

Pluralism Podcast

Episode 5- Part II: "Meditation in American Prisons" Transcript

[Introductory Segment]

Summary: Your hosts Maggie Krueger and Cody Musselman, introduce the sixth episode of the Pluralism Podcast, a production of [The Pluralism Project](#) at [Harvard University](#). This organization was founded by Harvard Professor [Diana Eck](#) over two decades ago to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources. [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) (or OCG, which you can access at pluralism.org) is one such resource. OCG includes essays, interactive maps, and links to historical documents and current news articles.

This show, in three vignettes, presents a snapshot of the research and information you will find in [On Common Ground](#). These vignettes highlight America's rich religious diversity, her changing religious landscape, and particular moments of encounter in the public sphere.

As a follow-up to the Pluralism Podcast Episode 5: Religion in Prisons, this episode focuses on the Buddhist practice of meditation found within some prisons.

Dhamma Brothers Trailer: [door clangs shut] Life without parole doesn't mean you're to be punished, or worked, or any of that. It means you're to be warehoused until you die. [door clangs shut] From six months up to death-row. We have 'em all here. [sirens] Donaldson is a pretty dangerous place. Somebody being stabbed or killed is a common occurrence. The violence here--this is a breeding ground. [chanting] There we were in Alabama, a very Christian part of the country, and we were teaching the teachings of the Buddha. It's a very regimented day, stricter than your regular prison schedule. What is that? I don't want to go through that. I thought, well, we're waste some time here. I've been through every course imaginable. A meditation course? Come on?! [meditation chime]

Maggie: Hi everyone, welcome to the Pluralism Podcast. I'm Maggie Krueger, and you just heard part of the trailer for [The Dhamma Brothers](#) documentary. This film is about a group of men in a [high security Alabama prison](#) who began practicing [Vipassana](#) meditation in the midst of a sometimes violent and dehumanizing environment. My co-host, Cody Musselman interviewed the film's producer and director, [Jenny Phillips](#).

Cody: Maggie this is such a powerful film about personal transformation and human potential. And this episode, part-two of a two-part series examining religion in American prisons, specifically addresses meditation, mindfulness and the Buddhist tradition. In our previous episode, episode 5: Religion in Prisons, Amanda Napior and Harvard Professor [Kaia Stern](#) both touched upon the powerful tension that arises when someone is physically imprisoned, yet

emotionally and spiritually free. *Dhamma Brothers* follows a group of men as they experience that phenomenon.

Maggie: To better inform our discussion with Jenny Phillips, Pluralism Project research associate Abhishek Raman first shares excerpts from the [On Common Ground](#) essays [The Dharma: The Teachings of the Buddha](#) and [The Practice of Mindfulness](#).

[Vignette 1: The Dharma: The Teachings of the Buddha and The Practice of Mindfulness]

Summary: In the first vignette, Abhishek Raman reads excerpts from the [On Common Ground](#) essays "[The Dharma: The Teachings of the Buddha](#)" and "[The Practice of Mindfulness](#)."

Abhishek: The Buddha's sermons and teachings sought to reveal the true nature of the universe, what is known within Buddhism as the *Dharma*. He gave his first sermon on the outskirts of the city of Varanasi at a deer park called Sarnath. This first sermon presents an overview of suffering and the way out of suffering. It is called the "Four Noble Truths." The first noble truth is that life involves suffering, *dukkha*. Secondly: Suffering is caused by desire and grasping. The third noble truth is that there is a way out of suffering. This way out of suffering is the "Noble Eightfold Path" which provides instruction for ethical conduct, including right understanding, really knowing, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The "Noble Eightfold Path" is the fourth of the Noble truths.

What the Buddha "saw" in his enlightenment experience came from the alert, wakeful consciousness of his meditation. Thus for some, to "practice" Buddhism is to practice meditation.

The most common meditation practice is sitting meditation, in which one establishes a sitting posture, often in a cross-legged lotus or half-lotus position, with spine erect. While it may take some time for this posture to feel comfortable, it is one which eventually will enable the practitioner to maintain both stillness and stability for a half hour, hour, or in some cases much longer.

In the Theravada tradition, the first stage of most meditation practice is calming or stilling the mind by resting the attention on some particular focal point—the breath, a word or *mantra*, an image of the Buddha. The practice of "calming the mind," called *samatha*, is the practice of tranquillity. Associated with it is insight meditation or *vipassana*, which directs one's attention

toward the workings of the mind and body, developing “mindfulness” of the contents of consciousness and the changing sensations of the body.

The purpose of such practice is not to turn away from the world, but to sharpen the capacity for attentive awareness in all one’s activities. Walking meditation is another form of this practice in which mindfulness is directed carefully and explicitly toward the movements of walking. As with breath-centered meditation, it involves developing conscious awareness of what, for most people, is done on “automatic pilot.”

To learn more about Buddhism or one of the 17 other traditions profiled by the Pluralism Project, visit pluralism.org/ocg and click on [Religion](#).

[Vignette 2: Donaldson Prison and Vipassana Meditation]

Summary: In the second vignette, Cody speaks with Jenny Phillips about how Vipassana meditation came to the [Donaldson Correctional facility](#) in Alabama.

Cody: Jenny Phillips has been teaching a meditation-based emotional literacy program called [Houses of Healing](#) in prisons for almost twenty years. In 1999 she learned of a group of people in the Donaldson Correctional facility in Alabama who were using the Houses of Healing program to teach each other how to meditate. Phillips was interested in how meditation impacted the lives of individuals in prison, so she got in contact with the prison psychologist, Ron Cavanaugh.

Jenny: So I contacted Cavanaugh and he said why don’t you come down interview some of the guys that are learning to meditate in the prison and take the Houses of Healing course and maybe we can do a comparison between our group down here and your group in Massachusetts. So I went down there in 1999 in November and, it’s the way I often feel when I walk into any prison, but, particularly that prison, that when you walk in you have a lot of feeling, a lot of emotion, kind of flooded with hopelessness and despair but also this sense of possibility. When you talk to the prisoners they are often very bright eyed and hopeful that something is going to help them change their lives, lead better lives whether they are inside or outside of prison. And so it was just a transformative trip for me because did three days of interviews with these men in Mr. Cavanaugh’s office behind closed doors, one by one and I tap-recorded them. And their search for redemption and peace inside—their stories were so powerful.

And when I came home, someone gave me for Christmas, that December, a film called [Doing Time, Doing Vipassana](#). Vipassana is very intense, it is 10 days, 100 hours of meditation. So someone gave me a copy of the film and it just kind of came together with the experiences I had just had a few weeks before in Alabama when the men were saying “ya, great, we sit and we

meditate for 15 or 20 minutes and then, bang, we are back in the chaos again.” It does help, and prisoners always feel it helps to go inside their bodies, quiet their minds hollow their breath, powerful experience for them. But the guys at Donaldson wanted something deeper where they would be really protected, where they could really do some deep inner work. I think that is fundamentally what they were asking me for. Maybe not in exactly those words but they wanted to go deeper. But when I saw the film I thought, “Wow, I have never even heard of Vipassana. I thought, wow, this is what they want. This would be great. Let’s take this program to Donaldson Correctional Facility -- the worst prison in Alabama. Probably one of the very worst prisons in the United States and here are all these men learning to meditate, with very little support from the administration and asking for a deeper practice. There was no movie intention at that point and I was not a filmmaker back then, perhaps a writer, but certainly not anybody that could tell stories on film.

Cody: A series of negotiations began to take place between the [Vipassana center](#) in Massachusetts and the [Alabama Department of Corrections](#) with the help of Dr. Cavanaugh. By 2001 a group of Donaldson prison staff visited the Vipassana center for their first training and a 10 day sitting.

Before we go one, we’ll hear more about the Vipassana tradition and its history in the American context from Pluralism Project research associate Abhishek Raman as he reads an excerpt from the [On Common Ground](#) essay “[Building ‘American Buddhism.’](#)”

[Vignette 3: Building “American Buddhism”]

Summary: In this vignette, Abhishek reads an excerpt from the [On Common Ground](#) essay [Building ‘American Buddhism.’](#)”

Abhishek: The *vipassana* or “insight meditation” of the Southeast Asian Theravada tradition began to flourish in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of both increased immigration from Southeast Asian countries and when many young Americans encountered *vipassana* meditation while traveling outside of the United States. Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield, for example, are the founders of the first major Theravada retreat center in America. Both Goldstein and Kornfield spent time in Thailand in the 1960s and 1970s undertaking the serious practice of Buddhist meditation with some of the leading meditation masters of the Theravada tradition. After meeting in 1974 at Naropa Institute’s summer school in Boulder, Colorado the two began teaching together. In 1976, a group of *vipassana* practitioners bought a huge Catholic monastic house in rural Barre, Massachusetts, and created the Insight Meditation Society. In 1985, Jack Kornfield and others on the West Coast started Insight Meditation West and began the Spirit Rock Center in Marin County, California. Today there are dozens of *vipassana* meditation centers, large and small.

It was not until the 1970s that Euro-American Buddhism focused intently on the discipline of meditation practice and began to build the communities and centers to sustain such practice. In 1988, when the first edition of Dom Morreale's *Buddhist America: Centers, Retreats, Practices* was published, it included descriptions of 148 Mahayana centers offering instruction in some form of Zen practice; 67 Theravada centers with *vipassana* meditation practice; and 160 Tibetan or Vajrayana centers.

Not surprisingly by the end of the 1980s, there emerged a number of American-born and American-trained students of Buddhist teachers who received *Dharma* transmission and who can be said to be "second-generation teachers." As centuries-long Asian lineages were passed for the first time to Americans, these teachers came to represent the first step in truly indigenizing and "Americanizing" Buddhism.

[Vignette 2, continued: Interview with Jenny Phillips]

Cody: Now let's return to our interview with Jenny Phillips as she continues to describe how Vipassana meditation impacted the lives of the practitioners in the Donaldson prison.

Jenny: And in January of 2002 we brought the program into the prisons and I was there on-site. You couldn't be in all the meditations because if you are not actually sitting the ten-day course you are actually not allowed into the meditation center. But I came in, there were a couple of sittings each day that you were allowed to come in and witness. I was actually cooking food for the group that was locked in the gym doing the deep meditation course. So I would come wheeling in with carts of food and I would see what was going on. And it was like "Oh my god, I have seen beautiful sites in prison, but I have never seen anything this spiritually mind boggling. That was when I decided that this story needed to be told to the world, so that people could see the power of the program and the treatability of prisoners even if they are in an end-of-the-line prison where many of them will never be released from that prison and they are still trying to find answers for themselves. So then I decided after that, after witnessing it, at first I thought I was going to write about it, and I thought, but how many people will actually read it if I write about it. If I put it in a magazine, it just didn't seem graphic enough. So then I decided, ok, in the second course which happens a few months later, which happened in May 2002, let's make a movie.

Cody: Again with the help of Dr. Cavanaugh, Phillips received permission to return to the prison and collect film footage during the next meditation session.

Jenny: Just to emphasize, the movie was really an afterthought because the program was so powerful, and when I made this film I never ever ever expected it to go anywhere. And yet, it just took off and many years later, it could be a full time job. I can't let it be but it could be a full time job because I just can't keep up with it. I mean, we had a national broadcast on public television. We were in movie theatres in 2008, it was released in movie theatres. There was a tremendous amount of media, TV, print, radio. You could buy it, rent it, stream it. Its out in the international markets now as well. [Oprah Winfrey](#) got involved and brought me to Chicago and interview a couple of the Dhamma Brothers on a telephone hookup. There are still streamings around the world. There are a lot of very targeted streamings to criminal justice organizations. The mission

statement was originally to create a national conversation about the need for effective treatment programs inside prisons and that's what we did. And it continues at Donaldson. Unfortunately, it's heartbreaking to me, but it has not spread to other facilities for a variety of reasons. And I know quite a few reasons why it hasn't but I think one of the most amazing things to me is that this program--despite wardens changing, Dr. Cavanaugh tragically died in April, there is a new [Commissioner of Corrections](#)—so far, it's still there. There are 4 ten day courses a year. There are refresher three-day courses for students that have been through the ten-day program and it has become a part of the very fabric of the prison. Which is not to say that it could not be thrown out at any moment -- it could be thrown out. But right now it's still there. It's hard for me to say how different things are down there now as a result of the program. I think it's still a very violent prison. I am not really welcome down there anymore because we got just such massive media. I mean, a Japanese TV crew just going and knocking on their door to get in. There was all kind of TV coverage, I was on the radio all the time. At this point in my life with the *Dhamma Brothers*, I try to get a little away from the film. In the sense that the film spreads a message—but the really important thing is what I said in my mission statement, is to...and you asked if this was an advocacy film and I guess I would say yes, in the sense that when you think about advocacy films, I think they are often in your face with a message. And all I wanted to do here was just have people see things for what they truly are, to see the truth, because we live under so many different stereotypes. We are so conscious of bad people and danger and, you know, we shut down about issues because we're scared, or because we just don't care because we don't know anything. So that is what I continue to hope for in terms of prisons, that we'll understand that locking people up, sometimes it's necessary to get people shut away from society forever because they can not be returned. But for most of them they can. Many shouldn't have been locked up in the first place, but I guess I shouldn't say too much about that because I don't want anyone to think that the message in the film is not important. But I think the large majority just need help.

And from my point of view, because my background is clinical, I am a psychotherapist as well, from my point of view I think that the only way to really help prisoners is to give them the opportunity to do some trauma treatment. And the common feeling is that you can't treat trauma in prison, you can't open it up, it's not safe. But actually what you see in the *Dhamma Brothers* is trauma treatment. You see the prisoners addressing their earliest memories of things that were done to them, or things they did to others. All their issues in the sitting of a hundred hours and all of their issues, or a lot of their issues do come up, they come to the surface. And they are processed and integrated in a way that is very healing for them. And then of course during the ten-day period of time there is a teacher there who is available 24 hours a day to sit with them and process what is going on. In a Buddhist way, not in a Western psychotherapy way. but in a very healing Buddhist way to help them stay with the work and not get scared or panicked. You see in the film the story of [Edward Johnson](#), which, he tries to jump and run because he can't come to terms with the fact that his daughter has died. And then with a lot of support from the teacher, he was able to come to conscious realization that his daughter had died and he was really able to settle down with that truth. And that was a healing—it was a bad thing to know she was died. It was what he needed to come to terms with. And I see that happening again and again and again with prisoners and also with free-world people when they do this program. They

really come to terms with deep things they haven't been able to really address before in their lives.

Cody: Seeing people coming to terms with difficult memories and emotions during Vipassana sessions is something that Phillips has witnessed time and again. The story of [Grady Bankhead](#), a man featured in the *Dhamma Brothers*, made quite an impression on me. Let's hear a little bit of what he had to say about his experience.

Grady [clip from *Dhamma Brothers*]: It was horrible. It was probably the worst experience I've ever been through. I spent eight and a half years on death row and this was harder. All the stuff that's buried down deep, they come up gradually. And most of them are small things and you can deal with. You look at it, you recognize it and you move on. But I never felt anything like that. It was hard to maintain composure. I wanted to jump and run, bad. I've always justified some of my behavior during that crime, and on day five, I just couldn't get away from myself. I had to actually see it. Things don't just happen. And your behavior causes the things that you get into. So I am guilty. I am guilty of the crime, whether I hit the man, whether I stabbed the man, whether I cut the man, which I didn't do any of those. But I am just as guilty of the ones that did. It hit places in me I didn't even know was there anymore. Places like your first child, when he gets old enough to talk and he looks you straight in the eye and tells you "I love you daddy," and you for the first time he understands what he's saying and he means it. Those kind of places in you. And after 16 years of being locked up in here, I wasn't sure there were any places like that in me anymore. [Vipassana instructor in background says "the in breath and the out breath"]. That's why they give a ten-day course, rather than you come in and sit 4-6 hours a day and then you go home. There want you there long enough that you actually deal with your stuff.

Cody: I asked Phillips if she was still in contact with some of the men in the film. She still writes to many of them and she filled me in on what has been happening with Grady.

Jenny: I'm a little bit out of touch with Grady although I do hear about Grady. But I do think Grady is one of those people who got swept up with the crime that he witnessed—a terrible, terrible crime that he witnessed, stood by and actually assisted the murders as they escaped. They were people he had only met that day. And so he got swept up. Grady is still hoping that someday he'll get out. But of course he is hurt and angry, very very hurt and angry and I think that was part of his journey during the ten-day course. I think he has done several courses now, several courses at Donaldson. And yes, when he heard about his daughter's death he was flooded with a wish for revenge. And I know he went to one of the counselors there and I have talked to her about when he came to her, she just handled him so beautiful. Using humor and her personal relationship with Grady to have him really look at himself and how panicked he was and she worked with him as he got through that to the point that because of his deep Vipassana practice he was able to feel compassion. And that is one of the things that come out of Vipassana. Its not like compassion-focused, may you be free from suffering kind of thing. It just emerges from the deep practice of finding yourself, finding compassion for your own self and then it just radiates out from there and radiates out from your enemies. And it radiates out

to his daughter's murder to the point that—this is really—he actually put word out through the grapevine, he knew where this man was in another prison—the prisoners have a very active way of communicating with one another, they know how to do it. And he put word out into this guy's prison that this was who he was and his daughter and he didn't want anyone to try and hurt the man.

Cody: Here's Grady talking about that experience in the film:

Grady [clip from *Dhamma Brothers*]: They had a newscast on, and the guys sitting around the TV one day we were listening to it and they said, Grady that's your daughter that their talking about. And one of the guys that was getting the *Mobile* paper, there was an article in there and sure enough it was my daughter. And she had been murder and that is how I found out, I read it in the paper. My first reaction was, "Boy, if I could just get my hands on this cat." But that only lasted a few minutes. And it was like "What are you talking about Grady?" I can't feel that way. I don't like anything that he did. It makes me physically ill to think about what my daughter went through. But I gotta still love the guy, he is still a human just like the rest of us. I don't like what he did, I hope he can't never do that to nobody else ever again, but he is a human being. And if I believe anything about what I say I believe here, I love him too. It's a choice. Vipassana gave me the right to make my own choice, where I can choose how I want to react to this, I don't just have to react.

Cody: Phillips commented on her decision to focus on the transformative process meditation had on Grady's life.

Jenny: Yeah I almost didn't put that part in at the end because I thought people would laugh when they saw it or not laugh but say, "Ah, silly, of course he doesn't *love* his daughter's murder." And I find that people understand it. Maybe because it is at the end of the movie and you are kind of already at an understanding of the processes these guys went through so that it becomes more understandable. But I don't know. Ya, it is definitely a powerful message.

There was a warden there at one point, not the one you see in the film. He and I use to speak together on panels and stuff like that and he made it very clear that the *Dhamma Brothers* became very special in his eyes because they were "good prisoners." And that concerned me a little bit because I don't think we are trying to make zombies that march around and obey the rules. We are trying to help people find themselves within and that works better of prison and administration. That helps them keep order. But it also helps—the reason it is more orderly is because the guys who go through the program, is because they are not hair-trigger upset about things all the time. They really know how to work with their emotions. They have addressed some of their deepest issues. And they know how to walk around and spread peace because they feel more peaceful inside.

As I have said before and as I am sure you already know, it isn't really a religion per se. Although the different national variations of it in Tibet and China and Thailand and Japan at times it does involve deities. But the basic practice itself going back to the Buddha, is really, its

all about acceptance and coming to terms with the truth of things as they are so I think if you are locked up and you can't stand it. Do you remember a guy at the end who said I was always ripping and running and now this is like freedom. I don't know if you remember him but he raises his hand in a way that is so beautiful with a beautiful smile on his face and he says this is freedom. And to be free inside, inside a prison is quite an amazing gift for people to have for themselves.

Cody: The film debuted in 2007 and Phillips is now working on a new film project called *Beyond the Wall*, focusing on the revolving door phenomenon jails often precipitates. She hopes to see the film complete by the end of 2015.

Maggie: This podcast is a production of [The Pluralism Project](#) at [Harvard University](#), which highlights America's rich religious diversity, her changing religious landscape, and particular moments of encounter in the public sphere. The project was founded by Harvard Professor [Diana Eck](#) over two decades ago to help Americans engage with the realities of religious diversity through research, outreach, and the active dissemination of resources. [On Common Ground: World Religions in America](#) (or OCG, which you can access at [pluralism.org](#)) is one such resource. OCG includes essays, interactive maps, and links to historical documents and current news articles.

Maggie: Many thanks to Jenny Phillips, Abhishek Raman

Cody: ...and you, our listeners, for tuning in to this episode of the Pluralism Podcast. Check out our online resource [On Common Ground](#) for more at [pluralism.org](#).

Maggie: For the [Pluralism Podcast](#), I'm Maggie Krueger

Cody: ...and I'm Cody Musselman.