

Newsletter, Spring 2014



DON'T GO CHANGING

“Things are going to be different this time.” “I’m staying out of the madness.” “I’m going to work hard to become the person I want to be.” Inside of prison and out, we say things like this, and hear other people saying them too. It’s good to know things can be different, and to take charge of the direction of our lives.

What I often have a harder time with, once I realise I want to do things differently, is accepting what I am right now, and becoming that. Without accepting who and what we really are in this moment, meaningful change can’t actually happen. But if we can accept who and what we really are, the possibilities for change open up -- big time.

A small example: Say you’re just dying to break your personal record in weight lifting or on the rowing machine, but you’ve pulled a muscle in your back from too much digging and planting flower bulbs. If you don’t accept that you’re someone who at this point has a bad back, and don’t rest or treat it appropriately, you’re not going to have any chance of doing anything in the gym. You need to fully be “the man or woman with a bad back” before any kind of meaningful change can happen.

Similarly, if I’m scared out of my wits about some event that’s coming up – a hearing, job interview, a tough meeting – I need to be able to become as fully scared as I am, to recognise and accept the fear, not simply wish that I weren’t feeling it, or think that there ought to be some other way I should be feeling. If I don’t do that, I’m not going to be as useful or alert, because the fear will be acting like a brake or a half flat tyre – I’m not really running at full capacity.

There are plenty of things we don’t want to admit that we feel, not just fear or a dodgy back. Whatever it is that we’re trying to avoid, we will find much more capacity for meaningful change

when we first accept exactly who we are in this moment.

What this newsletter and our classes and books and CD and letters back and forth to you are all about is a practice that links the mind, body and breath together, giving you the strength of mind to examine what is going on inside. This examining lets

us be who we are in any given moment, and allows us to have whatever feelings we are having, in any given moment. Strangely enough, the more we can practise this without any desire for things to be different or for them to change, the more that they do change, often beyond what we could have imagined.

As you are sitting in meditation watching your breath - becoming your breath - sink deeply into this fact that there is nothing that needs changing, that how things

are is exactly how things are meant to be. Become exactly who you are in this moment, and THAT is when the way is clear for meaningful change.

Our ability to accept how we are at any time is hugely strengthened by the discipline of meditation practice, because we learn to sit through all kinds of distractions and thoughts and feelings. Instead of following thoughts, we can lean into and rest in the breath until we can be with our feelings and thoughts without stirring them up any further. Just seeing them, and letting them be.



Working where we are at Castlerae Prison



Love Sam – and Lucy, Sally, Jason, Clive, David, Kaye & Brent

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”

~ Viktor E Frankl (1905 - 1997),
holocaust survivor

ABOUT THE PRISON PHOENIX TRUST

The Prison Phoenix Trust supports prisoners in their spiritual lives through meditation, yoga, silence and the breath. It recommends breath-focussed stretches and meditation sensitively tailored to students' needs. This safe practice offers students ultimate peace of mind. The PPT encourages prisoners and prison staff through correspondence, books, CDs, newsletters, free taster workshops and weekly classes.



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From HMP Old Durham

Thank you for the *Freeing the Spirit through Meditation and Yoga* book and the CD. I have wanted to do yoga a few times in the past as a couple of friends swore it helped them get through some bad times.

I have also heard that when yoga is introduced into a training program, such as strength training, like what I am doing, then you become more flexible and supple. This helps the body repair itself whilst building muscle and it is doing wonders for me.

The meditation has helped me overcome demons which plagued my mind for the last few months, after getting diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from serving in the army.

The counsellors, wing officers and my lawyer have noticed a massive and positive change in me, from a person who was put on suicide watch numerous times because I didn't want to talk to many people about why I am in prison in the first place.

The point I am getting at, is that the meditation has helped release my depression demons and the violent and disturbing flashbacks I would get when I closed my eyes. The flashbacks are so disturbing that the police and my girlfriend (who is eight months pregnant and is now my ex) would not believe me.

The flashbacks are why I am in prison. I just wanted to love and be loved, to live a happy and normal life with my gorgeous pregnant girlfriend and to look forward to

our baby.

I know I can't get rid of the things I saw or my memories, but the more I do meditation, the happier I am becoming and the closer to being that happy, fun loving and caring guy my girlfriend fell in love with. I know I have lost her and will never see my baby who has come along in such a difficult time in my life. I just wish I could of changed before it all went wrong and I wound up in here.

I would love any other books you have to help me recover and to help other ex-soldiers going through the same pain as myself.

From HMP Erlestoke

My prison has been holding yoga classes for six weeks now after receiving funding.

I have attended every session and do it in my cell twice a week or when I'm stressed. I have done yoga before when it's been in other prisons and have done it in my cell from time to time which is rewarding especially as I get very stressed from time to time. Even after six weeks I can feel a difference. I've been using the CD too.

I have been a hardened criminal all my life but find yoga really works for me.



From HMP Kirklevington Grange



Awhile ago I received your *Clearing the Head, Relaxing the Body* CD on yoga and meditation. I have tried the techniques

Prisoners'

over the past month, and am hooked already. It has really changed my outlook. I am in the early days but try and meditate for 10 minutes each day. I do the yoga CD at least two times per week. I train hard in the gym and the yoga really releases my body and mind.



From Rowanbank Clinic

When I'm not busy doing stuff I ask myself what I appear to be. I often come up with descriptions of myself such as I am locked up, I am afraid, I am insane – or it may be more positive things such as I am happy, I am feeling good, I am strong. All sorts of "I am"s go through my mind. I could say I am writing to Anita, I am sitting on a chair, I am sore, I am funny, I am a mad, mental crazy lunatic. But really all these things are in a flux. They all come and go with time. The one thing that doesn't change is the "I am". The "I am" is my awareness of myself and the world. It is constant, unchanging, never ending.

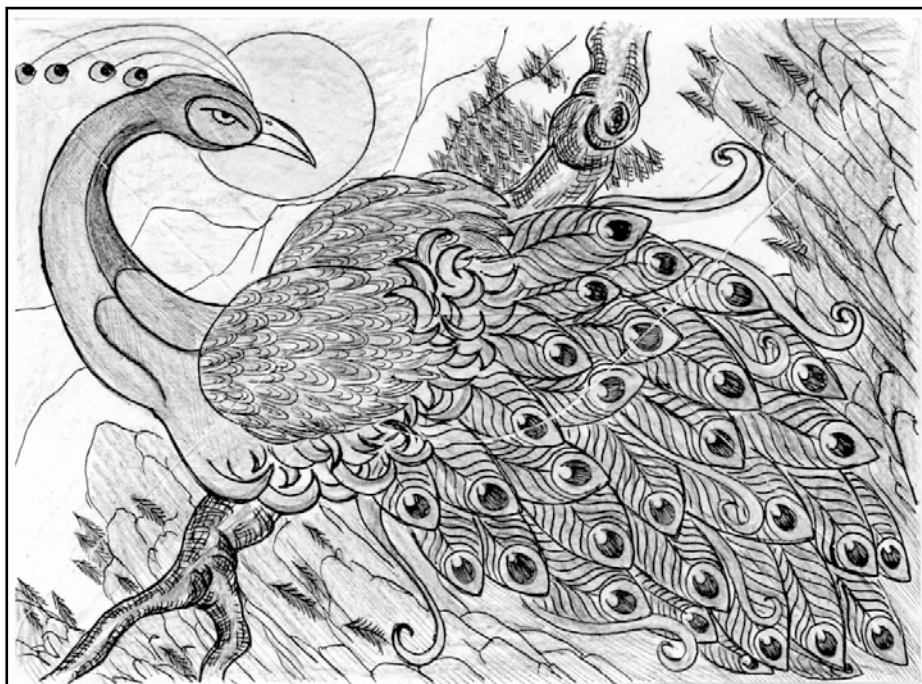


From HMP Inverness

Isee exactly what you're saying about distractions. I have realised that I've been starting meditation sessions lately, always expecting something from it, i.e. physical/mental energies or drowsiness when I need it. Effectively I've swapped one addiction for another, but your letter has made me aware of the mistakes concerning my practice.

In future, whilst meditating I will have quietness of total mind and just observe what comes along "au naturel". I've strayed from the path but I'm hopefully "Enlightenment bound" once again! I have gone back into normal associations again as I believe I have all the rudiments of Buddhist philosophy, so now I will try to put what I've learnt into practice. No point in living like a hermit if I cannot be tested by certain situations/temptations. This is where the real test will begin.

I have turned Vegan recently; I was meditating one day and it dawned on me listening to small birds flying about and singing that if there's an alternative food source there's no need to eat any kind of animals in my opinion! For some reason I've found it to be a good decision as I believe it adds to the system being less



Peacock on the back of an envelope, from a friend at HMP Whitemoor

Letters

sluggish. I fast every Sunday as I've also found 24 hours with no food seems to limit pressure on internal organs and flush the system of toxins!

I'm trying to focus my mind and body for the New Year and remove impurities one by one, as a wise man/woman does.

I thought of something last week that meditation resembles for me. It is comparable to unblocking a river or stream. When I was a kid I used to dam up streams with rocks in order to catch or keep fish, but I noticed that the water gets stagnant and murky and the fish don't breathe too good, so unblocking the stream the waters run faster and clearer and more free – no longer stagnant or harmful to any life, even a fish (ha ha). Unblocking the stream – that's what it's all about for me!

From a prisoner

Yeah, I completely understand what you said about others also lacking in self-esteem but putting on a 'front' to make



them appear otherwise. I have seen that a few times recently. One that sticks in my mind was someone who is seen as a tough guy on a wing and is believed to be a bully. I went to his cell and he was really upset and crying and as soon as he noticed me he said a few choice words my way, so I left.

I'm quite like that in a way. I won't let others see me cry in here, not prisoners nor officers, but then in the night it all comes flooding out and that's mainly when meditation is needed to calm me down, focus on the breath and get back to a normal state. If I don't get back to the normal state I know self-harm thoughts wouldn't be far behind so I try to avoid that.

From HMP Highdown

You don't even know me yet you have shown me more kindness and support and generosity than people that I have known over my whole life. Thank you for sending me *Becoming Free through Meditation and Yoga* and *We're All Doing Time*. I am doing the yoga asanas every morning and night. I am not finding it



easy - I have almost no flexibility and cannot even touch my toes.

I am also struggling to get into a lotus, half lotus or even quarter lotus. I was wondering, is there any way to stretch the muscles in my legs to fix this as when I try to meditate the pain in my right leg is too much for me to try to slow my mind.

I feel so different already. I can't even imagine where this could possibly lead.

Ed: The lotus position is helpful because it feels solid and rooted, but you can meditate perfectly in any position. One way to get used to being in lotus is to try it for one minute one day, then 90 seconds the next, then two minutes the next, and so on. But if lotus hurts, your books show other ways of sitting. And that includes sitting on the edge of your bed. Again, sitting on the floor in lotus or half lotus can feel more stable and solid, but as long as your back is upright, and you are relaxed and still – that's all that matters.

PPT letter writers are always happy to write to you about your yoga and meditation practice. Drop us a line!

Meditation Corner

It's Alright Here

How would you describe your cell or the room where you sleep? Many of you who write to us say your rooms are small and remarkably cramped – even more so when there are two or three of you sharing. Meditation is sometimes described as being freeing and expansive, so meditation can seem difficult when you have little control over your surroundings.

Despite all this, your cell can be the perfect place for meditation, so let's find out if your room can be transformed from a 'pokey hole' (another description we sometimes hear) to a place of peaceful retreat. Even with the TV blaring, or your padmate snoring, now is just the time to give this a go.

First of all, make the area as clean and tidy as possible, without upsetting your cell mates. Make your bed, straighten books and papers, put things away, give the floor a sweep. If it's not too cold, and only if it doesn't annoy your padmate, open a window, if only briefly, to let some fresh air in.

With a small corner of your cell now in order, sit upright with your back straight.



By Jason

Feel balanced and still. Your head should feel like it is being pulled gently upwards, with the chin slightly in and chest lifted. With your eyes relaxed but slightly open, turn your awareness to the breath, and breathe normally and silently through the nose. Pay special attention to the out-breath. Count each exhalation until you reach ten. Then go back to one again and keep repeating, one to ten. It is good to keep your eyes open and your hearing alert, and become aware of the TV, radio, smoking, or whatever else is happening in your room. Accept these as essential to each moment, and not a disturbance.

You may start to be distracted by thoughts, worries and anxieties. Although these appear to be private and in your head, they are still occurrences

happening each moment. Keep counting the out-breath even when the distractions are happening. If you lose count it doesn't matter, not one bit. Simply start again at one. Gradually your cell may not start to feel so different to being in a larger room like the gym or canteen. There are still noises, people, activity, anxiety and expectations, coming and going each moment, but there really is enough space for them not to get under your skin.

If you can keep focussing on the breath, you may find it becomes easier not to make judgements about where you are. All are

experiences that come and go – suddenly or slowly, sharply or repeating; they can all happen each moment wherever we find ourselves. If you try this at different times, like when queuing for dinner, cleaning the wing or working out at the gym, you will see that in the midst of this activity there is always peace and stillness – exactly as there is in your cell.



Your Own Healing Breath

From our book *Freeing the Spirit through Meditation and Yoga*

When we work with our breath we are working with the Life Force itself. This is both powerful and sacred. Let the power in the breath do its own thing for you. It will shift the blocks that stop your head working the way it should. For thousands of years, meditators have known that we all have an inner power. If we allow it to heal body and mind by sitting in silence we can change our lives. But we have to do that for ourselves. Here's how you can start.

Sit either on the floor, or on a chair. Ensure you are sitting upright, with a straight back, and your hands on your lap. Now look straight ahead and ensure your head does not flop forward. All our senses should remain open, so keep the eyes merely resting on a spot about one metre in front of the nose. If you are meditating well, your eyes will probably go out of focus on occasion.



Take several long deep breaths, and then start to breathe normally, evenly and silently through the nose.

Focus upon your breathing, and count the breaths silently to yourself, in 1, out 2, in 3, out 4 etc. Count up to 10, and then start from one again. If you

lose count, just return to 1 again and keep going. Try to ensure the breathing remains even and natural. Keep repeating this sequence ideally for at least quarter of an hour, making sure that your back remains straight, and your head remains upright. And that is all there is to the practice; it is as easy (and as hard) as that.

As you meditate, thoughts will arise in your mind, and you will be tempted to follow them. This happens to us all, and it takes some discipline to return to the breath counting again. Do not be over concerned over the thoughts, even if they appear important; just see them as thoughts, let them go, and return to counting your breaths again. Keep doing this until your quarter of an hour is up, and then your meditation is finished.

Meditation is most effective when practised at the same time every day, so a regular routine is developed.

Try an 8 week programme of meditation like this -

Weeks 1 and 2	Count each in-breath and each out-breath as above, to 10.
Weeks 3 and 4	Just count the in-breaths and breathe out naturally.
Weeks 5 and 6	Breathe in naturally and count the out-breaths up to 10.
Weeks 7 and 8	Don't count. Sink into silence with each in-breath and out-breath. This is difficult but give it a try.

When you notice the effects of this programme you may want to sit for longer. Slowly extend your meditation to 25 minutes. Early morning is best - this is when the mind is clearer. Sit then, and again in the evening. You will feel the benefit quite soon.

Focus on the breath the way you did for

weeks 5 and 6, breathing in naturally and counting the out-breaths. You may also be able to spend short periods with your mind on the breath without counting. This is very peace-giving.

After a while if something in the day crops up and stops you from meditating, you will miss your sitting.

Mandela on Meditation

Nelson Mandela, who died late last year, was a South African anti-apartheid activist who served as President of South Africa from 1994 to 1999. He spent 27 years in prison. During his time inside, he wrote the following in a letter to his wife, Winnie, who was also imprisoned:



Nelson Mandela in 2008

The cell is an ideal place to learn to know yourself, to search realistically and regularly the process of your own mind and feelings. Internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one's development as a human being. Honesty, simplicity, humility, pure generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve others – qualities which are within the reach of every soul – are the foundation of one's spiritual life. Development in matters of this nature is inconceivable without serious introspection, without knowing yourself, your weaknesses and mistakes. At least, if for nothing else, the cell gives you the opportunity to look daily into your entire conduct. Regular meditation, say about 15 minutes a day before you turn in, can be very fruitful in this regard. You may find it difficult at first... but the 10th attempt may yield rich rewards. Never forget that a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying.



Nelson Mandela's prison cell on Robben Island

Doing Nothing

Living Silence is a book of poems from Sylvia Ostertag, a meditator of many decades. It is the most helpful book on meditation practice that we've seen in many years. Sylvia's words point with crystal clearness to the nitty gritty of sitting in silence as a spiritual practice – and living out what you discover. We hope you find the same warmth and guidance that we found in this extract from her introduction, and in one of her poems.

The practice of silence is precisely a matter of doing “as much of nothing as possible”.

This is easier said than done. But you can try – for a couple of minutes, right now, simply to do nothing, nothing at all. But now is unlikely to be the right moment. You are certain to have something more important to do just now, even if it is only to carry on reading. This is the first obstacle. There is almost always something more important to do than nothing, than merely to sit in silence.

If you want to commit yourself to the practice of sitting in silence you will do well to do it always at the same time. In the morning, for example, before breakfast, before your head is filled with a multiplicity of impressions and plans. But it can of course be in the evening or whenever you like, as long as it is a time that you have set yourself, so that you cannot say that you have something more important to do just now.

If the practice of silence is to reach into all areas of our experience and action, to transform our everyday life, it will require a certain length of time. Twenty-five minutes is a good time. But this is only a guideline. Each minute of sitting in silence is more than not doing it at all. You will

find out what length of time is good for you and also what kind of ritual you find appropriate to prepare for the practice – to light a candle, for example and turn towards the place of silence with a gesture of respect, a bow.

Invitation and challenge

To sit in silence and really do nothing is no small challenge when you do not happen to be sitting in a beautiful old church or pausing in the woods listening.

Putting your hands in your lap is not too difficult. Nor is keeping your mouth shut for a while. But to still your feelings and silence your thoughts is a different matter. And for silence this is crucial. Not, of course, because it is bad to feel and think. It would be very good to be able to feel more deeply and think more clearly. It would be very good, too, not to be utterly taken over by emotions or distracted by involuntary thoughts but rather to create new thoughts out of a felt connectedness. Silence cleanses our emotions and thinking of compulsive identifications precisely because feeling and thinking remain quiet during this time.

Old Pain

It has hardly grown silent
when there it is again,
the age-old
pain in my heart.

At long last
I want to stop feeling it.
Do not want it.
Do not want.
Not.
Nothing.
Want nothing.
Let go.
Feel.
Pain.
Yes.
Silence
around all
pain.

Sylvia Ostertag

No Mat? No Problem!



Making do quite well with just a towel



Chair



Kneeling with a
folded blanket on
your heels



Washing up
bowl



Pillow folded
in half



Stack
of books



You can meditate
anywhere, any time...

What An Adventure

By Mark

From the age of 16 I was on the criminal path, getting in trouble with the police regularly and served about four years in prison. Behaviour spiralling I was abusing myself with drink and drugs. To put it mildly my life was out of control. In 1991 I got busted in Portugal for fraud travellers cheques and false instrument passport. I was given a three and a half year sentence. Getting arrested and gaoled came as a blow, especially as my plans had been to join the Army (foreign) and make a new start. Whilst inside I ended up in the block for cutting through my bars trying to escape. I had an old magazine with yoga and meditation practices in it which I started to practise as I'd had an interest in meditation but did not know anything about it. When I came back on the main somebody told me about *We're All Doing Time* and the Prison Phoenix Trust. I sent off for it, practised yoga and meditation every day and the results were remarkable. After some time I felt on a complete new level. Someone even had a

go at me for smiling so much.

In '93 I was released and came out a new man, physically, mentally and spiritually. I made a decision that I would not drink because of my spiritual practices. The first year out I found difficult; I found work on the building sites as a labourer but I wasn't left with much after bills and food. I tried to find work on the sites in Germany. Towards the end of 1994 two significant things happened. I was introduced to Narcotics Anonymous as I was looking for help with mental issues stemming from my drug use and I was accepted in the territorial army parachute regiment. I was still practising my yoga and meditation and physical exercise and running which I'd started in prison. Things were looking up.

Eight years sober

After being in the T.A. for one year and very much enjoying it, I had a psychiatric episode and received a medical discharge. I became very down and stopped running and everything and eventually picked up a drink. I did not know what to do with

myself but became a cycle courier with the intention that I would try to get back in the T.A. For the next ten years I drifted, trying to get back in the military. A couple of times I picked up drugs and was in and out the rooms and some spells in the psychiatric ward. I went to Madagascar in 2005 where I have family and very much enjoyed it. That is where I had my last drink.

I also discovered that Madagascar was a source country for gemstones. On my return I started to do meetings and work the 12 steps and I also went to night school to study gemmology. I decided to study full time and went to University in Birmingham and graduated with a Higher National Diploma in 2008. I then went on to study watch and clock making, horology. As a present to myself I went back to Madagascar for 1 year and studied more gemmology. I returned in October 2013. I am looking for work with my new found skills and enrolled for more studies in the new year - computers which I am behind on and French for my travels in Madagascar.

I'm pleased with my progress. I have



not been in trouble for 20 years, not been on the psychiatric ward for ten years, and have not had a drink for eight years. I still have issues, life is not perfect and never will be but it's a darn sight better than where I was. I don't think it's by coincidence that meditation and prayer is step eleven in the twelve steps. I think it's the most important thing you can do to connect with a higher power and it was certainly the catalyst that changed my life. What an adventure.



“... looking for work with my new found skills ...”

Don't Draw Another's Bow

By Wendy Tyndale, PPT Letter Writing Volunteer

“Don't draw another's bow, don't ride another's horse” said one of the Zen masters of ancient China. In fact it is impossible for us to do either. We can only draw our own bow and ride our own horse. When we start getting involved in another's life, however helpful we think we are being, if our own desires and judgements are in the way then what we shall actually be doing is trying to get that person to conform to our standards or criteria or to comply with our own need for control and order in life. We are drawing our own bow.

However, no Zen master would deny that one of the most deeply human characteristics is compassion and caring for other people – and herein lies the riddle. In the deepest friendships but also in a casual encounter people can suddenly and unaccountably feel that they are at one with each other. Each is drawing their own bow and riding their own horse because there is only one bow and one horse; there is no separation between them.

About 10 years ago I volunteered with the PPT to write to a prisoner. Why? What

was I looking for? Did I want to “help” someone? Was I trying to fulfil my own need to feel “useful”? I have no idea. All I do know is that when, roughly a year later, I was asked if I would like to write to Ian, I had no inkling of what I was – we were – entering into.

Writing letters is a unique form of communication. It involves no spoken word, no meeting face to face, no fixed place or time and, even though the words may fill a whole page, a letter can be full of silences. Its words may be written as if spoken quite loudly or as though they were barely whispered or not audible at all. When writing to Ian or reading his letters to me, I often feel as close to him as though he were in the room and then I think how odd it is that he has become so important to me and that we have managed to get to know each other so well. We have never met and our life histories have been about as different as anyone could imagine them to be. If Ian weren't in prison, we are very unlikely indeed ever to have come across each other, let alone to have formed an extraordinary – yes, out of the ordinary – friendship.

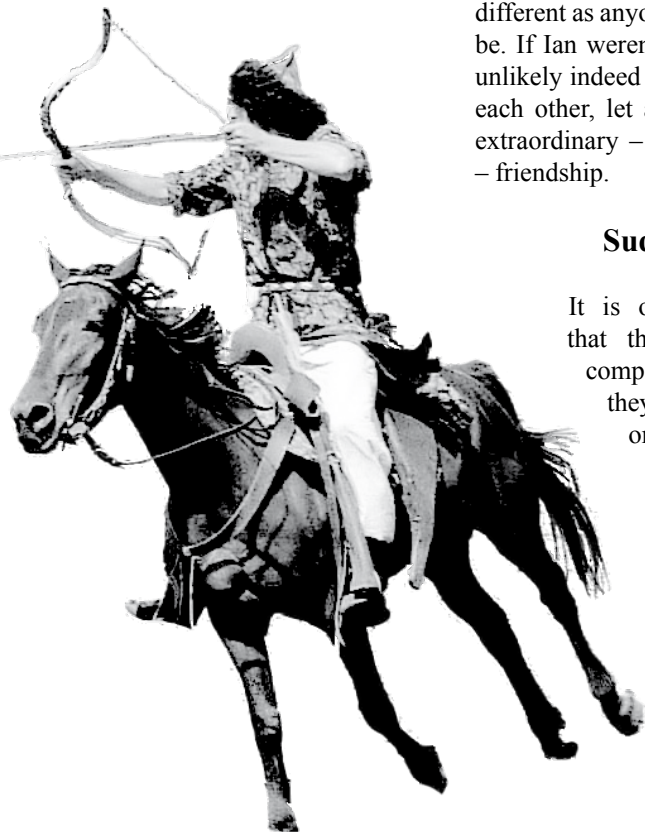
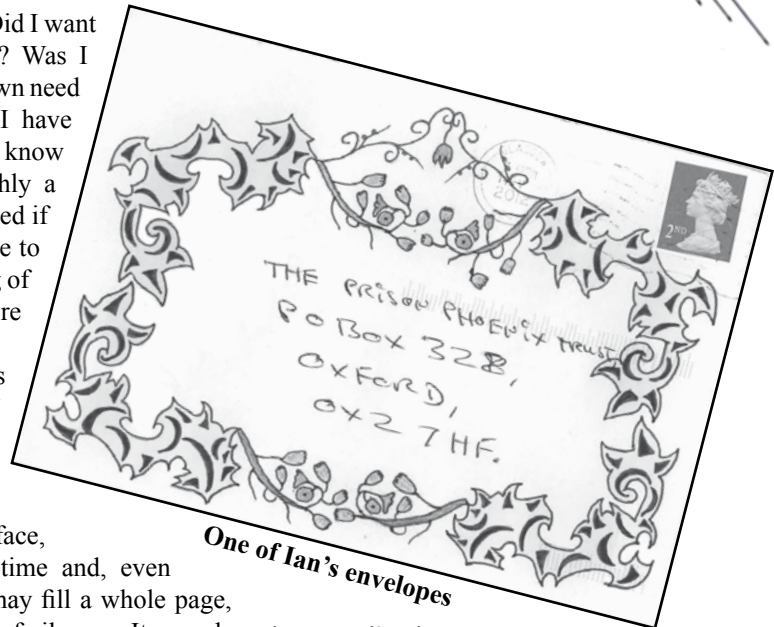
Suddenly at one

It is often said of musicians that they lose themselves so completely in the music that they seem to disappear, their ordinary selves have simply ‘gone’, so that instead of playing the music, the music seems to be ‘playing them’ – and I have had such an experience when writing letters to Ian. Sometimes, even when I have started out feeling too busy or tired or ‘not in

the mood’, the act of communicating, usually answering a letter of his, has seemed to take over. Whether our attention is focused on a quotation from a spiritual writer, the birthday party given to Ian by his friends in prison or what I have been growing on my allotment we are suddenly at one. At such moments I have felt a sensation of freedom as the words I am writing seem to come out of nowhere rather than from any thought on my part.

Finding unity

Maybe it is impossible to know quite why this happens, or even how, but if we are alert and open, this feeling of ‘oneness’ can arise anywhere, with anyone. However, it does seem clear that, by bringing us to a place ‘beyond’ ourselves and reducing our sense of separateness, meditation and yoga can help us to develop the potential that lies in all of us for such a state of mind. The fact that Ian and I both practise silent meditation has surely been a fundamental element in establishing the bond between us. The PPT provides invaluable guidance in this and I can imagine that many other volunteers have had similar experiences with people they write to. Perhaps all there is to say is that we have been given a beautiful gift in having the experience from time to time of drawing our own bow and riding our own horse and finding unity rather than separation in doing so.



Take Five



By Lucy



This simple yoga routine can help you feel calm. It can stop you feeling stressed or angry and can help you get to sleep. While you work, take calm, slow, deep breaths. Hold each pose for at least five of these breaths, but longer if you are happy and comfortable. Don't worry about getting the postures exactly right - all that matters is that you are helping yourself to relax and feel better.

1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.



Rest your legs against a wall.

Now try sitting quietly for a few minutes in this position, or one from p.5. Focus on the feeling of the breath entering and leaving your body. Don't be bothered by your thinking. Just focus on your breathing. Allow yourself to be just how you are.

8.



“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less.”

~ C.S. Lewis (1898 - 1963), novelist

This newsletter goes to members of the prison community and to our many friends on the outside who continue to offer us their encouragement. The Prison Phoenix Trust is a small charity depending totally on supporters' kindness and financial generosity to continue in our work to help our friends inside. One way you can help is to consider remembering us in your will. Any sum, however small, is much appreciated.

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