.gov/PRI/PDF/Mentoring_Ex_Prisoners_A_Guide.pdf)

A guide to prison re-entry programs

**NATIONAL COMMISSION ON CORRECTIONAL HEALTH CARE**

<http://www.ncchc.org/>

The mission of the National Commission on Correctional Health Care is to improve the quality of health care in jails, prisons, and juvenile confinement facilities.

# Sentencing Disparities

## Enduring Understandings:

- Sentencing disparities based on race affect the demographics of the prison population.
- Today's sentencing disparities are deeply rooted in historical inequity and oppression.

## Essential Questions:

- How has the legal system been used in the past to discriminate against members of a minority?
- What new laws contribute to the disproportionate number of minorities who have been imprisoned?

## Notes to the Teacher

By 2010, the prison population in the United States had reached approximately 2.4 million, more than in any other country. Social activist Angela Davis referred to the expanding prison system in a 1997 speech as a “Prison Industrial Complex”; the term is modeled on Eisenhower’s identification of a military-industrial complex. Davis described it as a growing system of ordered oppression that has resulted from the increasing privatization of prisons. Industries that build and supply prisons, administer private prisons, provide surveillance technology, and lease convict labor in Davis’s view form a partnership with government that tends to obscure difficult and complex social problems like homelessness and drug addiction by incarcerating vulnerable individuals.

Race-based sentencing disparities in the United States both complicate and solidify this system. While some adjustments to sentencing regarding possession of crack cocaine and powder cocaine have occurred, the disproportionate number of those with life sentences and life without parole who are black or Latino is at an all-time high; states with low crime and low minority populations disproportionately arrest and incarcerate far more men of color. These same trends extend downward into the school systems, where the rate of recorded racial disparities in suspensions and expulsions of students is alarming. The purpose of this lesson is to invite students to contemplate and articulate how race-based disparities in conviction and sentencing continue to fuel today’s prison system.

The first activity shows how laws were used in the past to target blacks and then funnel them into prisons. During this activity, you will show an 8 1/2 minute clip of PBS's video *Slavery by Another Name*. This documentary, based on Douglas Blackmon's Pulitzer Prize-winning book on forced labor in the American South from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of World War II incorporates many primary-source documents from the period. The video can be purchased at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org) or viewed free at <http://www.pbs.org/tpt/slavery-by-another-name/watch>. The primary focus of the free-writing exercise that follows the film clip is not to create a polished response but to capture an immediate written account of students' ideas.

The second activity builds upon the first by showing how 20th century legislation helped usher in the present prison boom. The Rockefeller Drug Laws that were passed by the New York legislature established mandatory prison sentences based on the weight of drugs confiscated; the weight threshold for cocaine was lowered in 1988 and resulted in prosecutions for a small amount of the drug. As a result, the prison population increased dramatically. Blacks and Latinos, who made up 23 percent of the general population, constituted 85 percent of the state's prison population by 1996.<sup>6</sup> The War on Drugs initiated by the Reagan administration was largely aimed at the new, cheap, highly addictive form of cocaine known as crack, which was starting to devastate poor urban neighborhoods; the longer sentences mandated for crack have long been criticized as a factor in increasing minority representation in prison populations. California led other states in mandatory sentencing with three strikes laws in the 1990s, mandating sentences of 25 years to life for a third felony conviction, even if the crime was nonviolent; California's law was modified in 2012, but many other states still have such laws on the books.

Finally, a reading and discussion-based exercise gives students an overview of sentencing disparities for crack cocaine. In 2010 Congress passed the Fair Sentencing Act, which changed the disparity in sentencing for crack versus powdered cocaine from 100:1 to 18:1. Previously, a defendant would have to have been convicted of possession of a hundred times the weight of powdered cocaine to receive the same sentence as a man with one unit of crack; now it is only 18 times as much. The two articles in this activity discuss the sentencing disparity between largely black users of crack and largely white users of powdered cocaine. Be sure students understand that neither is an endorsement of drug use and that the second especially is an opinion piece rather than a news report.

Note: Lesson 8 contains a number of hands-on meditation activities. You may wish to choose one of these as a conclusion to this lesson.

<sup>6</sup> Partnership for Responsible Drug Information at <http://www.prdr.org/rocklawfact.html>.

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

#### LANGUAGE ARTS

#### STANDARD 8. USES LISTENING AND SPEAKING STRATEGIES FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

3. Uses a variety of strategies to enhance listening comprehension (e.g., focuses attention on message, monitors message for clarity and understanding, asks relevant questions, provides verbal and nonverbal feedback, notes cues such as change of pace or particular words that indicate a new point is about to be made; uses abbreviation system to record information quickly; selects and organizes essential information; summarizes points of agreement and disagreement in discussion).

#### STANDARD 9. UNDERSTANDS INFLUENCES ON LANGUAGE USE (E.G., POLITICAL BELIEFS, POSITIONS OF SOCIAL POWER, CULTURE)

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

1. Uses a range of strategies to interpret visual media (e.g., draws conclusions, makes generalizations, synthesizes materials viewed, refers to images or information in visual media to support point of view, deconstructs media to determine the main idea)

### THINKING AND REASONING

#### STANDARD 1. UNDERSTANDS AND APPLIES THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PRESENTING AN ARGUMENT

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

4. Understands that to be convincing, an argument must have both true statements and valid connections among them.
5. Uses a variety of strategies to construct an argument (e.g., facts, anecdotes, case studies, quotations, logical reasoning, tables, charts, graphs).
12. Understands that very complex logical arguments can be formulated from a number of simpler logical arguments.

### WORKING WITH OTHERS

#### STANDARD 1. CONTRIBUTES TO THE OVERALL EFFORT OF A GROUP

##### LEVEL IV (GRADES 9–12)

2. Works cooperatively within a group to complete tasks, achieve goals, and solve problems

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

### READING STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY/ SOCIAL STUDIES GRADES 11–12

RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RH.11-12.6 Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning, and evidence.

### READING: INFORMATIONAL TEXT INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

### Duration of the Lesson:

Three class periods

### Assessment:

Posters

Free-writing exercise

Exit slips

Journal entries

### Materials:

#### PART ONE

Newsprint or poster paper

Tape

Markers

DVD player and projector

Notebooks, netbooks, or tablets

#### PART TWO\*

Photocopies of, or computer access to, the political cartoon “Builders of the Prison Drug Boom” found at [http://www.realcostofprisons.org/materials/comics/rcpp\\_wod\\_builders.pdf](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/materials/comics/rcpp_wod_builders.pdf).

Computer access to, or photocopies of, the political cartoon “Cycles of Exile” found at [http://www.realcostofprisons.org/materials/comics/rcpp\\_wod\\_cycles.pdf](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/materials/comics/rcpp_wod_cycles.pdf).

Chalkboard or poster paper and markers

#### PART THREE\*

Photocopies of, or computer access to, the following two Internet posts:

a. “Retroactivity: Supreme Court Rules on Crack Cocaine Sentences” by Lauren Victoria Burke at <http://politic365.com/2012/06/21/supreme-court-rules-some-crack-cocaine-sentences-are-retroactive/>.

b. “Remove the Knife and Heal the Wound: No More Crack/Powder Disparities” by Carl Hart at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-l-hart/crack-cocaine-sentencing\\_b\\_1707105.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-l-hart/crack-cocaine-sentencing_b_1707105.html).

\*If links do not work, copy and paste URLs into your browser.

## Procedure

**PART ONE:** Historical relationships: Connecting Slavery, Reconstruction, Incarceration, and Forced Labor

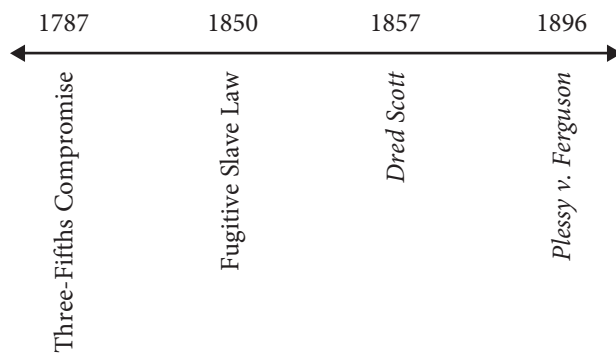
1. Divide students into small groups and distribute large poster-sized paper, tape, and markers to each group. Tell them to draw a line dividing the paper in half vertically. Ask students to list on the left side of the poster paper the films, television shows, or books they have watched or read in which the primary setting is a prison or the focus is on imprisonment. These can be “reality” TV shows, feature films, graphic novels, and such. Ask students why people might be drawn to these types of shows, books, and films.
2. Ask students what they have learned in school about prisons in the United States: their history, their purposes, and their population. How does the content of their listed films and books support or differ from what they have learned in school? Do students feel that they have a clear picture of the criminal justice system from any of these sources?
3. Tell students that they are going to see a film clip from the PBS documentary *Slavery by Another Name* that will explain one segment of the history of American criminal justice, the use of law in the South during the decades after the Civil War and Reconstruction. Show students the film clip at 13:33–21:16 (Chapter 3).
4. Lead a discussion about the film clip:
  - a. What new laws affected African Americans in the South after Reconstruction ended? Why?
  - b. What were the “pig laws”? The vagrancy laws?
  - c. How does the 13th Amendment allow for the extension of slavery?
  - d. What was the convict leasing system? Why did Southern states use it?
  - e. What happened to the people who were leased out under this system?
5. Write the word “precedent” on the board and ask students to define the term. (In a judicial sense, a precedent is a past court decision that becomes a model that guides and affects future decisions.) Explain that for homework they are going to find out about legal precedents that paved the way for the convict leasing system. Assign **HANDOUT 1: LEGAL PRECEDENTS** to be completed for homework.



## Part Two: The 20th Century Incarceration Explosion

### 1. Review the homework on **HANDOUT 1**.

Suggested answers:



The Three-Fifths Compromise: This clause in the U.S. Constitution provided that representation in the House of Representatives (and therefore in the Electoral College as well) should be calculated by counting the number of free persons [except Indians] in a state and adding three-fifths of “all other persons.” This same formula was to be used for direct taxation. Slaveholding states therefore had greater representation than they would have had if only free persons were counted.

The Fugitive Slave Law, part of the Compromise of 1850, provided that escaped slaves living in free states could be legally seized and taken back to their masters in slaveholding states. Any free citizens abetting their escape could be prosecuted, and free citizens could be required to assist in the slaves’ recapture, whether they wished to or not.

In the *Dred Scott* decision, the Supreme Court held that Scott could not sue for his freedom because neither he nor any other African American could claim U.S. citizenship and therefore had no standing to sue in U.S. courts. It overturned the Missouri Compromise and exacerbated North–South hostilities.

*Plessy v. Ferguson* was the Supreme Court decision that held that the principle of segregation, “separate but equal,” was acceptable. Under this ruling, segregation of schools, public facilities, and transportation was inviolable in the South; the decision was not overturned until *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954.

2. Have students write a journal entry about how the legally binding positions of the Three-Fifths Compromise, the *Dred Scott* decision, the Fugitive Slave Law, and *Plessy vs. Ferguson* paved the way for ambiguous rules like “pig laws.” After five to seven minutes of writing, ask students to share their responses with the class while you record important points on the board. Be certain students can begin to see the history of how legal cases were used to systematically support capturing a targeted population.
3. Write the terms “War on Drugs,” “Rockefeller Drug Laws,” and “Three Strikes Laws” on the board or poster paper. Ask students what they know about these terms and record student responses.
4. Share the political cartoon “Builders of the Prison Drug Boom” through photocopies or by projecting the image with a SMARTboard or overhead projector. After discussing the cartoon, ask students to add any new information they have learned to the board or posters.

5. Have students, either individually or in groups, write at least three specific questions about each of these policies. Record the questions in a different color marker.
6. Allow students time to work in research clusters to find answers to their questions.
7. For homework, have students study the political cartoon “Cycles of Exile” found at [http://www.realcostofprisons.org/materials/comics/rcpp\\_wod\\_cycles.pdf](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/materials/comics/rcpp_wod_cycles.pdf).
4. After looking at community notes, ask students to find a discussion point where they agree and a point where they disagree. Use the remainder of the period for the students to write journal entries on one or both points.
5. For homework, have students review the timeline at <http://realcostofprisons.org/materials/timeline.pdf>. Since the timeline ends at the year 2000, ask students to add two more points based on class discussion or research they conduct at home.

## Part Three: The Deep Divide: Crack Cocaine Sentencing Disparities

1. Split the class into two groups and distribute the Burke article to one group and the Hart article to the second group (both articles are referenced under “Materials”). Allow students time to read independently and annotate the articles.
2. Select one group of students to discuss their article. Ask those students to sit in a circle and talk about what they read. Have the second group form a second, outer circle and observe the discussion, choosing either to take notes or to generate questions based on the discussion. Have one or two members from the second group record “sound bites” from the conversation on poster paper.
3. After 8–10 minutes the groups should switch roles and use the same method of discussion, listening, and recording. At the end of the second discussion, allow all students to look at both sets of notes and reflect.

## Extension Activities:

1. Watch *Slavery by Another Name* in its entirety.
2. Download and use graphic novels from [realcostofprisons.org](http://realcostofprisons.org) as points of departure for a multi-genre research project.
3. Complete research about Chicago as the location of the United States’ first juvenile imprisonment system. Present your research to the class.
4. Research how the United States is imprisoning more women at a faster rate than other industrialized countries.
5. Research how major private companies use United States prison labor in manufacturing.
6. Prepare a presentation focusing on three strikes laws and how and why the number of “life without parole” sentences is at a record high.

7. Research how schools disproportionately suspend and expel black and Latino students and how that may correlate with disproportionate sentencing rates.
8. Read and report on the 18-page study titled “Cracked Justice” by Nicole Porter and Dr. Valerie Wright at [http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/dp\\_Cracked%20Justice.pdf](http://sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/dp_Cracked%20Justice.pdf).
9. Visit <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/series/inside-story> for a series of reports on America’s prison system by journalist Sadhbh Walshe. Evaluate the evidence she presents in one or more of her articles.

Handout 1

# Legal Precedents

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:**

The Three-Fifths Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Act, the *Dred Scott* Decision, and the Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* left a legal blueprint about the realities and the perceptions of African Americans and race. Sketch a quick timeline of those four legal decisions and then discuss or write how these decisions normalized unjust and unequal treatment of blacks.



Three-Fifths Compromise

Fugitive Slave Law

*Dred Scott*

*Plessy v. Ferguson*

# Meditation and the Brain (An Experiential Lesson)

## Enduring Understandings:

- We can understand how the key brain circuitries that determine our suffering and happiness operate.
- Meditation can give us direct insight into the circuits of our brain that process sensations, fear/aversion, seeking, and satisfaction.
- In as little as two months, regular meditation can
  - Improve our ability to concentrate.
  - Enhance our performance in school, work, sports, arts, etc.
  - Decrease our stress and suffering.
  - Increase our physical and psychological health.
  - Increase our peacefulness, playfulness, kindness, ability to be loving, and happiness.

## Essential Questions:

- How do the brain circuitries of fear and seeking contribute to our stress and suffering?
- Why can seeking to escape suffering with “quick fixes” create more suffering?
- How can meditation help us to feel safe in our bodies, to understand our suffering, and transform our suffering into healing?
- How can meditation help us to focus our seeking circuitry more on “true goods”—deeply meaningful things like love and friendship—that bring greater freedom, happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment into our lives?

## Notes to the Teacher:

Over the past 10 years there has been a great deal of research on how meditation can change the brain—both its structure and its functioning. A lesson for high school students cannot, of course, summarize all of this research. Also, because the brain is extremely complex, a lesson like this must necessarily offer a narrowed and simplified focus on some aspects of brain structure and function.

Within these limitations, this lesson is designed to impart scientifically sound and psychologically profound information and insights. Unlike presentations of this subject in the popular media, or even the scientific literature, this lesson is organized around brain circuitries that students—and teachers and anyone else—can directly and easily see operating in their own daily lives, indeed, in every moment. Based on (a) the experiential knowledge arising from meditation practice, including the practices engaged in by the Dhamma Brothers, and (b) key insights central to Buddhist psychology, the focus is on four fundamental brain circuits:

- Fear/aversion
- Seeking
- Satisfaction
- Embodiment

The brain circuits involved in those aspects of experience and behavior are among the most studied and best established in neuroscience. With conceptual material and experiential exercises, this lesson helps students see that common and accessible meditation practices (e.g., concentration, mindfulness) can reveal the operations of these circuitries within their own brains. It helps students begin to experience and understand how interactions between these

## Lesson 7 (PSYCHOLOGY, BIOLOGY)



circuits can bring emotional pain and suffering—or freedom and happiness. Finally, this lesson helps students get a taste of how meditation can harness the circuitries of seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment to transform their brains, bodies, emotions, relationships, and schoolwork.

Before teaching this lesson, assign to students the online video (in four parts) called “Meditation and the Brain” (available at [www.jimhopper.com/videos/jif](http://www.jimhopper.com/videos/jif)) and **HANDOUT 1: MEDITATION CAN HARNESS KEY BRAIN CIRCUITRIES TO BRING HEALING AND HAPPINESS**, both by Dr. Jim Hopper, the author of this lesson. The video has several “review quizzes” and “review reflections” within it, and you may assign (some of) these for students to complete in writing as part of watching the film. Students should watch the video *before* reading the handout.

The classroom portion of the lesson begins with eliciting from students, and writing on a whiteboard or chalkboard, what they found interesting or enlightening about the assigned reading and “Meditation and the Brain” video. From the recorded comments students are asked to pick out key themes and to have a full-class discussion about one or two of them.

Next, give a brief PowerPoint presentation on the brain circuits of fear/aversion, seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment, eliciting from students descriptions and examples throughout, making sure everyone understands. Do the same for the suffering and healing cycles. After this, students are divided into groups corresponding to the two suffering and two healing cycles, and the groups discuss how these cycles play out in their own lives and those of people they know (cautions and instructions are given to ensure appropriateness and anonymity). The groups then

present “small” and “big” examples of each cycle, and discuss how the healing cycles presented might be used to address the suffering cycles presented. The classroom portion ends with a brief wrap-up in which students talk about what they found interesting, helpful, and inspiring in this lesson on meditation and the brain. Finally, **HANDOUT 2: WHAT I DO WITH MY SEEKING CIRCUITRY** and **HANDOUT 3: LOVINGKINDNESS MEDITATION** may be assigned for completion as homework.

#### STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THE LESSON

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1** Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2** Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1** Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

#### Duration of the Lesson:

One or two class periods, plus time to read **HANDOUT 1: MEDITATION CAN HARNESS KEY BRAIN CIRCUITRIES TO BRING HEALING AND HAPPINESS**, to view the “Meditation and the Brain” video (approximately 1 hour, 42 minutes), and to complete homework assignments.

#### Assessment:

Whole-class discussion

Group discussion

Homework assignment(s)

Journal entries

#### Materials:

Internet access for watching “Meditation and the Brain” video on YouTube before class

Photocopies of **HANDOUT 1: MEDITATION CAN HARNESS KEY BRAIN CIRCUITRIES TO BRING HEALING AND HAPPINESS** for each student to read before class

**POWERPOINT: LESSON 7 SLIDES ON KEY BRAIN CIRCUITRIES AFFECTED BY MEDITATION** available on the Internet: [www.jimhopper.com/jif/meditbrain.pptx](http://www.jimhopper.com/jif/meditbrain.pptx)

Method of projecting PowerPoint slides on brain circuitries and cycles of suffering and healing

Photocopies of **HANDOUT 2: WHAT I DO WITH MY SEEKING CIRCUITRY**

Photocopies of **HANDOUT 3: LOVINGKINDNESS MEDITATION**

## Procedure

### Part One: Preparation

1. Ask students to watch the video “Meditation and the Brain” on YouTube. Suggest that they watch it in a quiet place, using headphones instead of speakers. Assign embedded quizzes as desired.
2. Ask students to read **HANDOUT 1: MEDITATION HARNESSES KEY BRAIN CIRCUITRIES TO HEAL SUFFERING AND BRING GENUINE HAPPINESS AND FREEDOM**. If you feel that students are not able to read this on their own, read it together in class, pausing to clarify when needed, or use the reading as the basis for a lecture or discussion.

### Part Two: Circuitries and Cycles

1. Ask the students what they found interesting and enlightening about the assigned reading and video. Record their answers on a whiteboard or chalkboard. Ask the students if there was anything confusing or if they need more information about anything. Write these down, too.
2. Have students read through what you have written on the board and have them pick out some key themes. Lead a discussion on one or two of the themes they pick.
3. Using PowerPoint slides, briefly review the circuitries of fear/aversion, seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment. Elicit descriptions and examples from students, and make sure everyone is clear about the circuitries and how central they are to human existence, daily life, and moment-to-moment experience.

4. Using PowerPoint slides, briefly go over the suffering and healing cycles. Again, elicit descriptions and examples from students, and make sure they are clear about the cycles and how central they are to our lives and experiences.
5. Divide students into four groups, corresponding to the two suffering cycles and the two healing cycles.
6. Ask students to discuss, in their groups, ways these cycles play out in their lives and the lives of people they know. [Note: With respect to themselves, stress that they should not reveal anything too personal or things they don’t want everyone to know about. With respect to others, if it’s someone they know personally, instruct them to be careful to disguise identities of people they know, and if they can’t be sure they can do that effectively, not to use the person as an example.] Tell them that they can also choose famous people they’ve learned about through the media or characters from literature or films.
  - a. Ask each “suffering cycle” group to discuss common ways that cycles can play out in people’s lives. Have them write down names and brief descriptions of “small” suffering cycles that play out in students’ lives (e.g., fear of not doing well in a class or subject, avoiding paying attention, then doing poorly on a test; finding it aversive to remember the last time they “messed up” talking to someone they were attracted to and not learning from their mistakes). Then have them write down and briefly describe “big” suffering cycles (e.g., getting lost in addiction after the death of a loved one, losing a job, experiencing an assault or other traumatic event).



- b. Ask each “healing cycle” group to discuss ways they do and could engage in that healing cycle, in “small” and “big” ways. Tell them to be sure to include examples of using mindfulness meditation to engage with and transform suffering, and of using meditation to cultivate positive states and qualities like love, kindness, compassion, gratitude. Have them do this even if these are things they haven’t tried yet. Have them try to identify some methods that they truly believe might work for them—or identify what kind of research they would need to do to identify such methods.
7. Bring the class back together and have each group present their “small” and “big” cycles. For the suffering cycles, have the healing cycle groups lead discussions of how the healing cycles they discussed might be used to address the particular sources of suffering.
8. Ask students for feedback on what they’ve found interesting, helpful, and inspiring about learning about meditation and the brain. Assign **HANDOUTS 2** and **3** (or just one of them) to be completed as homework later that week or the following week.
9. Optional: Have students write in their journals daily observations about how the circuits of fear/aversion, seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment are manifesting in their lives and relationships, both in terms of suffering and in terms of healing and happiness.

### Additional Resources for Teachers:

<http://www.mindfulnesscompassion.org>

Free guided meditations (both written and audio) for cultivating compassion are listed under “Meditations.” This link is useful if you feel you need more guidance on how to teach mindfulness and meditation.

<http://www.mindful.org/mindful-voices/on-mental-health/teens-get-more-than-better-test-scores-with-mindfulness>

Report of a study showing that meditation helps teenagers regulate attention and deal with stress.

<http://www.mindful.org/the-mindful-society/education/what-mindfulness-in-the-classroom-looks-like>

A film showing how young children are introduced to mindfulness.

<http://www.roomtobreathefilm.com>

The home page of the film *Room to Breathe*, showing how struggling middle school students in San Francisco learn about mindfulness meditation.

## Handout 1 ▶ P. 1      Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness

By Jim Hopper, Ph.D.

INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT & HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL

This document offers a framework to clarify how meditation can harness basic psychological and brain processes—especially those involving the circuitries of seeking, satisfaction and embodiment—to cultivate healing, freedom, and happiness. This framework is consistent with well-established neuroscience research on basic brain circuitries and with the growing scientific research on how meditation can change brain structure and function. Most important, this framework is easy for students to understand and connect to their daily lives and moment-to-moment experiences, especially their handling of their own emotions and relationships with other people.

The first part describes the brain circuitries of fear/aversion, seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment. (“Circuit” simply means a collection of brain areas that work together to perform certain tasks; and those three circuitries are among the best established in neuroscience.) Described next are what I refer to as fundamental “cycles of suffering” and “cycles of healing,” and a framework for understanding the roles of the key brain circuits in those cycles. Finally, I offer an explanation of how the seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment circuitries can be harnessed by meditation and other contemplative practices including prayer—especially those that cultivate mindfulness, love, kindness and compassion—to relieve suffering and bring genuine happiness.

### Fear and Aversion Circuitry

This is one of the best known and most studied circuits in the brain. The important points: First, the fear circuitry isn’t only for what scares us. It is triggered by *anything* we find unpleasant and want to avoid. Indeed, the most common research on this circuit in animals uses mild foot shocks and measures fear by how long a rat freezes before moving around again. That’s why I call it the “fear and aversion” circuitry and the “fear circuitry” for short. Also, efforts to avoid or escape unwanted experiences that trigger the fear circuitry always recruit the brain’s *seeking* circuitry (described next). Our brains are constantly, automatically—mostly without our awareness—“tagging” some things as unpleasant and unwanted, thus things to *avoid and escape*. When feared and unwanted emotions like sadness, loneliness, or shame get triggered—however much we notice or not—our brains may seek to escape into addictive experiences. And for some who have been hurt in important relationships, especially as children, even “positive” experiences with other people, like being offered genuine affection, caring, or love, can cause fear and attempts to escape.<sup>7</sup>

### Seeking Circuitry

This is part of the brain’s reward circuitry and plays a central role in addiction to substances and behaviors. Like the fear circuitry, the seeking circuitry includes several brain areas. But knowing exactly which ones make up this circuit isn’t necessary to understand the roles it can play in suffering, healing, and happiness.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.northsideaikido.com/en/zazen-meditation>.

## Handout 1 ► P. 2

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

Researchers have found that the seeking circuitry is what enables us to want and seek *anything*. It could be a new dress, pair of shoes, or technology toy. It could be an affectionate comment from a girlfriend or boyfriend, praise from a teacher or coach, or our next big life goal. It could be the next pain pill, the next drink of alcohol, or the next hit of marijuana. As discussed later, when we strive to fulfill our highest moral, religious, and spiritual values and goals, this circuitry helps us do it.

For people struggling with unpleasant memories, painful feelings, anxiety, depression and other psychological difficulties, their seeking can get overly focused on—even enslaved to—quick fixes. These can be intoxicated states brought on by alcohol or drugs, but most important, they are *any experience that is sought to escape from suffering*. Such fixes may be habitual defense mechanisms like mindless distractions or ruminating about one’s problems; these harm us in less obvious ways, by disconnecting us from our current experience and from our potential to respond to unwanted experiences in healthy ways. They can be clearly harmful behaviors, like angrily yelling at someone else to escape a feeling of powerlessness or self-harming behaviors like cutting or burning. Because seeking *anything*, including any kind of escape, involves the seeking circuitry, the many ways we can ignore or deny what’s actually happening around and within us all can be understood as *brief escapes or quick fixes that involve the seeking circuitry*. Such escapes not only tend to be brief, but also addictive, and unfulfilling in any lasting way. Ultimately, they cause more problems than they solve.

### The pleasure of seeking

The seeking circuit is involved in the pleasures of seeking and expecting what we want, and the excitement of both. But the anticipatory pleasure of seeking is only one kind of pleasure; it’s very different from the pleasure of satisfaction from getting what we’ve sought. There’s a difference between the pleasure of anticipating eating a hot fudge sundae and the pleasure of actually eating it. The same is true of any addictive substance or behavior. (However, some substances, like cocaine and meth, can be addictive precisely because they increase the pleasure of seeking itself.)

### Seeking imaginary rewards

When we’re not focused on something that’s very absorbing, our minds tend to wander. This wandering includes running through plans or scenarios in our heads, and imagining things we do or don’t want to happen. Brain researchers now call this the default mode of the human brain; it’s what our brains do whenever we’re resting or simply not fully absorbed in anything else, and the brain’s default mode network (or circuit) has been mapped. The default mode and seeking circuitries are not identical, but research has shown their connection, and if we step back and observe our daydreams, memories, and plans, we can see what they often revolve around: Seeking and imagining hoped-for rewards—of either getting or keeping things we want, or, when fear drives our default-mode seeking, escaping from things we don’t want or wish hadn’t already happened. This is even truer when we’re stuck in bad feelings or depression.

## Handout 1 ► P. 3

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

In short, the seeking circuitry is constantly active, often in response to the fear circuitry getting triggered. It's constantly driving thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The central role of seeking in human experience and behavior has long been pointed out by philosophers and religious sages.

#### Satisfaction Circuitry

Just as important as the seeking circuitry is what I call the satisfaction circuitry. It is well established that opioid brain chemicals are involved in feelings of satisfaction, contentment, and connection with others. This opioid circuitry can give us deeply fulfilling pleasures of feeling happy and loved in truly satisfying ways, and any time we feel satisfied in a *contented* way, this circuitry is involved. Such experiences, of course, are minimal or missing in the lives of people who are suffering greatly.

Again, one need not know every brain chemical and region involved in satisfaction (although there is substantial and growing research). But it's helpful to know that opioids play a central role and are produced by the brain itself, and that opiates from *outside* the body—whether injected, snorted, or in pain pills—also act directly on this circuitry. That's why such highs involve strong (if short-lived) feelings of great satisfaction and well-being, even bliss.

#### Embodiment Circuitry

This is how I refer to another well-established brain circuitry. It's what allows us to know *what it feels like to be in our bodies*. The embodiment circuitry includes a brain area that brings together *all* information coming from the body (e.g., sensations of movement, touch, tension, pressure, pain, pleasure, etc.). Clearly different people have differing degrees of awareness of body sensations, including those that go with emotions. Some people, especially those who have had many traumatic experiences, suffer from lack of bodily awareness and emotional numbing.

#### **BODY SENSATIONS TRIGGER FEAR AND SEEKING (TO ESCAPE).**

Information from the body includes unpleasant and unwanted sensations—like those of fear, anxiety, sadness, or withdrawal from an addictive substance. It includes sensations that go with behaviors we find addicting, and with intoxicated states. Such sensations, processed by the embodiment circuitry, can be strong drivers of craving, whether for substances or behaviors. For example, researchers found that when people addicted to cigarettes suffered brain damage, damage to a key part of the embodiment circuitry was much more likely than damage to other brain areas to be followed by quitting smoking—suddenly, completely, and *without even trying*. Asked why, those with damage to this key part of the embodiment circuit said things like, “My body forgot the urge to smoke.” As discussed below, pleasant body sensations, especially of satisfying and loving experiences, can be powerful antidotes to fear and craving for escape.

## Handout 1 ► P. 4

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

#### Cycles of Suffering

All of us get caught, at times, in self-perpetuating cycles of suffering. It can be helpful to understand these cycles as unhealthy relationships among the circuitries of fear, seeking, embodiment, and satisfaction. (Buddhist psychology and meditation practice are important sources of this framework, specifically the focus on fear/aversion and seeking/craving, which along with ignorance are known as the three poisons, or root causes of suffering.)

What makes cycles of suffering self-perpetuating? Seeking is focused on escaping suffering in ways that do not really address one's pain and problems (let alone bring genuine and lasting happiness), but instead keep them going and make them worse. Cycles of suffering are often cycles of addiction, here defined broadly as all habitual behaviors, including internal mental ones, used to automatically and repeatedly seek escape from suffering. All are quick fixes that bring no more reward than this: brief and partial escape from an unwanted experience.

Different cycles of suffering involve distinct unhealthy relationships among the circuitries of fear, seeking, embodiment, and satisfaction. The framework specifies two common cycles of suffering—one revolving around fear and anxiety, the other around depression, defeat, and demoralization.

In the fear/anxiety cycle, seeking is focused on avoiding things one is afraid of or anxious about, or avoiding fear and anxiety themselves. Thus the seeking circuitry is driven primarily by the fear/aversion circuitry, not by pursuit of what's truly satisfying or fulfilling. The embodiment circuitry is occupied with sensations of fear, aversion, and anxiety, and with sensations of craving for escapes from

sensations of fear, aversion, anxiety, and craving. There's little activation of the satisfaction circuitry anywhere in the cycle, with the possible exception of briefly while experiencing escape (e.g., intoxication, sexual pleasure).

In the depression/defeat cycle, it's about feeling stuck in and overwhelmed by something bad that's already happened. The fear circuitry is relatively inactive, since something that may have been feared has already come to pass. The embodiment circuitry is occupied by sensations that go with feeling heavy, slow, tired, low-energy, bad about oneself, and unmoved by things that should be motivating or enjoyable. The seeking circuit is actually suppressed, so we don't expect good things to happen or feel motivated to pursue them. To the extent the seeking circuitry *is* active—whether in sporadic bursts like getting off the couch to go out and drink (or shop or do something sexual), or at an ongoing low level as in someone just motivated enough to smoke pot and watch TV or surf the Internet all day—it focuses on escaping the bad feelings and sensations of depression and defeat. And of course such states involve little or no activity of the satisfaction circuitry. Finally, the suppression and misdirection of the seeking circuitry in the absence of satisfaction—especially with one's own actions or lack thereof—contributes to demoralization (i.e., feeling bad about not living up to one's values or potential).

Of course, sometimes people can be fearful or anxious *and* depressed, and may seek escape from other unwanted experiences too, for example emotional numbness. A bottom line for any suffering cycle: So long as our seeking circuitry is suppressed or focused almost entirely on escaping pain and suffering—and not on seeking what's truly satisfying and fulfilling—we're caught in a suffering cycle.

## Handout 1 ► P. 5

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

#### Cycles of Healing and Recovery, Freedom and Happiness

Just as the framework specifies cycles of suffering, it describes cycles of healing and happiness. A central goal here is to focus attention on the seeking circuitry, including its potential roles in healing one's psychological suffering and finding true happiness and fulfillment in life.

Two keys to recovery and healing—and spiritual transformation—are focusing one's seeking circuitry on pursuing things that are (1) genuinely healing and (2) truly satisfying and fulfilling. Therefore I specify two fundamental cycles of healing and happiness: *seeking to engage and transform suffering*, and *seeking true goods*. While these cycles support each other and are potentially simultaneous, it's helpful to consider them separately—particularly with respect to how each may change relationships among the circuitries of seeking, fear, satisfaction, and embodiment.

#### HEALING CYCLE: SEEKING TO ENGAGE AND TRANSFORM SUFFERING.

This brain-based healing cycle is about seeking to know, tolerate, understand, and make positive use of pain and suffering.

What this means for any particular person will always be very individual. For some, seeking to know and understand their suffering means working with a therapist or counselor. For others, it's about sharing with supportive family members and friends, with members of one's religious or spiritual community, or members of a support group for those struggling with similar problems. For others it means writing about their experiences of suffering, or expressing them artistically. And for more and more people, it involves engaging in meditation or other contemplative practices

that cultivate mindful and loving embodiment, which fosters mindful and loving thoughts and actions.

Whatever works for a particular person, the *seeking to engage and transform suffering* healing cycle is about just that: seeking to engage with pain, suffering and unwanted experiences, and doing so in healthy and healing ways that decrease emotional pain and break cycles of suffering. Whatever path someone takes, however, engaging the embodiment circuitry, which registers and allows awareness of one's suffering, is key. For some people, particularly those who have experienced extreme emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or have witnessed horrible things, attending to bodily aspects of suffering can be very difficult and "triggering." For everyone this healing cycle requires strong motivation, another reason it's referred to in this framework as *seeking to engage and transform suffering*. To sustain that seeking and to find success in engaging with suffering, we need support, sometimes from a therapist, counselor, or spiritual teacher. We need to learn new skills and develop new abilities, especially new capacities for self-understanding and self-regulation (capacities of the brain's prefrontal cortex, a circuitry beyond the scope of this document).

True, engaging in this healing cycle is difficult and sometimes painful. But the payoff is huge. We can come to live in much less fear and be much less avoidant of life. We can have more compassion for ourselves, no matter what we're going through. We can find courage and strength inside that we never realized were there. We can free up our seeking circuitry to pursue much more satisfying and fulfilling things in life, which will bring more happiness and healthiness than we ever imagined possible.



## Handout 1 ► P. 6

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

**HEALING CYCLE: SEEKING TRUE GOODS.** Fortunately, psychological healing isn't all about seeking to deal more effectively with pain and suffering. That wouldn't be very appealing or inspiring, would it?

The second key healing cycle, *seeking true goods*, is about harnessing the brain circuitry of seeking—that always-active and powerful driver of our thoughts and behaviors—to seeking out the truly good things in life. This isn't about trendy things we see on TV or can buy with lots of money. This is about love, peace, playfulness, and joy. It's about the kind of happiness and satisfaction that comes from being a good friend, a good boyfriend or girlfriend, a successful student or contributor to one's community.

We all need to sort out, for ourselves, what truly makes us happy. What we find to be the greatest goods in life, the things we most deeply value and find most satisfying to experience. It may take some time, especially if we've had little experience with true goods and genuine happiness. It will take the support of others who do not judge our values or push us to adopt theirs, but instead give us the space, as well as the support and inspiration, to sort things out for ourselves—and to awaken and harness our seeking circuitry to this pursuit.

The *seeking true goods* healing cycle is about realigning the seeking circuitry with one's deepest needs and longings. It's about seeking what will be genuinely fulfilling and satisfying, and spending more and more time experiencing that satisfaction and fulfillment. Also, the more we activate our brain's satisfaction circuitry, and occupy our embodiment circuitry with the sensations of that satisfaction, the less power the circuitries of fear and seeking have over us. That's what it means to be satisfied and content: accepting

and embracing this moment, without wanting or seeking more from it; accepting whatever may come next, without fear. Activity of the fear and seeking circuits, including in response to old triggers of fear and craving, is actually reduced.

When this happens, we are no longer enslaved to fearing and seeking, or the cycles of suffering and addiction. Instead, with increasing satisfaction with our life (despite the inevitable setbacks), we can put naturally arising fear and seeking to good use: Avoiding what brings suffering, and pursuing what reduces suffering and brings true health and happiness.

### Contemplative Practices for Seeking to Engage and Transform Suffering

Contemplative practices can be used to carefully attend to and investigate any experience that human beings may have—including those of pain and suffering—and to cultivate capacities for doing so. This is central to the *seeking to engage and transform suffering* healing cycle, which is about seeking to know, tolerate, understand, and make positive use of one's pain and suffering.

**PREPARATION.** Before directly facing pain and suffering, people need skills for managing painful and unwanted feelings and body sensations, including traumatic memories and addictive cravings. For example, therapists or counselors who are competent at working with traumatized people, including those with addictions, understand that the first stage of recovery is focused on learning and strengthening self-care and self-regulation skills.

## Handout 1 ► P. 7

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

**MINDFULNESS.** A common definition of mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” When someone freely chooses to pay that attention, mindfulness is an excellent tool for exploring painful and troubling memories, feelings, bodily experiences, thought processes, and ways of relating to others. Experiences that had previously felt too unbearable to focus on can be explored and investigated, and seen as arising and passing sensations and thoughts, without resorting to seeking escape. When habitual reactions arise, or suffering cycles begin to unfold, one can mindfully observe them and not get carried away.

**BODILY AWARENESS AS KEY.** Mindful awareness of bodily sensations, that is, one’s *moment-to-moment experiences of embodiment*, is the foundation for attending to and exploring one’s emotions, thoughts, behaviors, and relationship patterns. Only with that grounding in embodied awareness can we effectively bring mindful awareness to emotions and thoughts; otherwise we are repeatedly swept away in habitual cycles of seeking brief escapes and quick fixes that perpetuate suffering and disconnection from present experience. Researchers have found that a key component of the embodiment circuitry is larger and has a greater density of “gray matter” in long-term mindfulness meditators. Researchers have also found that mindfulness meditators exhibit brain functioning in which this circuitry dominates the processing of sadness and pain sensations. Mindfulness enables direct and safe engagement with the bodily sensations of pain and suffering. Rather than seeking to control or escape those sensations, mindfulness allows tolerance and compassionate understanding of such experiences. In short, mindfulness enables the transformation of suffering experiences into opportunities for healing, even spiritual awakening.

**EXAMPLES OF MINDFULNESS AND SUCCESSFULLY SEEKING TO ENGAGE AND TRANSFORM SUFFERING.** In therapy a young woman who was sexually abused as a child learns to mindfully observe constricted feelings in her chest and visual images of the abuse, without immediately getting lost in feelings of disgust and shame that go with them. She also learns to mindfully observe the disgust and shame, including the transitory bodily sensations that go with them—again, without getting lost in them or seeking to escape. In time these memories, feelings, and sensations lose their grip on her, and she discovers peace, strength, and freedom she had never known were possible. A young man subjected to extreme emotional abuse by his parents learns to mindfully observe—without judging himself or being consumed by fear or shame—experiences of helplessness and betrayal connected to the abuse. Even without (yet) engaging in practices to cultivate self-compassion (see below), new compassionate understandings of those experiences, and his reactions to them, spontaneously arise and replace the guilt and self-hate that he had struggled with for years.

Importantly, mindfulness and other contemplative methods for engaging with and transforming suffering are not quick fixes or panaceas. For some, even after cultivating the self-care and self-regulation skills needed to engage directly with suffering, it can be a long process. We are all creatures of habit and conditioning, and old habits can be hard to break, especially if they once ensured our physical or psychological survival. But with a foundation of self-regulation skills, regular practice, and relationships that support both, mindfully engaging with one’s suffering can facilitate the healing cycle of *seeking to engage and transform suffering*.



## Handout 1 ► P. 8

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

#### Contemplative Practices and Seeking True Goods

This is about how contemplative practices may harness the brain's seeking circuitry, which when wrongly directed causes so much of our suffering, to the pursuit of true goods that bring genuine happiness. Unfortunately, to date the seeking circuitry has been largely neglected in psychology and psychiatry and in theories and research on meditation, yoga, and prayer.

Our seeking circuitry is always active. For anything we want, whenever we are motivated to have or to do something, it's active. Fortunately, unlike many other aspects of brain function, this aspect is accessible to us, something we can reflect upon and contemplate. And we can choose: What shall I seek? What should I seek as my highest priorities? What do I want to seek in this moment? We can also contemplate and choose our answers to these questions: What really makes me happy? What is my motivation for doing (or saying or writing) this? These questions and choices are at the heart of meditative and other contemplative practices and how we put them into practice in our lives.

**WHAT SHOULD WE SEEK?** Religious and spiritual leaders have long sought (whether wisely or in confusion themselves) to help people seek transcendent "true goods"—obedience to God's law, surrender to God's will; an intimate relationship with God or Jesus; loving others, even our enemies, as we love ourselves; forever striving to free all beings from suffering. Profit-seeking companies, politicians, and advertisers bombard us with sights, sounds, and words designed to harness our seeking circuitry to the (perceived) benefits they seek for themselves. The Declaration of Independence declares it a self-evident truth that we are endowed by our creator with unalienable rights, not only to life and liberty,

but also the pursuit of happiness. In short, the brain's seeking circuitry is central to human life.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, often says, "We all naturally desire happiness and not to suffer." He writes that "genuine happiness"—which has "inner peace" as its principal characteristic, "is rooted in concern for others and involves a high degree of sensitivity and feeling," and provides a basic sense of well-being that cannot be undermined, "no matter what difficulties we encounter in life."<sup>37</sup> He distinguishes this genuine happiness from all those states of mind that, despite being called happiness and sought by many, lack those qualities.<sup>37</sup> Like wise men and women from other religious and spiritual traditions, he is pointing to the genuine happiness that should be a central focus of our seeking.

Yes, seeking can cause problems—when it becomes craving, grasping, clinging, and attachment to passing things that cannot bring genuine happiness. But seeking can be focused on true goods that, when experienced but not clung to, bring genuine happiness and reduce craving and attachment.

**SEEKING LOVE, KINDNESS AND COMPASSION.** Every religion and spiritual tradition has its images of wise, loving, and happy beings that can powerfully activate our seeking circuitry and deepest longings. Yet often more effective for cultivating love within oneself—at least initially, for those struggling with much suffering—are simpler and more common images that are easily called to mind or found with Google images, like a cute baby, a puppy, a kitten. The key: bringing the image to mind causes motivations and feelings of love, kindness, and compassion to arise spontaneously and effortlessly.

## Handout 1 ► P. 9

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

In the *metta* practice of the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, which was taught to prisoners during the intensive meditation retreat depicted in *The Dhamma Brothers*, the focusing of attention on such an image, and the bodily sensations of spontaneously arising motivations and feelings, is combined with internally repeating phrases like these:

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be at peace.

May you be free from suffering.

**HARNESSING THE BRAIN'S SEEKING CIRCUITRY TO CULTIVATING EMBODIED AND SATISFYING LOVE, KINDNESS, AND COMPASSION.** In this way, visual imagination and verbal thoughts—typically absorbed in memories, plans, and fantasies of imagined rewards—along with attention to bodily sensations, are used to harness the brain's seeking circuitry to love, kindness, and compassion. If while doing the practice we experience in our bodies feelings of love, kindness, and compassion, we occupy the embodiment circuitry with them. If those good feelings are accompanied by feelings of contentment, peace, and satisfaction, then this practice also involves the satisfaction circuitry. Finally, to the extent we experience the bodily sensations of contentment, peace, and satisfaction, the embodiment and satisfaction circuitries are not only involved but being transformed.

Harnessing the seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment circuitries to the cultivation of love, kindness, and compassion is the most basic and powerful form of the *seeking true goods* healing cycle. The benefits of cultivating love, kindness, and compassion toward oneself and others are many—

especially for people who so far have experienced little of these in their lives. As with mindfulness, however, things can be more complex. Given the neglect, losses, abuses, and betrayals that some people have experienced in their lives, feelings of love, kindness, and compassion can trigger fear.<sup>38</sup> This is normal, and there are many ways that therapists and counselors can help someone to gently and safely explore, understand, and overcome these obstacles to receiving, cultivating, and giving love, kindness, and compassion.<sup>38,39,40</sup>

**OTHER “TRUE GOODS.”** There is a good case, made by many for millennia, that love—which we can experience and express in many ways—is the greatest good and the greatest source of genuine human happiness. But most of us agree there are other (if lesser) “true goods” too, other experiences and goals that are most worthy of seeking and most likely to bring genuine happiness. Depending on our personality, our cultural and religious background, and several other factors, we may highly value and seek various things along a continuum from false to true goods (e.g., power, money, technology tools and toys, entertainment, sexual stimulation, physical health, beauty, creativity, knowledge, courage, generosity, connection with nature, playfulness, achievement, contributing to others through our work).

Finally, the world's religious and spiritual traditions supremely value wisdom, which includes liberation from ignorance and, to use a central Buddhist concept, “seeing things as they really are”—not as we fear or want them to be. Such wisdom entails accurately perceiving and knowing oneself, per the ancient Delphic maxim, thus insight into our true motivations for what we do, say, and think.<sup>41</sup> Then we find that even efforts to pursue true goods are sometimes largely motivated by fears of failure, judgment,

## Handout 1 ► P. 10

### Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness (continued)

or rejection; by cravings for lesser goods like others' attention or admiration; even by false goods like revenge. Over the course of writing this, I've been motivated by a sincere wish to share something helpful, but also by fears that it won't be good enough, that students will find it useless, and by craving readers' admiration. Seeking the true good of self-knowledge can help us to mindfully and compassionately acknowledge such normal human shortcomings, gain more freedom from them, and focus our seeking on true goods and genuine happiness.

In short, there are many contemplative practices—especially but not only those for cultivating love, kindness, and compassion—that can bring healing from suffering, and much more, by harnessing the brains' seeking circuitry to the pursuit of true goods and genuine happiness.

### Conclusion

This document offers an explanation of some key psychological and brain processes involved in cycles of suffering and healing, and in potentially transformative meditative and contemplative practices—especially those for cultivating mindfulness, love, kindness, and compassion. It draws on knowledge from many scientific, psychological and contemplative traditions, and necessarily goes beyond scientific data to provide an integrative vision. While simplifying things in some ways, the framework acknowledges the complexity of suffering and healing. Also, appropriate neuroscience reviews found nothing that's inconsistent with current knowledge, although it's important to note that research on interactions between the brain circuitries of fear, seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment is still lim-

ited. Certainly more research is needed. In the meantime those of us seeking to heal and find genuine happiness can better appreciate and explore the power of meditative and contemplative practices (used carefully and appropriately) to harness the brain's seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment circuitries to decrease our suffering and to transform ourselves into more mindful, loving, wise, free, and happy human beings.

## Handout 2 What I Do With My Seeking Circuitry

We focus our brain's seeking circuitry on things that are bad for us, good for us, or somewhere in between. We can focus our seeking circuitry automatically or deliberately. This handout is an opportunity to reflect (without judging yourself) on what you've been doing with your seeking circuitry, and to come up with some goals for how you can focus your seeking circuitry on enjoyable and/or healthful things and on what's most satisfying and fulfilling in life.

First, write down things you do that are (a) "quick fixes" to escape unpleasant experiences, (b) enjoyable and/or healthful, and (c) very satisfying and fulfilling. Then write down some goals for doing more things that are or will likely be (a) enjoyable and/or healthy and (b) very satisfying and fulfilling. Finally write down some contemplative practices (e.g., types of prayers, meditations, yoga) that embody and cultivate such experiences and states.

### Harmful Quick Fix

#### Behaviors

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### Enjoyable and/or Healthful

### Very Satisfying and Fulfilling



#### Goals

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#### Contemplative Practices

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**Handout 3 ▶ P. 1**

# Lovingkindness Meditation

## Introductory Notes:

*Metta* or lovingkindness meditation was practiced every day by the Dhamma Brothers during their 10-day retreat. Many of them report that this meditation, which they continue to practice regularly, has had huge positive effects on their lives and relationships.

Lovingkindness is an ancient meditation that, it is said, the Buddha first taught to monks who were so afraid of predatory animals that they were unable to meditate in the forest. The Buddha did not want to eliminate the healthy functioning of their fear, in response to real threats. Rather, he gave them a method to calm the fear in their brains, so it would not play tricks on their minds and get in the way of their meditation practice. In Buddhist psychology it is taught that kindness, love, and compassion are the strongest antidotes to fear, anger, and hatred.

We can understand this practice in terms of the brain circuitries covered in this lesson: (1) Wishing health, happiness, freedom from suffering, etc. harnesses the seeking circuitry to the pursuit of kindness, love, and compassion. (2) Using the image and repeating the phrases harnesses visual and language brain circuits that might otherwise be lost in the “default mode” circuitry’s plans, daydreams, memories, etc. (3) Experiencing kindness, love, and compassion in our bodies occupies the embodiment circuitry with loving sensations, including warmth, softness, gentleness, etc.; activates the satisfaction circuitry, which can bring peace and contentment and be deeply fulfilling; and calms the circuitries of seeking and fear/aversion.

## Sequence of Activities

1. Find an image that causes feelings and motivations of kindness, love, and compassion to arise spontaneously and effortlessly. It could be a cute little baby, a puppy, a kitten—whatever works for you. Don’t use an image of someone or something about which you also have negative feelings or memories. Feel free to search your imagination or Google Images until you find one that works for you.

Identify or describe your image here:

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2. Find a comfortable position sitting on a cushion, pillow, or chair. Give yourself some time to settle into the posture. Notice the points of contact between your body, the floor, and whatever you’re sitting on or against. Notice your breathing without trying to change it.
3. Close your eyes and focus on the image, while repeating the phrases below—or similar phrases that feel right to you, which you can write on the lines below. Again, feel free to experiment, but eventually stick with four simple phrases of kindness, love, and compassion. (See next page)

Handout 3 ▶ P.2

# Lovingkindness Meditation

May you be happy.

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May you be healthy.

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May you be free from suffering.

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May you have a calm, gentle, and loving mind.

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4. Whenever you get distracted (which is totally normal), gently bring your attention back to the image, the phrases, and the sensations arising in your body as you focus on the image, the words, and your wishes for happiness, health, etc.
5. Do the practice for 5 to 15 minutes, as long as feels comfortable for you.

## Optional Experiments

1. After trying the practice a few times and becoming familiar with it, see how it changes your experience of something that you find upsetting or angering.
  - a. Before doing the practice, for one or two minutes remember and think about something that you have found upsetting or angering. Pick something mildly to moderately disturbing, not something extreme or traumatic.
  - b. Notice and write down on the lines below the dominant thoughts and body sensations that you experience while remembering and thinking about it.
- c. Do the lovingkindness practice for 5–15 minutes

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## Handout 3 ► P.3 Lovingkindness Meditation

- d.** After finishing the practice, spend one or two minutes remembering and thinking about the same thing you did before engaging in the practice. Again, notice and write down the dominant thoughts and body sensation that you experience.

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- e.** Compare the thoughts and body sensations that you experienced before and after doing the loving-kindness practice.

- 2.** After trying the practice a few times and becoming familiar with it, see how it changes your experience of a person toward whom you have felt emotionally neutral.

- a.** Before doing the practice, for one or two minutes remember and think about a person whom you see every day but have little or no interaction with, and have no significant positive or negative feelings toward (e.g., a kid you don't know well who's in a class or two with you; a staff person at school with whom you have just a little contact, like someone in an office or on the cafeteria staff; a bus driver or neighbor).

- b.** Notice and write down on the lines below any thoughts and body sensations that you experience while remembering and thinking about that person.

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- c.** Do the lovingkindness practice for 5–15 minutes.

- d.** After finishing the practice, spend one or two minutes remembering and thinking about the same person you did before engaging in the practice. Again, notice and write down the dominant thoughts and body sensation that you experience.

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- e.** Compare the thoughts and body sensations that you experienced before and after doing the loving kindness practice.

- f.** When you encounter that person over the next few days, notice if you experience him or her differently than you did before the practice. Feel free to do this practice over several days and notice any changes in your experience of that person, or how you relate to him or her.

# Mindfulness and Meditation (An Experiential Lesson)

## Enduring Understandings:

- Meditation can take many different forms in different cultures and religions. Buddhist meditation is concerned with overcoming suffering and living wisely with compassion.
- The benefits of meditation can positively affect the challenges of daily life.

## Essential Questions:

- What can we learn from silence and stillness?
- What is mindfulness? What is meditation?
- How can we incorporate mindfulness and meditation into our regular schedule?
- What are some of the challenges we might face in practicing meditation?

## Notes to the Teacher

The Vipassana practice of meditation brought to the Donaldson Correctional Facility is an ancient form of meditation. Introspective practices predated the Buddha and had roots in ancient Hindu practice; Vipassana was the Buddha's pathway to wisdom and enlightenment. There are practices of concentration, meditation, and prayer in many religions that serve to focus the practitioner on spiritual truths. Vipassana did not conflict with the Dhamma Brothers' traditional Christian and Muslim religious backgrounds because it was not concerned with God. Buddha himself was pragmatic and did not entertain theoretical discussion, but rather focused on what could help mankind in its immediate pain and suffering.

This lesson familiarizes students with the key practices of Buddhism, which are mindfulness and meditation. The concept of mindfulness means paying attention to one's experience in the present moment. This is quite a shift from the usual state of being that is based upon thinking and acting, and often far from paying attention to one's immediate experience. Mindful attention is open, aware, nonjudgmental, curious, and accepting of things as they are. In fact, the word Vipassana is from the Pali language spoken by the Buddha and means literally "to see things as they really are." This is the essence of both mindfulness and meditation.

In this lesson, students will have an opportunity to practice basic mindfulness as well as a few different forms of meditation. Students then consider the impact that meditating regularly would have on their own lives. This may allow discussion about what they expected versus what they actually experienced. They are rarely the same.



The first activities will introduce students to basic mindfulness. They will eat a raisin mindfully, quite a different experience from our normal eating habits. They will also practice sitting and listening with mindfulness. Like the eating of the raisin, they will listen with all the qualities of mindful attention; with curiosity, openness, and acceptance. They will observe their mind as thoughts and judgments arise, notice them, and let them go as they return to mindful attention. Both of these simple exercises provide the opportunity for building self-awareness and insight.

The next activity introduces students to the Zen tradition of using stories as a teaching tool, and then shows them a form of meditation that involves “just sitting.” There is no other purpose but to sit—still and silent—and observe what happens inside. Students get into a comfortable position and then become aware of bodily sensations, feelings, and thought. (You may wish to let your administrator know that students may be sitting on the floor of your classroom as part of the lesson.) This five-minute meditation practice is followed by journal reflections and discussion. It is useful to remind students that whenever they get lost in thought, they may simply return to the awareness of the breath and to what is arising in the senses from moment to moment.

Buddhist literature includes walking meditation as one form of meditation, and this activity can be found in other traditions as well. Students will practice walking mindfully, paying attention to their steps, maintaining silence, and experiencing their breathing. Another activity helps foster student awareness of their breathing. Mindful meditation uses the breath as a steady yet constantly changing stimulus, as an object of meditation; it is not a type of breathing exercise, but a way of training attention. Another activity helps students to under-

stand the nonselective nature of true attention; in contrast to their usual cacophonous world of background noise, they practice mindful listening. Students are asked to record their feelings and impressions in a journal immediately after each meditation practice. Lastly, students will practice the body scan, slowly and mindfully moving their awareness through various parts of the body, perhaps starting in the toes and systematically moving awareness to the top of the head and then back again to the toes.

Instead of teaching all these forms of practice as one lesson, you will probably want to break this lesson out into sections, and teach each one as an experiential part of the other lessons in the curriculum. You may also wish to use an individual activity more than once to help students grasp the processes and their effects. This will allow students to begin to build skills over time in the basic practices of mindfulness and meditation.

## STANDARDS ADDRESSED BY THIS LESSON

### McREL COMPENDIUM OF STANDARDS

#### HEALTH

#### STANDARD 4: KNOWS HOW TO MAINTAIN MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH.

#### LEVEL IV (GRADE 9–12)

2. Knows strategies for coping with and overcoming feelings of rejection, social isolation, and other forms of stress
3. Understands the role of denial as a negative influence on mental and emotional health, and ways to overcome denial and seek assistance when needed

### Duration of the Lesson:

One to two periods, or dedicated time at either the beginning the end of other lessons

### Assessment:

Class discussion

Journal entry

### Materials:

#### HANDOUTS

Pen or pencil

Journal or notebook

## Procedure

### PART ONE: The Art of Mindfulness

1. **EATING A RAISIN:** This exercise is about cultivating awareness and beginning to learn to focus on the here and now. It is about being in the present moment and not missing out on it. Give students the following directions, pausing throughout to allow them time to consider the answer.

Pick up a raisin and hold it in the palm of your hand. Look at it. Examine it. Describe the raisin. What does it look like? What color is it? How would you describe the texture? Now, feel the raisin on the palm of your hand. What does it feel like against your skin? Pick it up with your other hand. What does it feel like in your fingers? Is it slimy? Rough? Smooth? Soft? Hard? Squeeze it softly. What do you feel? Smell the raisin. Describe how it smells. Put the raisin in your mouth, but do not eat it. What does it feel like on your tongue? What does the texture feel like now? How does it taste? How does the taste compare with the way it smelled? Move it around in your mouth and notice every aspect of the raisin. Bite the raisin and think about what you taste. Now how does the raisin feel in your mouth? Finish chewing and swallow the raisin.

Have students write in their journals about the experience of eating a raisin.

2. Mindful Listening: Just like the raisin exercise, this exercise is also about cultivating awareness and beginning to learn to focus on the here and now. It is about being in the present moment rather than lost in thought.

- a. Ask students what kind of background noises they have in their day. Ask if they ever consciously tune out sounds around them. [Students may say, for example, that they try to ignore school bells when they are taking high-stakes exams or that they occasionally tune out boring teachers.] Explain that they are now going to practice mindful listening for a change.
- b. Direct students to spend five minutes simply listening, to see how many different sounds they notice. Remind students that they are not interpreting or analyzing the sounds, just listening and experiencing them.
- c. If possible, try this exercise in various locales around the school.
- d. On another day, provide students with an audio recording of sounds of nature, waves breaking, world music, or other appropriate recording to practice mindful listening.
- e. Have students record their observations again in their journals. Did they hear more sounds than they expected? What sounds surprised them? How successful were they at listening and experiencing rather than analyzing the sounds they heard? In what other circumstances might they practice mindful listening?

## Part Two: The Art of Stopping Time

1. Explain to students that one kind of Buddhism, Zen, uses stories as a way of opening the mind and of seeing things in fresh ways.
2. Share with students the following Zen story “The Man and the Horse.” Encourage students to discuss their ideas about the story’s meanings. Generate as many ideas as possible before giving them the meaning offered by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh.

*The horse is galloping quickly, and it appears that the man on the horse is going somewhere important. Another man, standing alongside the road, shouts, “Where are you going?”*

*And the first man replies, “I don’t know! Ask the horse!”*

Hanh’s interpretation, paraphrased in part: This is also our story. We are riding a horse, we don’t know where we are going, and we can’t stop. The horse is the strength of our habits pulling us along, and we are powerless. We are always running, and it has become a habit...we have to learn the art of stopping—stopping our thinking, our habits of keeping on the go, our forgetfulness, the strong emotions that rule us. (Hanh, p. 24.)

3. Tell students that in Zen Buddhism, a *koan* is a brief paradoxical statement or puzzle used as a meditation point. The effort to solve a koan opens the mind to respond on an intuitive rather than analytic level. There are about 1,700 traditional koans, which are based on anecdotes from ancient Zen masters. Ask students to sit and contemplate these two koans, not searching for the right answer as much as simply experiencing the puzzle itself. In fact, there are no “answers.”

- a. “When both hands are clapped a sound is produced; listen to the sound of one hand clapping.”
- b. “How can the Experience (of Being) experience the Experience (of Being)?”

## Part Three: The Breath of Life

1. Read the following passage to the class: “The ancients knew that any person can understand breathing, so that teaching the control of breathing is extremely important.... The most perfect breath is continuous and quiet as if it were a faint breath. We have to shape our breathing into such long deep breaths.”
2. Then tell students they are going to practice a very simple form of breathing meditation.

3. Guide students through the following steps:

- a. Start by sitting in a comfortable posture that can be easily maintained.
- b. For correct breathing, start exhaling by pulling in your abdomen.
- c. When you have exhaled your air completely, you will naturally inhale.
- d. Let the air flow in, and your abdomen gently expands.
- e. When exhaling, count your breaths.
- f. When you reach the number 10, start over again.

4. Have students record their observations about this experience in their journals. Ask them to respond to these questions: How did you feel as you did this exercise? Where was your breathing most prominent—the abdomen, the throat, nose, or the upper lip? Did your mind feel calm? Did you grow restless? How could you incorporate this kind of breathing into your daily routine?

#### Part Four: Meditation

1. **Sitting Meditation:** Tell students that you are going to acquaint them with several different forms of meditation. The first form of meditation will be “just sitting.” There is no other purpose but to sit—still and silent—and observe what happens. Provide straightforward, clear instructions for students to prepare themselves and for the first time try this exercise for five minutes. Give students the following set of directions over the five-minute period:

- a. Whether in a chair or on the floor, find a posture that is comfortable and relaxed. Be sure that you will be able to maintain this position for five minutes without having to adjust your body. (Then give them time to find the position and get settled.)
- b. Do a mental sweep of all your body, from your toes up to your forehead. As you consider each part of your body, let it relax. Look for areas of tightness or even pain, and observe these sensations without reacting or judging. Just accept whatever reveals itself in the moment.
- c. Imagine you are sitting on a riverbank, and the river is the flow of emotions through you. Do you get bored? Frustrated? Distracted? Do you remember some past hurt or joy? Identify the feeling, recognize it, and greet it. There is no need to judge it, or reject it. Let it flow past as you observe it with curiosity.

- d. Buddhism labels thoughts as mental formations. Again, as with feelings, simply observe and recognize your thoughts as they float past, like clouds in the sky. When you observe them, what happens? Do the thoughts change?
- e. When the time period allotted is over, have students remain in silence and write quietly in their journal for another few minutes about what they observed before having a discussion about the experience. What did they notice? (Often beginners report that they didn’t *notice* their thoughts, because they were swept up in their thoughts. Thoughts come and one leads to another, and they end up daydreaming more than observing their sensations, feelings, and thoughts.) How difficult was it to sit still and silent for five minutes?

2. **Walking Meditation.** For a simple version of walking meditation, instruct your students through the following steps:

- a. Give them a route to walk. Indoors, it could be around the perimeter of a large room. Outdoors it could be along a sidewalk or path in a park.
- b. At first, it is good to have a prescribed path, so they don’t have to think about where they are going. Back and forth is best, so there is less temptation to get hijacked by going somewhere. If they continue with this practice, they may be able to walk somewhat aimlessly, within a certain defined space.

## Lesson 8 (MEDITATION)



- c.** Begin to walk slowly, not trying to get anywhere in particular.
- d.** Walk with a soft vision, allowing the eyes to relax and focus forward and slightly down, but on nothing in particular.
- e.** Smile with your eyes, and then your face, and then let your whole body relax as you walk without worry.
- f.** Breathe naturally. Be aware of your breath, without trying to control it.
- g.** Walk in silence.
- h.** Pay attention to each step, as your feet rise and fall on the Earth. Be mindful of your weight, and your balance, as you move forward slowly and deliberately.

When the time allotted has passed, call the students back and have them return in silence. Then have them write in their journals in response to the following questions: As before, record your impressions from the meditation. Were you more aware or less aware of your thoughts or your body while walking? Was it easier or harder to remain in the present than in sitting meditation? How could you use this in your daily life?

- 3.** Metta Meditation. Tell the students that *metta*, or meditation on lovingkindness, is an essential ingredient in Buddhist meditation. It is the icing on the cake of all mindfulness. The word *metta* is commonly translated in English as “lovingkindness.” *Metta* signifies friendship and nonviolence as well as “a strong wish for the

happiness of others.” You can experience yourself sending lovingkindness to particular people, to friends, and also to those with whom you are experiencing difficulties. Or you can send *metta* to all creatures on Earth. Give students the following directions:

- a.** Sit in a comfortable position. Let your mind be still.
- b.** Focus on the breath as you repeat phrases over and over of lovingkindness:
  - May all beings be filled with lovingkindness.
  - May all beings be well.
  - May all beings be peaceful and at ease.
  - May all beings be happy.
- c.** Hold an image or sense the presence of all those to whom you are sending selfless love and good wishes. Feel the *metta* coming from your heart and moving forth into the universe.

# Appendix

## Meditation Can Harness Key Brain Circuitries to Bring Healing and Happiness\*

\*This is the full text with documentation for the essay that appears in Lesson 7, Handout 1. Endnotes are listed on pp. 145–147.

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This document offers a framework to clarify how meditation can harness basic psychological and brain processes—especially those involving the circuitries of seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment—to cultivate healing, freedom, and happiness. This framework is consistent with well-established neuroscience research on basic brain circuitries and with the growing scientific research on how meditation can change brain structure and function. Most importantly, this framework is easy for high school students and anyone else to understand and connect to their daily lives and moment-to-moment experiences, especially their relationships with their own emotions and with other people.

The first part describes the brain circuitries of fear/aversion, seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment. (“Circuit” simply means a collection of brain areas that work together to perform certain tasks; and those three circuitries are among the best established in neuroscience.) Described next are what I refer to as fundamental “cycles of suffering” and “cycles of healing,” and a framework for understanding roles of the

the key brain in those cycles. Finally, I offer an explanation of how the seeking, satisfaction, and embodiment circuitries can be harnessed by meditation and other “contemplative” practices including prayer—especially those that cultivate mindfulness, love, kindness, and compassion—to relieve suffering and bring genuine happiness.

### Fear and Aversion Circuitry

This is one of the best known and most studied circuits in the brain.<sup>1,2</sup> The important points: First, the fear circuitry isn’t only for what scares us. It is triggered by anything we find unpleasant and want to avoid. Indeed, the most common research on this circuit in animals uses mild foot shocks and measures fear by how long a rat freezes before moving around again. That’s why I call it the “fear and aversion” circuitry and the “fear circuitry” for short. Also, efforts to avoid or escape unwanted experiences that trigger the fear circuitry always recruit the brain’s *seeking* circuitry (described next). Our brains are constantly, automatically—mostly without our awareness—“tagging” some things as unpleasant and unwanted, thus things to *avoid and escape*.<sup>3,4</sup> When feared and unwanted emotions like sadness, loneliness, or shame get triggered—however much we notice or not—our brains may seek to escape into addictive experiences.<sup>5,6</sup> And for some who have been hurt in important relationships, especially as children, even positive experiences with other people, like being offered genuine affection, caring, or love, can cause fear and attempts to escape.<sup>7</sup>

## Seeking Circuitry

This is part of the brain's reward circuitry, and plays a central role in addiction to substances and behaviors.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Like the fear circuitry, the seeking circuitry includes several brain areas. But knowing exactly which ones make up this circuit isn't necessary to understand the roles it can play in suffering, healing, and happiness.

Researchers have found that the seeking circuitry is what enables us to want and seek *anything*.<sup>8,9</sup> It could be a new dress, pair of shoes, or technology toy. It could be an affectionate comment from a girlfriend or boyfriend, praise from a teacher or coach, or our next big life goal. It could be the next pain pill, the next drink of alcohol, or the next hit of marijuana. As discussed later, when we strive to fulfill our highest moral, religious and spiritual values and goals, this circuitry helps us do it.

For people struggling with unpleasant memories, painful feelings, anxiety, depression, and other psychological difficulties, their seeking can get overly focused on—even enslaved to—quick fixes. These can be intoxicated states brought on by alcohol or drugs, but most important, they are *any experience that is sought to escape from suffering*. Such fixes may be habitual defense mechanisms like mindless distractions or ruminating about one's problems; these harm us in less obvious ways, by disconnecting us from our current experience and from our potential to respond to unwanted experiences in healthy ways. They can be clearly harmful behaviors, like angrily yelling at someone else to escape a feeling of powerlessness or self-harming behaviors like cutting or burning. Because seeking *anything*, including any kind of escape, involves the seeking circuitry, the many ways we can ignore or deny what's actually happening

around and within us all can be understood as *brief escapes or quick fixes that involve the seeking circuitry*. Such escapes not only tend to be brief, but also addictive, and unfulfilling in any lasting way. Ultimately, they cause more problems than they solve.

**THE PLEASURE OF SEEKING.** The seeking circuit is involved in the pleasures of seeking and expecting what we want, and the excitement of both.<sup>8,10</sup> But the anticipatory pleasure of seeking is only one kind of pleasure; it's very different from the pleasure of satisfaction from getting what we've sought. There's a difference between the pleasure of anticipating eating a hot fudge sundae and the pleasure of actually eating it. The same is true of any addictive substance or behavior. (However some substances, like cocaine and meth, can be addictive precisely because they increase the pleasure of seeking itself.)

**SEEKING IMAGINARY REWARDS.** When we're not focused on something that's very absorbing, our minds tend to wander. This wandering includes running through plans or scenarios in our heads, and imagining things we do or don't want to happen. Brain researchers now call this the default mode of the human brain; it's what our brains do whenever we're resting or simply not fully absorbed in anything else, and the brain's default mode network (or circuit) has been mapped.<sup>11,12,13</sup> The default mode and seeking circuitries are not identical, but research has shown their connection,<sup>14</sup> and if we step back and observe our daydreams, memories, and plans, we can see what they often revolve around: Seeking and imagining hoped-for rewards—of either getting or keeping things we want, or, when fear drives our default-mode seeking, escaping from things we don't want or wish hadn't already happened. This is even truer when we're stuck in bad feelings or depression.



In short, the seeking circuitry is constantly active, often in response to the fear circuitry getting triggered. It's constantly driving thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The central role of seeking in human experience and behavior has long been pointed out by philosophers and religious sages.

### Satisfaction Circuitry

Just as important as the seeking circuitry is what I call the satisfaction circuitry. It is well established that opioid brain chemicals are involved in feelings of satisfaction, contentment, and connection with others.<sup>16,17,18</sup> This opioid circuitry can give us deeply fulfilling pleasures of feeling happy and loved in truly satisfying ways, and any time we feel satisfied in a *contented* way, this circuitry is involved. Such experiences, of course, are minimal or missing in the lives of people who are suffering greatly.

Again, one need not know every brain chemical and region involved in satisfaction (although there is substantial and growing research). But it's helpful to know that opioids play a central role and are produced by the brain itself, and that opiates from *outside* the body—whether injected, snorted, or in pain pills—also act directly on this circuitry. That's why such highs involve strong (if short-lived) feelings of great satisfaction and well-being, even bliss.

### Embodiment Circuitry

This is how I refer to another well-established brain circuitry. It's what allows us to know *what it feels like to be in our bodies*. The embodiment circuitry includes a brain area that brings together *all* information coming from the body (e.g., sensations of movement, touch, tension, pressure, pain, pleasure, etc.).<sup>19,20,21</sup> Clearly different people have differing degrees of awareness of body sensations, including those that go with emotions. Some people, especially those who have had many traumatic experiences, suffer from lack of bodily awareness and emotional numbing.

#### **BODY SENSATIONS TRIGGER FEAR AND SEEKING (TO ESCAPE).**

Information from the body includes unpleasant and unwanted sensations—like those of fear, anxiety, sadness, or withdrawal from an addictive substance. It includes sensations that go with behaviors we find addicting, and with intoxicated states. Such sensations, processed by the embodiment circuitry, can be strong drivers of craving, whether for substances or behaviors.<sup>22</sup> For example, researchers found that when people addicted to cigarettes suffered brain damage, damage to a key part of the embodiment circuitry was much more likely than damage to other brain areas to be followed by quitting smoking—suddenly, completely, and *without even trying*. Asked why, those with damage to this key part of the embodiment circuit said things like, “My body forgot the urge to smoke.”<sup>23</sup> As discussed below, pleasant body sensations, especially of satisfying and loving experiences, can be powerful antidotes to fear and craving for escape.

## Cycles of Suffering

All of us get caught, at times, in self-perpetuating cycles of suffering. It can be helpful to understand these cycles as unhealthy relationships among the circuitries of fear, seeking, embodiment, and satisfaction. (Buddhist psychology and meditation practice are important sources of this framework, specifically the focus on fear/aversion and seeking/craving, which along with ignorance are known as the three poisons, or root causes of suffering.)<sup>24</sup>

What makes cycles of suffering self-perpetuating? Seeking is focused on escaping suffering in ways that do not really address one's pain and problems (let alone bring genuine and lasting happiness) but instead keep them going and make them worse. Cycles of suffering are often cycles of addiction, here defined broadly as all habitual behaviors, including internal mental ones, used to automatically and repeatedly seek escape from suffering. All are quick fixes that bring no more reward than this: brief and partial escape from an unwanted experience.

Different cycles of suffering involve distinct unhealthy relationships among the circuitries of fear, seeking, embodiment, and satisfaction. The framework specifies two common cycles of suffering—one revolving around fear and anxiety, the other around depression, defeat and demoralization.

In the fear/anxiety cycle, seeking is focused on avoiding things one is afraid of or anxious about, or avoiding fear and anxiety themselves. Thus the seeking circuitry is driven primarily by the fear/aversion circuitry, not by pursuit of what's truly satisfying or fulfilling. The embodiment circuitry is occupied with sensations of fear, aversion and anxiety, and with sensations of craving for escapes from

sensations of fear, aversion, anxiety, and craving. There's little activation of the satisfaction circuitry anywhere in the cycle, with the possible exception of briefly while experiencing escape (e.g., intoxication, sexual pleasure).

In the depression/defeat cycle, it's about feeling stuck in and overwhelmed by something bad that's already happened. The fear circuitry is relatively inactive, since something that may have been feared has already come to pass. The embodiment circuitry is occupied by sensations that go with feeling heavy, slow, tired, low-energy, bad about oneself, and unmoved by things that should be motivating or enjoyable. The seeking circuit is actually suppressed, so we don't expect good things to happen or feel motivated to pursue them.<sup>25</sup> To the extent the seeking circuitry *is* active—whether in sporadic bursts like getting off the couch to go out and drink (or shop or do something sexual), or at an ongoing low level as in someone just motivated enough to smoke pot and watch TV or surf the Internet all day—it focuses on escaping the bad feelings and sensations of depression and defeat. And of course such states involve little or no activity of the satisfaction circuitry. Finally, the suppression and misdirection of the seeking circuitry in the absence of satisfaction—especially with one's own actions or lack thereof—contributes to demoralization (i.e., feeling bad about not living up to one's values or potential).

Of course, sometimes people can be fearful or anxious *and* depressed, and may seek escape from other unwanted experiences too, for example emotional numbness. A bottom line for any suffering cycle: So long as our seeking circuitry is suppressed or focused almost entirely on escaping pain and suffering—and not on seeking what's truly satisfying and fulfilling—we're caught in a suffering cycle.

## Cycles of Healing and Recovery, Freedom and Happiness

Just as the framework specifies cycles of suffering, it describes cycles of healing and happiness. A central goal here is to focus attention on the seeking circuitry, including its potential roles in healing one's psychological suffering and finding true happiness and fulfillment in life.

Two keys to recovery and healing—and spiritual transformation—are focusing one's seeking circuitry on pursuing things that are (1) genuinely healing and (2) truly satisfying and fulfilling. Therefore I specify two fundamental cycles of healing and happiness: *seeking to engage and transform suffering*, and *seeking true goods*. While these cycles support each other and are potentially simultaneous, it's helpful to consider them separately—particularly with respect to how each may change relationships among the circuitries of seeking, fear, satisfaction and embodiment.

### HEALING CYCLE: SEEKING TO ENGAGE AND TRANSFORM SUFFERING.

This brain-based healing cycle is about seeking to know, tolerate, understand, and make positive use of pain and suffering.

What this means for any particular person will always be very individual. For some, seeking to know and understand their suffering means working with a therapist or counselor. For others, it's about sharing with supportive family members and friends, with members of one's religious or spiritual community, or members of a support group for those struggling with similar problems. For others it means writing about their experiences of suffering, or expressing them artistically. And for more and more people, it involves engaging in meditation or other contemplative practices

that cultivate mindful and loving embodiment, which fosters mindful and loving thoughts and actions.

Whatever works for a particular person, the *seeking to engage and transform suffering* healing cycle is about just that: seeking to engage with pain, suffering and unwanted experiences, and doing so in healthy and healing ways that decrease emotional pain and break cycles of suffering. Whatever path someone takes, however, engaging the embodiment circuitry, which registers and allows awareness of one's suffering, is key. For some people, particularly those who have experienced extreme emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, or have witnessed horrible things, attending to bodily aspects of suffering can be very difficult and “triggering.” For everyone this healing cycle requires strong motivation, another reason it's referred to in this framework as *seeking to engage and transform suffering*. To sustain that seeking and to find success in engaging with suffering, we need support, sometimes from a therapist, counselor, or spiritual teacher. We need to learn new skills and develop new abilities, especially new capacities for self-understanding and self-regulation (capacities of the brain's prefrontal cortex, a circuitry beyond the scope of this document).

True, engaging in this healing cycle is difficult and sometimes painful. But the payoff is huge. We can come to live in much less fear and be much less avoidant of life. We can have more compassion for ourselves, no matter what we're going through. We can find courage and strength inside that we never realized were there. We can free up our seeking circuitry to pursue much more satisfying and fulfilling things in life, which will bring more happiness and healthiness than we ever imagined possible.

**HEALING CYCLE: SEEKING TRUE GOODS.** Fortunately, psychological healing isn't all about seeking to deal more effectively with pain and suffering. That wouldn't be very appealing or inspiring, would it?

The second key healing cycle, *seeking true goods*, is about harnessing the brain circuitry of seeking—that always-active and powerful driver of our thoughts and behaviors—to seeking out the truly good things in life. This isn't about trendy things we see on TV or can buy with lots of money. This is about love, peace, playfulness, and joy. It's about the kind of happiness and satisfaction that comes from being a good friend, a good boyfriend or girlfriend, a successful student or contributor to one's community.

We all need to sort out, for ourselves, what truly makes us happy. What we find to be the greatest goods in life, the things we most deeply value and find most satisfying to experience. It may take some time, especially if we've had little experience with true goods and genuine happiness. It will take the support of others who do not judge our values or push us to adopt theirs, but instead give us the space, as well as the support and inspiration, to sort things out for ourselves—and to awaken and harness our seeking circuitry to this pursuit.

The *seeking true goods* healing cycle is about realigning the seeking circuitry with one's deepest needs and longings. It's about seeking what will be genuinely fulfilling and satisfying, and spending more and more time experiencing that satisfaction and fulfillment. Also, the more we activate our brain's satisfaction circuitry, and occupy our embodiment circuitry with the sensations of that satisfaction, the less power the circuitries of fear and seeking have over us. That's what it means to be satisfied and content: accepting

and embracing this moment, without wanting or seeking more from it; accepting whatever may come next, without fear. Activity of the fear and seeking circuits, including in response to old triggers of fear and craving, is actually reduced.<sup>26,27,28,29</sup>

When this happens, we are no longer enslaved to fearing and seeking, or the cycles of suffering and addiction. Instead, with increasing satisfaction with our life (despite the inevitable setbacks), we can put naturally arising fear and seeking to good use: Avoiding what brings suffering, and pursuing what reduces suffering and brings true health and happiness.

### Contemplative Practices for Seeking to Engage and Transform Suffering

Contemplative practices can be used to carefully attend to and investigate any experience that human beings may have—including those of pain and suffering—and to cultivate capacities for doing so. This is central to the *seeking to engage and transform suffering* healing cycle, which is about seeking to know, tolerate, understand, and make positive use of one's pain and suffering.

**PREPARATION.** Before directly facing pain and suffering, people need skills for managing painful and unwanted feelings and body sensations, including traumatic memories and addictive cravings. For example, therapists or counselors who are competent at working with traumatized people, including those with addictions, understand that the first stage of recovery is focused on learning and strengthening self-care and self-regulation skills.<sup>30</sup>

**MINDFULNESS.** A common definition of mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.”<sup>31</sup> When someone freely chooses to pay that attention, mindfulness is an excellent tool for exploring painful and troubling memories, feelings, bodily experiences, thought processes, and ways of relating to others. Experiences that had previously felt too unbearable to focus on can be explored and investigated, and seen as arising and passing sensations and thoughts, without resorting to seeking escape. When habitual reactions arise, or suffering cycles begin to unfold, one can mindfully observe them and not get carried away.

**BODILY AWARENESS AS KEY.** Mindful awareness of bodily sensations, that is, one’s *moment-to-moment experiences of embodiment*, is the foundation for attending to and exploring one’s emotions, thoughts, behaviors and relationship patterns. Only with that grounding in embodied awareness can we effectively bring mindful awareness to emotions and thoughts; otherwise we are repeatedly swept away in habitual cycles of seeking brief escapes and quick fixes that perpetuate suffering and disconnection from present experience. Researchers have found that a key component of the embodiment circuitry is larger and has a greater density of “gray matter” in long-term mindfulness meditators.<sup>32,33</sup> Researchers have also found that mindfulness meditators exhibit brain functioning in which this circuitry dominates the processing of sadness<sup>34</sup> and pain sensations.<sup>35,36</sup> Mindfulness enables direct and safe engagement with the bodily sensations of pain and suffering. Rather than seeking to control or escape those sensations, mindfulness allows tolerance and compassionate understanding of such experiences. In short, mindfulness enables the transformation of

suffering experiences into opportunities for healing, even spiritual awakening.

**EXAMPLES OF MINDFULNESS AND SUCCESSFULLY SEEKING TO ENGAGE**

**AND TRANSFORM SUFFERING.** In therapy a young woman who was sexually abused as a child learns to mindfully observe constricted feelings in her chest and visual images of the abuse, without immediately getting lost in feelings of disgust and shame that go with them. She also learns to mindfully observe the disgust and shame, including the transitory bodily sensations that go with them—again, without getting lost in them or seeking to escape. In time these memories, feelings and sensations lose their grip on her, and she discovers peace, strength and freedom she had never known were possible.

A young man subjected to extreme emotional abuse by his parents learns to mindfully observe—without judging himself or being consumed by fear or shame—experiences of helplessness and betrayal connected to the abuse. Even without (yet) engaging in practices to cultivate self-compassion (see below), new compassionate understandings of those experiences, and his reactions to them, spontaneously arise and replace the guilt and self-hate that he had struggled with for years.

Importantly, mindfulness and other contemplative methods for engaging with and transforming suffering are not quick fixes or panaceas. For some, even after cultivating the self-care and self-regulation skills needed to engage directly with suffering, it can be a long process. We are all creatures of habit and conditioning, and old habits can be hard to break, especially if they once ensured our physical or psychological survival. But with a foundation of self-regulation skills, regular practice, and relationships that support both, mindfully engaging with one’s suffering can facilitate the healing cycle of *seeking to engage and transform suffering*.

## Contemplative Practices and Seeking True Goods

This is about how contemplative practices may harness the brain's seeking circuitry, which when wrongly directed causes so much of our suffering, to the pursuit of true goods that bring genuine happiness. Unfortunately, to date the seeking circuitry has been largely neglected in psychology and psychiatry, and in theories and research on meditation, yoga, and prayer.

Our seeking circuitry is always active. For anything we want, whenever we are motivated to have or to do something, it's active. Fortunately, unlike many other aspects of brain function, this aspect is accessible to us, something we can reflect upon and contemplate. And we can choose: What shall I seek? What should I seek as my highest priorities? What do I want to seek in this moment? We can also contemplate and choose our answers to these questions: What really makes me happy? What is my motivation for doing (or saying or writing) this? These questions and choices are at the heart of meditative and other contemplative practices and how we put them into practice in our lives.

**WHAT SHOULD WE SEEK?** Religious and spiritual leaders have long sought (whether wisely or in confusion themselves) to help people seek transcendent “true goods”—obedience to God's law, surrender to God's will; an intimate relationship with God or Jesus; loving others, even our enemies, as we love ourselves; forever striving to free all beings from suffering. Profit-seeking companies, politicians, and advertisers bombard us with sights, sounds, and words designed to harness our seeking circuitry to the (perceived) benefits they seek for themselves. The Declaration of Independence declares it a self-evident truth that we are endowed by our creator with unalienable rights, not only to life and liberty,

but also the pursuit of happiness. In short, the brain's seeking circuitry is central to human life.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of the Tibetan people and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, often says, “We all naturally desire happiness and not to suffer.” He writes that “genuine happiness”—which has “inner peace” as its principal characteristic, “is rooted in concern for others and involves a high degree of sensitivity and feeling,” and provides a basic sense of well-being that cannot be undermined, “no matter what difficulties we encounter in life.”<sup>37</sup> He distinguishes this genuine happiness from all those states of mind that, despite being called happiness and sought by many, lack those qualities.<sup>37</sup> Like wise men and women from other religious and spiritual traditions, he is pointing to the genuine happiness that should be a central focus of our seeking.

Yes, seeking can cause problems—when it becomes craving, grasping, clinging, and attachment to passing things that cannot bring genuine happiness. But seeking can be focused on true goods that, when experienced but not clung to, bring genuine happiness and reduce craving and attachment.

**SEEKING LOVE, KINDNESS AND COMPASSION.** Every religion and spiritual tradition has its images of wise, loving, and happy beings that can powerfully activate our seeking circuitry and deepest longings. Yet often more effective for cultivating love within oneself—at least initially, for those struggling with much suffering—are simpler and more common images that are easily called to mind or found with Google images, like a cute baby, a puppy, a kitten. The key: bringing the image to mind causes motivations and feelings of love, kindness and compassion to arise *spontaneously and effortlessly*.



In the *metta* practice of the Theravadin Buddhist tradition, which was taught to prisoners during the intensive meditation retreat depicted in *The Dhamma Brothers*, the focusing of attention on such an image, and the bodily sensations of spontaneously arising motivations and feelings, is combined with internally repeating phrases like these:

May you be happy.

May you be healthy.

May you be at peace.

May you be free from suffering.

**HARNESSING THE BRAIN'S SEEKING CIRCUITRY TO CULTIVATING EMBODIED AND SATISFYING LOVE, KINDNESS AND COMPASSION.** In this way, visual imagination and verbal thoughts—typically absorbed in memories, plans, and fantasies of imagined rewards—along with attention to bodily sensations, are used to harness the brain's seeking circuitry to love, kindness, and compassion. If while doing the practice we experience in our bodies feelings of love, kindness, and compassion, we occupy the embodiment circuitry with them. If those good feelings are accompanied by feelings of contentment, peace, and satisfaction, then this practice also involves the satisfaction circuitry. Finally, to the extent we experience the bodily sensations of contentment, peace, and satisfaction, the embodiment and satisfaction circuitries are not only involved but being transformed.

Harnessing the seeking, satisfaction and embodiment circuitries to the cultivation of love, kindness and compassion is the most basic and powerful form of the *seeking true goods* healing cycle. The benefits of cultivating love, kindness and compassion toward oneself and others are many—

especially for people who so far have experienced little of these in their lives. As with mindfulness, however, things can be more complex. Given the neglect, losses, abuses, and betrayals that some people have experienced in their lives, feelings of love, kindness, and compassion can trigger fear.<sup>38</sup> This is normal, and there are many ways that therapists and counselors can help someone to gently and safely explore, understand and overcome these obstacles to receiving, cultivating, and giving love, kindness, and compassion.<sup>38,39,40</sup>

**OTHER "TRUE GOODS."** There is a good case, made by many for millennia, that *love*—which we can experience and express in many ways—is the greatest good and the greatest source of genuine human happiness. But most of us agree there are other (if lesser) "true goods" too, other experiences and goals that are most worthy of seeking and most likely to bring genuine happiness. Depending on our personality, our cultural and religious background and several other factors, we may highly value and seek various things along a continuum from false to true goods (e.g., power, money, technology tools and toys, entertainment, sexual stimulation, physical health, beauty, creativity, knowledge, courage, generosity, connection with nature, playfulness, achievement, contributing to others through our work).

Finally, the world's religious and spiritual traditions supremely value wisdom, which includes liberation from ignorance and, to use a central Buddhist concept, "seeing things as they really are"—not as we fear or want them to be. Such wisdom entails accurately perceiving and knowing oneself, per the ancient Delphic maxim, thus insight into our true motivations for what we do, say, and think.<sup>41</sup> Then we find that even efforts to pursue true goods are sometimes largely motivated by fears of failure, judgment,

or rejection; by cravings for lesser goods like others' attention or admiration; even by false goods like revenge. Over the course of writing this, I've been motivated by a sincere wish to share something helpful, but also by fears that it won't be good enough, that students will find it useless, and by craving readers' admiration. Seeking the true good of self-knowledge can help us to mindfully and compassionately acknowledge such normal human shortcomings, gain more freedom from them, and focus our seeking on true goods and genuine happiness.

In short, there are many contemplative practices—especially but not only those for cultivating love, kindness and compassion—that can bring healing from suffering, and much more, by harnessing the brains' seeking circuitry to the pursuit of true goods and genuine happiness.

## Conclusion

This document offers an explanation of some key psychological and brain processes involved in cycles of suffering and healing, and in potentially transformative meditative and contemplative practices—especially those for cultivating mindfulness, love, kindness, and compassion. It draws on knowledge from many scientific, psychological and contemplative traditions, and necessarily goes beyond scientific data to provide an integrative vision. While simplifying things in some ways, the framework acknowledges the complexity of suffering and healing. Also, appropriate neuroscience reviewers found nothing that's inconsistent with current knowledge, although it's important to note that research on interactions between the brain circuitries of fear, seeking, satisfaction and embodiment is still limited. Certainly more research is needed. In the meantime those of us seeking to heal and find genuine happiness can better appreciate and explore the power of meditative and contemplative practices (used carefully and appropriately) to harness the brain's seeking, satisfaction and embodiment circuitries to decreasing our suffering and to transform ourselves into more mindful, loving, wise, free and happy human beings.



## Endnotes

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