

# Decency and Human Dignity *in Prison*

A seminar for people who work within  
and care about the prison system

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HELD AT



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## Spirituality in Prison – Seminar Report: Decency and Human Dignity in Prison

### Welcome and Setting the Scene

Gail Bradley, Prison Administration Group

Dignity is something that all human beings consider precious. Dignity nourishes our relationships and also gives us a sense of personal fulfilment. Real dignity is something that stays with us despite changing circumstances. Human dignity and decency can therefore be seen as an expression of an inner state of self-worth. How can we develop and sustain that sense of self-worth?

### Reflections on Dignity

Mal Gillan, Head of Operations, HMYOI Huntercombe  
and John McConnel, Trainer, New Horizons

The session was built around a series of questions that encouraged participants to identify the expression of dignity and decency within their own experiences.

- 1) Draw, construct or describe an image that represents dignity to you.
- 2) Think of someone whom you perceive to personify dignity. What is their manner and their behaviour?
- 3) What are the qualities that you associate with that person?
- 4) Recall a time when you experienced dignity within yourself. What were the circumstances? How did it feel? What was the outcome?
- 5) Think of a current situation that you are involved in where there is a need for dignity. How might you apply that dignity to improve the situation?

### Decency and Human Dignity in Prisons

Discussion with Trevor Willson, Project Manager,

The Prison Trust; Barbara Stow, Assistant Ombudsman; Anthony Reeves, Senior Officer, HMP Wandsworth

*– “Decency is about treating people as we would expect to be treated ourselves, about being professional, despite what personal views you may hold..”*

*– “It is often about the little things that cost nothing: the simple please and thank you or the few moments talking about last night's football.”*

*– “All prison staff have a role in modelling and reinforcing pro-social behaviour and values. Anything else is likely to undermine the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes.”*

*– “Decent and just relations between staff and prisoners are at the heart of the whole prison system. Successful prisons cannot be run by coercion but depend upon staff having a firm, confident and humane approach that allows them to maintain close contact without abrasive confrontation.”*

*– “I think treating prisoners with fairness, respect, justice, decency and dignity helps to confer upon them dignity, self esteem and self respect.. This is the first step to self transformation”.*

*– “To desist from re-offending, you have to feel a sense of empowerment, and self-respect. You have to feel you are capable of being a good person and that's the person you really are.”*

*– “Why do complaints arise? Because people do not really listen, do not take the trouble to understand and do not explain. It's all about relationships and seeing people as individuals.”*

*– “How we treat prisoners is a reflection of how we treat ourselves and how we treat each other. If I rely on an*

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*external source to validate myself then I have lost it. I need to start loving myself and believing that I am very special.”*

*– “There is a need to recognise the importance of individual discretion, stemming from a sense of justice and decency for all, and to reward it. However, there exists a culture of blame that encourages individuals to hide behind rules and not to accept that responsibility. As an organisation, we don’t allow people to make mistakes, yet we grow by making mistakes and learning from them. Staff need to feel valued and respected. They need leaders who command confidence, people in authority who constantly demonstrate their worthiness and legitimacy to lead.”*

*– “Justice matters because it helps people to make sense of their surroundings. It creates a predictable and understandable environment, where if you do ‘A’ then ‘B’ follows. It helps you to make sense of a world that can be so bizarre. It also conveys respect, which helps your self-respect. You are worth being treated with justice.”*

### The Restoration of Dignity

Mike George, Author, Motivational Speaker

*– “Dignity is made up of a number of different things closely linked to **self-esteem**. We each need to look at self-esteem for three basic reasons.*

*First, we are each unique but have been conditioned to forget that **uniqueness** by constantly making comparisons with others. In that moment, it’s as if I want to be like them, to have their characteristics, lifestyle and traits and through this, I begin to lose my dignity.*

*Second, is our **beauty**, based on what we are and not what we have.. However, we’re taught to associate with the external. This drains our self-esteem, because whatever is external is subject change.*

*Third, is our **value**.. Expecting to be told how valuable I am is quite different from knowing that I have value. One is very free, un-needy and non-dependent and the other is very dependent”..*

*– “Self-esteem has its own core, based on self-worth, self-respect and self-image.*

*(i) Someone who bases their **self-worth** on what they possess, their pay or their position will not have real self-esteem. Why? Because any day it may disappear.*

*Instead, see yourself as a source of wealth in the world; a wealth of love, a wealth of peace, a wealth of happiness.*

*(ii) If I base my **self-respect** on the regard I receive from others, one day I’m not going to receive that regard when I expect it.*

*(iii) When somebody bases their **self-image** on how they look, they will not have real self-esteem because looks are always deteriorating. Your true self-image is not something you see – it’s called the third eye..”*

*– “**The foundation** of self-worth, self-respect and self-image is my **self-identity**. This is the core on which one’s dignity stands. How I see myself and what I identify with at any moment will define how I think about myself, others and the world. That will define the energy I bring to those relationships.*

*– “My spiritual identity is my highest core identity, transcending all limited identities such as, Scottish, male, affluent.. This spiritual identity is a loving, open, trusting, respecting energy.”*

*– “Throughout the day we constantly lose our identity with things that are not me: an idea, a concept or another person. When that which we identify with doesn’t do what we want it to, we lose both our respect and dignity for we then react and become upset”*

*– “Another influence on self-esteem is to feel that others should do as we want them to do. If they don’t, we feel less about ourselves as we feel we’ve failed.”*

*– “Do I allow the way others see me to dictate how I behave, despite how I may feel inside? Am I aware enough not to let other peoples limited expectation affect my clarity of thinking and my ability to pick up what another needs from*

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*me in order to change their own situation? The power of spirituality, in practical terms, is the power to stay detached or in management terms, to have detached involvement. I can remain very involved in the person's story yet detachment allows me to retain clarity and empathy."*

*- "If I loose my sense of dignity, I loose my sense of purpose, my sense of why I am here, my sense of self."*

### The Power of Dignity

Sister Jayanti, European Director, Brahma Kumaris

*- "We live in a materialistic world in which there is a constant stimulation of the senses. Our attention becomes focussed on that domain in which only materialistic values exist. Values exist within our own inner world and are then expressed within our life, our behaviour and our activity. So, any time we are disconnected from our inner world, we loose contact with our values and therefore with our dignity."*

*- "Some of the words that relate to that inner world are thoughts, feelings, emotions and memory. These cannot be weighed or measured nor can they be put in the physical dimension of space or time. These things are not tangible but are what we describe as spiritual- they all exist in some place inside that I shall call 'soul'. 'Soul' describes the totality of that domain in which my values and dignity reside, the world of awareness, the world of consciousness. My dignity is not dependent on anything external. It is not dependant on name, status, image, possessions or relationships. My dignity depends on my own inner state of awareness.."*

*- "Fluctuation of that inner sense of worth, value and dignity can occur. Therefore, the word 'integrity' is important. Integrity - connected with the word 'integration'- is that state where there is alignment, where there is no discrepancy between the things that are happening within me. It is where the mind, with its thoughts, feelings and emotions are working together with the silent voice of conscience."*

*- "When one's focus is on the external the voice of conscience tends to disappear. We do not often connect with it, give ourselves the time to listen or create the space or the stillness to hear it."*

*In that state of division, where there isn't integrity and integration but a lack of stability and loss of dignity, a small thing can happen and the reaction can be enormous. We point outside of ourselves as to the cause when, in reality, I need to look to myself. When one pays attention to performing good and positive actions in their life, their interactions with others will be influenced by this."*

*- "With such conditions of chaos and breakdown in the world generally, it becomes necessary for my personal health, to create time to explore my inner being.. This enables me to strengthen that voice of conscience, understand what my inner values are, and give validity to and acknowledge those values."*

*- "I need to understand causes, reactions and upheavals in my mind, be able to move it from a negative track to a positive track, to stabilise it in an elevated state and to be in tune with my own conscience and inner values. This enables me to know truly who I am and build that level of dignity. This state of inner power comes from:*

- keeping thoughts on a positive, elevated track*
- choosing opportunities to nourish oneself with good company and a supportive atmosphere daily*
- a relationship with the Divine."*

*"As I fill myself with inner strength, everything comes back into a state of alignment and integrity, and dignity returns to my life again. This enables trust to develop within and with others."*

### The Spiritual Foundation of Dignity

Dadi Janki, Co-administrative Head, Brahma Kumaris

*- "Dignity is a state of being that emanates from one's core, whilst decency relates more to the quality of our interactions with others. Dignity is not something that is superficial. If*

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*you start to work with it in a superficial way then it has no power”.*

*– “When you share something with others with the spirit of service then it will touch people in a different and unique way. A high state of consciousness like this will lift oneself and others, too. Such spirituality will melt and nourish the hearts of others and so much would be achieved as a result of that.”*

*– “The result of dignity is love, truth and compassion. When these are present, even if I make a mistake, I will be willing to forgive myself. Without forgiveness I will continue to experience sorrow. With forgiveness for the self, then I can uplift myself with truth and love.*

*When I have dignity I am in a position to uplift those around me. If someone makes a mistake, then there has to be love, as well as law, in dealing with that. When the law is applied with love then there will be realisation and that mistake will not be repeated. In this way the person who made the mistake will not lose their honour or their dignity. There is no place for criticism, dislike, competition, favouritism or prejudice. It shouldn't be that you wag your finger at someone, ask ‘Why did you do that?’ or ask for an apology. In front of truth, those with falsehood will automatically want to remove that falsehood. They themselves will have the thought that they should apologise.”*

*– “The power of truth is such that I don't make the mistake of causing sorrow to another or of taking sorrow from someone else. When I create so much love for myself then I can create love for others also. When someone makes a mistake, no matter what, their conscience will bite.”*

*– “Two values that are particularly important in maintaining relationships are tolerance and contentment. When I have a lack of tolerance then others have to pay attention so that I don't become upset or affected by what they are doing. One without tolerance is not prepared to hear what anyone else has to say, nor to try to understand them.. Dignity that is on the basis of spirituality will*

*automatically have these two values. Such relationships will show strength and power.”*

*– “When we develop virtues, the weaknesses we have inside that make us perform negative actions, are removed. Let me emerge those qualities. Twelve core values are recognised: peace, love, happiness, simplicity, humility, co-operation, freedom, responsibility, respect, tolerance, honesty and unity. This is my dignity”*

*– “We become drawn away from our dignity when we either, become caught up in someone through becoming impressed and therefore deceived by that person, or by coming into conflict with them. For the latter, it's not until they take revenge that they stop thinking about it. For some, this has become a habit so that, even after punishment, they won't stop. Realisation needs to occur as to why we do this for only then will transformation and hope come. This requires understanding of the need to do something positive and the inspiration from another. Our job is to give them the right thing, to inspire and to become an example. This is our form of mercy towards others. This is our dignity.”*

### Practical Methods for Self Empowerment

Maureen Goodman, Programme Co-ordinator, Brahma Kumaris and Doug Stephenson, Brahma Kumaris Prison Outreach Co-ordinator

This session is about establishing the bridge between inner dignity and its practical application.

*– “When that which I know to be right, valuable and true, begins to be expressed in my external behaviour then that is the process of empowerment.”*

*– “A person with dignity is one who is the master of the self, one who does not react but remains unaffected by everything around them. Such a person is able to make a very positive contribution.”*

*– “When I am dignified I will behave with decency towards another person. That decency will maintain that other*

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*person's dignity. They will in turn, act with decency and so endorse and increase my own dignity."*

*- "As I become aware of that sense of self we called 'soul', then I live in the awareness of my innate qualities".*

*- "Even in the midst of very negative, perhaps violent situations it is very empowering to hold onto the awareness that, deep down, every human being has innate goodness. Unless we maintain that, we would lose faith in the work that we are doing."*

*- "My thoughts are the basis for change as they dictate what I experience. For example, thoughts of self-criticism will suppress our innate qualities of love, wisdom and truth; the goodness within. Practical empowerment, therefore, is about allowing the inner goodness to come to the surface to be expressed."*

*- "It is important, especially when surrounded by negative dialogue, to look at the quality of our thoughts and practise an elevated, powerful level of thinking that appreciates the good in others, the self, and goes beyond the inner voice of criticism."*

*- "Our thoughts are affected by our attitudes and they in turn are underpinned by our beliefs. If I believe in goodness, that will inform my attitudes, thoughts, behaviour and vision of others. Self-empowerment is being clear about where our beliefs and attitudes come from. This involves making sure that they are our own and not those of other people that I have adopted."*

*- "There is a close connection between our values/virtues and our inner, personal powers.. Without the powers, I cannot use my virtues. I may be caring and compassionate but if I do not have the power of tolerance, I lose the ability to use those virtues. We need to develop these powers."*

Eight specific powers follow in succession

- The power to **withdraw** - to create a little distance from the world around you.

- The power to **pack up** - to stop thoughts not directly necessary at this moment.

Once I have control over the direction of my thoughts I can begin to see the world around me without reacting.

- The power to **tolerate** - to utilise knowledge and insight that enables one to see people and events in a compassionate manner and to respond positively.
- The power to **accommodate** - to expand and accept the presence, ideas and desires of others.

When I have understanding the intellect is no longer clouded by negative thoughts of criticism, anger or rejection.

- The power of **discrimination** - to discern the subtle, and separate what is true from what is false.
- The power of **judgement** - to assess the quality of choices, decisions and actions in yourself/others.

Knowing that my motivation is altruistic and that there can be benefit in everything I move with confidence.

- The power to **face** - to confront and resolve external/internal obstacles, tests and challenges.
- The power to **co-operate** - to give your attention, time, and experience in the service of others.

*- "Bringing ones' thoughts under control is essential. The key is to create space in ones' life for reflection, contemplation and meditation, each of which has its' own importance. Reflection is looking back on the quality of my interactions and learning from that. Contemplation is the accessing of new understanding and insights and the consideration as to how that can be implemented into my way of being. Meditation is to give focus to and experience my highest potential and innate qualities and to visualise that."*

In summary, the succession of the eight powers can be summarised as 'go **inside**, create **elevated** thinking, and come **out** into the world.

