

Jenny Phillips, Anne Marie Stein, and Andrew Kukura (directors). *The Dhamma Brothers: East Meets West in the Deep South*. Bullfrog Films, 2007 (DVD).

Hope is most audacious when there is no good reason for it. The 2007 documentary *The Dhamma Brothers* profiles a practice of hope within a system premised, from start to finish, on hopelessness. In a documentary that examines the intersection of self-inquiry and social justice, we witness the implementation of a Buddhist meditation practice (*vipassana*) in a maximum security prison in rural Alabama, where most inmates face lifetime sentences with no possibility of parole. In most cases, these inmates have participated directly or indirectly in the murder of another human being. Hopelessness marks *the system*, which assumes that these men via their crimes have forfeited any possibility for transformational change. And it marks *the men*, whose only horizon is a lifetime of daily violence and aggression (their own and others). Through the efforts of justice advocates, who “start with the premise that where there is life, there is hope,” vipassana is introduced to a group of self-selected inmates, and after a period of daily practice they commit to a 10-day silent meditation. It will turn out to be, in the words of the participants themselves, “horrible, probably the worst thing I’ve ever been through” and also “the best thing that’s ever happened here.”

Like all compelling documentaries, *The Dhamma Brothers* is both informative and personally arresting, as we hear primarily first-hand accounts from the inmates and their families about their crimes, their prison experiences, and their encounters with vipassana. These intimate portraits are the heart of the film, and the men’s transformations are palpable. (Indeed, do not miss the additional “Reflections from the Dhamma Brothers” in the DVD “Extras.”) We also watch the prisoners go through the 10-day retreat together, what one inmate describes as “20 men in, 20 men out, 20 men stronger.” The environment in the maximum security prison allows for no solitude (other than the long-term, punitive kind), nor is it conducive to relationships of care and affection. The 10-day vipassana retreat gives the ‘Dhamma brothers’ the quiet space to go fully into themselves – a productive solitude – while also creating bonds of respect and care among them. One participant notes that after the retreat, the brothers are able to touch and hug each other, something unheard of in the larger prison culture. In the weeks and months following the retreat, they also find themselves able to resist being drawn into the cycles of aggression and violence that generally characterize inmate interactions. One participant describes being provoked and in response simply breathing deeply and walking away; the would-be aggressor was dumbfounded and wanted to know, “How did you do that?!”

Along the way, the documentary offers an unsettling glimpse into the penal system in Alabama as well as insight into what vipassana practice entails. Although vipassana emerges out of Buddhism, one need not be Buddhist to practice it, and those who initiate the program make clear that it is only the practice itself that is taught to the inmates. Before,

during, and after the implementation of the vipassana program, however, there is concern both inside and outside the facility that Buddhism is being propagated. In a cultural context where most consider Christianity the only legitimate faith, this is perceived as a real threat. Thus, despite the program's obvious success in transforming the prisoners' attitudes, behaviours, and psycho-emotional landscapes – the inmates, the guards, and the facility administrators all agree – soon after the retreat the Dhamma brothers are forbidden to meet for daily sitting practice. Several years later this policy will be reversed (and another retreat will be held), yet the cultural-political resistance to the program illustrates the disheartening ways justice and human flourishing can be sacrificed to religious dogmatism. Ironically, much of the language that the Dhamma brothers use in describing their vipassana experiences has a Christian flavor. They speak of “dying to the self” and of a discovering a “new day.” One participant sees no contradiction between his Christian faith and what he has learned from vipassana: “What’s not to understand about compassion, love, and caring?” he asks.

Intentionally or not, *The Dhamma Brothers* offers a profound meditation on hope and how it might, or might not, be fostered. It even raises theological questions about how the Christian discourse of hope – which tends to posit hope as external to the self and located primarily in the future – intersects with a legal-penal system premised on hopelessness. As one advocate notes, the surrounding society dehumanizes the prisoners, seeing them not as human beings but as symbols of danger, violence, and evil; they are thus cast as literally “beyond hope.” Where, in turn, is the hope for the men themselves – only on the other side of life? Christian figurations of hope can be helpful to those facing lifetime imprisonment, for they promise, in the words of medieval mystic Julian of Norwich, that in the very end “all shall be well.” The Christian focus on forgiveness and absolution is also clearly apt for those who have committed the unthinkable. The question is whether Christian notions of hope are sufficient for helping the inmates move beyond simply endurance and toward flourishing. Vipassana, which places transformational change in the present moment and inside the self, works on a different model of hope that can fruitfully supplement other religious understandings. Hope shifts from future to present. Says one of the brothers, “It gave me a beginning I can cultivate.”

Although *The Dhamma Brothers* does not directly address issues of gender, this documentary would enhance any number of feminist courses in areas such as sociology, religion, race and racism, American studies, and the justice system. It is highly recommended.

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