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International Edition

## Nirvana Behind Bars

At Tihar Jail, many dangerous criminals have mellowed out by learning how to meditate

By Sudip Mazumdar  
NEWSWEEK INTERNATIONAL

Septmeber 18 issue — Three years ago Bhu-pinder Singh, a burly 23-year-old man, was sent to Tihar Jail on the outskirts of New Delhi. He'd been charged with murder. When Singh arrived at Tihar, say prison officials, he was angry and violent. Then, in 1999, he joined a meditation program inside the prison.

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“TODAY YOU CAN’T recognize Bhupinder,” says Sunil Gupta, a jail superintendent. “He is not only gentle but helpful to others.”

## Hundreds of inmates meditate daily—and claim to be changed men.

With 11,000 inmates, Tihar is not only India's largest jail, but also one of its most dangerous. The prison is home to hardened criminals who engage in drug peddling, sexual abuse and gang violence. But lately Tihar has undergone a startling transformation. Thanks to a spirited police officer named Kiran Bedi—who ran Tihar in the mid-1990s and introduced Vipassana meditation techniques to the prisoners—the place has mellowed out. Once dangerous convicts now preach peace, love and understanding. Hundreds of inmates meditate daily—and claim to be changed men. Their violent instincts have been supplanted by an almost spiritual serenity. Rather than fight, many prisoners grow flowers inside Tihar. "Meditation techniques help calm the agitated minds of prisoners," says V. P. Garg, another Tihar official, "and change their way of looking at things."

Praveen Chawla, a 28-year-old serving a life term for raping his former girlfriend, typifies Tihar's new breed. He says he was disturbed when he was first tossed into the prison, feeling he was wrongly convicted. But he took a series of meditation courses, and now says: "I have no quarrels with myself or with anybody." In fact, he's become a meditation instructor. "I know you can find peace and a deeper sense of freedom within the confines of this jail. I'd never thought that meditation could be so liberating."

Among the four different types of meditation offered by trained volunteers inside Tihar, Vipassana is the most demanding. Vipassana, which literally means to see things as they really are, is one of the most ancient Indian meditation techniques.

The meditator is trained to observe the close interconnection between thoughts and bodily sensations. Tihar's prisoners initially take 10-day courses, during which time they practice self-control by abstaining from speaking, sexual activity and intoxicants. They sit in a quiet room for prolonged periods each day, fixing their attention on their breathing. By the fourth day the participants learn not to react to their emotional or physical urges. Out of such

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discipline, say Vipassana exponents, comes

equanimity.

The Indian government is impressed by the results at Tihar—and has asked all the prisons in the country to introduce meditation. Tihar officials admit that the idea doesn't always work; some prisoners quickly drop out of the meditation courses, unable to withstand the rigors. But those who persist are thankful. "Now," says Singh, "when I hear my bail application has again been postponed by the courts, I don't get agitated." In fact, he feels "fortunate" to spend more time in jail, where he can continue his journey of self-awareness.

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