



Newsletter, Winter 2010

WINTER'S JOY



On the way home last week I saw nature dishing out her winter's best: lashing rain driven by strong gusts of wind that whipped the last of the year's leaves from the branches of trees as they bowed and straightened, bowed and straightened. People scurrying for shelter, seeking refuge from the wind and wet. Afternoon's light long gone. It seemed everything was conspiring against any peace or security.

Our lives can often look to us chaotic and bleak like that storm. James said as much when we met him doing yoga and meditation workshops in his prison recently. He had a vicious eye wound, red and only just beginning to heal after a razor attack. "Surviving: that's all it's about on our wing." Later Danny spoke of his own recent knockbacks which landed him back inside for an indefinite period. Several other men on remand were waiting for their hearings in two weeks, feeling anxious.

It is so tough when it seems everything is against you. It can feel like things will always be the way they are at the moment – no peace from the restlessness, no let up from the hassles. Yet just as winter holds within it the remarkable turning point of the solstice, when daylight begins to lengthen again, we humans always hold within us light and stillness, even when life seems chaotic.

You may be used to celebrating that light in winter through Christ's birth, by fasting or putting on a play to mark Ashura, marking the sun's journey into the northern hemisphere on Makar Sankranti, lighting a Menorah, or meditating into the wee hours to mark the Buddha's awakening. These rituals can help you connect yourself with others in the dark winter months. Another daily ritual that can give more meaning to the others (or you can practise it alone) is making a time each day to sit

comfortably, still and upright, and let life's business just be, as you put yourself fully into each in-breath and each out-breath.

Forgetting everything except just this breath, it is possible to become firmly grounded in stillness. And touching life's essence like this each day with determination, freedom is inevitable.

From out of the light and the stillness comes

once again the irrepressible activity of life: an unsuccessful hearing or receiving an unexpected gift, your favourite pudding being served up or spilling your dinner, discovering a like-minded friend or being fed up with your pad mate. All this can carry on as always. No problem. What can be different is experiencing it all with your feet firmly grounded in that stillness. Even though we can't see the sun, it is still

there behind the clouds. Finding some degree of stillness on a daily basis makes it more possible to cope. And you may find that like so many people in prison, the groundedness you develop allows you to do far more than just cope: you can feel completely free as it is all happening.

With this freedom, winter storms and life's events may not swamp you so much. This winter, may you walk openly – even joyfully! – in whatever weather life serves up.



Opening the shoulders at HMP Maidstone



Love Sam – and Luisa, Jason, Elaine, Lucy, Kaye, Clive & David

“The light for which the world longs is already shining.”

- Thomas Kelly (1893-1941)

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-focused 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, newsletters, workshops and weekly classes.



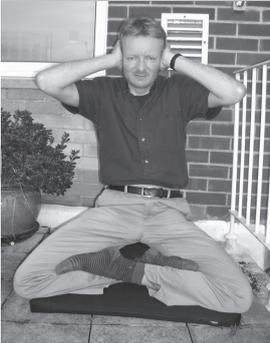
Contents

Page 2	Meditation Corner
Page 3-4	Prisoners' Letters
Page 5	Winter Warmer
Page 6	Christmas Crossword
Page 7	Etty Hillesum
Page 8	Rivers of Calm

Meditation Corner

Hear No Evil

By Jason 



Ever had the feeling your buttons are being pressed? Like someone is purposely trying to wind you up and get a reaction? It's been like that for me this week.

To start with, my meditation practice has been difficult - and it is not my fault. With the final run up to bonfire night, bangs and fireworks are going off each evening. Trying to concentrate and focus is incredibly difficult with sudden noises and flashes. It feels like someone digging me in the ribs every time I settle down.

Another thing that is not my fault: people zooming past me when I'm on my bicycle. The worst offenders are motorbikes with horrendously loud exhausts. Why do they insist on making a noise like a machine gun and spoiling my quiet ride through the countryside?

Sorry to gripe about my hang-ups. There are good things happening too. Today I bought a box of fireworks ready for bonfire night. I have always been fascinated by chemistry and if something spectacular can be produced, all the better! On the way to the shops, I took the long route on my motorbike, picking a few choice roads to blast down. So it's not all bad at the moment.

You may notice a pattern here. It seems acceptable for me to do as I want, but not for others to do the same. And after all this meditation practice the same patterns keep occurring! Now is a perfect time to clear the mind, and so I sit upright and perfectly still, focusing on the breath, with each inhalation and exhalation silent and even. Inevitably all the annoyances start to arise - but something odd has happened. They are even more vivid and presenting themselves to me continuously. A jet flies overhead, and the stillness unfolds to make room for the noise of the engines. In the background the gentle hum of traffic gets louder and recedes again. A door blows shut and for a moment the stillness is split and immediately reforms again. Is this really a door slamming? All I can be certain of is the sudden crack breaking the silence.

What can you hear at this moment? Without naming or blaming, the universe reveals itself in the most wonderful of ways, with ample room for everything, however annoying it first appears.



Prisoners'

From HMP Forest Bank

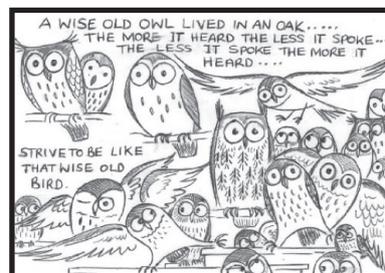
Since receiving your 90-minute CD last week I've done it every day, sometimes twice. Throughout the day I really do feel so much better. I am sleeping better and crying less. Even other inmates on the wing have seen a difference in me in this short time. I cannot understand why I haven't tried this before. I'm now looking forward to trying some of the harder asanas. 

I've found a book in the library called *Yoga - The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness* by Erich Schiffmann which is also enlightening. Some of the asanas in this book look scary though! I think I will go slowly through and try the gentler poses till I'm more flexible and supple. Yoga is helping me greatly with my diet too. I want to look after my body now. I want to understand it more. I want to find the inner me. Life feels different now.

From HMP Lindholme

All is well. I have continued to practise yoga and breathing exercises, despite still not receiving your free book *Becoming Free Through Meditation and Yoga*. Normally I would have blown up about this and thrown a right wobbler. I can only put this beautiful calm down to yoga. Nothing much alters here in Lindholme. I have visits mysteriously cancelled, mail going missing and in five months of being here they still will not give me any sort of employment. But it's okay by me. 

Quite simply this proves that your CD works. Besides turning me into a 'rubber-jointed man' and making me able to move like



a gymnast, it has done wonders for my temper. I am getting through my sentence so much easier now. Besides the missing books I have also found acceptance a lot easier through yoga and listening to the breath. Old feelings like guilt, rage, hate and even jealousy, seem to be dissolving.

You were right about the mind wanting to drift during meditation but it's nowhere near as bad as it used to be.

Please try to start up yoga sessions in Lindholme for us. I'm sure a lot of lads would be interested. If it were up to me, I would make yoga compulsory in schools and prisons. There would be a lot more level-headed people walking around. Before I came to prison, I couldn't draw a picture to save my life. Now I am constantly drawing. I love what yoga is doing to me.

From HMYOI Swinfen Hall

A month ago I read about a book called *We're All Doing Time in Inside Time*. I found it in the library and it helped me with sleeping which had been hell for me for the past five years. Some days I would fall asleep only at 6 a.m. for just 2-3 hours. Now I have read this book it is amazing. It's putting my mind in control and teaching me how to relax. I never knew that meditation could help. Now I am doing it every day and it helps lighten the day. I feel a sense of freedom 

Letters



and the stress I had in my shoulder has gone. It's helped me look at things in a different way. I am going to continue doing it till I find what I am looking for.



From HMP Woodhill

I was introduced to yoga by another inmate who was already into it and I have now been attending the yoga class here for several months. It has become an essential part of my week. As I attend gym regularly, yoga helps me stretch out my muscles more effectively and as a result I am more flexible. Some of the positions can be difficult but our yoga teacher Katie always makes sure we work within our ability and progress at our own rate.

As prison can be a very stressful place, doing yoga every week helps me to relax and forget where I am for those few hours. I wish we could have more sessions each week. Other prisoners are constantly asking me about yoga and I point them in the right direction so they also get involved. After each session I feel totally relaxed, flexible and ready for the rest of the week. Yoga is the best activity available to us at Woodhill. It is priceless in helping me through my sentence and life in general.

From HMYOI Polmont

Since I came into prison I realised that I have to change once and for all. I have been doing great with my programmes and also I am doing a lot of education, but the best of all that has helped more than any of those is yoga classes. It has helped me with controlling my pent-up anger and sheer stress. I also had a bad stutter but since going to yoga all my anger and stress and tension is slowly draining away and so that helps my stutter calm down. I am thankful from the bottom of my heart. When I do the meditation and breathing exercises I completely shut off from all around me and I go to a place far, far away. It's amazing how such a simple exercise can bring so much.



The teacher who takes the class, Yvonne, is so nice. She brings a sense of calm. I would appreciate any help you could give me for when I am practising in my cell.

From HMP Littlehey

When I was in prison I came across your book *Freeing the Spirit* and the CD *Clearing the Head* in the library which I used in my cell. Your methods helped my breathing and have brought my asthma attacks under control. I have not had to use my inhalers as much as I usually would.

On my release I found it rather stressful having no fixed abode. With the yoga and meditation and my Buddhist spirituality, despite all the hassles of finding employment and putting a home together, I am gradually finding my own space in this universe.

From HMP Forest Bank

Yoga is something I wouldn't have considered trying before coming to prison, but seeing how it has helped my friend, I was curious and intrigued. I took a look at the book *Freeing the Spirit* and decided I too would like to give yoga and meditation a go as they are obviously tried and tested techniques.



From Kneesworth House Hospital

Thank you for sending me the newsletters, *Freeing the Spirit* and the CD. Every day I get up at 7.00 a.m. and do some 25 minutes in the morning before I have a shower and I do find I am happier than before I tried this. I even get a better night sleep most nights. It has helped me to see for the better and feel happier inside my body.

From HMP Full Sutton

I would like to respond to the article on page 7 'from a friend on the outside' in the autumn newsletter. It's got me thinking about our personal perspectives and how they shape our lives by our actions or inactions.



Eleven years of support is a very courageous thing for you to have done and it's heartbreaking to think it would be thrown away, but some people think themselves unworthy and so destroy what they cannot understand. Their perspective is: 'Why would anyone want to support me other than to manipulate me?' When you live in a predatory environment like prison, you become a predator. Kindness is taken for weakness. It's not even a conscious response – it's a natural response to this environment. On release into the wider world, the perspective stays defensive. It is very difficult to adjust.

Friend on the outside, I give you a massive cosmic hug on your recovery. Your journey has been full of ups and downs making you wiser and stronger. I congratulate you again and again. Anything that is worth learning is never easy and changes who you were. That is the only certainty in life – everything is change. You my friend, our friend, are a survivor – much love, your friend on the inside (the universe).



A special high five to our 'friend on the outside'

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

Led by the Breath

Wrighty from F Wing, HMP Leeds

I am at the early stages of what will be a lengthy sentence. Right now even though my body is telling me to slow up due to aches and pains, my new environment and my mind are telling me to be on my toes and guard up at all times. I guess that's to be expected. This is the reason I so strongly want to learn meditation and yoga.

The little I have learnt, especially the breathing has got me through up to today. It has also given me belief and strength that I can get through this situation and in fact come out of it with something – that being a sound mind. This is a huge change, for believe me, I have not been of sound mind for some time, hence my situation.

I listen to the PPT *Clearing the Head* CD and read *Freeing the Spirit* on a regular basis, and now am reading *We're All Doing Time*. I know my sentence will be long and will take all my strength and experience in life to get through.

I have lots of love and support from my family and close friends. I don't want to just go through the system feeling hurt and anguish. The last two months have been so hard and I know it's my breathing and meditation which is pulling me through.

Sharing a cell does not allow me the

space and time I would really like. However, as I've said, I have a long way to go and eventually will be in my own cell and be able to do more.

My daughter is doing so well in trying to cope with our situation. She came to visit me and we had a good chat. She has since made enquiries to go to yoga classes. I know it's a bit harder for my partner to get her head around. So I'm not pushing her. All I can hope is that my newfound calmness will help not just me, but her as well.

I feel their sentence

It's still early stages and them not knowing for sure how long I'm going to be away doesn't help. I feel their sentence, because they are really serving one. It's a lot worse for them.

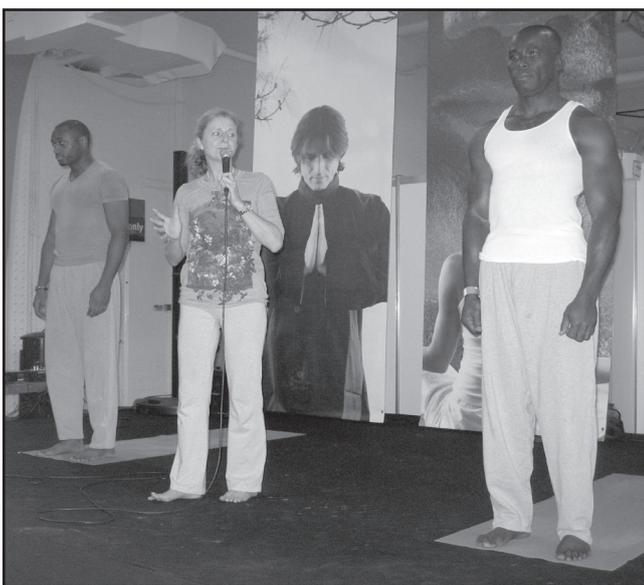
What little time I get to meditate, I love. I find it so helpful. I believe I would defo have lost the plot, cracked up, if not for your help and advice regarding the breath while I have been here. I find it such a strong and valuable part of my everyday



existence. I know, no matter what, it will get me through – or should I say, give me the strength to get me through. In fact it has had such a strong effect on me, I have spoken openly about it to other people when they have asked me how I am coping. But I don't push too hard when it comes to yoga. I learnt a long time ago that people will only wear something that fits and feels comfortable for them.

I do find myself doing breath while sat watching TV or whenever I am sat somewhere. It always helps relax and turns me away from negativity. I have suffered anxiety for some years and would say I know now how to handle it. When I start to feel stressed I go and do my breath. I am determined to carry on and meditate no matter what and know in time I will master it.

Playing to the Crowd



Darren, Tuesday and Ricardo

Amid thronging crowds, inmates on day release held two yoga demos at the Yoga Show in London this October. Billed as 'All things yoga under one roof' the three-day event attracts tens of thousands of people. Neill, Darren, Ricardo,

Joao and their teacher Tuesday McNeill, all from HMP Latchmere House (an open prison), showed appreciative audiences what a typical prison class is like – not easy doing yoga as a spectator sport!

Darren has been practising since he went to a PPT workshop at HMP Ashwell in 2007. When he arrived at Latchmere House, he was a regular student at Tuesday's class, but now his work with a construction firm means he can no longer make the class. He says his regular meditation helps him cut through a lot of the ego stuff in his mind and just focus on what needs doing at the moment, on his work and on his plan to become a fitness instructor. On home visits, he feels clearly the struggle and pain of some of his family members, but never preaches to them about his practice.

Neill has been practising yoga for two and a half years. He used to go to Santoshni's class in HMP The Mount and began to practise in his cell. He would get up early to do yoga and it would leave him revitalised and refreshed for the day ahead. After Tuesday's class he feels more warm and alive. "Many people think yoga's a hippie thing – they don't realise the fitness side or how challenging it is," said Neill.

Ricardo and Joao said that they get a lot from their yoga practice and Tuesday's class. They were pleased they could help let more people know about prison yoga.



Winter Warmer

by Elaine 



These three movements warm the whole body and help you connect with the breath. They are an excellent way to prepare for stronger yoga postures, or to get yourself going on a chilly morning.

Change of air

From a standing position:

1. Bend the knees and swing the arms down in front of you until they cross.
2. As you breathe in through the nose bring the arms up, out to the sides and over the head, straightening the knees.
3. Breathe out through the mouth as you lower the arms down to your sides. Cross the arms in front as you bend the knees.
4. Repeat steps 2-3 ten times.
5. When bringing the arms down for the last time make the movement slower.



Circling the elbows

1. Place hands on shoulders, with elbows pointed down. As you breathe in through the nose, keep the hands on shoulders and slowly lift the elbows in front of you and upwards, bringing the elbows towards each other.
2. At the end of the in breath, the elbows are pointing up towards the sky. As you breathe out through the nose, take the elbows back behind you and down, bringing them towards each other to stretch the pectoral (chest) muscles.
3. Keep circling the elbows slowly, moving with the breath.
4. After five times, change direction. Keep your attention on your breath, feeling the full range of motion in the shoulder joints.
5. Then do the change of air three times (first sequence above).



Opening the sides

1. Stand with feet hip width apart, place your right hand on the waist. As you breathe in through the nose, move the left arm out to the side and overhead.
2. Lengthen the inhale as you stretch the left arm up towards the sky without hunching the shoulder.
3. Breathe out through the nose and bend over to the right side.
4. As you breathe in straighten up and bring the left arm back up in the air.
5. Breathe out as you bring the arm down to your side.
6. Repeat steps 1-5 on the right side.
7. Repeat ten times on each side.
8. Try to work as if you are standing between two walls so that you don't lean forward or backwards as you bend over.
9. Then do the change of air three more times (first sequence above).





Bright Soul: Etty Hillesum

From Rachel Howell, PPT letter writer



Etty in 1938

“If you have a rich inner life, there probably isn’t all that much difference between the inside and outside of a prison camp.”

These words were written by a young woman called Etty Hillesum living in Amsterdam during World War II, who had her freedom gradually taken away by the Nazis because she was a Jew. But while the persecution got worse and worse, Etty became more and more free – free from fear, depression, anger, and hatred. She refused to go into hiding when she realised that she, and people she loved, would be sent off to Nazi ‘labour camps’. Instead she volunteered to go and work at a prison camp in eastern Holland, because she wanted to help the suffering people there.

In the camp there wasn’t enough food, there were lice, people sometimes shared three to a bed without a mattress, and everyone was afraid because hundreds of Jews were transported from there to Poland each week. But even after experiencing this, Etty wrote, “I want to be right there in the thick of what people call ‘horror’ and still be able to say: life is beautiful.” So I think she has something to say to us about becoming free, whether in an actual prison, or a prison of fear, sadness, anger etc. Here are some quotes from her diary,

which she started in 1941, aged 27:

“I’ll ‘turn inward’ for half an hour each morning and listen to my inner voice. Half an hour of exercises combined with half an hour of meditation can set the tone for the whole day. So that something of ‘God’ can enter you, and something of ‘Love’ too, the love you can apply to small, everyday things.”

She didn’t always find it easy: “I feel just like a dustbin sometimes, what with all the murkiness, conceitedness, halfheartedness, and second-rateness inside me!” but she kept trying: “I am unhappy again. I can quite see why people get drunk or go to bed with a total stranger. But that isn’t really my way. So I withdrew to the farthest corner of my little room, sat on the floor, squeezed myself in between two walls, my head bowed. Yes. And sat there. What I am waiting for whenever I sit huddled up like that is for something to give, for something to start flowing inside me.”

One mighty whole

Eventually Etty discovered, “I now listen all day long to what is within me, and even when I am with others I no longer have to withdraw but am able to draw strength from the most deeply hidden sources in myself.” So she was able to accept suffering as part of life: “What they are after now is our total destruction. I accept it. Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors – I accept it as one mighty whole. Life is meaningful even in its meaninglessness, provided you make room in your life for everything, and accept life as one indivisible whole. But as soon as you try to exclude certain parts of life, refusing to accept them and arrogantly opting for this and not that part of life, yes, then it does become meaningless because it is no longer a whole.”

Etty also realised that how we respond to things matters more than what happens

to us: “They can’t do anything to us, they really can’t. They can harass us, they can rob us of our material goods, of our freedom of movement, but we ourselves forfeit our greatest assets by our feelings of being persecuted, humiliated, and oppressed. By our own hatred.” She believed “True peace will come only when every individual finds peace within himself; each of us must turn inward and destroy in himself all that he thinks he ought to destroy in others. And remember that every atom of hate we add to this world makes it still more inhospitable.”

In the end Etty’s turn came to get into one of the cattle trucks bound for the death camps. She threw a postcard out of the train for her friends which said, “Tell them we have left the camp singing.” She died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943, aged 29, but her spirit lives on and I hope you find it inspiring.

Waltzing Matilda: Swedish Officer Joins PPT

Matilda has joined our small team for a few months after working with the Swedish Prison Service as a contact for prisoners in rehab.



Her special interest is helping people with addiction to anabolic steroids. She taught inmates yoga in an old church on the prison grounds. Matilda feels it was the most fulfilling thing she did in her work there. She saw how yoga helps deal with behavioural problems, and how her students were calmer, less aggressive and slept better after yoga. Other staff reported a big change in the environment on their wings. Matilda also taught officers - many had not tried yoga before and really loved it. “Yoga and meditation complement rehabilitation work perfectly,” says Matilda. “They help you to change old behaviour patterns and give you the space of just being - rather than being stuck in your head.”

Matilda hopes to see how we do things and to take the information back to support the development of prison yoga in Sweden.

SOLUTIONS Across: 1 Misyry 4 Scotties 9 Dorset 10 Crackers 12 Ilex 13 Frost 14 Palm 17 House-warming 20 Glass slipper 23 Here 24 Shave 25 Stet 28 Mince pie 29 Sleigh 30 Specimen 31 Resent **Down:** 1 Midnight 2 Served up 3 Rhea 5 Christmas Eve 6 Tuck 7 Ice-cap 8 Sesame 11 Breaks the ice 15 Jelly 16 Untie 18 Spitfire 19 Cratchit 21 Chimes 22 Orange 26 Yeti 27 Floe



Rivers of Calm: Part One



By Luisa

Ever have problems sleeping? Just can't slow down your racing mind? Or are you the other way – just so tired you can't get up in the morning? Alternate nostril breathing might just help.

The ancient yogis found that when we are breathing through the left nostril we are in a more passive, receptive state, and when we're breathing through the right we are in a more active frame of mind. (Test for yourself next time you are in a noticeable mood and see which nostril you are breathing through most strongly.) The yogis developed a technique called 'nadi shodhana'. In their language Sanskrit 'nadi' means river, or energy channel and 'shodhana' means cleaning. This involves breathing first through one nostril and then through the other to help balance out the two sides of our being. Here's how:

-  Sit in any comfortable upright position (not necessarily like the man above!). Tuck the index and middle fingers of your right hand in, keeping the thumb, ring and little fingers out.
-  Bring your right hand up to your face. Place your thumb close to your right nostril and your ring finger and little finger by your left. Your left hand can stay resting on your knee or in your lap. Keep the nostrils open.
-  Breathe deeply out and in through both nostrils.
-  Keeping the head straight, close off your right nostril with your thumb and breathe out through the left. The breath should be slow, steady and full.
-  Breathe in through the left nostril. At the end of the inhale, close off the left nostril with the ring finger and breathe out through the right.

-  Breathe in through the right. At the end of the inhale, breathe out through the left.
-  Repeat this sequence 5-10 times, building up the repetitions as you become more familiar with the practice.

You can practise nadi shodhana at any time during the day. If you start to feel stressed, 10 rounds will help calm you down.

Look out in our Spring newsletter for *Rivers of Calm: Part 2*, where we will develop this practice further.



“Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths.”

- Etty Hillesum (1914-1943)



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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