A Mantra a Day

De-stress with meditation

November 1, 1998 By Bo Young

Centering of the mind, a crucial healing tool for people with HIV, isn't something you'd associate with hellish prison life. Yet an age-old technique to accomplish just that—meditation—is being taught to a growing number of inmates. Studies have found that consistent meditation can strengthen the immune system and reduce disease-worsening stress.

But what appeals most to wardens is the practice's pacifying effect, first shown in 1993 at India's largest prison, in New Delhi. A new superintendent, upset by widespread drug use and infighting, invited instructors in the 2,500-year-old method of Vipassana meditation to conduct courses for the prisoners. The behavioral improvements were so dramatic that the practice spread throughout Indian prisons and then internationally.

Classic Vipassana meditation takes two hours a day (an hour in the morning and evening), but any time spent is beneficial. It involves sitting quietly and focusing awareness, first on breathing and then on the body overall. Thomas Crisman, a coordinator of the Vipassana School's Prison Program, says the method "allows the mind to unlearn old stress reactions and achieve a new balance."

The school's 10-day training course is free. "We only require that a prison administrator first attend a course at one of our centers," Crisman says. "During the course at the prison, we ask that the institution provide vegetarian meals for both teachers and students because of this food's simplicity, plus facilities to isolate the participants." Course enrollments have ranged from seven to 1,000.

Crisman says people with HIV have been enthusiastic about the benefits of meditation: "It helps them reduce stress and face the physical challenges of their illness. And it gives them a new lease on a life sentence, whether that's prison or HIV."

Vipassana meditation is taught at the Seattle North Rehabilitation Facility, and discussions are under way with the Texas, Vermont and federal prison systems. The Vipassana School has centers in California, Washington, Texas and Massachusetts. For more information, write Thomas Crisman, 1445 Ross Avenue, Suite 3200, Dallas, TX 75202; phone 214.855.4785; or visit www.dhamma.org. A video called Doing Time, Doing Vipassana *and a book on Vipassana titled* The Art of Living *by*

William Hart (Harper Collins/New York) can be ordered online at www.pariyatti.com.

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