



Newsletter, Summer 2014

COOLING OFF



There's no getting around some things – sweltering summer heat for example, or being stuck somewhere we'd really rather not be. What

happens in our lives simply can't be made to behave exactly the way we'd like all of the time, or even very much of the time! Of course far more cruel and unfair things happen besides high temperatures or living somewhere you don't want to for a few months. Part of being human is learning how to heal old hurts, and how to best respond to fresh challenges.

Whether we get thrown off balance or find a cooler way of handling such things depends to a large degree on the state our nervous system is in. Your nervous system – including the spinal cord, the brain and all the nerves in your body – has a HUGE influence not just on how the brain communicates with the rest of the body, making sure all the different aspects of the body work in harmony. It also has a massive impact on how you feel and your mood and outlook. So if you can do anything helpful for the nervous system, you will really be doing something for the quality of your life. It's a "sweet spot" for human beings: putting a little energy into it pays big benefits.

Magical breathing

The nervous system controls things like heart rate and sweating. It does this without us needing to be aware. Breathing is also usually controlled automatically this way. The magical thing about breathing is that it works the other way too: control your breath (for example, in the way Brent recommends on page 8) and you change your nervous system.



Releasing the back in a prison class

Purposefully making your breath longer flicks the "rest and digest" switch for the nervous system. Much of the time, we're in a different mode, called "fight or flight" which we need when our lives are at risk. But out of habit, we can find ourselves tense, anxious, restless, ready to fight or flee, even when there's no actual threat! Tuning into the breath allows the body to rest and give energy to things like digesting food, or healing from a cut finger. And like a cut on your finger, the old hurts we have inside need time and the right attention to heal.

When you are controlling your breath or going more simply and just paying attention to it, you can let go of thinking about the nervous system, healing, flight or fight, and even ideas about yourself. In fact, you are working on something far deeper than just the nervous system. To discover all the breath has to offer, the fewer ideas you have while doing it, the better. Just fully "be" the breath. The power that it can unlock – to heal, to cool, to wake us up – gets stronger the more we focus on it and let go of thinking about anything, including ourselves.



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



“All things share the
same breath - the beast, the tree,
the man... the air shares its
spirit with all the life it supports.”

~ Chief Seattle of the Duwamish Tribe
(1780 – 1866)

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.



Contents

Page 2-3	Prisoners' Letters
Page 3	Meditation Corner
Page 4	A Place of Retreat
Page 5	Stretches for Sitting
Page 6	Life On Release
Page 7	Spotlight on the Spirit
Page 8	Even it Out

From HMP Coldingley

Someone loaned me a copy of your book *Freeing the Spirit* and it has turned my life around.

I am 6 years clean from cocaine and alcohol addiction and was sentenced to 24 months in prison.

Since being incarcerated my head has been all over the place and your book has definitely got me back on track. I have used meditation before, but never stuck to it and also did a little bit of yoga just before I was sentenced.

The change in my thinking is amazing and I am much more grounded and level-headed due to meditation, prayer and yoga.



beaten up a long time ago, and I instantly got angry.

Now, I know that I have to let go of that anger and forgive the person who attacked me. The book you sent me explained this to me. Too many people have suffered and many wars fought because of those feelings of underlying anger. I just want peace, and maybe a little love.

From HMP Barlinnie

A long time ago I had contact with the Prison Phoenix Trust. Since then I have grown up! It's taken me long enough. I don't say that to put myself down, it's just the facts. I hope in years to come God will use me to help others.

Sometimes as human beings we can be over critical of each other and create negative scenarios. But taking action, coupled with forgiveness and acceptance can liberate us.

I'm a great believer that if we're willing to look at ourselves, we can free ourselves from the fear of others. With time, perhaps we can free others from the fear of ourselves. Especially if we have committed crime and hurt and disturbed other people's lives.

I covered an anger management course last year. So the anchor is down and the mind is aware. Knowing that I can be in control of my emotions and that the behaviour of others cannot affect me unless I allow it, is freeing and stabilising. But in the real life of jail, we sometimes have to deflect the anger of others to stave off their behaviour!



From HMP Long Lartin

I'm about half way through the Self Change Programme now.

It's going alright, even though at times it proves stressful. The good thing is realising that I'm not the person I was in the past that did horrible things to people. I'm a lot saner now, and peaceful. I don't believe in violence anymore. There can always be peaceful resolution.

It's true what you say about watering the good seeds. I've started to have a better life since I've been good to myself and others around me. I'm getting more visits and everything. But I realise that I have to let go of my underlying anger.

Today I was lying on my bed in the dark listening to music and I felt really tense. After doing some relaxation exercises, the first thing I thought about was getting



From HMP Ashfield

I'm diagnosed schizophrenic and I have trouble relaxing. I also have arthritis and

Kienbocks disease. The book and CD helped on all fronts. I can now relax and feel stronger and healthier. I've been in prison 4 ½ years and thought yoga was just for females or old people. How wrong I was. It is really good, I enjoy it. The relaxation technique is superb.

When I first did yoga my body was struggling to cope but now muscles are stretching and dealing with the movements of it all. The CD is brilliant; I listen to this every day and try to relax as often as I can.

From HMP Peterborough

Could you send me some of your materials? I saw your advert in Inside Time. Since I joined Peterborough,

I've been working in the Link, an area dedicated to support and advice during your time inside and back in the



From HMP The Mount...

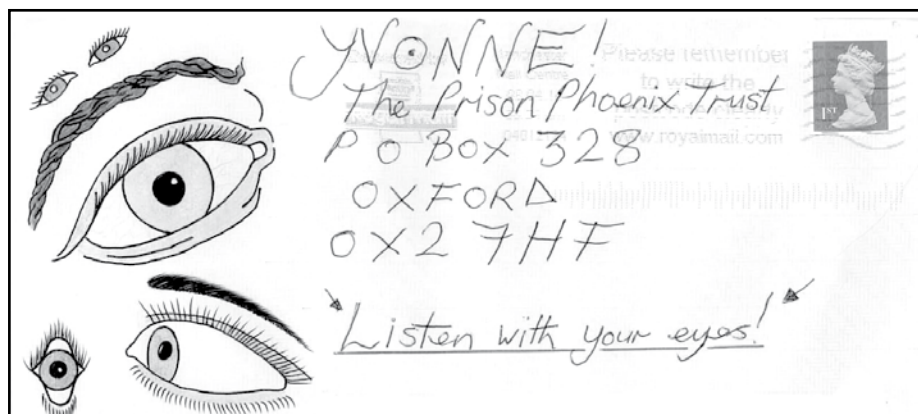
The most transformational thing I can do in jail is sit in my cell, reading, listening to my radio (I don't have a TV) and practise meditation. I practise every day now and have done for about a year and a half.

I tune into the emptiness. The empty space in the room and the silence in the room. I am aware of my body, the feelings in my body and my body breathing. Sometimes I feel an expansion that goes out in all directions, way beyond the walls. I don't know what significance this has, if any, but it feels like finally I'm starting to get somewhere. It feels like everything, the trees outside, the walls, in fact the whole jail and my body is being held by emptiness.



Moving prison?

Let us know so we can keep sending you newsletters!



A letter from a friend at HMP YOI Forest Bank

Prisoners'

community. The Link offers support from both in-house teams and outside agencies. I'd love to add your literature and manuals to what we offer.

Editor: Eleanor from the PPT showed us your letter. By now, she will have sent you some books and a request form for you to photocopy and make available to prisoners who would like the free books or CD. We can send a poster to help advertise them too. We are always grateful to hear from people like your good self in supportive roles who are willing to let fellow prisoners or prison officers know about our free books, CD and on-going letter writing support. Best of luck to you and the Link at Peterborough!

Letters

...and on the out

It seems a little strange writing to you, now that I'm out of that place. I've kept up my practice and sit every morning and most evenings. I've also joined a yoga class but don't practise as often as I did in the past.

I bought the book *Living Silence* mentioned in the last newsletter. It was helpful and brought up some interesting questions.

When I think back to what I went through it still haunts me. It was a true nightmare in the beginning. I try to live in the moment but sometimes my mind takes me off into the past and future. If I think about prison too much, I can feel those old feelings of frustration and anger, but if I keep practising one day I can be free of the past and the future. This is an insight I have gained from my meditation.

There should be much more opportunity for spiritual growth through effective practice in prisons, as well as offending behaviour courses that don't merely 'bounce across the surface.'

p.s. I'm still clean of drugs and alcohol.



From HMP Coldingley

I'm practising yoga on a daily basis. I start my day at 6.00 with 20 –30 minutes of sun salutations. After doing the yoga-thon last October I can do this comfortably and it sets me up wonderfully for the day ahead. I also do the yoga on your CD every lunch time and I do the asanas from the newsletters in the evenings.

I borrowed the book *Freeing the Spirit through Meditation and Yoga* from a friend on the wing. However he has recently been moved off the wing and I wondered if you would be so kind as to send me a copy if you have some spare. I'd really appreciate it.

Ed: We can definitely send you a book! We send books free to any prisoner or prison staff member who would like to start a daily practice of yoga and meditation.

From HMP Nottingham

I never really intended to read your newsletter or take any notice of it, but it was given to me by my CARAT worker John and it sat in my drawer for ages. Then one day I picked



it up and started to read it and I couldn't put it down. I love hearing all the people's experiences and journeys.

I tried to do some of the yoga and it has helped me get a few more hours sleep! Wow, I've not slept properly for nearly a year now, so thank you for coming into my life. Even the breathing techniques have helped me not to be so stressed about my up coming court sentence! All's good today and I'm kind of happy.

From HMP Isle of Wight



I first contacted you in 2012 when I was at HMP Winchester. I received your CD and book, as well as the newsletter.

Since being at HMP Isle of Wight I have started going to yoga classes as well as by myself in cell. Yoga has helped me with my state of mind and physical well-being. I am calmer and able to sleep easier and I have learnt to relax. Are there any more books or CDs that I could use to help me develop?

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



Meditation Corner

Missing From Action



By Jason

Each week, many people write telling us their favourite part of the day is returning to their cell in the evening. With the door shut, it's possible to drop the image you display to others, and to stop acting and behaving in certain ways. And if sharing a cell, time on your own bunk can be a vital way of stepping back from things. On page 4, we read how a friend organised a retreat in his cell, and how this break from his normal routine helped. This type of retreat is within reach of most people in prison and is a good way of spending time away from others. Over the years I've been on a number of retreats. Some have been in monasteries as part of a group; at other times I've been alone.

You may not find it possible to organise a retreat for yourself, but retreating does not have to mean withdrawing to a quiet, protected setting: the noisiest of

environments can be the perfect place for a retreat. With the attention on the breath we can engage with the activity around us no matter where we are. If someone is talking about themselves endlessly, listening to them may help them feel less burdened. Perhaps another person is cautious about stating their opinion. We might put them at ease and help them feel valued by listening and then telling them our own experience.

All of this involves being in the midst of activity, and not locking ourselves away or trying to escape. It means putting others before ourselves, staying alert and not acting out of habit. Instead of physically removing ourselves, we withdraw from making ourselves the centre of attention.

In prison there is usually plenty of time with the door shut away from others. This can be a valuable time (especially if you watch telly – or practice yoga) but to be amongst the action is equally important.

You might choose to follow the suggestion for doing a retreat in your cell on page 4. Good luck if you do. But don't forget, the ability to pay attention and "retreat" wherever you are is always here in you.





Our free books describe how to sit and walk in meditation, and what to do with your mind while meditating. Check out the Spring 2014 PPT Newsletter, or write

Of course, officers or others may knock on your door, needing information

Try to build in 3 or 4 periods of meditation to your day where you have 90 minutes uninterrupted by meals, tea breaks or having to leave your cell. During this time, sit for 25 minutes, then walking meditation in a line up and



down the cell for five minutes followed by another 25 of sitting, 5 of walking and one more cycle to make 90 minutes. Your concentration will start to become stronger thanks to these long stretches.

At other times, when you don't have 90 minutes free, try for one or two 30 minute cycles of sitting and walking.

Wake up earlier than the rest of the prison, while things are quiet. After splashing some water on your face and cleaning your teeth, spend 10 or 15 minutes with some yoga or simple stretches to get the body going a little bit.

Build in time for a tea break, your meals, and time for a short reading.

Take time, up to 30 minutes if you can, of doing some work. This may be a general clean of your cell, or tackling a corner or area that could use some elbow grease. Or you may be able to find work that is helpful to someone else. This may take some planning before the retreat begins. The point is that we are all dependent on everything else, and doing work for someone else helps us to remember that.

While doing these other things – eating, drinking, using the loo, working, even while going to sleep and waking up – keep attention firmly rooted in your breathing.

While it is good to have as few distractions as possible, some short readings each day that take 15 or 20 minutes can help keep you on track. You may have passages from a religious text you want to read. Or some other inspirational material. Certain sections from *We're All Doing Time* seem to help many people. Whatever you read should point you towards more stillness, and provide hope and encouragement.

Finally, some helpful things to keep in mind:

- Don't have any great expectations of the retreat. Continue throughout to not have any expectations.
- Put in the right amount of energy – not too much and not too little.
- Be patient. Keep things really simple while you're sitting.
- You are not just benefiting yourself on this retreat. Allowing silence to touch you will have benefit far beyond just yourself.
- When you sit, although you may be the only person in your cell, you are never alone.

Stretches for Sitting

Nothing helps you to be stiller and more focussed during seated meditation than yoga postures done with full attention on the breath. It loosens your body and quietsens your mind. You could do this routine twice a day during a retreat - once mid morning, and again in the early evening. Practise these moves with your attention on the breath. Hold each pose for five slow, steady breaths.



Five breaths with the left leg forward, then with the right leg.



Flow between these two movements with the breath five times.



Repeat with arms the other way around.



Repeat on the other side.

“Jail helps me to express the monastic life.”

From HMP Barlinnie



Lightening my Load

Mike Smith

Mike tells us about his experiences of leaving prison and following the Twelve Step Program through Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. If you would like more information on this way of quitting drinking or drugs, talk to your CARATS or healthcare team.

March 2013 – I was released three weeks ago and chose to go straight into treatment (rehab). It took the best part of two weeks to feel comfortable. I was really uneasy, on edge, like a fish out of water. The sound of a car alarm, identical to the general alarm in jail, would put my teeth on edge and the all too familiar fear would flood back in. I'm so glad for this chance of rehab as that fear is what I relapse on, fear of normality, the uphill struggle for housing, benefits, work, clothing and feeding myself and the knowledge that in jail none of the above are any cause for concern.

I need to break this pitiless cycle of addiction, criminality and prison and now have the strength to face any challenges head on. In my short three weeks I have really been challenged and been made aware of behaviours that were hard to accept. I've faced fears that have been so ingrained that I was oblivious to them. They seemed like unclimbable mountains, but now that I'm over them, they are no more than molehills. This fear kept me from feeling, and I mean truly feeling. It blocked me from crying, expressing myself fully, and it feels so great to now be able to shed a tear in public!

The things I missed while in jail – the beauty of nature, children laughing, the stars at night, and choosing the company I keep – seemed so important then, but what I find most special is the things I did in jail: meditation, yoga and tai chi. They all bring me joy – stars and meditation – but what counts is what's going on inside.

Another amazing thing is the welcoming and generous acceptance I've found in the fellowship and the local Buddhist group. Being accepted on face value was almost overwhelming at first, but totally welcome. It will take a while to get used to.

Recently I actually let go while meditating and wow! What an experience. Totally liberating and freeing. The same



Laying down burdens we have been carrying...

night and the next day I was so full of love, it felt like every drop of love in the universe was coursing through every single molecule of my body. It didn't stay for long and I'm now okay with that. I just enjoyed it while it lasted.

I've met a lot of nice people and am drawn to spiritual people. I'm glad of this chance for a new beginning. It fills me with dread to even imagine setting foot in my home town, to face all my using associates and be reminded of where I came from. In time I'll be strong enough, but for now I'm happy and safe where I am and feel no need to test myself.

Connected and loved

January 2014 – Since I last wrote, I've been on another retreat. Seven days away from what others call reality. There was a lot of friendship building, communication and practice. There's definitely a benefit in meditating around others and the energy of 29 other people with the same purpose and goal is indescribable. For me it was like living in a large family, with an ease and comfortable getting on and getting things done. Food was cooked and eaten together. We all spent time together, went for walks and really got to know each other on a deeper, more personal level.

There was what we call confession, but

not in any Catholic sense. For Twelve Steppers it would be step five, but for anyone else, it is laying out all our dirty secrets and bringing our skeletons out in to daylight. Sometimes this was painful and sometimes embarrassing, but there is growth in that.

By meditating three times a day for a total of four hours or more, my practice has taken off again. On return to 'normality' I could clearly see that my practice had a profound effect on me. Christmas shoppers buzzing about me, clearly obsessed with consumerism, manic in their behaviour. Very disheartening. I suppose that was the only negative thing that came from the retreat, seeing humanity for what it actually is, if you can call that a negative.

Apparently my face opened up during that week, and on reflection my face opening up was the result of my heart and mind opening up, and of me letting a lot more of my past go.

In treatment, it's likened to putting down rocks that we have been carrying around in a rucksack. That week I just stopped carrying the bloody thing!! I may still have a few rocks, but hopefully they will go, eventually.

I have been struggling to work out what has changed in me, and realised that I now feel a part of something that is bigger than me. I feel connected, and I feel loved.



Building Back Up

From HMP Ashfield

The books you sent continue to be beneficial. Until December I was attending yoga classes at the gym as well, with a brilliant teacher. Sadly she has now left the prison, though myself and others continue to request they invite her back.

The benefits of meditation really have been remarkable for me. Before prison I was a very confident individual, an award winning coach and highly driven in all I attempted. By the time I arrived here in Ashfield I was a shell of my former self. Several bad prisons, with all the usual violence and horror, had knocked the confidence and ambition out of me. Through meditation I was able to finally sleep properly – a huge improvement! I began to be able to release all the built up frustration, tension and anger inside – and not let fears of the future get me so down. Above all, it helped me rediscover my love for tai chi. This led me to my current role as gym orderly. I was asked about my past as a coach, my confidence given a much needed boost, and commissioned to teach several classes to both inmates and staff.

Since then as well as tai chi classes for the gym, which are still running successfully, I was asked to teach classes for other groups. This led to me delivering a six-week course as part of a Gym Academy, culminating in a group demonstration in front of a very impressed Governor. After the Academy, I began taking on personal training 'clients' at the gym, and set up a system whereby inmates could benefit from personal training sessions with gym orderlies, without any of the bartering type payments typical in most prisons. The reward for orderlies is practice for their gym instructor qualifications, which I help with now as well. Each week I currently train 14 'clients' at the gym. Though I don't claim to be changing their lives, I hope I'm at least helping them cope better.

There were issues within the gym regarding bullying – all of which have now been fully resolved. This resulted in me being elected the gym's sole representative for the Safer Custody meetings. To truly liaise, I was made a Safer Custody Rep and asked to advise on any health matters. Soon I was teaching tai chi classes weekly for this group, as well as a walking club and delivering in-cell exercises and support for inmates with self harm and/or confidence issues.

I am always happy to offer advice for my fellow inmates, and often go and help with meditation, but have asked to be put on a yoga course before I teach. The Psychology department have even asked Safer Custody to loan me out, to teach tai chi to their offender program groups.

All of this has meant a very hectic schedule and therefore the time flying by! I still have no television in my cell, and am glad: I'd have no time to watch it now anyway. Each morning I meditate and go through the sun salutations in preparation for my action-packed day. Each evening I do the same to unwind and let go of all my worries. I sleep better now, most of the time, than before I was sent to prison! And I honestly believe all of this stems from the meditation, and the inspiration I took from the books you sent – so thank you again.

It hasn't all been plain sailing of course, we all have our demons to deal with, and I do still struggle often. But the improvement is

huge, and is still increasing as I progress with my meditation.

This week is World Depression Week and I'm busy running tai chi and relaxation workshops. I've managed to secure five zafu cushions and have had the carpentry workshop make us ten meditation benches like the ones in your books. The Safer Custody Team also brought me ten new yoga mats as we're getting so many participants.

Looking ahead

I now have all the big lads in the gym and all the wannabe 'hard' guys doing yoga in the hall and on the wings. It's great to see and offers me a great challenge in breaking down barriers and misconceptions. They seem to listen to me although I'm hardly big or muscle bound.

I definitely consider my teaching as a gift for myself more than others. In my former life I gained more benefit from teaching than my students, and learnt more from them than they ever did from me. When I came to prison I was devastated to be losing the opportunity to teach, so it's great that I can still help others in some small way.

The snowball effect yoga and meditation has had on my new life is still rolling on and on. It has resulted in me reassessing my whole future, and even getting a good job offer in Spain once my licence is over. Now I'm looking at setting up some kind

of charity to teach tai chi in prisons

and to ex-offenders, which

is being backed

by several

managers in

here. Still very

early days, and

perhaps it'll all

change direction

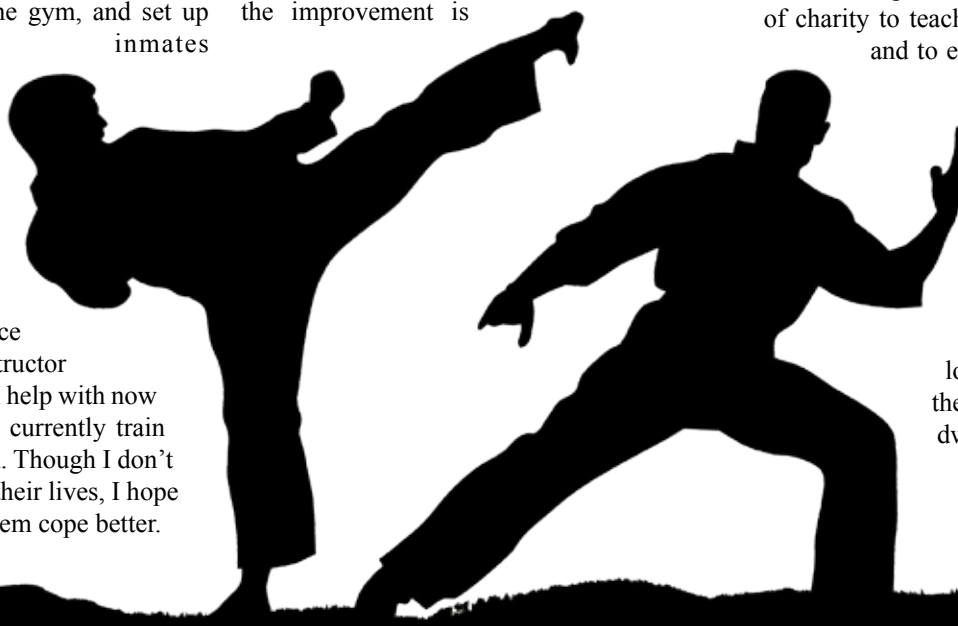
again, but at least

I'm now actually

looking towards

the future rather than

dwelling in the past.



Even It Out



By Brent



The best things are often the simplest. This breathing exercise couldn't be simpler, yet it's a great way of letting go of tension, whether it's the stress of the day, or been storing up for years. If you're practising yoga but you're not yet including any breathing practices, we think you'll like this one. If you haven't done any yoga before, you'll catch on easily. Here's what you do:

- Sit on a chair with your spine upright, away from the back of the chair, so you are self-supporting. You can also sit on the edge of the bed. Both feet are flat on the ground, hands in your lap. If you are used to sitting cross-legged on the floor, you can do that. Keep your eyes open, looking at a spot two feet in front of you.
- Draw attention to your face and as you breathe out, let your face relax.
- Then draw attention to your arms, and, as you breathe out, let them relax.
- Keep going like this, relaxing your torso, then your legs, then your feet.
- Now begin to control the length of the breath. As you breathe in, count to 4 or 5 slowly. If you find this easy, you can count up to 6.
- As you breathe out, count to 4 or 5 again. Keep going like this, making the in-breath the same length as the out-breath.
- If you are more than 6 feet tall, you may wish to make the count longer, say up to 8.
- Keep going for 5 minutes, building up over a week to 20 minutes.
- At the end of each part of the breath, don't rush to start the next part. Instead, just let the next part come in its own time. There may be a pause when you are neither breathing in or out. Notice this and keep your attention in it while it's happening.

If you want an extra element, which will help to release tension even more, you can add the ujai breath as you count. This is also known as the Ocean Breath (see Spring 2011 Newsletter). To do it, slightly narrow the top of your throat so that you make a sound like a gentle ocean wave rolling in.



Make it even and smooth...



**“I am a hole in a flute that
the Christ's breath moves through.
Listen to this music.”**

~ Hafiz, Persian poet (1325 – 1389)

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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