



Newsletter, Spring 2015

LEAP OF FAITH

One day a few years ago, when I was with some friends, someone passed around a plate of fried anchovies. This was in Thailand, where these tiny fish are common food. I popped a handful in my mouth: tasty! They invited me to have some more. Only after I finished that second helping did someone tell me that what I'd actually eaten were fried termites, a seasonal delicacy for Thais.

Some of you say that you discovered yoga and meditation in a similar, almost accidental way. You never thought it was for you. One student at HMYOI Feltham once described what he thought yoga was before trying it, saying, "It's all ballerinas and rabbit food". But something or someone encouraged you to put aside your ideas, and you were brave or curious enough to just give it a go. And you were blown away by the difference it made to your body and your mind.

We hear this again and again from prison. What brings many people to try it is hearing good things about how it helps you get to grips with the exhausting hamster-on-his-wheel that is your own mind: your own thinking and yo-yo feelings. Sometimes it seems like life is nothing but chaos, and you just want the wheel to stop, or at least slow down a little.

So you take a leap of faith, and go to a yoga class, or get that guy from D-wing who's always doing yoga to show you a few moves. You ask your cell mate why he meditates, and you start sitting together in silence.

And once you get into it, there's another leap of faith to take. Because even though you may have worked the body – stretched it, strengthened it, relaxed it – when it comes to sit in meditation, your mind will still want to control, worry, figure things out, remember stuff. It's what our minds love to do. They're good at it. So the next leap of faith involves trusting that it's helpful, and very possible for you, to let all that thinking just be, in fact, to let all your ideas be. And keep your energy and attention instead just on the breathing for a few minutes. (Has all the thinking ever really brought you any freedom or peace anyway?)

Before long, you start to feel that underneath all that controlling and figuring

things out is a part of you that is deep and true, but difficult to describe. You find this deeper part of life more easily, each time you sit. You find that it's affecting your whole life, even when you are not meditating. And you wonder how you ever got by without sitting in silence.



Photo by Laura Poortenga

Preparing for lift off at Limerick Prison



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



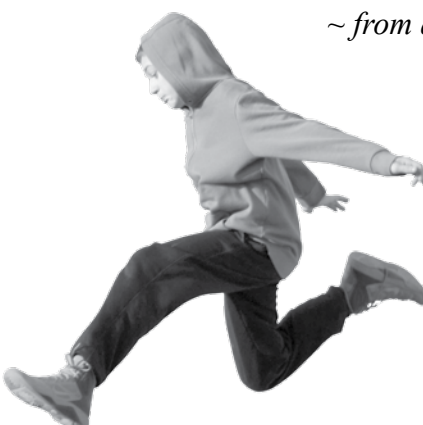
“Prisons are built in our hearts and minds. It is only there that we can find the freedom we all deserve.”

~ from a prisoner at HMP Glenochil



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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Feel like writing? We're happy to help in any way we can with your yoga and meditation.

From HMP Frankland

There was a big meeting in the chapel after I completed my training as a mentor for the Drug and Alcohol Recovery Team. There were staff of all ranks, DART co-ordinators and their directors from outside. I was to give a speech. I was relaxing, controlling my breathing just before I went to the chapel. Your letter came through the door minutes before I went to the chapel. I read it then went back into meditation.

At the chapel I kept control of my breath. I gave the speech relaxed and confident. I will be helping men with their drug and alcohol problems. I will also be co-facilitating groups with staff.

You're right that trying to fight our emotions causes immense stress and anger. When you have a background like mine, it's sometimes hard to let it go. I go back to my cell and write the person a letter. I let all my emotions out – stress, anger, revenge, hate. I then lie down, control my breath and go into meditation. When I have calmed down I read my letter, reflect on the words and think of the trouble it would cause if sent. Then I rip it up and flush it down the loo.



From HMP Greenock

Your book and CD is a great help. I suffer with

mental illness, all kinds of diagnosis, and I'm at a turning point in my life. I'm a life sentence prisoner and have served almost twelve and a half years. I was ready to be tested in the community, but I made a stupid mistake and got downgraded for three months. I got a yellow card.

Now, I face each day head first. From being lazy, I'm up at six in the morning doing my yoga and stretches. I've started feeling results, which has filled me with energy. I try to go to the gym twice a day – at 8:30 am, and then again if they'll let me. I used to be a heavy smoker, and I've been off them for eight weeks.

Yoga has given me a rush of energy, and tools to tackle any negativity. I feel ready for anything in front of me.

From HMP Dovegate

Thank you for writing to me and sending me the *Clearing the Head, Relaxing the Body* CD and *Freeing the Spirit through Meditation and Yoga* book. I've never really tried anything like yoga or meditation before but with the help of the stuff you sent me, I've noticed a bit of a change in my mood and it's really starting to have a positive effect.

Being in prison is difficult. I'm also on a therapeutic community which can be even more stressful at times. I've tried to set up a routine: at the



Prisoners'

moment at 10 pm and 6 am I do 10-15 minutes of yoga (from one of your newsletters) and about 10-20 minutes of sitting in meditation. It's early days and I struggle with my own thoughts: usually I have my TV or music to distract me. I do a lot of talking in therapy but then I sit on my own in my cell and it's really hard. But it's getting easier. I'm sleeping much better now; I am also less stressed and less depressed. I feel a bit more comfortable with myself.

From Guernsey Prison



I meditate for 30 minutes daily. Since the last time I wrote to you I have been sentenced to four and a half years for a cannabis offence. I have been able to take this on the chin and not let it get me down. I don't think that would have been possible if not for meditation.

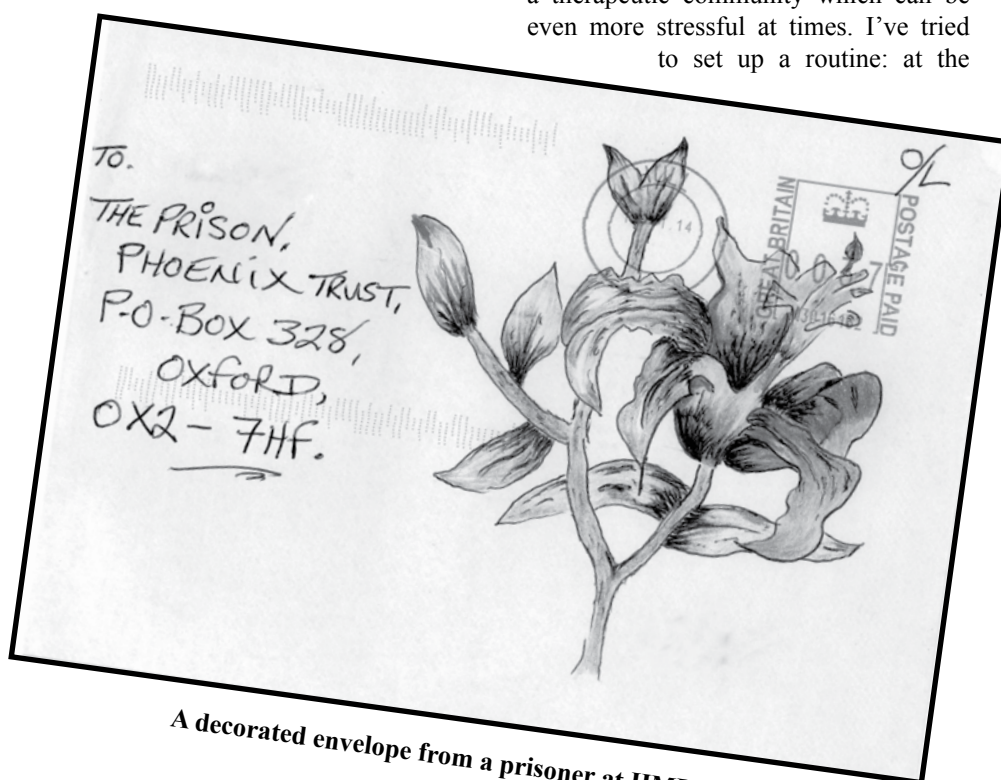
From HMP Coldingley

We often look at prison as a totally meaningless and negative experience. As we pass through the system we sometimes forget to give praise and thanks to the positive people who've helped us.

Firstly I would like to thank the monk, Khemadhammo, from the Buddhist chaplaincy for his bi-weekly visits. I found him inspirational. His words were kind, direct and put life into its correct perspective. He affirmed that we must try and achieve loving-kindness, not only for all around us but also for ourselves – and even more so in times of hardship.

Secondly, we have been lucky to have a fellow prisoner become a qualified yoga teacher. He managed to persuade staff to have yoga as part of the daily curriculum in the prison. He would move from wing to wing taking yoga classes each day. These opportunities had a profound effect on the inmates who attended them. Over the two year period this prisoner helped hundreds of inmates over thousands of hours.

Many inmates started investing in mats for self-practice and started helping others; some even pursuing the path to



A decorated envelope from a prisoner at HMP Hull

Letters

teach for themselves. It is a pity these events are not formally documented, as having a full-time yoga teacher had a positive effect for prisoners and staff alike. The set up achieved by this prisoner should be encouraged throughout the system.

Ed: We've been in touch with the teacher you mention since 2008 and have documented his progress. It's great to hear how much you've been helped by him!



From HMP/YOI Moorland

As a committed Christian for over 50 years, I have long been aware of the power of prayer. However, this spiritual experience has been greatly enhanced since I came into prison six months ago and strengthened by my recent involvement in yoga and in particular the breathing activities. Without doubt,



the basic exercise routines are helping me to cope. I'm sure it is no coincidence that even within the oppressive structure of a prison regime, I've been increasingly aware of an encouraging peace within my meditations.

From HMP Isle of Wight

For the past three months I have been practising yoga exercises every morning, incorporating the exercises suggested in the last issue of your newsletter, with those practised at the prison's fortnightly sessions. I must say the benefits to me have been encouraging indeed. When I came into prison I had suffered with very bad hay fever and sinus problems, as well as suffering from back ache every morning. Since my daily morning routine of breathing and physical exercises, both these problems have cleared up. Yes, I am a convert.

I have found the book *Freeing the Spirit* plus your CD an excellent aid. Would you please send *Becoming Free through*



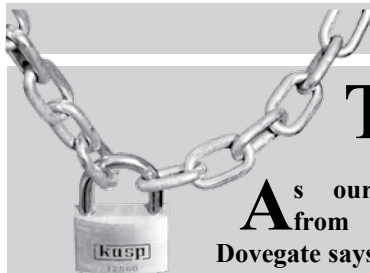
Meditation and Yoga and We're All Doing Time?
Thank you.

Another positive

I have found is more suppleness of the joints. Although I was a keen cyclist on the outside and walked a lot, once I came into prison my joints and muscles became neglected, leading to stiffness and tiredness. By practising yoga exercises every morning, I have felt my suppleness return and I feel physically less tired. At 62 years of age that can't be bad. I also try to have a meditation session most evenings, even if only for a little while. I feel a little calmer and slightly less anxious, though I've still got some way to go.

Check out our yoga and meditation column each month in Inside Time!

Meditation Corner



The Ultimate Strength

As our friend from HMP

Dovegate says on page 2, prison is a tough place to be. From the

strength of the buildings, to the size of some of the people, it's easy to feel you too have to become like an unstormable castle. You may feel like no one, neither prisoners nor staff, really show their true feelings, and everyone is just trying to get through each day with the minimum of trouble and intimidation.

So strength is highly valued. That's why people work for huge muscles at the gym. You don't want others stepping over the line. You've got to be "hard, but fair." No one wants to be easy pickings on the wings.

There is a way of being strong and resilient without attracting trouble from others. Surprisingly this is not dependent on being big, loud and threatening, and is within reach of anyone. The key is developing an inner strength that can tolerate all situations: being able to bend and yield, but swiftly spring back into



By Jason

shape again. To absorb the shit from others and not point the finger of blame. All this is in reach of the quietest, puniest of people (I'm in this category) or the heaviest bruiser.

When the body is perfectly still, and not distracted by television, talking, or any other activity, we cannot fail to notice our busy minds. Meditation and yoga are about noticing this activity and then focussing our attention, our whole being, upon the breath. Gradually this focus builds strength

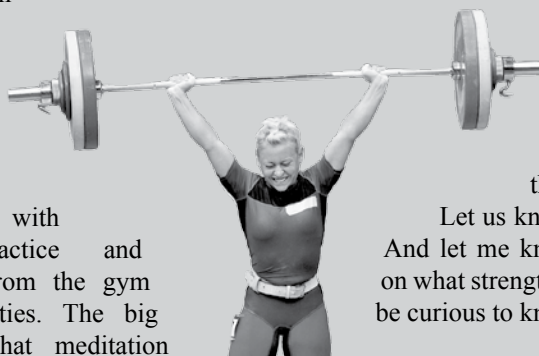
and resilience as we become more adept at concentrating our energy. You may be familiar with repetition, practice and concentration from the gym or other activities. The big difference is that meditation

and yoga work inwardly, and they affect our entire being, not just our bodies. We become less intimidated by others; and because of this, less vulnerable. We are less likely to complain, and more able to weather storms without hiding. And because we have nothing to prove, we keep away from trouble and get on with the things that actually matter to us.

Sometimes meditation and yoga are criticised for excluding others and being self-centred. But this is never true – less trouble, more resilience and a focussed temperament are what the world really needs. You can see from the letters on

these pages that prison is the perfect place to develop these skills and put them into practice.

Let us know if we can help. And let me know your thoughts on what strength really means. I'd be curious to know.



Everyday Yoga

The best way to practise yoga is to do it every day. It doesn't have to be a complicated routine, or take very long, but it is good to get into the daily habit of doing something good for yourself.

Here is a basic routine to get you started. It covers poses that work on your strength and flexibility, calm you down, focus you and reduce aches and pains. If you do this every day for a week you may well see a big difference in how you feel – both in your body and your mind.

As you practise, focus on your breathing and keep your breaths long and slow. Don't rush through the poses, but take the time to enjoy them.

You can adapt this routine to what you need on any given day – if you are feeling strong, maybe you will hold the standing postures for twice as long. If your back is tight, you may want to spend more time on the first three postures, or any that make you feel freer. Whatever you need from your practice, remember to treat yourself with kindness. Never do anything that hurts, and know that whatever your body can do today is just fine. You are perfect exactly as you are.



By Lucy

1.



Breathe in

2.



Breathe out

Flow back and forth between these two poses, slowly and in time with your breathing. Do each pose 10 times.

3.



5 slow breaths

4.



5 slow breaths

5.



5 slow breaths

6.



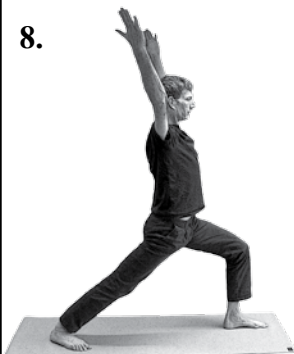
5 slow breaths

7.



5 slow breaths each side. If your hands can't reach each other, use your sock to bridge the gap.

8.



5 slow breaths

9.



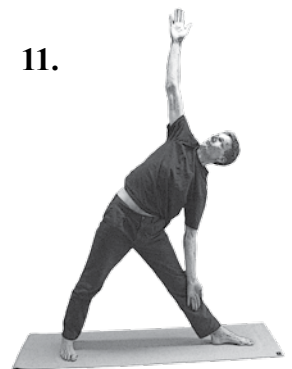
5 slow breaths

10.



5 slow breaths

11.



5 slow breaths

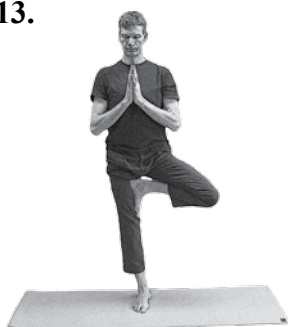
You can either do each pose in turn straight from the last one, first on one side then the other, or you can return to a standing position between each pose, doing each one first on the left then on the right.

12.



5 slow breaths

13.



5 slow breaths each side. Look at a still point ahead to keep your balance. You can also rest your foot on your shin.



5 slow breaths

15.



5 slow breaths each side

16.



5 slow breaths

17.



10 slow breaths

If there are things here you can't do, keep at it! Your body will become stronger and more flexible with time.

Turn On, Tune In, Stretch Out

18.



Lie like this and let your whole body relax, supported by the floor or your bed. Stay here for at least 20 deep breaths, or up to 10 minutes if you have time.

Want to try yoga and meditation in your cell with a private tutor? You're in luck. A weekly yoga and meditation class called *Freedom Inside* is starting on National Prison Radio on the 5th of April. The show will air at 7 am and 6 pm on Sundays and at noon on Fridays. You'll be able to join in easily whether you've done yoga and meditation before or not. Erwin James (see page 7) will introduce each programme, with guests Benjamin Zephaniah, Jeremy Irons, and prisoners who practise yoga. Three Prison Phoenix Trust teachers will walk you through 45 minutes of yoga postures, relaxation and meditation, helping you find a sense of freedom in yourself, even while you're still inside.

Now sit in meditation for at least 3 minutes - but up to 25 if you have the time and have done it before. See back page for meditation instructions.

19.



"Yoga teaches us to cure what need not be endured and endure what cannot be cured."

~ B.K.S. Iyengar, author of Light on Yoga, 1918 - 2014



Looking for Real Freedom

from a prisoner at HMP Lewes

October

For nearly nine months, I have been practising meditation. I still can't define it properly – exciting, torturing, empty, full, unbearable, unmissable. Perhaps it is for its mysterious simplicity that I can't help but do it every day. Has it changed my life? Well, it's hard to tell, because prison changes you, no matter what.

Other forms of "active" meditation have also helped me stay focussed and strong. Yoga for a start, but recently even tai-chi. My body benefits, and my mind is usually "lighter" after practising.

What attracts me to these things is that they point towards freedom. It's not about believing something or hoping for some kind of future happy resolution of my troubles. It's more about looking for real freedom through self-discovery.

I may not be experiencing hours of bliss when flowing in silence with the breath, nor always be happy and calm. But at least now I can just look at myself and shut up, observing what goes on in my mind. So far, finding out that as problems and worries arise, they also cease. Like with breathing, when the mind manages to let go, everything flows on alright on its own.

December

It's incredible how amazingly powerful, in both good and bad ways, our mind is. Since my arrival in prison, I decided that I would not waste this strange challenge and the best I could come up with was exploring the mind whilst trying to keep fit. When I started meditating, I could barely sit for 10 minutes. Now, I train my mind through meditation and yoga for longer periods, usually twice a day.

Throughout this sentence, my first, there have been difficulties. Many times I felt low, many times I felt I was not "good enough" in my practice. Sometimes I would miss my family or I would feel sorry for causing a big hassle to them by coming to jail. But this practice has made me realise that suffering, craving, unsatisfactoriness, expectations and all possible states of mind or feelings arise, exist and pass away right here, inside my mind. They are not in the prison, they are the children of my own self, that I've built day after day.



Whatever I do and wherever I look, I see the constant action of my ego and my inner demons. I am not really happy, but I'm fairly calm and I want to face my mind full on. I feel a bit like Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*: slightly sad and full of questions because I can't help but fight what has been my "family" (concepts, ideas, beliefs, views, etc) but I also feel the greatness of this opportunity. Up until my sentence I thought that being free meant freedom to do as you please. Up until last month I was thinking that knowledge was something intellect could master, but realise that true knowledge transcends thought and explanations.

Preparing for the future

Sometimes, I ask myself what will happen in two months, when I'll be released. Surely I'll not repeat my past mistakes. Surely I'll be able to sort myself out "in the world". But what about my practice? How should I fit it with whatever life expects of me? On one side I'm tempted to simply allot the practice a bit of time, whilst trying to be mindful in my daily activities, but going back nonetheless to pursue worldly goals. On the other side, I fear to admit to myself, that I may be actually tempted to make my practice the central part of my life. Well, I guess wisdom regarding how to practise afterwards will only be available when those days come. So, yeah, let's not forget a valuable teaching of prison life: Take one day at a time.

One of the biggest insights I had recently could be phrased as "you may not have an answer, but you can't not have the question." So, even if exploring

my mind and trying to liberate it may be scary at times, and forces me to face my most insidious fears, I feel I can't give up right now.

January

Thanks for the book, which helped me fix into words many feelings about my practice. At the moment, I usually do one hour of yoga and breathing exercises in the morning, followed by sitting meditation – between 20 and 50 minutes. Then I try to practise when I eat, brush my teeth, walk in the yard or work in the workshop. In the evening, if I have gym, I cool down with tai-chi. Otherwise I just read. Just before bed I do some more sitting, about 20 minutes.

If there is one thing that I'm learning from meditation and yoga it's that the best way to prepare for the future is to live each moment grounded in the present. Speculating over what we can't be sure of is something my mind still ends up doing. So I guess that I will try and concentrate on making the best out of these last eight weeks in prison.

My father is coming to stay with me for a week when I'm released. He is a man with a great heart and his Christian faith has recently turned from a dogmatic set of beliefs to something more open-minded. I remember when he told me about his memories of his father dying in his arms. He is very concerned with death. Neither hard work, nor taking care of the family's well-being can – alone – help with his doubts and questions about the end of life. When I talked about meditation in our last conversation, he said, "I wish I had five minutes to sit doing nothing, son."

The Good in All of Us

by Erwin James, PPT Patron



Erwin in the BBC studios

This piece is transcribed from a recording at the BBC in 2013, when Erwin was presenting our Radio 4 appeal.

I think of myself primarily as a writer or a journalist, but I have a really problematic past. I was in prison – I was convicted of murder – in 1984. I was in prison for life. But I was lucky in prison – I met people who wanted to help me. I had no aspirations or hope or plans for a future. Life for me was finished when I got my life sentence, and I was glad.

But then I met someone, a psychologist, who persuaded me over a long period of time that I had some value. And that took some doing. Then she encouraged me to go to education classes – I'd never really had a formal education, so I started to get educated.

But one of the things that helped me to to survive was yoga. Mr Andrew James (no relation!) came in and did this yoga class and I went along because I wanted to find that gentleness within me that's in all of us, and I was convinced there was something good in me – in all of us! The yoga class for me was an opportunity just to do something off the prison landing – where there was no aggression, there was no threat. And Andrew was such a gentleman.

The best sleep I ever had in prison was after that first yoga class. Because my breathing was regulated, my movements were regulated, it was very gentle movements, slow movements. And then, because in prison you live inside your head, but your thoughts are always racing. They're always racing then they slow, then they race and then they slow, because your anxiety's peaking, then you hear the keys jangling because the officer's going to come and open the door, and then you get a bit anxious, then the door opens and

We're delighted that Erwin James became one of our Patrons at the end of last year. While serving his sentence, he developed his writing skills, and in the final four and a half years, Erwin wrote a column for the Guardian newspaper from his cell, called A Life Inside. This helped hundreds of thousands of people with little experience of being locked up understand the lives of people inside a little better. Erwin works tirelessly for prison reform and is still a journalist.

you've got to go out and face the landing.

Who we should be

And the yoga thing, just for that hour, allowed total peace to descend. Internal peace. And I got into the habit of doing it in my cell. I could sleep better in my cell. You'd be doing yoga, and you could hear people screaming in the cell two doors down, people shouting threats out of the windows and near the wings, but there you were in this little peaceful cocoon of gentle movements and feeling good about yourself. Feeling good about being alive. Prison's a very depressing place, and without things like the yoga class coming in, open hearted, open handed people to give us something, without that, we'd have had much less of a chance of becoming who we should be.

Putting in the Miles for Prison Yoga

Chris Herbert, prison officer at HMP Grendon, is running an ultra marathon on the 11th of July 2015 to help raise funds for the Prison Phoenix Trust. The event, *Race to the Stones*, is a 100km (62 miles) run along the Ridgeway - the oldest path in Britain.

Chris started running over thirty years ago, while serving in the forces, and has run the London Marathon five times. He has been going to the staff yoga class in Grendon / Spring Hill for the past two years, and says yoga goes brilliantly with his running training.

If you're reading this on the outside and you want to sponsor Chris, have a look at his fundraising page at <https://www.justgiving.com/Chris-Herbert-PPT>.

We're deeply grateful to Chris and to all prison staff who support yoga and meditation in prison - for officers and prisoners alike.



Chris running the Blenheim Triathlon in 2011

Aylesbury YOI Yoga Teacher Joins PPT!

We're pleased Victoria has joined our small office to help get more yoga and meditation classes started in prison. She takes her passion for yoga into



Aylesbury YOI for two classes and to Grendon for a staff class, and she brings it to the PPT office too, along with her wit and lots of common sense.

When asked about what she likes about this work, Victoria says, "Yoga and meditation have helped me in so many ways: like remaining focussed and calm when I worked in print and marketing and always had crazy deadlines. Now, as I levitate (zen-like) above my office chair (see photo) I'm looking forward to getting out and sharing yoga and meditation with you, and helping other teachers start classes in as many prisons as I can!"



Training Your Mind With Meditation



By Sam



With any experience you have, there seem to be two things involved. There's what's going on around you – sun rising quietly, people shouting, putting on your t-shirt. The other thing, which we bring to every moment of our lives, is the state of our minds. You might feel so low that you don't even notice the beauty of the sun rise. Or, you might feel really well-balanced and free, so that you keep your cool with people arguing around you, and find a way to be fully with it.

Meditation is about putting our minds, and our hearts, in the best possible place, so that we can live happily with other people, and with ourselves, wherever we are. There are benefits: from sleeping better to not feeling as wound up. But meditation's really about seeing clearly into the nature of human being, and in that understanding, coming to live more easily in your skin.

How to do it

Take a minute to give your cell a sweep, put things away. If you can find something from the natural world – a feather, flower, or small stone – place that on a surface near you.



Experiment with the positions pictured here and choose one that's comfortable. Your back is straight, your chin tucked in slightly. Your eyes are open, looking down at a spot in front of you. Your eyes may go out of focus; it doesn't matter. The hand position shown (left hand on top) helps to connect up energy circuits in the body. If you have a timer, set it for 5 minutes. Do 5 minutes for 5 days,

then 10 minutes for 5 days, and build up to 25 minutes. Still, alert, curious about your breath. Stay still.

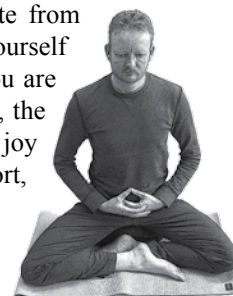
Your breath is normal and natural. Your attention is on the breath – how it feels going into the nose, into the throat, how it makes the belly and chest expand as the breath comes in, and contract as it goes out. Is the breath smooth? Shallow? Deep? Rough? You are simply experiencing the breath, not thinking about it. Experiencing each breath anew.

Counting the breath

With this awareness of the breath, begin counting. When you breathe in, count *1*, and when you breathe out, *2*. Go up to *10* (5 complete breaths) and then start again at *1*. Keep going. (You can sit without counting and simply be the breath, but counting helps the mind stay focussed.)

Distractions

Don't worry if your mind wanders off. Just gently bring it back to *1*, without giving yourself a hard time. The mind will try to distract itself from remaining focussed through restlessness, sleepiness, doubt, wanting things (including a focussed mind!), getting fed up or cross. Stick in there through these distractions. They are not separate from meditation, and each time you bring yourself back to the counting and the breath, you are strengthening your mind. With patience, the distractions play themselves out, and the joy of their absence is well worth your effort, even if they come back again.



**“The best way to prepare for the future
is to live each moment grounded in the present.”**

~ From a prisoner at HMP Lewes

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

