1 Meditation Practices and the Reduction of Aggression and Violence: Towards a Gender-Sensitive, Humanitarian, Healing-Based Intervention

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Introduction

Contemporary solutions to the problem of violence at the individual level usually involve punitive social control mechanisms. As a humane alternative, meditation programs within correctional institutions are experiencing growth and greater acceptance in North America. A handful of scholarly and anecdotal studies report reduced violence, aggression, and anger and increased self-awareness and hopefulness among inmates who take up meditation and contemplative practices (Phillips, 2008; Parkum & Stultz, 2000). In this chapter we explore the mechanisms of reducing violence and aggression and combating recidivism through meditation programs and practices. We situate this phenomenon within a larger socio-cultural framework that considers the gender-specific subjectivities of a majority male correctional population.

In exploring the possibility of reducing violence and aggression through meditation techniques, we review literature across several disciplines, including peace and conflict studies, criminal justice, sociology, neuroscience, social work, and Buddhist studies. We give an overview of select current meditation programs operating in prisons that embrace the goal of reducing recidivism. Finally, we make the case
for a humanitarian system of intervention that emphasizes respect, care, empathy, community, empowerment, healing, and personal transformation among incarcerated individuals.

What Is Meditation?

Contemporary meditation practices are rooted in Eastern spiritual traditions (Reps, 1994). Most Eastern traditions have as a foundation of practice some sort of mindfulness meditative technique that will help individuals calm the mind and explore the nature of reality. While contemplative practices are central to all the world’s religions, meditation is historically rooted in Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoist religions and has been practiced for at least 3000 years (Schuhmacher & Woerner, 1986). With the introduction of Buddhism to the West in the 20th century, a host of secular meditation practices began to crop up in health care, education, and correctional settings. These secular practices tend to emphasize stress reduction, relaxation, and self-improvement, and sometimes aspects of spiritual growth (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Mitchell, 2008).

According to Shapiro and Walsh (2003) meditation is “a family of practices that train attention and awareness, usually with the aim of fostering psychological and spiritual well-being and maturity. Meditation does this by training and bringing mental processes under greater voluntary control, and directing them in beneficial ways” (pg. 87). As indicated by this definition, meditation practices take many forms, but all are practices oriented around concentration, where awareness is focused on the breath, a mantra, or an object. The four most common types of meditation techniques are Transcendental Meditation (TM), Ānāpāna (mindfulness) meditation, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Vipassanā.

Transcendental Meditation practice is a technique where the practitioner repeats a personalized mantra during sittings, typically done for 20 minutes twice per day (Abrams & Siegel, 1978). Ānāpāna meditation is a simple form of meditation that focuses awareness on the breath. According to Thích Nhất Hạnh (2012, p. 15), “breathing is a means of awakening and maintaining full attention in order to look carefully, long and deeply, see the nature of all things, and arrive at liberation.” Ānāpāna is the foundation of all Buddhist meditation and is mindfulness in action. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction