



Newsletter, Autumn 2015

GARDENER'S DELIGHT

This morning coming into work, I noticed some of the flowers on the geranium plants outside our office were dying, going brown. This is their natural way:

sleeping buds turning to flowering colour, which in turn lose life and die off. The plants would struggle to produce any new flowers, all the while the dead ones stay on the plant. So I snipped the dead and dying flowers with some scissors, knowing it would help the plants offer up more beautiful bunches of colour.

So many people in prison say they are being helped to come awake, to flower, and discover new or long covered aspects of themselves and to slough off parts of themselves that they no longer need through yoga, meditation and the silence inside themselves. You can hear from a resident of

Maghaberry Prison in the following pages, who says he's let go of some of the fear caused by shortness of breath from asthma, thanks to yogic breathing. Or another prisoner who has been able to turn down alcohol and drugs in prison while battling with his addiction.

These aspects of ourselves which we can sometimes allow to die – ways of thinking and acting and believing – they may have had their place: we took them up as ways of surviving, defending ourselves against the world. The wonderful thing about meditation and yoga is the freedom to simply breathe, concentrating on the breath in yoga positions and movements, including a seated meditation posture. If you've tried meditation, you'll know there is of course a strong pull towards old habits of mind. But sustaining a pose, or remaining in meditation for the

time you have set yourself, bringing attention back to the breath, you become aware of these habits of mind. You realise that while you've been sitting there, you haven't been responding to them

as much. You don't have to try to make them go away, or think positive thoughts. Simply keeping attention on your breathing, you feel the habits of mind begin to lose their power, to die off.

Sustain the attention long enough, and the mind can become so sharp and clear that another kind of dying is allowed: a dying of your small self and allowing your True Self to come more fully forward. This is what yoga and meditation are for.

This route of self discovery is not easy. It's a question of being in it for the long haul, if not our whole lives. But patience and endurance to sit through what's

going on in your heart and mind help. Equally important are sharing and encouragement from friends who are also committed to this most natural kind of pruning.



Holding what's needed, letting go of what's not, HMP Greenock



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

“Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back into the slow circles of nature, is a help.”

~ May Sarton, poet, 1912 - 1995



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 a prisoner HMP Lewes

Although the yoga class I attended here was excellent, my spinal injury (crushed discs in the lower spine) means that the postures cause me quite a bit of pain. Having said that, I do some gentle stretching in my cell and find I am okay with it.

What I am most pleased with, however, is the meditation. I do this sitting cross legged on my bunk (in a half lotus) and look at the wall while concentrating on my breath.

For my first session, I thought I would try sitting for maybe 15 minutes, as my back tends to hurt so I can't sit for very long. So I sat, gazed at the wall, breathed slowly and deeply, letting my eyes go out of focus and my mind go blank. I was surprised to look at my watch, which I did because my back wasn't hurting yet, and see that rather than having sat there for five or ten minutes, I'd been there for 35!

Having got over the shock I tried the corpse position for another ten minutes, and felt completely refreshed: more than I do after a night's sleep!

I have now been meditating every day since, and have found the change marvellous. I am no longer angry with everybody, nor am I worried about being in here. I find I am completely at peace, not just with being in prison, or the other inmates, but most importantly I am at peace with myself, something I now realise I have never been before.

I have lost my ever-present sarcasm, which is no small feat. Before, I only spoke to a couple (literally) of people, one of whom was my cell-mate, the other a listener. After I started meditating, instead of just walking by, people would nod and

say hello, or how are you, and I actually answered them. There must now be about 20 or 30 people I speak to on the wing, and another 15 or 20 that I say hello to if we pass.

Although my sentence is only 16 months, meditation has completely changed my life, and my outlook on it.

From a prisoner HMP Dovegate



Thank you for your book *Freeing the Spirit through Meditation and Yoga*.

The meditation has helped me overcome demons which plagued my mind for the last few months. The counsellors, wing officer and officers from around the jail have noticed a big change in me.

From a prisoner HMP Guy's Marsh



This is not my first violent offence or my first custodial sentence but hopefully it's my last. I have always found it hard to get my point across verbally. I am now 29 years of age and have had to change a few of my morals in life. They have not been successful, which is why I am in here. I used to feel that I could get support for my behaviour from the regime, but this is not the case. I have suffered with depression which I am on medication for, when I have found everyday life in jail hard. It has got harder with no routine due to cutbacks. I used to use the gym as a coping mechanism for my frustration but no longer, as it is cancelled more often than not due to staff shortages. I have found myself so frustrated that I've self harmed.

There is a lack of understanding for mental health in prisons. They have sent

Prisoners'

me to the doctors for anti-depressants, but I feel that when I am doing physical activities and keeping myself occupied it helps me a great deal. There is hardly any help even when you reach out and ask for it. I know I have done wrong and am being punished but we are all humans and should be treated with common decency, not like animals.

I was fortunate to have another prisoner come up to me and speak about this. He said he deals with his frustrations by going to yoga class once a week. I wasn't too sure if it was for me or not but I thought I'd give it a go as a coping mechanism for my impulsive behaviour and stress relief.

I attended my first yoga class about a month ago. I was unsure at first but I went with the flow and thoroughly enjoyed it. The relaxation part was especially beneficial to me as I felt just for that hour that I was not in prison. The teacher Sally treats you as a human being and the class is always full with like-minded people. I now look forward to yoga class every Friday. I think because of this class I am more patient with the regime and staff. I feel I have benefited from this one hour a week greatly and many others think the same. I appreciate the yoga teacher giving the time and the donations that pay for the class and improve my life. I know it is only small things, but small things matter.

From a prisoner Maghaberry Prison



Your card and book arrived while I was out in hospital for eight days. About ten years ago

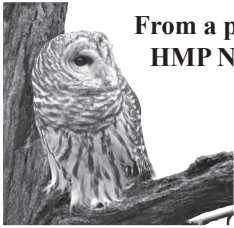


HMP Greenock

"At peace with being in prison, with other inmates and with myself."



I was diagnosed with seasonal asthma and about two weeks ago, I was finding it very hard to breathe. Luckily I was already doing the breathing exercises you had sent me. I really thought it was a life saver by keeping me calm and helping deal with the shortage of breath, so thank you. I'm really getting into the breathing now as that attack would have scared the shit out of me if not for the yoga.



From a prisoner HMP Nottingham

May 2015

I'm in prison for the first time, aged 39, and it's all been a bit of a shock. A huge culture change for me! However, I discovered your Sunday yoga show on my first weekend inside. I was sceptical beforehand as I'm a proud man who had never been through a yoga session. However, I thought what's the worst that can happen?

I was in a cell on my own and I thought I would give it a bash. I'm so pleased that I did! It is a great, great help and I really look forward to the weekly early morning session. Now I take part in the 6 p.m. session as well. It's really helping me to relax in my 'ground floor apartment'.

I have recommended your sessions to numerous other people in my block and have many more converts now.

July 2015

I've used your CD, newsletter and printed exercises every day, with fantastic results. I'm so pleased I made the brave move to open my mind and allow yoga into my incarcerated world. I look forward to expanding my knowledge and use of all aspects of your treasures in my outside world.

My wife and children are also very much looking forward to their first introductions to the benefits of the exercises and meditation. With only a few days before my release date, I wanted to say thank you for walking with me through my 'establishment journey'. I'll keep you updated on my progress after the end of this month.

From a prisoner HMP Wormwood Scrubs



A week ago I started doing yoga. As a sceptical, narrow minded ex-addict

Wishful Thinking



By Jason

Right now, how do you feel about **prison**? You may feel it can be both unpredictable and boring, secure yet dangerous; an opportunity to change... or even just a waste of time.

Perhaps you have read how meditation enables us to rise above prison life and no longer worry about such things. With clear minds free from thoughts, anxiety or worry, perhaps it is possible to wipe away memories of how we came to be in prison. Wishful thinking!

So far, all this is about meditation - and this is not how it works. It must be practised and not just thought about. Walking, eating or sleeping are all activities that cannot happen until we actually do them - and so it is with meditation.

Give it a go right now. As you read this article, sit upright and lift the chest. Be perfectly still, and start to notice your breathing. You may prefer to keep your eyes relaxed and open, so others don't notice anything strange. Immediately you may start to notice thoughts coming and going. There is a good chance you will try to think - but instead of getting involved, simply return to your breathing.

After this sentence, look down, away from the page and just be here for several minutes, following your breath. Go ahead and do that now.

While you were following your breath just now, were there thoughts coming and going? Did you notice that you could bring your attention back to your breathing? That's the whole idea. No need to worry about thoughts being there. Just keep bringing your mind back to the breath.

Sometimes people are keen to measure their progress. Don't bother - this is just the mind trying to find a solution. This morning dozens of thoughts were trying to grab my attention during meditation, but just like being in a room with noisy people, it's possible to simply not be involved in the chatter. If you can stay quiet and keep focussed, with practice the mind can actually be peaceful even whilst thinking.

Gradually you will accept that the mind likes to think, and this is a perfectly acceptable activity - even during meditation. Thank goodness there is always the choice not to become involved.



and alcoholic I've always dismissed meditation, but I believe that I am discovering something unique, powerful and special. I have been searching to get better spiritually connected and this is the way forward. I suffer from bad anxiety and depression. Yoga can help me relax and I get very focussed afterwards with a deep sense of calm.

I find the yoga similar to shiatsu: sometimes it's very noticeable and others it's more subtle. I am hungry to learn more. I might well be rushing it but I don't feel the need to count the breath very often and background noise can just be there rather than affecting me. For me this is huge growth in a very short space of time.

I did a rehab about three years ago and it really opened my mind a lot. I am so glad I've started this journey.

I'm supple in some ways but a fair bit tight around the groin muscles - when I

do the cobbler's pose I can get a fair bit sore on the right side when I'm finished and I can struggle to come out of the pose. But I'm learning. I want to know more ways of interconnecting the poses so it makes up a whole - like sun salutation for example. I will take it easy on the muscles that hurt and stretch properly to avoid injury.

If an instruction says, "Do at least 20 breaths on this pose," I will just sit or lie there and lose count and not even think about anything. This is great as I have a head that chatters absolute nonsense even when it's asleep. This is so refreshing.

Check out the yoga and meditation column each month in Inside Time and tune into our radio programme 3 times a week on National Prison Radio.

Clarity of Mind

By Shaun Attwood

Shaun Attwood is a former stockbroker and drug dealer, who served five years in prison in the United States. He now tours schools and prisons, speaking about his experiences. He has written four books about his time in jail.



In this extract from his fourth book, Lessons from a Drug Lord, Shaun tells what happened after his sister sent him a yoga book, hoping it could help him.

Over several weeks, the book gathers dust. In her letters, my sister keeps asking if I've tried yoga. My guilt at not having done so grows. If I try the exercises one time and don't like them I can at least tell her I gave yoga a go. I wait until my cellmates are downstairs and retrieve the book. On the grimy cement floor between the doorway and a toilet reeking of sewage, there's just enough space to do yoga. I try several basic postures to the best of my ability, bending this way and that and rotating my spine, worried that I'm going to pull a muscle in my stiff body. Holding the positions for up to one minute is harder than it looks in the book. Sweating in forward bend, I strain to touch my toes, but my fingers refuse to go any further than my shins.

At the end, thankful the routine is over and no one saw me doing it, I lie on my back in corpse pose and close my eyes. For the first time in jail, I feel all of the anxiety over my safety, the conditions and the uncertainties surrounding my case melt away. In particular, my shoulders are so relaxed that all of the tension concentrated in that area and the back of my neck feels as if it's oozing out. I'm breathing slower and the constant worries have emptied from my mind. It feels so good, I stay there longer than the few minutes the book recommends, tuned into my heartbeat and out of the mayhem in the day room just a few feet away. How's it possible to feel this good without drugs? After yoga, I remain relaxed for a few hours until the worries and anxieties resume.

Being a sucker for things that feel great and craving more of the yoga fix, I abandon my inhibitions and start doing it daily. Fortunately, my cellmates

spend most of their time in the day room watching TV or gambling at cards. Over the months, I advance to more difficult postures. At the end of each routine, I try to spend a few minutes meditating, but meditation doesn't make much sense. The book instructs me to sit cross-legged and to try and halt the flow of my thoughts, but every time the things in my head slow down, a thought intrudes and my brain speeds up again. I'm clueless about meditation, but the physical side of yoga is working so well for me, I resolve to persist with the mental.

Over several months, I make little progress with meditation. Having lived such a fast-paced life, one of the hardest parts for me is having the patience to sit for longer than a few minutes. Just when I'm managing to still my brain, a thought pops up about something pressing - I need to tell my lawyer this, I need to write to that person... - and before I know it my body is springing off the floor to handle what's on my mind. To keep such thoughts at bay, I pay attention to my breath by saying to myself in, out, in, out... After a few minutes of using this technique, I stop monitoring my breath, and my mind goes quiet for a little bit at first, increasing over time.

Deep relaxation

At first, I'm intimidated by the prospect of calming my mind for more than 10 minutes. I start out concentrating on my breathing, counting my breaths when I have to. Eventually, the thoughts stop. Every now and then a thought intrudes, but I refocus on my breathing. Thirty minutes in, I'm struggling to ignore aches and pains and pins and needles. I stop, but try again the next day. Over time, I learn to alternate crossed-leg positions to ease my discomfort. After an hour of meditating one night, my thoughts are barely there. I enter a state of deep relaxation as if all that exists is my breath, pulse and the movement of energy through my body. Sensing areas of tension within my face, I concentrate on allowing those subtle muscles to relax. My previously tense fingers open up like flowers blooming. I want to meditate forever, but my cellmate using the toilet snaps me out of it. After meditating for a few hours every night for two weeks, I feel less stressed. My clarity of mind returns.

Graciously Grounded in the Present

(serenely and softly settled)



Many it seems

Want to move forward

But I

In Joy,

Move Backwards,

Beyond the word(s),

(who needs em anyway)

Moving back into

The hue

Of the origin,

The sacred source,

The very first

Not forced

Force

Called love...

Which does not move
backward(s)

Or forward(s)

But is inward;

Deep inside,

Where

Fair

Care

Does abide.

Does not weep or wail

But has care for all

Who ail,

Which in its dharmic dignity it
does sail

Without fail.

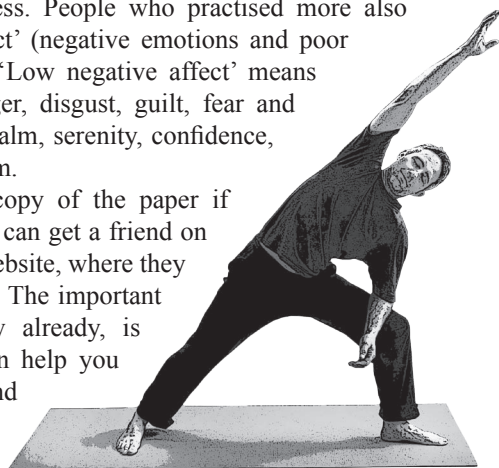
By Joe Staunton © 2015
"A Nirvanic Nomad"

Oxford University Research on Prison Yoga and Meditation: Put More in, Get More out!

Some of you helped out a few years ago when researchers worked with the Prison Phoenix Trust to measure the effects of going regularly to a prison yoga class. Oxford University published a paper afterwards showing that yoga, including silent meditation, improves wellbeing, mental health and ability to override impulse among people in prison. Thanks for your help in getting those facts published!

This June, they published another paper, using the original interviews and tests, but taking a different angle. The new paper is called 'Preliminary Evidence That Yoga Practice Progressively Improves Mood and Decreases Stress in a Sample of UK Prisoners.' It's in the peer-reviewed journal, *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. It says that prisoners who attended more yoga classes and practised five times or more each week on their own between classes, had significantly greater decreases in stress. People who practised more also saw their 'negative affect' (negative emotions and poor self-concept) go down. 'Low negative affect' means you experience less anger, disgust, guilt, fear and nervousness, and more calm, serenity, confidence, activeness and enthusiasm.

We can send you a copy of the paper if you're interested, or you can get a friend on the outside to visit our website, where they can download it for you. The important thing, which you know already, is that yoga and meditation help you manage emotions, and the more you put in, the more you get out!



Christmas Cards

Our friend Reg Zenshen at HMP Woodhill has designed this year's Christmas card (144 x 103mm). The inside message is from the poet John O'Donohue - "Now is the time to free the heart / Let all intentions and worry stop / Free the joy inside the self / Awaken to the wonder of your life." You can see it in colour on our website. To order, send the form to the right with payment to: The PPT, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF. If your prison is sending payment for you, you still need to send us the form.



New CD to Use in Your Cell

Many people who say they've been helped by our first CD, *Clearing the Head, Relaxing the Body*, have asked if we had another one, to help them keep practising. We've been working on that, and now, it's ready! *Freedom Inside* is free for people living (or working) in prison or who've served a sentence (£10 for other people on the outside). It's a double CD, and uses material from our weekly yoga and meditation show on National Prison Radio. Both complete sessions have an introduction from former prisoner and PPT Patron Erwin James, yoga postures and movements, relaxation and meditation. And there's a bonus asana (postures and movements) track.

Our first CD is the best one to start with and we can send it to you. If you have that already and want the new CD, drop us a line.

Christmas Card Order Form

- Please send me _____ packs of cards at £5 per pack of 10
- I enclose a cheque payable to the Prison Phoenix Trust for £ _____

Name _____

Prison number (if in custody) _____

Address _____

Postcode _____

☐ I have requested that my prison send you payment

It's Hip to Be Square



Do you train hard in the gym and want to improve your performance? Perhaps you're a smoker or have recently given up? Maybe you have asthma or hayfever or are recovering from a cold? Training your breath may help.

The breathing exercises here can reduce feelings of tightness by removing tension and calming your mind. Over time they will also improve your breath capacity by extending the length and depth of each in breath and out breath. Being 'square' can help develop your general fitness levels; you may notice a difference in the gym or on the pitch.

While doing this, be patient and listen to your body. Don't over exert or force your breathing. Practise for five minutes every day and you'll soon feel the difference.

Sit comfortably in a position that you can maintain for five to eight minutes. Try cross legged or kneeling, sit on a chair, or the edge of your bed. Keep the spine upright and the shoulders back, check that your head and neck stay relaxed. You could use the sound of a ticking clock as a regular beat or just count in your head. It takes roughly a second to say "one elephant" in your mind.

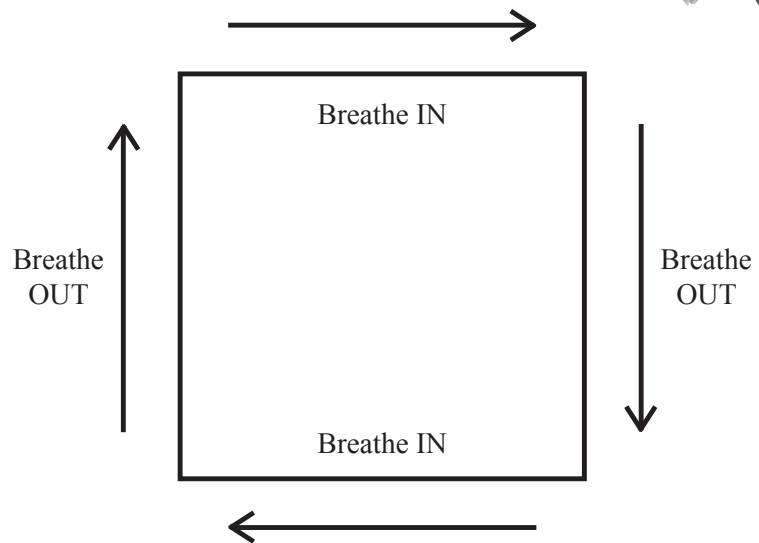
Checking In - Breath awareness with counting

Breath awareness helps you notice where you're at today, right now.

- Breathe in through the nose and sigh out through the mouth three times to relax the jaw, throat and upper body. Sit comfortably upright.
- Now breathe in gently through the nose, counting, until the lungs feel full but not over inflated.
- Breathe out through the nose and count the release of the breath. Don't push or force it out.
- You will notice a natural pause between each part of the breath.

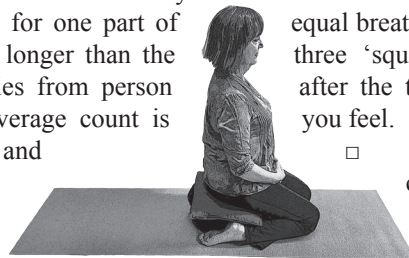


By Victoria



Allow this pause time to happen but don't hold it.

- Repeat, breathing and counting a few times so that you have a general idea of your natural breath count today. It's quite normal for one part of the breath to be longer than the other and it varies from person to person. An average count is between three and six.
- Use the lower number of this 'checking in' breath count as a starting point for the next exercise.



Samavritti - Equalising square breath

- Begin to breathe in and out using the same count and pace to equalise each part of the breath. If the shortest part of your breath in the last exercise was a count of four, breathe in for the count of four and breathe out for the count of four this time.
- Visualise your next in-breath as one side of a square and the following

out-breath as the second side. Your second in-breath is the next side of the square and the following out-breath completes the shape.

- Breathing in and out, using your equal breath count six times to make three 'squares'. Take a short rest after the third square. Notice how you feel.

- Was it comfortable and calm? Was it a little fast or slow? If it was too slow then make the count shorter by one. If it

felt too rushed or you feel a bit light headed, add one more to your count, breathing in and out for five beats each time. Don't add more than one or two beats to your original count as this will be too much exertion in one session.

- Try this again for six complete breaths, or three 'squares'.
- Have another short rest to notice how you feel.
- Repeat once more so that you do three sets of six breaths or three 'squares'.
- Finish with three sighing breaths and have a stretch. You may feel like you want to sit still in meditation now, without counting, just being aware of your natural breath for five minutes.
- Practise the same breath count for a couple of weeks before adding to the count so that you gradually improve. You can take the breath count to a maximum of eight seconds if you practise regularly and increase gradually.

"Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts."

~ Thích Nhất Hạnh, b. 1926, Buddhist monk, teacher and peace activist

This Beautiful Peace

Meditation and yoga can be taken up by people of all belief systems, as well as those who don't follow one. We often hear from friends inside who tell us they work a daily practice into their faiths, or those of others around them. Here, we hear from two prisoners who have done this.

From a prisoner HMP Birmingham

I am totally new to yoga, however have learned many of its stretching exercises and breathing techniques. I hope to incorporate and include yoga postures alongside my five daily prayers. During prayers I attain peace and during yoga, patience and confidence. I aim to practise one hour yoga every morning after or before the fajar (morning/dawn) prayer and one hour yoga after or before the Isha (dusk) prayer and to meditate afterwards.

The book *We're All Doing Time* is the ultimate survival manual for prisoners and inmates alike. I am to be released in February 2016 and intend to further pursue and include yoga in my everyday life to maintain confidence, courage, tolerance, patience and peace - all the

disciplines that can be gained via yoga and meditation. I can manage three to five breaths per asana (posture) and love the sun salutation.

I suffer from mental health problems, and yoga and my prayers help me tackle my illness.

From a prisoner Bombat Phiset Prison, Thailand

They keep on bringing in harder rules and just a couple of weeks ago, we had to throw away all our belongings like clothes, books and anything that don't fit in a small locker. People who have been here for some time and made themselves a routine have lost everything and are starting from scratch.

As Thailand is ruled by the military they want to harden the prisoner life so people don't come back to prison. The hard way isn't going to work. Better education and teaching other life skills might change people's attitudes.

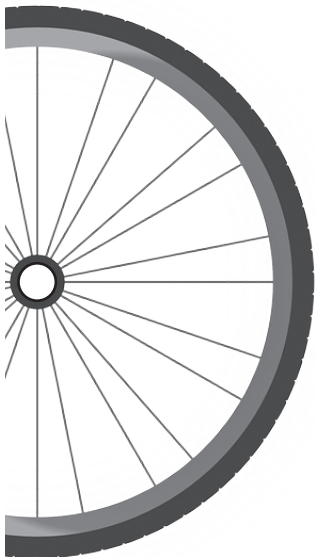
My practice is still good. I wake up at 5 am and do yoga until 5.40 am. Then there is a prayer over the speakers through the jail, a Buddhist prayer that goes for half an hour. During that time I do pranayama

and meditate.

It is not easy as you say with so many people because there is

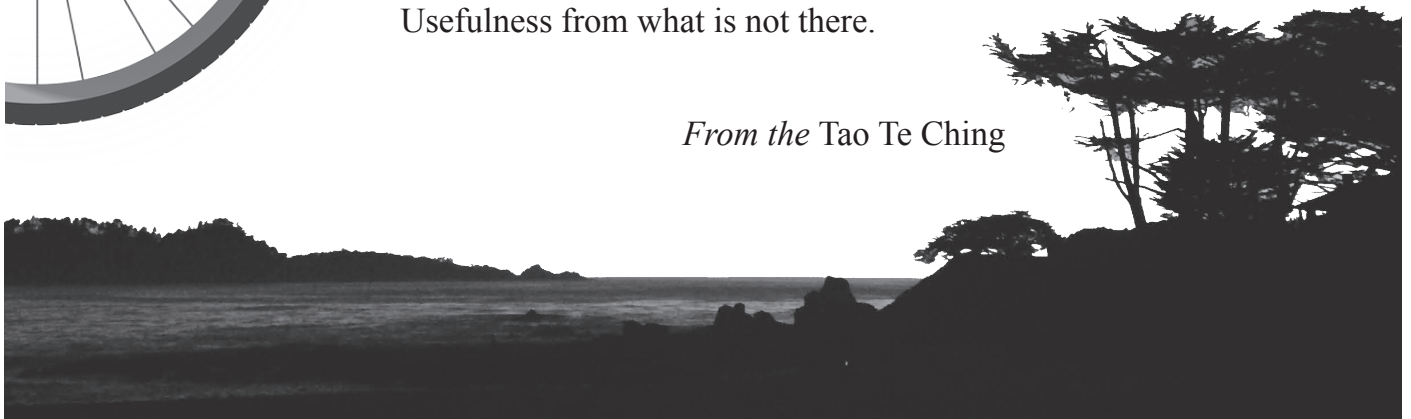
always somebody going to toilet or looking for cigarettes. It still can disturb me but I take it much easier than a year ago. And sometimes I catch a moment during meditation that takes me away and fills my soul with peace. Even if it's only a few seconds out of a 30 minute meditation it charges me up and I feel this love surrounding me the whole morning. I welcome the day so much better now and have decided that from next week, I will stop medication.

Since I have signed the paperwork for my transfer to Germany, I've been missing home more than before and often it goes through my mind. I wish I were already in Germany where I have my own cell and I can practise whenever I want. I will be able to lift up for longer periods of time and find this beautiful peace I'm longing for.



Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the centre hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.

From the Tao Te Ching





Back in Focus



By Sally

We all have days where life seems to be spinning out of control, when we are stressed and distracted, not working at our best. This routine can help you get back on track.

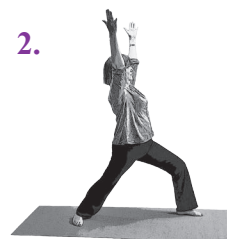
As you move through these poses, keep bringing your attention back to the breath. Breathe slowly, calmly, and with the knowledge that you can find calm focus whenever you need to.

1.



5 slow breaths

2.



5 slow breaths
each side

3.



5 slow breaths
each side

4.



5 slow breaths
each side

5.



5 slow breaths

6.



5 slow breaths

7.



5 slow breaths
each side

8.



5 slow breaths

9.



5 slow breaths

10.



5 slow breaths

11.



5 slow breaths

12.



Sit upright, on a pillow or a couple of books if you have them. Relax everything, and begin counting the breath silently - in, 1, out, 2, in, 3, out, 4... Up to ten then start again from one. If you lose count don't worry, just start again from one. Do this for 5 minutes, or longer.

“The focus is what is right before you -
to give it your best. It sows the seeds of tomorrow.”

~ Kiran Bedi, Indian politician, social activist, retired police officer and PPT patron



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.

Prison Phoenix Trust Newsletter
PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF
registered charity no. 327907

