

**THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON VIPASSANA MEDITATION RESEARCH PROJECT  
AT THE NORTH REHABILITATION FACILITY**

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In November 1997, the King County North Rehabilitation Facility (NRF) cautiously opened its doors to a meditation program for inmates. NRF, located just north of Seattle, Washington, was already committed to a rich menu of offender change programs and services. Most of the 273 “long-term” inmates at NRF were recidivists characterized by significant involvement with alcohol and other drugs, and often, with one or more co-occurring mental disorder as well.

Today, meditation often has esoteric or “new age” connotations, but the meditation course initiated at NRF, Vipassana meditation, is not a religious or mystical practice, not a relaxation technique or an escape from reality. Vipassana meditation, as taught by instructor S.N. Goenka and assistant teachers under his direction, is a systematic process of mental training and ethical conduct in which sustained self-observation leads to increased awareness, self-control, and inner balance (Hart, 1987). The Vipassana meditation course is offered free of charge by well-qualified volunteer teachers and course assistants in communities all over North America and throughout the world. To be successful in a correctional context, it takes a serious commitment from both the inmate and the penal institution. The Vipassana meditation course requires ten continuous days of intensive meditation training in a self-contained area segregated from the main jail population in which inmates and volunteer teachers observe a rigorous schedule of eleven hours per day of meditation practice and a code of moral conduct, and are taught a method of mind training they can practice the rest of their lives (see *American Jails Magazine* article, July/August 1999).

After considerable planning and preparation, Vipassana meditation courses were held at NRF every three to four months from November 1997 through August 2002 using multipurpose program space. In total, 20 courses were conducted at the facility. Total start-up costs were minimal, and the largest ongoing expense was for additional hours of security coverage for the ten-day period of the course. The Vipassana meditation courses at NRF were successfully implemented due to model collaboration between security, program, and food services personnel. A vegetarian menu for courses was developed that required no additional staffing to prepare and serve. Program classroom and office space was modified for rapid conversion to residential use by meditating inmates. Procedures for course set-up (security clearing and training volunteers, notifying health services and classification units, risk management protocols, inmate orientation, etc.) became routine over time.

In order to evaluate the outcome of the Vipassana program on post-release criminal behavior, the NRF Programs Manager completed the Vipassana Recidivism Study (Murphy, 2002) which included data collected from courses one through eight. The study consisted of a two-year criminal history pre-program review and a two-year recidivism post-program review. The sample size of Vipassana course completers for this study was small ( $n = 75$ ), and NRF did not have the resources to review recidivism data outside King County. Nonetheless, this study provided valuable baseline information that led to the awarding of a two-year research grant from the National Institutes of Health to the University of Washington to study the effects of the Vipassana meditation program at NRF on alcohol and drug relapse and recidivism.

Final outcome results from the recidivism study (Murphy, 2002) revealed that approximately half (56%) of the inmates completing a Vipassana course at NRF recidivated as measured by returning to King County Jail (KCJ) custody within two years, compared with a 75% rate of recidivism in a NRF General Population Study (Murphy, 2000;  $n = 437$ ). Moreover, the average number of bookings for Vipassana course completers declined from 2.9 pre-program to 1.5 post-program. Fifty-four percent of women who completed the course returned to KCJ, as compared to 57% of men. This is remarkable given that the criminal histories and presenting problems were more severe for women than men admitted to NRF.

Using the encouraging results from NRF Vipassana Recidivism Study (Murphy, 2002) and their experience studying meditation, alcohol problems, and criminal conduct (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1998; Parks & Marlatt, 1999), a team of researchers at the University of Washington (G. Alan Marlatt, Ph.D., principle investigator) received funding in October of 1999 to conduct a two year study on the effects of the Vipassana meditation course at NRF on alcohol and drug relapse, psychosocial functioning, and recidivism. The University of Washington (UW)-NRF Vipassana Research Project was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (under the National Institute of Health), in association with the Fetzer Foundation of Kalamazoo, Michigan. From the start, the UW-NRF Vipassana Research Project involved close collaboration among University of Washington researchers, North Rehabilitation Facility staff, the Vipassana community, and the NRF residents who volunteered their time to take part in the study.

The UW research team began collecting data before the men's course held in January 2000 and continued through the last Vipassana course held at NRF, a women's course completed in August 2002. In total, nine courses were included in the research study, five men's courses and four women's courses. The research was designed to systematically compare Treatment as Usual (TAU) at NRF with Treatment as Usual plus taking the Vipassana meditation course (TAU+V). TAU included a rich array of rehabilitation programs, such as chemical dependency treatment, alcohol and other drug education, mental health services, cognitive-behavioral programs, adult basic education and GED testing, acupuncture, housing case management, and vocational programs.

For research design and ethical reasons, a randomized clinical trial (with a no treatment control group) was not possible, so the study used a quasi-experimental design in which Vipassana meditation course completers were compared as a group to all NRF residents who did not take the course, but who completed the same pre-course and post-course assessments. When the 3- and 6-month follow-up assessments are collected, the Vipassana meditation course completers will be matched to those NRF residents most similar to them who resided at the jail at the same time, but who did not take the Vipassana course. These case-matched pairs will provide comparative outcome data for the final research report. Data collection for the project is on-going and this article reports only preliminary results. More comprehensive results will be available in an upcoming chapter by Marlatt, et al., (in press). Overall, the preliminary data are suggestive of a clear trend favoring the Vipassana meditation course completers, although TAU at NRF was also shown to have significant positive effects. Final results of the research are expected to be available by Autumn of 2003.

The data collection for the study began with a pre-course assessment, occurring within one week of the beginning of each Vipassana meditation course, which asked residents about the last 90 days they lived in the community before their current incarceration. A post-course assessment, occurring within one week after each of the nine courses ended, was completed by research participants who were still detained at NRF during that time. To complete the longitudinal study, former NRF inmates filled out two additional follow-up assessment questionnaires at three and six months after their release from NRF. They were assessed at follow-up whether they were living in the community or in jail at the time of each assessment. Research participants were paid five dollars for assessments completed while incarcerated and thirty dollars for assessments completed while residing in the community.

### **UW-NRF Vipassana Research Project Preliminary Results**

The preliminary results of the UW-NRF Vipassana Research Project reported here compare Vipassana meditation course completers (n=29) with the TAU control group (n=59) on a variety of measures at 90 days prior to incarceration and at the 3-month follow-up after release into the community. Of 306 inmates who consented to participate in the study, 88 participants completed pre-course, post-course, and three-month follow-up assessments. The following analyses refer to this subsample. Statistical tests demonstrated that there were no significant differences between the TAU+V and TAU groups on drug or alcohol use, psychosocial measures or NRF program participation at the baseline assessment.

A series of statistical analyses (analysis of variance or ANOVA) were used to determine differences between the Vipassana meditation course completers (TAU+V) and the treatment as usual control group (TAU) on alcohol and drug use, psychosocial outcomes, and recidivism between precourse assessment and 3-month follow-up. The results reported here are preliminary in several ways. First, they represent a subset of the entire NRF study sample that has completed both the precourse and 3-month assessments. Additional research participants will complete questionnaires at 3-month and 6-month follow-up assessments before final results can be analyzed. Second, the results reported were calculated before case matching could take place. Final published results will include only Vipassana meditation course completers and their case-matched controls. Lastly, all dependent measures have not yet been analyzed and, therefore, reported results in this paper are partial.

Given these limitations, the following results provide support for the overall positive impact at the 3-month follow-up assessment for TAU at NRF, and more strongly for TAU plus the Vipassana meditation course (TAU+V). The rehabilitation programs offered at NRF had an overall positive impact in general on all inmates participating in the study. Data analyses revealed significant reductions at 3-month follow-up on tobacco use, peak drinking episodes, alcohol-related problems, and weekly heroin use for both groups in the study. On the psychosocial measures, psychoticism was significantly lower in both groups.

However, several of the study's results favor the Vipassana group over the TAU group. Vipassana completers experienced fewer adverse drinking-related consequences and demonstrated greater perceived control over their drinking behavior. Together, these results suggest that the Vipassana participants were being more thoughtful about when, where and how they were consuming alcoholic beverages. In addition, they used significantly less marijuana, crack, and powder cocaine in the three months following release. Drug abuse severity scores for the use of all illicit substances of the Vipassana meditators were also significantly lower at the 3-month follow-up, reflecting not only less drug use, but less drug-related negative consequences. Since many of the offenses committed by NRF inmates were alcohol or drug-related, these results may also contribute to reduced recidivism.

Regarding psychosocial measures, the levels of depression and thought suppression in the Vipassana course completers were significantly lower than in the TAU group. While not statistically significant, hostility and anxiety were also lower for the Vipassana group. Finally, Vipassana meditators scored significantly higher on their level of optimism, indicating they were more hopeful about their future. The study found no significant differences between the groups for recidivism based on the number of days incarcerated or new charges at the 3-month follow-up, although Washington State-wide arrest data have yet to be analyzed. Participants in both groups had an average of less than one recidivism event within the 3-month follow-up window compared with the 2-year time frame in Murphy's study (2002). Consequently, there was not enough variation in criminal conduct to detect any difference between the two groups. State-wide arrest data and recidivism at six months will be analyzed to determine if any group differences exist for the final report of the study.

Figures 1 - 4 on the following pages illustrate selected study results for marijuana, crack and powder cocaine use, and severity of drug abuse.

**Figure 1. Self-Reported Peak Marijuana Use**

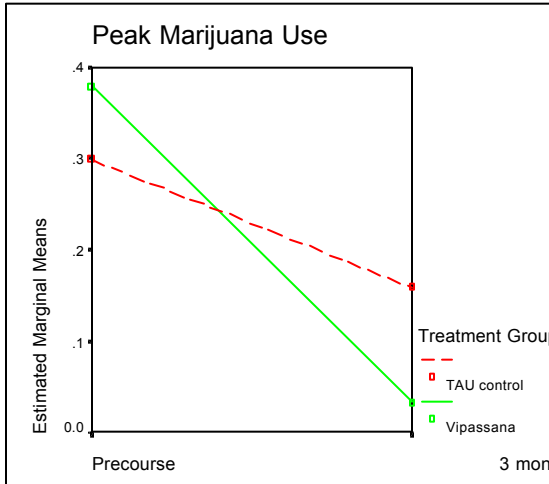
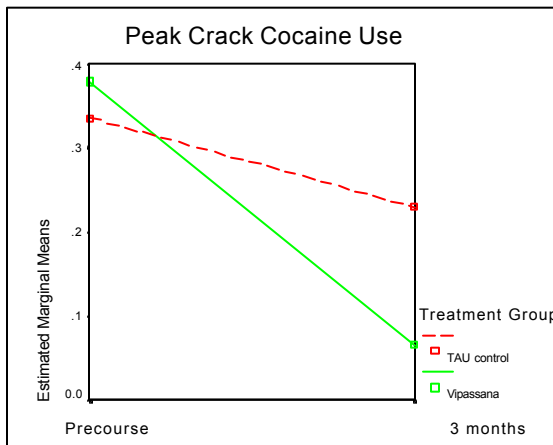


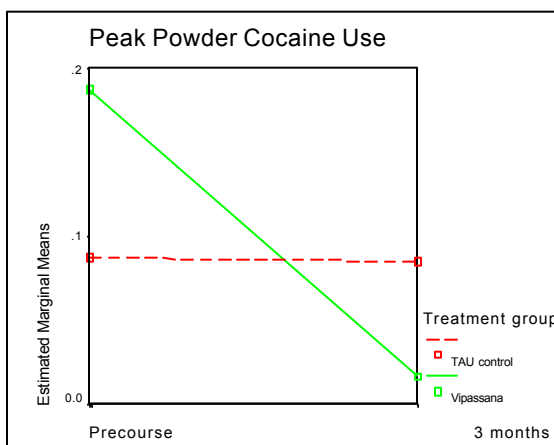
Figure One shows the TAU group was using marijuana .30 days during a peak week in the 90 days prior to their incarceration, and was using marijuana .16 days during a peak week at the 3-month follow-up assessment after release. The TAU + V was using marijuana .38 days during a peak week in the prior 90 days and was using marijuana .03 days during a peak week at the 3-month follow-up.

**Figure 2. Self-Reported Peak Crack Cocaine Use**



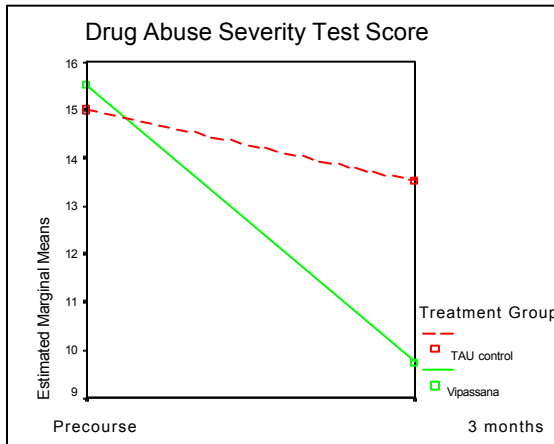
Results for crack cocaine (see Figure 2) follow a similar pattern, with the TAU group using crack cocaine .34 days during a peak week in the 90 days prior to incarceration and using crack .23 days during a peak week at the 3-month follow-up assessment after release, while the TAU + V was using crack cocaine .38 days during a peak week in the prior 90 days and was using crack .07 days during a peak week at the 3-month follow-up.

**Figure 3. Self-Reported Peak Powder Cocaine Use**



Regarding powder cocaine (Figure 3), the TAU used .09 days during a peak week in the 90 prior to their incarceration and was using powder cocaine .08 days during a peak week at the 3-month follow-up assessment after release. The TAU + V was using powder cocaine .19 days during a peak week in the prior 90 days and was using powder cocaine .02 days during a peak week at the 3-month follow-up.

Figure 4. Self-Reported Drug Abuse Severity



Concerning the degree of drug related problems related to drug abuse regardless of the type of drug (see Figure 4), the TAU group scored 15.02 before the course on the Drug Abuse Severity Test (DAST; 0 = no problems, 20 = severe level of problems) and scored 13.52 on the DAST on the 3-month follow-up assessment after release. The TAU + V scored 15.52 before the course and a 9.74 on the 3-month follow-up.

Given the present trend toward increased incarceration of individuals who have problems with alcohol and substance abuse, often co-occurring with mental disorders and physical health problems, there is a growing need for the availability and implementation of effective, low cost substance abuse treatment interventions for jail-based correctional populations. Jail-based substance abuse treatment programs offer an opportunity for inmates to change long-standing habitual behavioral problems such as psychological functioning, addictive behavior, and criminal conduct.

The preliminary results of the UW-NRF Vipassana Research Project as well as the NRF Vipassana Recidivism Report (Murphy, 2002) are noteworthy because of the potential ability of a mindfulness practice, as taught in the 10-day Vipassana meditation course, to significantly impact problem behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse which are often associated with re-offense. The preliminary results suggest that a 10-day Vipassana meditation course offered in jails or prisons could provide a relatively low cost and effective rehabilitation program for some substance abusing offenders. (Additional information regarding the research can be obtained by contacting the first author.)

NRF closed its doors after 21 years on October 31, 2002. Its deteriorated pre-WWII structures could no longer be used or replaced. Fortunately, NRF is not the only correctional facility in North American that has offered Vipassana courses. In addition to courses at the North Rehabilitation Facility, one course has been conducted in the San Francisco San Bruno facility and two were completed at the W.E. Donaldson Prison in Bessemer, Alabama. Other correctional facilities are in the planning phase. Additional information about correctional courses here and in other countries can be found on the Vipassana prison website [www.prison.dhamma.org](http://www.prison.dhamma.org). The Vipassana Prison Trust is also available to answer questions and provide assistance to correctional personnel who are interested in learning more about Vipassana: Vipassana Prison Trust, P.O. Box 877, Port Hadlock, WA 98339; (360) 379-8292.

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