

## **Loughan House Vipassana Course**

The first 10 Day Vipassana course in an Irish prison was conducted from 19<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> August 2015 in Loughan House in Blacklion, County Cavan. Loughan house is an open low security prison for males aged 18 years and over who are regarded as requiring lower levels of security. Many of the prisoners go out during the day to take part in further education courses in the near vicinity. There are various workshops on site such as bicycle repair, and organic vegetables gardening.

The course was preceded by 3 years of efforts by a local old student of Vipassana, who is a law professor in Ireland, in building a relationship with the Irish Prison Service (IPS). Through his connection with the Education Director for the IPS, an introductory meditation / Q&A session was held in Loughan House in 2014, led by a local Assistant Teacher. As a result of this session two prison officials attended the Easter 10 day course in Drogheda in Ireland, including the Education Director and a Loughan House official. On the final day of this course one of the officers expressed an interest in running a pilot programme in Loughan House.

Following the Easter course a meeting took place between the Vipassana and Prison organisations, including the Governor of Loughan House, and it was decided to propose a course for August of this year. A follow up visit to Loughan House was arranged to assess the site for running a course and to generate interest among the current residents. Over the coming weeks a UK / Ireland Vipassana project team was formed to plan for and coordinate the running of the course.

Orientation classes were held as recommended by the North American Vipassana Prison Trust over a series of 3 visits to Loughan House. The purpose of these sessions was to engage the residents of Loughan House, to begin to build trust between them and the Vipassana team who would be serving the course and to ensure the potential students were well prepared to sit the course once it started. During one of these visits interviews were held between the conducting Assistant Teacher and the course applicants.

When the Vipassana team arrived the day before the course was to start, preparations were well underway to transform part of the jail into a temporary meditation centre. A ground floor theatre room was used as a meditation hall and the adjacent billiard room was used as a dining hall. Rooms above on the first floor were for students and servers. Most students had a single room. A grassy area outside with a view of the lake and a tennis court were used for a walking area.

Eight students started the course. Their sentences varied from 2 to 12 years, with the average around 6.5 years. Ages ranged from 29 to 49 years old. Their physical and mental health was suitable for taking a course. Some had issues with depression and some also had drug use issues (although no hard drugs in recent times). Although four of the inmates were heavy smokers, they were keen to try a period of not smoking.

The Loughan House officer who sat the Easter course served most of the course. Three old students who had also been involved in the organisation of the course served and they proved a good team. The prison officer also proved very helpful as a bridge between the prison and the mediation site as she knew how both sides work. The kitchen menu had been carefully selected prior to the course and the prison cooks served a vegetarian menu that suited the inmates' taste.

As the course progressed students became more and more serious. Almost all of them had a strong emotion coming up to the surface at some stage of the course, some reliving vivid pictures such as their best friend being shot in front of his eyes. Students came for noon interviews and Q&A at 9 pm. It was useful to use the additional prison course signs (donated to us from the USA), which explains the terminology used in the discourses.

On day 10 there was a small reception held in the dining hall to commemorate the students' achievement and to hear from them about their experiences. In attendance were: the prison Governor, the Education Director, other prisoners who had not sat the course, the conducting AT, course servers, prison officers, a local Irish AT, and a few family members of prisoners. We had balloons and cake and flowers and it was a nice sunny day outside.

The Governor expressed his congratulations to the students for being the first to achieve sitting a prison course in Ireland. He gave thanks to everyone who took part in the course. He sent an email to the Director General to let him know of the course. He expressed an interest in running more courses in the future and having a long-term relationship with the Vipassana organisation.

The conducting AT explained what the course entailed, expressed his gratitude to the prison management and everyone at the prison who made some sacrifice to make the course possible and also explained about the background of prison courses in general. He suggested that the IPS may want to informally evaluate the effect of the courses by looking at things like the change in prisoners' behaviour, quality of their relationships, drug use, recidivism etc....

The Education Director conveyed that he understands how tough the course is (having sat one himself) and how it is difficult for others to understand the course if they have not sat one themselves. He spoke about how supportive the Director General is of this course-taking place and encouraged them to keep up their practice and to spread the word.

Each student gave a short speech to express their gratitude for having the opportunity to learn the technique. They thanked the prison management for their support. A number of them said it was probably the toughest thing they have ever done but very rewarding and a life changing event. They want to continue practicing regularly. Some quotes:

- "Really got to the depth of my mind and dealt with things that I was not aware they were there. .... I know it has changed my mentality and outlook of life.... I do look forward to the near future so I can keep my practice going on a daily basis and stay on the path, to a peaceful and happy life that I have been pointed in. "
- "Amazing experience, a lot of up and down but it has truly changed my life for the better. I would recommend it to anyone. The benefits are unbelievable. It's really difficult to put the experience into words. You have to try it for yourself, you will not be sorry."
- "There is no magic formula to find out the meaning of life. It's the simple things in life that matter. And it starts with the simplest, your own breath. Vipassana meditation gives you the path to your own inner truth and peace."
- It was the hardest thing I have ever done and I would recommend to anyone who gets the chance to do this course and take it with both hands and work really hard. In the last ten days I learned a lot about myself and how to deal with emotions which I always set to one side. I am now grateful for what I have and

love the people around me with more passion, the future looks brighter. Vipassana will make my life happy and I am sure it will help anyone taking part.”

- “I never knew myself inside until the last 10 days of my life, I am 29 yrs. Challenging and fulfilling, and I feel complete and fully ready for the ups and downs of the outside world. Whole thought process has changed at the root level. I am in prison 2.5 years and I wish I had done it on the first week.”

Other Prisoners who are friends of the students from within the prison also attended the reception. They were happy to see the change in the faces of the students and could tell they had been through a powerful experience. Some expressed an interest in taking part in future courses.

The servers on the course all expressed their congratulations to the students and their thanks to the various prison stakeholders who had made the course possible. They also expressed their gratitude for being able to take part in such an inspiring experience. One server made reference to the steps that had been taken in the years and months leading up to the course and his own pride in being Irish given the support from all levels of government and the IPS that had made the course possible.

It will be important to nurture the students from this first course otherwise the small flame might go out very quickly. The importance of facilitating daily practice in the prison was discussed with the prison management. The Irish Vipassana Trust has donated the cushions used on this course. Recordings of group sit instructions were provided to help with daily sittings and a follow up 1 day course has been scheduled for October with a local Assistant Teacher to conduct. More ways of supporting 1 day courses on site, short term leave to sit 3 day courses and local old students coming for group sittings at Loughan House will be explored.

Both the Governor and Education Director are keen to have more courses and both are in contact with the Director General who has been supportive all along. A review session with the IPS and Vipassana teams to capture key insights and learning from the course and plan next steps will take place by the end of October. It is likely that another course or two will be requested for 2016.