

Altered Bodies, Altered Minds: A Jail Meditation Program

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Residents in a medium security, general-population wing of the Boulder (Colorado) County jail have been offered a weekly two-hour meditation program for the last four years. This program is voluntary for both teachers and participants. Six different instructors and approximately 500 prisoners have participated in the program. Teaching meditation in the jail gives a meditation instructor a most interesting visit with the states of mind experienced by jail residents. Hopefully, the program provides a useful tool for inmates with which they can achieve sleep, reduce tension, control impulses, and more effectively deal with pain, both physical and mental.

Jails are full of individuals under intense stress. Unlike prison inmates, jail inmates often do not know how long they will be in jail or where they will go from that location. Some stay in the Boulder County jail for the full two years allowed; others are only present for a day or two. Some are awaiting charges, others await bail, trial, or sentencing, and yet others await transport to other facilities either in Colorado or elsewhere in the country. A few are simply finishing their sentences before being released back into civilian life. An inmate may receive a new cellmate in the middle of the night without warning. Friends disappear to other parts of the Boulder jail, to other locations in the Department of Corrections of Colorado, to other states, or to civilian life. Inmates are moved about within the jail itself. Intake, the first station, usually lasts at least 24 hours. From intake, prisoners are moved without much warning to their next location. Prisoners who are ill and/or require special medical attention or who misbehave in some way are moved rather abruptly to different sections. Jail is also stressful, although in different ways, for the guards.

Being incarcerated, whether in this Hilton of jails or in a less-well-endowed facility, is stressful in itself. The schedule is strange (lunch at 10:30); the noise is overpowering; the confinement is extreme, with many hours of lockdown every ordinary day and more lockdown on days that are not ordinary. In the summer, most inmates spend two hours per day outside, but if the weather is bad, this outdoor time is cancelled. In the winter when days are shorter, outside time scheduled for the later (darker) afternoon hours is cancelled, rather than rescheduled for a brighter time.

Other inmates are not always desirable companions. Some friendships do spring up, but some strong antipathies also develop, and there is no escaping one's fellow inmates. Guards are sometimes experienced as difficult parts of the environment, and complaints abound about the mattresses, pillows, clothes, food, temperature, air quality, noise, and just about anything else. Visits are difficult for friends and family to arrange; each unit in the jail has a defined number of visitors allowed on any visiting day.

In the United States as a whole, jail and prison populations now top two million. Like most other jails and prisons in the country, the Boulder jail (built in 1988) houses many more inmates than it was designed to hold. In Boulder, about 1/3 more inmates are accommodated by double bunking on the first tier of cells to reach a current population of around 400, which supports a staff of 143. This jail services a county of 215,000 people. After a few months in jail, an inmate will graduate to the second floor, where only one inmate is housed per cell. Cells are small and windows are tiny and high and designed to let in light but no view. A jail expansion program received voter approval in the fall of 2003.

Inmates of the Boulder jail, like jails and prisons throughout the country, are not representative of the county's general population. Most of the prisoners come from only one of the four cities in Boulder County, or live in Denver and happened to be picked up in Boulder. As many as 30 percent are mentally ill. Mental health professionals are called in routinely to evaluate the most severely dysfunctional inmates who need to be moved directly to treatment facilities. However, many who are less severely afflicted are left in the general population. A great many inmates reach jail from problems with drugs or alcohol either through possession, selling, or DUI (Driving while Under the Influence).

Unlike most prisons and jails in the country, the Boulder jail has very active programming for prisoners. In addition to meditation, other programs include English as a second language, GED preparation, some individual literacy coaching, occasional writing courses, a mandatory life-skills class taught by jail officers, and a substance abuse program housed in a

dedicated section of the jail. Although there are many programs, only the life-skills class reaches every prisoner, since it is required.

Despite Foucault's (1977) optimistic view that mental punishment has supplanted physical punishment in the western world, a modern jail offers ample demonstration of physical coercion. Any jail subjects its residents to severe and continuing physical restraint. There is no way that anyone in the jail – inmates, guards, visitors, volunteers, or professional workers such as lawyers or doctors – can forget that he or she is confined. To reach the general-population pod (medium B), where the meditation program occurs, one must pass through a metal detector and three heavy locked doors, two of which are voice controlled, and one of which requires a key which the officers carry. Corridors are long and floors are shiny. Keeping the floor polished seems to be a high priority, and prisoners in white are always at work on this task. From the corridor, there are additional locked doors to pass through to reach the program room, the prisoners' day room, or the guards' station. Even the closet in the program room, where the meditation cushions are stored as well as monopoly games and other stuff, has a locked door which must be unlocked by an officer at every session. Except for the few professionals and the volunteers, all others in the jail are uniformed. Guards wear tailored blue, while prisoners wear scrubs of navy blue, orange, yellow, tan, or white, depending on their location and activities.

The Boulder jail is a nonsmoking facility, so the many prisoners who ordinarily smoke experience discomfort from this abrupt change as well as withdrawal from drugs and/or alcohol. Most of the inmates are young, and a large proportion are Hispanic, which is the minority group of Boulder County. In addition, most inmates are poor. Few have lawyers other than their court-appointed public defenders; few can post bond for bail, and some choose not to incur the expense of required courses and treatments for alternative sentences. Many of the participants in the meditation program have severe physical problems such as cancer, failing livers, metabolic disorders, and damaged backs.

Anthropologists have contributed very little to the study of this large and growing population of Americans. A recent ethnographic study (Wacquant 2001) of the Los Angeles County Jail, which houses 23,000 individuals, is an exception. In fact, social

science inquiry within jails and prisons virtually ceased in the early 1970s following many decades of fruitful observational studies primarily by sociologists. However, studies of guards by sociologists and psychologists continued to flourish. A great deal about prisons and jails has changed since the 1940s and 1950s when these ethnographic studies were made. Possibly the Attica riots of 1971 were a turning point for changes already underway. Jails and prisons filled with protestors and drug offenders. As mental hospitals were closed, the mentally ill migrated to jails via homelessness and petty crimes. Public consensus about the nature of crime and the purposes of jails and prisons evaporated. Jails and prisons became an appealing political issue when politicians found that being tough on crime attracted voters. Rehabilitative goals were abandoned as a more punitive approach to incarceration became common (Allen 1981). Robert Martinson published an influential social science paper in 1974 which showed that most programs had little impact on recidivism, which further encouraged the abandonment of rehabilitation efforts.

Current conditions in jails and prisons do not support social science research. Budgets are strained as prison and jail populations expand; at the same time, various prison and jail industries are becoming less profitable. Indeterminate sentences have been replaced by mandatory sentences and increasingly severe sentences. Courts intervene in the daily operations of many jails and prisons. By 1980, 2/3 of the states had one or more prisons under federal court oversight. (Riveland 1999). Long-standing and often inhumane practices had to change in accord with the discovery that prisoners had rights. The flavor of these earlier times from a prisoner's perspective is eloquently portrayed by prisoner's writings such as *In the Belly of the Beast* (Abbot 1981). Prisoner-initiated lawsuits about prison conditions flourished until 1996 when the Prison Litigation Relief Act reduced the numbers of such suits. By this time, prison expansion had turned prisons into big businesses in which private companies joined with counties, states, and the federal government to provide facilities and guards for the ever-increasing numbers of prisoners. Prisons are often located in rural or economically depressed areas where they represent a major source of jobs. Guards are now more educated and often receive attractive salaries (\$36,000-\$72,000 per year in Boulder County).

More and more frequently, the goals of prisons have been reduced to retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation of dangerous individuals. More

elaborate security appears to have captured the attention of prison managers. However, a recent mega-study (Gae et al. 1999) found that some rehabilitation programs do reduce recidivism, in particular a structured cognitive-behavioral program developed in Canada. These findings lend support to one theory of crime (Gottfriedson and Hirschi 1990) which states that criminals are individuals with poor impulse control. Even a small success from such a program can be cost-effective in a situation in which the New York City jail costs \$100,000 per inmate year and the California system costs about \$30,000 per inmate year. Regardless of long-term impact, programs for inmates do create a less-violent and more manageable situation in the present, as many studies have demonstrated.

Changes in the corrections field are surely underway. Boulder County jail is not the only place where volunteers staff programs. San Quentin Prison in California has 25 percent of its population engaged in programs of one sort or another (Sheff 2004). The overwhelming expense of the punitive and incapacitation model may encourage a return to rehabilitation. Federal budget deficits have caused many program cutbacks and severe budgetary pressures at the state and local level should encourage alternative models of incarceration.

The Boulder meditation program teaches *shamata*, or peaceful abiding meditation. This meditation, which involves following the outbreath, is taught as a technique, rather than as part of a religion, although the teachers are Buddhists of various denominations. Meditation can be used to reduce stress, to fall asleep, to enhance a religious prayer session, to mentally escape, or simply to pass the time. When practiced over an extended period, meditation will alter an individual's approach to life. The program's founder spent 14 years in federal prison for drug offences and while in prison found that meditation helped him and other inmates who joined him in his practice. When he was released, he started a number of social action programs, of which this is one. The Boulder program lasts for two hours every Thursday. It includes meditation instruction, two to four short meditation sessions, some stretching exercises and tai chi, and discussion sessions. If the group includes many new meditators, there is a lot of discussion. If most participants have been attending for a while, there will be more meditation. Many of the participants find that meditation can be practiced in their cells without the group and do this especially at quiet times such as lock down after meals and in the night. Some participants

have found that brief periods of meditation during moments of high stress, particularly just before a court session while waiting to appear, can be beneficial.

Jail meditation does not attract a cross-section of the jail population. In fact, with 6 to 8 participants each week from a pool of approximately 80 men, it attracts remarkably few individuals. While the majority of prisoners appear to be under 25 and Hispanic, meditators tend to be over 40 and Caucasian. However, like the general jail population, meditators overwhelmingly face alcohol- or drug-related offenses and may stay for a few days or many months.

The continuing mental tension and physical discomfort of jail provide motivation for prisoners to try meditation. The guards are also extremely supportive of the program and encourage prisoners to try it. Unfortunately, other prisoners tease those who come to the program and when other prisoners pass the windows to the room used for meditation, they make faces. Nonetheless, many participants come week after week and start meditating on their own in their cells, especially after they have graduated to the higher tier of single cells. The meditation room, despite an amazingly loud ventilation system and the distraction of sessions for a residential drug treatment program in the other half of the room, is quieter and more peaceful than the large dayroom, which has the noise of two loud television sets and the energy of many angry young individuals.

The program has enjoyed some significant triumphs. When a prisoner is able to use meditation techniques to control his anger and to refrain from using violence against another inmate or guard, a major breakthrough has happened for him. Something significant has changed in his consciousness. However, at least one enthusiastic meditator did not restrain himself and is now serving two years on a new sentence. Prisoners who seem to be getting the most out of the program attend for many months.

We hope to begin a long-term evaluation study to document the impact of meditation on these men's subsequent lives. Since many of the participants are habitues of jails and prisons (one proudly claimed to have been in 50 institutions; another claimed he first experienced the hole when he was 9), recidivism, which is the most popular gauge for program success, may not be appropriate for these individuals. The Gae et al. (1999) study found that intensive programs using a variety of approaches with the youngest and highest-

risk offenders were the most effective as measured by recidivism. Meditators in medium B, however, do not fit their profiles of offenders, nor is the program intensive by their definition.

Meditation can have a major impact on an individual's mind. Psychologists are now studying how this works and how they can measure it. Meditation is also included in programs to reduce heart attack risk. However, the impact of meditation on inmates of jails or prisons has not been investigated. I think it is important to do so.

Notes

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