

*Hearts Grow: Contemplation-Based Inner Stability Development in
Female Inmates*

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Abstract

The research's objectives are to study the learning process facilitation appropriate for the inner stability development in female inmates, and to explicate the female inmates' inner experiences found during and after the completion of the program. The phenomenological result shows significant inner changes in the participants. These include the more inclusive perspectives one possesses, i.e. the ability to make more sense regarding the interconnectedness between oneself and surrounding people. Meanwhile, each participant can see herself as more self-authoring and more responsible for her own actions. Besides, Meditation has become a useful tool allowing them to mindfully take care of themselves from within. All these phenomena correspond with the results found during the 8 rounds of learning process. As for the learning process facilitation appropriate for such inner development, it consists of 14 key components within the sufficient length of time, while the process itself shows 3 distinctive phases.

Keywords: female inmate, contemplative education, inner stability, action research

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Introduction

According to the 2010 report of the Department of Corrections, Ministry of Justice, most female inmates in Thailand, while imprisoned by trivialities due to economic stress, were to suffer very much in depression, anxiety, fear, as well as a great risk of suicide. Many projects have then been taken into action in order to make a change in the quality of life in prisons, such as “*Narratives from gallows project*”, “*To become the editors of Jit-seri newspaper project*”, etc., consequently the results showed that the participants in such projects had the improvement in self-esteem, daily time use, relationships, attitudes, and worldviews.

In other words, works for inmates which count for much in long-term development of the life quality and also the decrease in recidivism rate are those regarding inner dimension, like self-reflection, cultivation of inner stability, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and right attitudes towards life, surrounding people, and the world. As indicated in the title, *inner stability* is considered as one of the important qualities signifying the spiritual wellbeing. It gives rise to values, happiness, and power that one, as a human being, could embody and hence becomes a critical factor for determining the positive outcome and success of such works. In this sense, contemplative education-based training program can appropriately serve this purpose, providing the learners direct experiences so that they can develop the inner qualities on their own pace. Likewise, the process for transformation rooted in inner dimension can also impact learners to their core and yield irreversible outcomes (Asdornnithee & Phukrongnak, 2012: 60; Thongtavee, et al., 2008:36). Such success results from the expansion of the person’s frame of reference to accommodate more reality she perceives, allowing the consciousness to be more inclusive and discernable, thus be able to make more senses of the world. The outcomes are also those recognizable in behaviors and ways in everyday life as they seem to be more authentic, right, and desirable (Mezirow, 2003: 58; Kitchenham, 2008: 105). Therefore, to apply contemplative education-based learning like this with female inmates in Thailand is quite an innovative and also a promising training project that a sustainable inner transformation in learners like stability and spiritual wellbeing can be expected. Moreover, this learning project, when its outcomes have been shown and publicized, could further influence related communities and society so that the social policies regarding punishment and imprisonment would be reviewed in a more understanding way.

The research aims to work upon the female inmates’ quality of life in two prisons, Chiangmai Woman Correctional Institution and Khonkaen Central Prison, by promoting the inner stability. The two prisons were purposively selected and the criteria were mainly based on the appropriateness of the policy and environment of the prisons. The research, run in parallel in the two prisons, has two objectives: 1) to study the learning process facilitation appropriate for the inner stability development in female inmates, and 2) to explicate the female inmates’ inner experiences found during and after the completion of the program. And for the maximal effectiveness, the number of participants from each prison is limited to 30. The study employs the action research and the phenomenological research as its main methodologies, whereas semi-structured interview, in-depth interview, focus group interview, and non-participatory observation are those of tools used. All the data qualitatively collected from facilitators, female inmates, as well as documents involved are

analyzed and interpreted to elucidate the reflection and action regarding learning process and facilitations that could successfully lead to the development of inner stability, and also to reveal the phenomena and dynamic of inner experiences of female inmates who have participated in the program.

Learning Process Design

There are 4 pillars that make up the entire learning process: **Self-awareness, Meditation, Social structure, and Transformative learning**, all of which is rooted in the Contemplative Education developed in Thailand’s educational institutes in the past 10 years (Asdornnithee & Phukrongnak, 2012: 9). Self-awareness and Meditation are the major elements of contemplative education in which the learners must cultivate the strength of mindfulness and use it to explore and see deeply within themselves their own pattern (of thoughts, feelings and actions), prejudice, and worldview. Meditation also plays an important role in creating time and space of serenity and peace, so allowing ones to be able to come back to look after themselves from within and build up their own inner stability even when their life is in much turmoil. Social structure contributes to most part of the content of knowledge that the program would provide the learners in order to raise up their awareness regarding relationships and social systems. Ranks, classes, power, consumerism, gender, and spiritual feminism, all of these are the topics to be contemplated and worked out together in the group so that their life’s difficulties would be unfolded and right understood. Lastly, Transformative learning gives the idea of how to work with the inner-most nature of a person, the frame of reference, in the way that the consciousness is developed to a higher stage where such person gains new capacity to perceive, understand, and be able to cope with the surrounding world with more complexity (Kitchenham, 2008: 120).

The learning program is set to be altogether 8 rounds within 10 months span. And each round lasts for 4 consecutive days. The contents, activities, and tools used in all 8 rounds of the program are summarized in Table 1 below.

Round	Contents	Activities	Tools / Materials
1 st	Empowerment, attunement, and coexistence	Icebreaker, Dialogue, Deep listening / perception, Different forms of Self-awareness, Self-reflection, Self-acceptance and Empowerment, Cultivation of Love, Compassion, Integrity, and other desirable qualities , etc.	Group process, Group sharing, Drawing / Painting, Journaling, Comprehension / Questioning, Critical Thinking, Film-watching, Meditation, etc.
2 nd	Self-esteem and relationship		
3 rd	Self-understanding and in-depth personality		
4 th	Creative & mindful communication		
5 th	Self-contemplation through gender and culture		
6 th	Embracing oneself by writing and drama		
7 th	Self-contemplation through consumerism, and contemplative arts		
8 th	Conclusion and life design		

Table 1: Summary of contents, activities, and tools used in the program

Opening Rounds

Although all participants were selected on voluntary basis, many of them, at the first place, did not feel very clear what the learning program was for, or wondered what the program and facilitators did want from them. On the other side, due to the strictness of prison life, most joined in the activities as a good girl, trying to say just nice things, complying with all rules, and not revealing what really was in their mind. Building up trust seemed to be the first task for everybody.

During the first self-introduction, many participants looked somewhat nervous and tense. But after they did some movement, all seemed to be more relaxed and joyful. Many participants said that they had fun and felt very happy. They liked to run around and shouting out loud because they were normally not allowed doing so in the prison area.

When asked to do self-introduction with picture they drew to describe about themselves for the very first time, many just briefly said their name but were too shy to talk more. However, facilitators' welcoming words and spending time with artworks helped soothing the atmosphere. And when the group came up with the common agreements, there was one who said, "*Just do whatsoever that somebody has told you to!*" The facilitators then suggested to the group some more friendly examples, like non-judgmental open space, respect, voicing inner experiences, and confidentiality.

In the following days, different games were introduced to challenge the group. Many of them were not played just for fun, but to induce cooperation and coherent power of the team. As life in prison taught people to always perform strictly according to the instructions, participants, once instructed, would absolutely get the task done by whatsoever way. When problems arose, they tended to do some things, like projection or even cheating the game to avoid being caught as a faulty person.

Many tried to participate in the game, while some looked unconcerned and did whatsoever as somebody spoke up. The unsuccessful techniques were repeated over and over and argument broke up. No one really listened to one another but the dispute was still not severe. Hours had passed, everyone seemed to be exhausted, tense, and bored. Many blamed others while some started to ask for extra helps or sought for new solutions like open a serious discussion. When participants settled down in smaller groups and began to share things mindfully, they learned that as they focused on the goal only, they have missed many untold voices and overlooked so many things along the way. They did not really see their friends in the team. The team went back to game with more receptivity and peaceful attitude with noticeably less blaming. More sacrifice and less projection finally led the group to success.

Trust among each other and the feeling of safety began to build up slowly as participants got to know one another closely, with the assistance of activities like movement, icebreakers, group sharing, deep listening, role-play, and journal writing. One thing which was very much against the custom here was to voice and talk things out without any judgment. Another significant helper was the Meditation, as

facilitators found that to introduce participants some easy practices like breathing meditation that they could make use in daily life really made things different.

Being bold and strong is very much like a core value here. So sharing deep down and touching the vulnerable things inside was almost impossible at first, not to mention about crying. When Dialogue was seriously practiced in a small group, it was a good opportunity for anyone to be like a receptive container. When one person started to let her heart break open, another followed and the whole group was filled with calmness and ready to listen deeply. The group could then welcome more and more things including tears. Suffering seemed to reduce when authentically shared. Some dared to talk about her own mistakes in the past, some were fully active in role-play, and some began to ask more questions to learn about others' perspectives. Many could experience, though a short one, a serene moment and felt relieved after the sharing and breath work.

Life in prison is an extraordinary one in the sense that sufferings and difficulties, both physical and mental, seem to be everywhere and, for many times, they look sort of overloaded. Things like this inevitably affected the learning process, too. Therefore, what the facilitators needed to do more to help the process to run smoothly was to work with the context and the involved people. Some of our facilitators approached warders and prison officers in a gentle and cooperative manner to gain trust and mutual understanding. And once during the process, an activity was spontaneously carried out to catch up with the upcoming national traditional festival of “Loi Krathong”¹, allowing participants to enjoy giving and receiving presents, as well as performing meritorious deeds and removing one’s bad fortune.

Another activity that played such an important role to yield understanding and acceptance deeply within oneself and others was the “Celtic Wheel”. By simply categorizing personalities into 4 different types (Fire, Water, Earth, and Wind), participants could see clearly how each type’s inner world functioned and eventually came up with the heartfelt appreciation in human diversity.

“Outside, I see myself as a Fire because I am short-tempered. When I am in here, I can no longer be like that but have to control and be more patient. It’s not worthwhile to fight so I see no reason to remain short-tempered. I now see myself more like an Earth here.”

“I feel so curious. I was born with all types, I guess. I like this activity because it makes me know more about myself.”

“I’ve got my own mirror. I have all types in me, though a little each. It’s also situational.”

“I can see more about myself. And to make any changes, it has to start first with my own way of thinking, which may take the whole life to do so.”

“I analyze and understand my surrounding friends more and will improve my own habits.”

“Thanks to all types, we are all the same, having pros and cons. It’s more important that how we make use of them.”

Approaching Half Way

After the first three rounds of the program, participants could now feel more of the intimacy and trust, as well as were accustomed to listening and sharing about inner experiences. The learning then a little shifted towards some content regarding outer issues, like gender, to raise the awareness in social belief systems, especially those imposed on women. Necessary information and facts were input to show how the society framed and affected the wellbeing of both men and women, then brainstorming was welcome. Meanwhile, self-reflection, including Dialogue, art works, and drama works, were carried out at times to ensure that each participant did not lose connection with oneself.

Most participants were eager to speak and share their own stories, partly because it was so familiar and directly affected their life. And when the gender box was clearly illustrated, some could realize the inequality and see its impacts. They came up with words saying how they truly felt when they themselves or their people of either gender had fallen victim to this. Some stories were cruelly hurt, and some were helpless but unavoidable.

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“Out there, if you are a woman you have to be pretty. That’s what I believe. I even took drugs to keep my figure good, to make my body slim.”
“Ever since I could remember, I saw my dad hit my mom. He had many wives, hurt my mom bringing those women into our house. I felt very angry and thought that if I ever had husbands like my dad, I could kill them all. One day, I had a very good husband, however I could never fully trust in him. I couldn’t stay with him long and felt guilty that it’s me who was his curse.”

Seeing the oppression on one side, many participants began to understand the problems and difficulties encountered by her party on the other side, too. Moreover, they realized more clearly both positive and negative impacts of the gender box, and admitted that they wanted to become a new person, going freely out of the box.

Empathy and mutual understanding slowly emerged during today’s talk. There was no criticism, outcry, or projection. The process itself was very much like healing one another, although there was one girl who was intensely shaken due to her own defense mechanism against the hatred for her father. She wept and felt disappointed that she was not able to forgive. She was approached attentively by facilitators and the healing for her seemed to take some more time.

The program also invited some (female) guest speakers to join the sessions uncovering totally everything about their own past experiences. Some was abused because of the cultural belief that favored men over women. And some shared about their pressure of being homosexual. As the true stories had been sincerely told, this became such an inspiring and powerful example, showing how ones could liberate themselves from the old belief systems, be more open, and empower themselves to face up their problems with more faith and awareness.

Social issues like gender and sexuality allowed each participant to come back to deeply see her own wound which then determined her life ever since. Many had gained understanding, relief, and forgiveness, while others were still being trapped but able to recognize that state of mind and became more acceptable. Time could help but the attitude of non-judgment, no-advice, and no-conclusion yet would also contribute to the true liberation afterwards. Again, Meditation helped essentially keeping balance between the outer and the inner world.

At the end of the sixth round, one could apparently notice the light, relieved, and relaxed feelings in many participants. Many had known the way to be aware of and release out whatever emotion stuck in a truthful and desirable way, and at the same time, be able to spiritually take care of themselves. Mindfulness, formerly installed, now became such a spiritual device that one could make use of it whenever needed.

After a session of Meditation, one participant revealed that, "When I think of the light, I smile. The light makes me feel valuable for everybody."

"I feel calmer, more discernable, and more acceptable. I try not to think too much."

"I have switched my bedroom. I adjusted myself once again. It's easier this time. Tired but fun. Yesterday, I lost my fan. I was angry with myself for not being mindful enough, still angry at the moment!"

"I miss my friends. I do sitting meditation everyday sending them all my best wishes."

"Great! I could spend time with trees."

Closing Rounds

The last two rounds time were devoted to the cultivation of long-term stability. This was achieved mainly by mindfulness, seeing one's own meaning in life, and self-contentment.

A participant reflected after contemplating what is precious in life, "Before, I never thought of loving myself. I hurt myself when angry. I felt satisfied when it hurt. Now, I learn to love myself more."

"..... I told my mother that I love her. I have never said this to her before."

The activity regarding consumerism allowed participants to realize that money or benefits could, many times, break the relationships apart, cause avarice, and make people compete.

"A life of running after every wanting is an exhausting one. Now I know what a sufficiency is like. After I go out, I will change my way of life."

A great example showing what participants finally learned was when one said, **"The real problem is in here, my mind. If my mind becomes weak, or loses willpower, then things get worse. What really shakes me is from inside. Sometimes it's overwhelming, though. The most important thing is in here, if I have inner stability, then nothing can make me shaken."** Indeed, the problems could be resolved just when we look back deeply inside and not outside.

To emphasize such importance, the inner stability could be created in many more ways, as facilitators introduced other forms of Meditation such as hand movement, walking, singing, or just bringing awareness back home, the breathing, whenever needed. Moreover, group counseling was also practiced to help open more space of sharing and supporting each other. Now they knew how to embrace one another's feelings and help them getting through with truthful and non-judgmental manner. By the way, "Being Mindful" or "Embracing" naturally became a catchword of the group.

By the completion of the learning program, changes in participants apparently noticed by facilitators (based on the data presented above) are summarized below.

1. Becoming more aware of oneself, feeling more of calmness and serenity from within, and having better skill in Meditation and being able to make use of mindfulness in daily life to sustain inner stability and reduce stress.
2. Having more of relaxed, trustful, welcoming, and caring atmosphere in relationships, including being able to deeply listen, as well as to sincerely voice.
3. Transcending one's old frame of reference into a broader and more relevant one with more capacity of making sense of the world. And also being less judgmental.
4. Unfolding one's own problem to see more of ways out, self-emancipating, and gaining back self-esteem and vital force.

The inmates' personal inner experiences inquired from interviews and journal writing also show similarity with those observed during the learning process. The phenomena found can be described in 4 aspects as follow.

1. The mind becomes more stable.

This started when participants could be aware and see more clearly their own inner world, no matter how good or bad it was. They can now delicately touch all those feelings with less resistance, at the same time, they feel more of happiness arising from self-acceptance, serenity, caring and supports from family and friends, as well as self-confidence and the commitment to make change in themselves.

"The program has changed my heart into a caring and tender one. It's warm. Besides, there are many other warm hearts, too, my friends'. When I realize this, I know that I am no longer alone. There is no point to be inferior any more. Yes, my life is happy, it is indeed. Before, I didn't see this just because of my own negative attitudes."

"There are a lot in here I can't describe. I only know that right now I am happy, and know how to make the rest of my life happy."

"I was bored to death when first attending this training. I didn't know how to be with my self. It's completely impossible for me. But when I learned more, I started to like it. Seeing myself being more calm, and more mindful, I now can come back to look at myself, pay more attention to myself, and most importantly, I now love myself much more than I used to do."

Many voices say not only that they are happy during the learning program, but also with much confidence that they, in the future, won't go back to be in trouble like before. This implies stability of mind and that the lessons in the past become like their immunity.

2. There are signs of spiritual growth.

One important ability is self-awareness that leads to the acceptance in one another. Difference and diversity are appreciated, interconnectedness is seen, and responsibility in all actions of one's own is recognized. Such growth then makes lives more authentic and meaningful, allowing ones to be able to make more contributions needed for others' wellbeing, and also to inspire others to grow.

"I see a little girl in me who needs cares and warmth. She now has a stronger heart which is ready to share warmth for others, too."

"I am proud that my story can help a girl to stand up again. The power that energizes her seems to energize me, too. Now my heart, once halved, is full."

"When I start to get angry, I come back and say to myself, "You are now angry, aren't you. Your heart is beating harder. Anger is coming, anger is coming." Only then, I can feel lightness."

As seen in many quotes, spiritual experiences help ones to become freer, less attached, and easier to let go things. Also, some have faith in something higher than their own selves, meanwhile, many can now seek happiness from within.

3. The view of life becomes expansive.

The content of Social systems introduced in the program resulted in broadening participants' view, and also, showed the healing effect. They become more objective, moreover, realize that one's own life can never be cut off from others and society. They are all connected, including whatever suffering they have at the moment. This new understanding leads to opening to other people's perspectives and to liberating oneself out of the trap. Moreover, non-judgmental attitude, forgiveness, and inspiration for a better life are now possible.

"We certainly don't live alone. Everyone influences one another. Friends can always show me ways."

"I feel more relieved. From now on, I'll be careful not to judge anyone again, especially those things about gender. Now, I can be myself fully. I am proud of what I am without blaming anyone."

"I want to understand the man I love, my husband, more. I want to listen to what he says, and accept more about what he is."

The lessons learned, if not heal them completely, can help participants to realize their own feelings more clearly and see deeply to the origin of the problems, which make them in better balance.

4. Meditation has naturally been integrated into life.

Being still and serene has more become very much like a familiar state of mind in many participants. Many have applied different ways of Meditation they have learned from the program to cope with various difficult situations in reality. Therefore, this is the essential way of how to take care of oneself in long-run and to be able to remain calm and stable from within even when life is facing difficulties.

“Recently, I am quite emotional, can’t really sit (sitting Meditation), however, I try to sit every day. I believe that my mind will be restored to calmness soon.”

“What I get most from the program is the mindfulness. I see my surrounding friends with mindfulness. When they are sad, I mindfully listen and pay attention to them. If I can suggest them something, then I’ll do, if not, I just cheer them up, and share whatsoever good.”

“I really like when I can be aware of my mind. I am practicing it at the moment. Before, my mind was really like a monkey. But now, if I see that I will bring it back to myself.”

After the 10 month long learning, participants feel grateful to what they have experienced realizing by themselves their own inner changes, the feelings of joy and happiness, and the expansion of their heart and perspectives.

Behind the scene

There are many components both within the inmates themselves and in the learning program facilitation, including qualities and competency of facilitators, that affect the outcome of this program. Very grievous and traumatic backgrounds in many female inmates, the pressurizing and oppressive atmosphere of the prisons, as well as the characteristics and nature of mind of participants certainly affect the facilitation in many ways.

In brief, action and reflection throughout all the 8 rounds of learning in both areas are analyzed and interpreted to obtain 14 key components which contribute to the success of this program facilitation. Those key components are as follow.

1. Mindfulness All activities are based on mindful approach, which is done through different ways of Meditation.

2. Inner Teacher The direction of learning is to bring ones back to their inner self. The final “A-ha” must come from within.

3. Contemplation The learning allows learners in their own sufficient space and time to inquire deeply.

4. Experience-based Validation The authentic learning must come from direct experiences ones have encountered.

5. Trust The learning is made possible in the atmosphere of relaxation, safety, and non-judgmental and non-marginalized manner.

6. Delicate Participation The learning is made possible by the attitude of compassion, empathy, intimacy, and gently attentive manner.

7. Holistic Approach The learning process is done through all channels, including sensation, feeling, thinking, and intuition.

- 8. Interconnectedness** The learning must be connected with all aspects of learners' life across all time.
- 9. Commitment** The learning makes learners to hold on to long term and regular practices.
- 10. Continuity** The learning must take place over a sufficiently extensive length of time.
- 11. Fluidity** For the sake of learners' benefits, the learning can compromise the fixed goals.
- 12. Contextual Work** The learning process has to also work out with the learners' life context.
- 13. Community** Not for individual, but the learning needs help and support from the group to bring about the collective growth.
- 14. Aim of Transformation** The learning process works out with learners' frame of reference in order to let them go beyond their edge and open up their new perspectives and worldviews.

The comprehensive 14 components described above altogether become a good mirror to reflect all important facets of a process when one facilitates. Likewise, the qualities of such facilitators must also be relevant. Easygoing, gently attentive, respectable, sensible, aware, decisive, pointed, profound, receptive, etc., all these attributes are certainly required for a successful facilitator. Nevertheless, what lies beneath such successful appearances is the fundamental belief that says, *“All humans are indifferent in dignity. Everybody has compassion and a seed to grow all the same. And all can always change.”* One last, but not least, finding regarding the contemplation-based facilitator is from a quote in the final focus group interview, saying that:

“The spiritual growth of learners is inevitably related to the spiritual growth of facilitator him / herself, too. To bring down oneself, in an egoless manner, to learn, to listen, and not to attach to what one has learned before, together with to cooperate with teamwork, is the real key to success.”

Conclusion

The flow of the entire program can be divided into 3 different phases where one would respectively lead to another. It begins with *the preparatory phase* when participants start to build up relationship, gain trust, learn how to create an open, safe space without judgment, and familiarize themselves with mindfulness practices. *The middle phase* is the work upon perspectives and worldviews as participants learn to free themselves from the old frame and be aware of social impacts. And the last one, *the long-term stabilizing phase* happens when participants come back to practice their inner work earnestly and see how to sustain the inner peace for the rest of their life. As a result, the female inmates' inner transformation apparently happens and its stepwise dynamic can be elucidated as;

*Trust gaining → Mind opening → Accepting and understanding →
Unfolding → Setting free → Having faith in one's own life*

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Endnote

¹ Loi Krathong is a Thai festival celebrated annually in a full moon evening of the 12th month in Thai lunar calendar. In the festival, people float a banana-leaf cup decorated with flowers, incense sticks, and a candle, in a river to pay respect to the water spirits, let go of all one's defilements and bad luck, and give thanks to the Goddess of Water.