



The Dhamma Brothers Discussion Guide

Directors: Andrew Kukura, Jenny Phillips, Anne Marie Stein
Year: 2008
Time: 76 min

You might know these directors from:

This is the first full-length feature from this directorial team.

FILM SUMMARY

Psychotherapist, writer, and cultural anthropologist Jenny Phillips had been teaching meditation to male prisoners for over a decade when Dr. Ron Cavanaugh, the psychologist at maximum-security prison Donaldson Correctional Facility in rural Alabama, asked her to visit. Soon after interviewing the prisoners, who had just begun integrating meditation into their daily routine of incarcerated living, Phillips came across Vipassana.

With roots in Buddhism and eastern philosophy, Vipassana meditation is a far cry from the teachings of the Christian community where Donaldson is located. Cavanaugh and Phillips, however, were undeterred in their belief that this ancient practice of self-realization could benefit the prisoners. "The inmates are very receptive to meditative practices. Vipassana takes it one step further to the sensational level, to where it puts you literally in touch with your bodily sensations, to realize these sensations are driving your behavior," stated Cavanaugh. And so the path towards rehabilitation began in 2002.

THE DHAMMA BROTHERS goes inside Donaldson, witnessing the prisoners as they prepare to venture within. In the quest for spiritual freedom amidst a life of physical incarceration, prisoners embrace the strict moral code of conduct over a 10-day course. Through interviews with prisoners, meditation practitioners, psychologists, wardens, and locals, the power of this program is revealed.

As a filmic expression of Phillips's book "Letters from the Dhamma Brothers: Meditation Behind Bars," THE DHAMMA BROTHERS reminds us that for many people the worst prison of all is the prison of the mind. In the words of inmate Benjamin Oryang, "Whether someone is free or whether someone is incarcerated, such work should be done if one wants to grow personally."

FILM THEMES

Deep within the Bible Belt, a group of inmates prove that a devoted program of meditation can redeem and rehabilitate even the most troubled person, injecting hope into a hopeless place.

THE POTENTIAL OF VIPASSANA MEDITATION

In the United States, when people step outside the law and into the prison system, there is very little chance for rehabilitation or support for personal growth. In contrast there is Vipassana, a regimented system with a strict moral code of conduct that allows all people to take time to reflect and that believes that any one of us can be rehabilitated. "It's in many ways stricter than your normal daily prison routine," stated Jonathan Crowley. Yet, when Vipassana promises the potential of healing to people who have been told they are unhealable if they can uphold complete silence, many prisoners approach it with curiosity and hope.

PRISON CULTURE

Prisons are societies in and of themselves, and within the walls of jail prisoners create an isolated culture. A hierarchy emerges: those who lead and those who follow. And while there are varying ways of fitting into that structure, it is primarily destructive. Prone to violence and chaos, prisons perpetuate the despair that delivered many of the prisoners there in the first place. Prisoners become accustomed to hectic action and noise, and can become dominated by negative feelings. As the cycle continues, many of the same men returning time and again. Vipassana meditation offers to reset the scales, starting with silence.

INTRODUCING BUDDHISM TO THE BIBLE BELT

"I don't believe in Buddhism and stuff like that. I'm a Christian," stated one Alabama resident when asked about her thoughts on meditation in prisons. Deep in the heart of the Bible Belt, where Christianity is a pillar of the community, Donaldson Correctional Facility is steeped the religion's moral code. The notion of introducing Buddhism's introspective teachings into the prison system in the deep South seemed like a preposterous proposal. Not only did society at large make it unlikely, but prison wardens, guards, and officers were wary of the teachings and felt threatened by the idea of opening up to the unknown. Yet, in spite of cultural hurdles, Vipassana reached Donaldson and had a tremendous impact on many of those who participated.

TAKING A CHANCE ON THE UNKNOWN

Rehabilitation at Donaldson was low on the list of priorities. Yet, by beginning to embrace an inmate treatment program and placing resources where they were arguably most needed, change was made possible. Once the new system was in place, the prisoners could begin to embrace the possibility of a new way of life. Inner redemption, a sense of personal accomplishment, and compassion became nearly normal in an environment that was previously overrun by shame, greed, and fear. By taking a chance on the unknown, the unimaginable happened.

"No one is telling them what to look at or how to change. They're gaining their insights within themselves."

Jonathan Crowley, Meditation Leader

"Every person is more than the worst thing they've ever done."

Bryan Stevenson, Attorney

"Vipassana gave me the right to make my own choice."

Grady Bankhead, Inmate

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Discuss your impressions of THE DHAMMA BROTHERS. How did the film impact you?
2. Have you ever practiced meditation? If so, discuss the effect this has had on you. If not, are you interested in incorporating meditation into your life after watching the film?
3. Do you believe it is the responsibility of prisons to rehabilitate prisoners, or should prisons be a place to house individuals who have committed unforgivable crimes?
4. Why do many people in the Bible Belt of America—and other places in the world with strong Christian beliefs—fear practices such as Vipassana? Do you think that Christianity and Buddhism can happily coexist?
5. The United States has the largest prison population and overall percentage of incarcerated individuals in the world. Why do you think is?
6. Does the ten-day Vipassana Meditation course appeal to you? Can you imagine undergoing ten days of silence and intense self-reflection?
7. Many of the men incarcerated at Donaldson are serving life sentences with no chance of parole. Is it a wise use of government funds to rehabilitate such individuals that will never be reintroduced into society again?
8. Do you take more of an analytical or emotional approach to things?
9. Did any of the prisoners featured in THE DHAMMA BROTHERS specifically stand out to you? Did you find the inmates' stories to be sincere, or do you believe they were feigning rehabilitation to gain early release?
10. What are your thoughts on nature versus nurture? Discuss, in particular with consideration to the background stories of the inmates featured in the film.

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- THE DHAMMA BROTHERS premiered in New York City in April 2008, and played at the Sidewalk Film Festival in Alabama in September of that year. The film's international premiere took place at the International Buddhist Film Festival in Mexico City in October 2008, and has gone on to be screened at film festivals in England, Singapore, Canada, Australia, Burma, France, New Zealand, and Ireland.
- Director Jenny Phillips is a cultural anthropologist, writer, and psychotherapist who has worked with men in prison, teaching emotional literacy and mindfulness for over 15 years. In 1999, Donaldson Correctional Facility prisoner psychologist Ron Cavanaugh invited Phillips to visit the prison and interview some of the inmates who were practicing meditation. Cavanaugh and Phillips then worked on bringing the Vipassana Meditation course to the prison.
- Director Phillips wrote an article entitled "Cultural Construction of Manhood in Prison."
- The William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility originally opened in 1982 as the West Jefferson Correctional Facility, with a capacity for 700 prisoners. In 1990 correctional officer Donaldson was stabbed to death by a prisoner, and the facility was renamed in his honor. As of 2015 the prison had a capacity for 1,760 prisoners, including 24 death row inmates.
- Dhamma means "ideal truth."
- Alabama had a 2014 population of 4.8 million. In the early 1800s, many people settled in Alabama due to the fertile cotton-growing land. By 1860 half of the population consisted of African-American slaves, who were freed in 1865. The contemporary population includes 68 percent White, 26 percent African-American, and 4 percent Hispanic. 86 percent of the population practices Christianity.
- Vipassana Meditation was first taught in India around 2,500 years ago, and since then has been handed down by an unbroken chain of teachers. The course is taught around the world and is offered free of charge, supported by donations from past students. Over the ten-day course, participants meditate for ten hours per day. For the first three days, students are taught to focus on their breath in order to master the mind. By the fourth day, individuals are better prepared to undertake Vipassana, which involves noticing bodily sensations and learning not to react to them. On the final day, goodwill to all is learned and practiced.
- The U.S. has the highest rate of incarcerated individuals in the world, with 25 percent of world prisoners being locked up in U.S. jails. As of 2014, 2.4 million Americans were behind bars.
- As of 2015, 31 U.S. states had the death penalty.
- The Bible Belt refers to the southeastern and south-central United States.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Read** "[Letters from the Dhamma Brothers: Meditation Behind Bars,](#)" a collection of letters from the prisoners of Donaldson Correctional Facility to director Jenny Phillips, which served as the inspiration behind the film.
2. **Learn** more about the [David Lynch Foundation](#) that teaches Transcendental Meditation to individuals across the world and offers the "[Freedom Behind Bars](#)" program in prisons.
3. **Support** the [Prison Mindfulness Institute](#) that offers prison staff and inmates tools for rehabilitation and self-awareness, and supports scientific research into the field of meditation.
4. **Support** the research of the [Center for Investigating Healthy Minds](#) that conducts research into understanding the mind, emotions, and the path to personal well-being.

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