

## Meditation in Prison

***“I’m looking forward to going back to my work and to try to be a different person, a better one,”*** was one participant’s response to a questionnaire, following a seminar held for prison staff in Poland. The programme was organised by the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University (BKWSU) with participation from ‘*Spirituality in Prison,*’ a working group of prison and probation staff, and members from the voluntary sector and BKWSU.

Twilight prevails in a small room. The sound of relaxing music emanates from within. The warm, quiet voice of the speaker invites you to slow down your thoughts to follow the visualization.

*“Imagine that you are standing in the street of a big city...the noise of the traffic is deafening... the pavement crowded with people...their faces tense ...talking, some shouting ... and in the midst of this aggressive reality – you – stressed, wrought up.*

*You step from the street to a large door at the top of a small flight of steps. ...You open it and step inside, closing the door behind you ... Immediately, the volume of noise is reduced. You find yourself in a long corridor down which you begin to walk ... Eventually you come to a door that you recognise as having a very familiar feel ... You turn the handle, step inside, closing the door behind you. You are in a room filled with a soft, warming diffuse light, a room whose atmosphere is very calming, relaxing, and peaceful. This is your own special, private space, a place where only you visit – a silent, safe, supportive place to retreat to. You sit in the light, absorbing the stillness, the silence, at peace.*

*For a few moments you stay in this room restoring your inner power. Filled with positive energy you retrace your steps back to the door through which you entered from the street. Once again you open the door and step back out onto the top of the steps. Everything is the same –the noise, the hustle and bustle, people rushing – this world remains the same as when you left. However, you are different. You are filled with an inner peace, a mental stillness from your time alone. You have developed a mental separation, a detachment from the dizzying pace, from the situations. You have a different perspective towards people and relationships. It is as if you are sitting next to them, independent and detached, strong but well meaning. Now with your strength and kindness you can support others.”*

A few more bars of music, a few more seconds of concentration and from the silence emerges a group of people with relaxed, smiling faces.

There wouldn’t be anything extraordinary in this (there are so many meditation groups in the world after all) if it were not for the fact that this time the meditation happened during the seminar for Polish prison staff.

These unusual workshops were presented in Poland within the framework of a programme called ‘New Leadership’. Developed in the UK by the ‘Spirituality in Prison’ group, it is the culmination of more than ten years of experience of running seminars and

workshops for prison staff. Because of its uniqueness it is worth to remind ourselves of its origin.

Doug Stephenson, one of the presenters and a student of the Brahma Kumaris, remembered that everything started, as is often the case, with the passion of one person who regularly visited lonely prisoners in the local prison. He wanted to befriend them, to support them, and to enable them to regain their dignity.

There is nothing unusual in such prison visits in England. What was unusual though was the man himself – a student of BKWSU. *“He spoke to prisoners about the positive side of each human being, about the dignity of all human beings, without exception. He managed to attract the interest of the prisoners in spiritual matters to such an extent the prison authorities agreed to run regular Raja Yoga meditation courses,”* says Doug Stephenson.

This was in a London prison - Wormwood Scrubs - designated for 1200 prisoners, mostly recidivists. Many of the prisoners who attended showed reduced levels of aggression, their behaviour improved, and the prison officers treated them better.

In 1991, a new opportunity presented itself. The University hosted a programme for prisoners and staff from different prisons on the occasion of the national week designated to celebrate ‘Human Dignity in Prison.’ Prisoners and staff, in a cooperative display of the power of dignity, played the instruments, sang songs, recited poems, as well as meditated together.

As a result of all these activities a new group was established, known today as the ‘*Spirituality in Prison*’ group. Working together were students of Brahma Kumaris University, prison staff, educators and some directors of prisons. One of them was Malcolm Gillian, Head of Residence at Huntercombe, a prison for juvenile offenders.

Mr Gillan said, *“For me, it was the beginning of a new chapter in my life and at the same time a personal spiritual and professional breakthrough. Today, after 25 years of working in prison, I am still evolving.*

*I try to be a friend and protector to my juniors, especially the young officers who are experiencing stress from working in the prison environment. I try to be a support for the prisoners, too. For years I have been working with young offenders. I think I have managed to create an uncommon situation in that, as a governor, the prisoners can directly address me with their problems and get an immediate response. I’m proud of this relationship, although it didn’t happen overnight.*

*At first I had to find myself, to build a strong personal foundation of value. This allowed me to become a good example for others for it is this that gives us hope that others will take this example to improve their own lives. My aim is to teach worthy successors.”*

Doug Stephenson, sharing his experience, said, *“Our main focus is to work with prison staff. However, some of the most significant instances for me personally are the meetings with prisoners.*

*I always will remember two young offenders whom were part of a course, some years ago. During a conversation I asked them, ‘What do you see as your positive traits?’*

*'None,' replied the first one. The other nodded his head and laughed. I then drew their attention to the fact that they both had a sense of humour. 'That's right' – they replied – 'without this it wouldn't be possible to survive here.'*

*I began to explore a little further with them. After a while one of the boys stated that he had regard for people, especially old people and young children. Also an ability to organise.*

*When our meeting finished one of the prisoners told me – 'You know I would like to thank you. I've never thought about these things before. I don't just mean here but ever!*

*That sort of experience is really satisfying to me.'*

Haline Paradele, the national coordinator for the Brahma Kumaris for Poland, related another story.

*"In one of the polish prisons there was a group of prisoners appointed by the officers to take part in relaxation program organised by the Brahma Kumaris. There was one particular prisoner who constantly tried to disturb the course! He was walking, gesturing, speaking loudly to himself, vulgarly commenting on the running of the programme. One day he suddenly quietened down, started to listen to what others were saying and he even took part in the relaxation exercise.*

*After the last workshop of the course he approached Halina and said: 'I decided to stop smoking and I'm going to learn English. On release, I'm going to find honest work and be a decent person.'*

*It sounds like a story from the children's story book. Nevertheless this man has kept his promise. He left the prison and remains in touch with University, regularly meditates, and does social work in the prison. He teaches prisoners the art of calming down."*

Over seven hundred prison staff from 60 prisons have taken part in the seminars held in the UK. In these events, not only prison staff participated but also members of non-governmental organisations, researchers, academics, as well as private individuals. The motto of these meetings is, 'When we change, the world changes.'

Those who teach prisoners spirituality need to be positive themselves and by their worthy behaviour, become examples. Only then is it possible to encourage new, positive relationships between the prisoners themselves and between prison staff and prisoners. As a result of this, the prisoners become more composed and disciplined, and their aggression diminishes. When they are treated respectfully they begin to respect themselves, other prisoners and the prison staff.

Mal Gillan commented, *"We would like to be able to pass our experience on to prison staff working in different countries. Prisons are places of great stress. To society, they tend to be neither places of great interest nor worthy of help. Also, the poorer the country then the worse becomes prison reality. I realised this when I spent some time in Kosovo as a UN representative."*

So why run the programme in Poland?

*“Two reasons. The BKWSU has been working in Polish prisons for over ten years. Secondly, the prison authorities know of the programme, having experienced it first hand, as have some Polish prison officers, and recognise the value of it.*

*I know that the participants of our seminar in Wisla had been chosen very carefully. These officers are interested in changing the criminal system as well as developing their own spirituality. They are, therefore, perfect candidates to become educators within the Polish Prison Service whom we would like to work with.”*

#### Some Comments from the Wisla Seminar Feedback Questionnaire

1. The most important session for me was how to maintain my own dignity and how to express that when relating to others.
2. I'm especially interested in relaxation techniques and meditation. It isn't simple for us and I don't think it will be simple for the prisoners either but this is the only solution I see to achieve a higher level of peace in the prison.
3. Stress destroys absolutely everyone and we have to fight it! This topic (managing stress) was the most interesting for me from the whole, rich programme of the seminar. I would like to experience peace inside of me so that I can share it with others. It might be an unattainable goal for many but I believe a few moments of concentration on positive thoughts is quite possible.
4. All of us are experienced on the professional level. It would therefore be good to think these ideas over and come to some personal conclusions in the context of the programme, New Leadership. This programme is something new and a question that arises for me is, *'Is it possible for me to be such a leader?'*
5. When the facilitators asked us to think about what would be the qualifications of a good leader, I was shocked to when they suggested that we consider the example of a mother. The mother radiating with kindness, generosity and sympathy as a model of a prison leader? After the surprise came the realisation – 'why not!' This is just what we need if we want to put a stop to this prison hell – the maternal traits.
6. I have looked at my profession from different perspectives but the tip that opened my eyes was, "Escape from the prison by going inside yourself." I am looking forward to going back to work and to try to be a different person, a better one. I'm looking forward to seeing the result.

Having finished the seminar in Wisla, 80% of the participants expressed a desire to take part in the next phase of the programme to be arranged for 2006.