



Newsletter, Winter 2019

PUZZLING IT OUT

This week I heard from two friends in prison, both doing long sentences. Each has done huge amounts of work to understand himself, diving deep over the years with different practices like yoga, meditation, the Twelve Steps, and lots of reading and thinking. Both wrote so helpfully about their experiences of exploring, and continuing to explore, what may be life's biggest question: Who am I?

One talked about "getting onto the path", and starting to question everything he thought he was, his belief systems, thoughts, his sense of identity. He said he was "like a jigsaw laid out on a table picture side up. I couldn't quite make out the picture of me. It was a jumbled up mess. But once I sorted out all the 'edges' of me, the things that I thought made me, I could analyse each individual piece. Over time, after looking at each piece, I was able to reform, rebuild myself. Strip all that old unwanted stuff away and build myself anew."

He said he started to see the importance of the body, especially through his tai chi. The penny dropped for him that the mind and body can't really be separated. He wrote, "Now, I have no path, no religion, no belief system that I'm enslaved to. I strive to be always in the Now, constantly absorbing on letting go."

The other friend also wrote about his old self and the various bits of it. He said he is fully embracing it all. "The fact is that these experiences [in prison and before] contributed to who I am and will always influence who I will be." He wrote, "I'm using these last few months of my sentence as a retreat for meditation (sitting, walking, etc) and reflection (life prior to prison and recovery in prison). What I have found is verification of the saying, "The older we get, the more we become who we are."

In my context it seems true for not only ageing but also for the longer I'm in recovery from substance abuse (and dealing with experiences that shaped me).

"I have found a recipe for living: coping skills for living, and management skills for when I cannot cope. Yet it is far from

hopping down the bunny trail into la-la happy land." He goes on to talk about how damaging traumatic events can be, and the limitations of many approaches which don't take into account just how challenging it can be if you've really been through the wringer. "It is a fluke or a miracle when people like me find radical change to escape our destructive programming."

The Prison Phoenix Trust encourages people to practise silent breath-based meditation because meditation helps you see into your own programming. With a little focus, a little practice, the right basic attitude and a little support from friends where you can find them, it's entirely possible to fully embrace who you think you are –

the various jigsaw pieces of yourself – and to see them arising in the form of thoughts and feelings. And also to see them as passing, transient things, letting them all go. You can experience that there is "something else" there (more a happening than a thing), apart from these fleeting notions of who you usually think you are.

This season, may you find rest and deep peace in that something else, which we all share, and which is who we truly are.



Connecting after a yoga session



Love from Sam - and Lucy, Sally, Jason, Clive, David, Laura, Victoria & Brent

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.



"Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it."

~ Confucius, Chinese philosopher and politician, 551BC - 479BC

Since I've been practising I still get stressed out but this feeling doesn't last long because I remember that it's ultimately down to me how I feel, so I choose to be happy.



From
HMP Swaleside

I read *Peace Inside* in one day and I really did find it insightful. I'm still practising the meditation daily. I do a 20 minute sit every morning at 7 and a further 20 before bed. I am also practising yoga but only three times a week at the moment. I feel comfortable with that, but over time I will try to increase it to daily.

Since I've been practising I still get stressed out but this feeling doesn't last long because I remember that it's ultimately down to me how I feel, so I choose to be happy.

Before I would always moan about things that I didn't have, but now I'm grateful for the things I do have and it's a good feeling.

When people used to say that they've found true freedom even though they're inside I used to think that they were either high on something or delusional, but I'm starting to understand what they

mean. Although they themselves may not be free physically they are mentally and spiritually free from mental turmoil.

I've suffered from insomnia for years. I would have to take a mixture of sedatives just to get a couple of hours a night. Now, although I still don't sleep the whole night through, the couple of hours I do get are at least natural sleep.

The energy I feel after I sit is unreal, it's the best buzz in the world, and do you know what the best part is? There's no comedown because it's a natural high. I'm also seeing the beauty in things, complexity and abundance in everything. I don't even know if I'm making sense but it's the only way I can describe it. It's as if all my life I've been in a cocoon and now I've finally broken free. People are constantly asking me what I've taken because I'm always full of energy and smiling. When I sit I'm connected to everything and vice versa. All my life I've been searching for something that's been inside me all along, all I had to do was look within.

It hasn't been easy confronting my inner self but I finally know who I am.

From
HMP Swaleside

Over the years when people have talked to me about how yoga



Prisoners'

works I have said, "Whatever," but for the last six months I've been doing it for myself. It has helped in so many ways what with the book *Freeing the Spirit* and the CD you sent me.

It's made me a new person – better than I was when I came to prison.

Plus it made me feel a lot brighter about myself. I'm a life prisoner and yoga gave me something to put my mind to and it's also helping me to think a lot clearer. It is helping me to sleep a little bit better. I have got into it so much I am doing it four times a day, seven days a week. I just can't get over how much it works and puts your mind at rest in ways you never thought you could be with yourself.



From
HMP Bronzefield

At the moment I am going through some struggles with finding peace in the midst of a lot of turmoil around me. Unfortunately, I have made decisions to keep myself safe, but it is not being respected by everyone.

The yoga practice helps me to focus on peace and calm. I found that outside was so very stressful for me and I felt alone. The support was not there for me and it was hurting me. I just want peace.

The newsletter helped me find ways of relieving stress and being at peace. It is not always easy to do in a constantly changing society and in certain environments. But I'm grateful I can use my time whilst here to learn positive ways of being and doing. One day at a time.

Learning how to breathe properly has really helped me with anxiety.

From
HMP Thameside

Reading the books you sent and doing the yoga exercises has helped me in many different ways. I suffer from a few mental health issues and if it wasn't for reading the books you sent me I believe I'd be taking drugs. The book *Peace Inside* was like reading a bible to me.

At times I find it difficult to speak to



Today I Choose

An ordinary day begins. That old, relentless voice Attempts to take me hostage, whispering, "You have no choice. Your life is cursed. Expect the worst. Best curl-up and die!" I shake my head, get out of bed, and to that voice I cry; Today I choose to see life's views as beautiful and bright. Today I choose to skip the news (I can't put that right) Today I choose to ditch the booze, throw away that crutch. Today I choose not to use the drugs I craved so much. Today I choose to refuse 'just one last' cigarette. Today I choose not to abuse good health that lingers yet. Today I choose to douse the fuse that only ends in hate. Today I choose not win or lose but to participate. Today I choose to beat the blues by dancing like a fool, Today I choose my blue suede shoes, not caring if they're cool. Today I choose to infuse my actions with good grace. Today I choose to pay my dues and join the human race. That voice that once I thought was me, I foreswear to lose. It only caused me misery, so from today I CHOOSE.

From HMP Hull

Check out the yoga and meditation column each month in Inside Time.

Letters

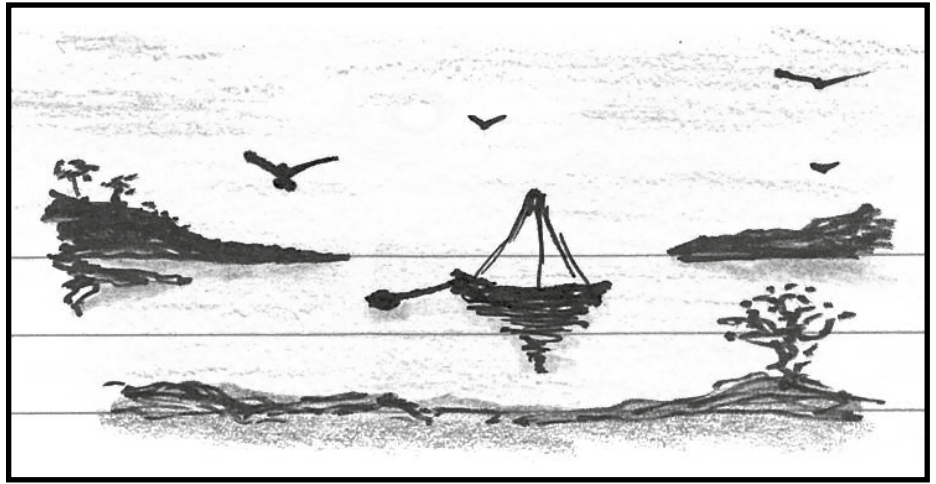
family and friends, staff and inmates because I feel they don't or won't understand me, so I talk to yoga.

Meditation is key for me—it understands me and I think that is why it helps me so much. Since doing yoga regularly I'm breathing better, I think differently, but most of all I'm sleeping. Sleeping was something bothering me because I rarely had peaceful sleeps. But once again yoga and meditation really relaxes my body, settles my nerves and clears my mind of unwanted things that would not make me sleep peacefully. They have helped me to transform.

From
HMP Isle of Wight

Your article "Going Deeper with the Dog" was exactly what I needed.

Having hypermobility and acrobatics training, I struggle to find "advanced" variations of poses. But also showing the milder variation



has allowed me to help others improve as well.

Thanks to the hard work of our Gym Instructor Jason, we now have a regular yoga class once a fortnight with at least five people each time. It's the best workout available and leaves everyone calm afterwards.

For a while I struggled to read the newsletter. It just wasn't clicking. But now I'm so glad I didn't give up, as it really helps spur me on. I sometimes think of that saying, "The journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step." Thanks

for supporting us. I hope there will be other "Going Deeper."

Ed: We're glad you liked it! See page 6 for a detailed look at the Tree.

From
HMP Greenock

I have drawn a little calm water picture for you at the top of this letter (above). If you are having a hectic day then take yourself into my picture and listen to the waves gently wash onto the shore...

Meditation Corner

All in Order



By Jason

It's particularly busy in our office right now, and especially at my desk, piled with paper and things to do. The Prison Phoenix Trust has only a small number of staff, and some days are particularly buzzy. As I write, the printer next to me is running, there are several phone conversations going on, the post has just come and I'd like to just focus on your letters that have arrived. But the deadline for this Meditation Corner is today too, I am in London tomorrow, and we have a big event next week...

Perhaps you too feel bewildered by a high level of activities at times.

In prison there can be many things to do, partly because so many situations appear unresolved and in need of attention.

Maybe with Christmas approaching it seems there are even more. It can be a difficult time of year in prison, so maybe this is a time to let go of the mountain of activities and anxieties that can easily

take over. Maybe you will join me for a few minutes as I step back for a while too.

You can do this right where you are sitting. Just make sure you are upright, with a straight back, and ears in line with the shoulders. You may find it helpful to slightly tuck your chin in and feel the top of your head being gently pulled upwards. When you are perfectly still and comfortable, focus on the breath, breathing normally and silently.

The breath operates automatically without thinking, and this makes it the perfect focus to quieten the mind.

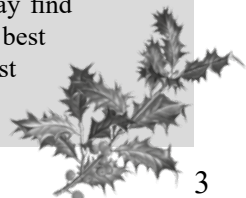
Counting the inhalations and exhalations may make this easier. When you reach ten just start from one again.

As you breathe and count, you may feel a strong urge to keep working things out in your mind. Just keep letting go of thoughts by focussing on your exhalations and release the need to judge whether a particular thought is more important than

another. Rest assured that this practice helps clarify your thinking, even if it does not actually appear to be productive. Nothing is imperative at this time, and focussing upon your breath allows all those tasks to fall away into just the right places. This is a little like clearing the desk and having complete faith that everything knows exactly where it should go without any help from you.

See if you can keep letting go for at least five minutes – just continue returning to the breath and notice how everything becomes resolved as the moments pass.

When you feel like stopping, you may notice tasks gradually appearing in your mind again, only this time they appear more achievable. Just let them arise naturally and deal with them as needed. You may find some tasks are actually best undone, and that most things can happily wait!



Chair Yoga for Every Body



By Victoria

There are a variety of yoga styles to suit every body, all ages and fitness levels. On a visit to HMP Wymott in July, we shared chair yoga with men from the CAMEO Unit (for people over 50). Below is a sample of what we did. It works for anyone, regardless of your age, and can easily be done in your cell.

Starting position: Sit towards the front edge of the chair or bed, with your feet on the floor hip distance apart, toes facing forward. Sit up straight, with your spine away from the back of the chair. Rest your hands on your legs. Take a breath, growing slightly taller. Look straight ahead.



1. Warm up

Raise your arms as you breathe in through your nose. Lower your arms, and sigh out through your mouth. Do this five times, synchronising the movement to your breath.



2. Seated Cat

Hold the seat and straighten your arms. Breathe in and squeeze your shoulder blades together, lifting your chest and looking up. Breathe out and round your back, your shoulders forward, chin to chest and looking down. Repeat these moves four more times while taking slow, even breaths.



3. Side Stretch

Breathe in, raising your right arm, and breathe out, stretching to the left. Hold the position for five breaths. Repeat on the other side for five breaths.



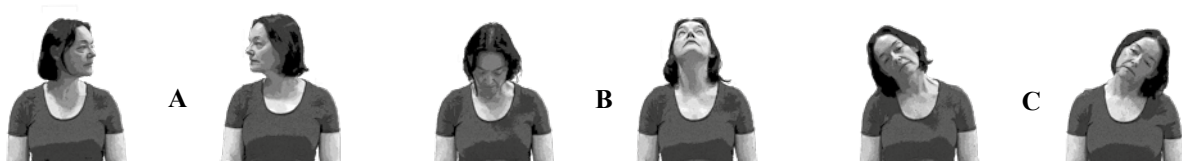
4. Neck Releases

Do these neck exercises in sequence. Use slow and gentle movements, and keep your shoulders and face relaxed.

A: Breathe out, and turn slowly to look over your left shoulder. Breathe in, returning the head to centre. Breathe out, and turn slowly to look over your right shoulder. Breathe in, returning the head to centre. Repeat four more times.

B: Breathe out, and tuck your chin slowly towards the chest. Breathe in, returning your head to centre. Breathe out, looking up. Breathe in, returning the head to centre. Repeat four more times.

C: Breathe out, tilting your right ear slowly towards your right shoulder. Breathe in and return your head to centre. Breathe out and tilt your left ear gently towards your left shoulder. Breathe in and return your head to centre. Repeat four more times.



5. Seated Eagle

Cross your right leg over the left. Raise your arms out to the sides. Bend the elbows and bring your palms and forearms together in front of you. Lift the elbows and relax the shoulders. Hold for five breaths. Repeat on the other side.



6. Seated Pigeon

Place your right ankle on your leg, above or below your left knee. Let your knee relax out to the side while keeping the foot flexed. Don't push or force the knee down. Take five easy breaths, then repeat on the left side.



7. Seated Twist

Have your legs hip distance apart, toes facing forward. Place your right hand on the back of the seat, breathe in and sit up straight. As you breathe out turn your upper body to the right and place your left hand on the outer right leg. Take five breaths here. Return to face forward on an in-breath. Repeat on the left.



8. Forward Bend

Forward bends have a calming effect on the mind and body. Start with your hands resting on top of your thighs. Breathe in and sit up taller. Breathe out, fold forward, gradually sliding your hands down your legs. Let your body rest on your legs, allowing your head and neck to relax. Take seven breaths here, and come back up slowly on an in-breath.



9. Relaxation

Sit back in your chair, take three sighing breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Now close your eyes, and rest your hands in your lap, feeling your body supported by the chair. Let your attention be with your natural breath and rest for 3 minutes or 30 breaths.

If you prefer you can also rest with your back on the floor and your legs up on the chair. Many people find this comfortable and refreshing for the legs. Follow your body and your breath and you will find the perfect way to relax.



Christmas Cards



This year our Christmas cards come in packs of five each of two designs, both drawn by our friend at HMP Grendon (144 x 103 mm). One of the cards is pictured left, the other is a winter woodland scene. The inside is left blank for your own message. You can see both designs in full 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.

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've asked my prison to send you payment.



Going Deeper with the Tree

Helps concentration and inner balance



By Sally

Balancing postures help us to work towards inner balance, and improved focus. The tree posture requires a steady, natural breath and concentration. Maybe you are lucky enough to see a tree from your window or pass one as you go about your day. Next time you see a tree, have a proper look at it. We can learn a lot from trees.

A tree has roots that reach into the earth to draw water and nutrients, and branches that reach to the sky to absorb sunlight and sustenance.

As you practise, it can help to be near a wall or a chair to steady yourself. Don't worry if you wobble. It doesn't matter. It's fine to put your foot on the floor whenever you need to.

- 1.** Stand up straight. Your weight is evenly balanced on the soles of both feet. Your arms are relaxed.



on the leg is fine. Breathe easily and settle into the posture. Try the foot in different positions and find out what works best for you.

Have your hands together in front of your chest. When you are feeling steady raise your arms over your head, palms together. You can also stretch your arms up to the sky - perhaps they can be your branches.

If you'd like to make this pose even more challenging, try closing your eyes and seeing how this effects your balance.



- 2.** Shift your weight onto your left leg and soften your right knee. Gaze at a spot on the floor.



- 3.** Bend your right knee. Place your right foot just below or just above your left knee. Try to keep your right knee pointing out to the side. You may be able to get your right foot to the top of your leg, but anywhere

- 4.** If you are not sure about balancing, place your right heel just above your left ankle, big toe on the floor. Keep your heel against your leg as you lift your toes off the floor. Lower them when you want to steady yourself. You can stay for 5 breaths, 10 breaths, or longer.



To Finish:

Come out of the tree and stand with both feet back on the floor. Be aware of the soles of your feet in contact with the floor, your arms relaxed by your sides and your chest lifted as you grow taller. Be aware of your steady, strong nature, just like an oak tree.

Repeat on the other side.

“The wind does not break the tree that bends.”

~ Tanzanian proverb

Can you puzzle out these cracker jokes?

Some of us at the PPT are fans of bad jokes, especially ones about eyes. The cornea the better...

Answers on back page.

1. What's a dog's favourite carol?
2. What does Miley Cyrus have for her Christmas dinner?
3. What is Santa's favourite pizza?
4. What do Santa's little helpers learn at school?
5. Who hides in the bakery at Christmas?



A Christmas Jumper

From HMP Stanford Hill

In January, you can start listening to Freedom Inside on National Prison Radio. This new series from the Prison Phoenix Trust features prisoners and former prisoners talking with each other about how yoga and meditation are helping them find meaning and hope in in prison, and back outside. And course there are teachers to talk you through yoga and meditation sessions. Check out Inside Time for broadcast times.

Below is an excerpt from a recording with one of the people you'll hear if you tune in. And page 8 features Sue, who also appears on the programme.

The main part of prison is boredom. People get bored and then they start thinking about what they've done. And that's the worst part of prison - that you have to face up to it. When people are being loud and boisterous in prison, a lot of the time they're trying to hide from what they've done. So many people I've seen blaring their stereos out and having to go to sleep with it on, because otherwise they have to listen to what's going on in their head.

The best time in prison is also the worst time in prison – when it's quiet, and you've just got time to think. It's the worst time because there's so much guilt attached to it, you start to realise that this isn't the kind of person you wanted to be. But that's also the time you realise that you don't have to be this person.

Moving on

You can try and work out why you did it and try and change. It's been the hardest part of my life, having to accept what I did, but that's a part of who I am. I can never deny what I've done or deny the hurt I've caused. But it doesn't have to be the full description of who I am. I can easily let that consume me, get swallowed up in despair and guilt and everything else. But I'm trying to move on from that and still remember it, and trying to use that as a focus and not to fall into that same trap and go down that same path.

When you're meditating, when that silence comes in, you can't control that little thought that pops up in your head. Sometimes you can get a smell or you can hear a sound that reminds you of something outside. And you can be missing that, and the thought will come in of why you miss it. And you can think that I'm missing it, but other people are suffering worse than me, other people aren't just in prison, they've got worse things going on, because of me. You think about the hurt you've caused – not just directly to the people you've hurt, but to



their friends and family, to your friends and family, to people around them. And you start to realise that there's so much. That can really become a spiral of guilt and shame. You have to acknowledge that, but not fall into it. It's really a fine line to walk, and I can see why a lot of people avoid it completely.

The shape I held in people's lives has changed. I've been in prison for a long time now and I haven't seen either of my brothers for most of that time.

So they're not used to having me around – I've become a voice on the phone to them. I'm not going back to my old flat, or even my home town. I can't expect to have my brothers there, have my dad there, and have them make all that time for me. I will be able to talk to them and have their support, but it's always going to be difficult for them. It's going to be a change in their routine, just as me being ripped out of their lives and coming to prison was a change for them. But this is something we can deal with together, slowly, which is the big difference between now and the start of my sentence.

When I first came in it was my brother's birthday and we were on lockdown. This Listener came round to see if we were alright, and I told him through the door that I was a bit stressed because it was my

brother's birthday and I couldn't get hold of him. He asked for my brother's number and he went out and used his pin credit to phone him, and he wouldn't take anything back. He just phoned my family to say that I couldn't phone but I was okay.

Feeling human

I've always remembered that, and I became a Listener myself for a few years. It's not all aggression and violence in prison. There's more to us than what we've done and people bouncing round the landings, how they're portraying themselves. Everyone's got a good side and a bad side to them. I often find that I'm scowling at people, so they react to that and it becomes a self fulfilling prophesy. But if I just say good morning to someone it takes a little bit of the tension out of it.

When I was in a local prison, it was the middle of winter. People were outside, shivering, because they didn't have a jumper. So I went out giving people jumpers. They said, "Alright, what do you want for it, do you want a Mars bar?" I said, "Mate, it's a prison jumper. I don't want anything for it, just put the damn thing on and stop shivering."

I wasn't doing it for a Mars bar – I was doing it to feel a bit more human.

Starting Afresh

From Sue

When I was in Styal prison I was in a long termers' house and I worked in the gardens.

Women can be difficult and they can be bitchy, but overall my memories of prison are very happy.

I was free of my drug habit, I was working on myself, doing my meditation. I was no longer the person I was before I went to prison. I'd ended my relationship with a guy who I thought I'd always be with, but I'd got to the point where I just knew we weren't good for each other. I'd have come back and be doing nine years next time – so I had to let it go.

Growing and changing

I remember when I first walked into prison. The houses were all large detached houses, and I was looking at the houses thinking, "Oh how beautiful, they've got leaded windows." Actually they were bars, but in squares.

The first moment when you go in there's that judgement, the weighing up of who you are and what you're there for, people wanting to put you in a box. But you're never in a box. They're never going to know who you really are.

I found that the majority of people in prison were kind, and they could be really funny. Some of the best laughs I've had were over the silliest things in prison. And if I hadn't been sent to prison, I could easily be dead now.

There'll always be people that don't grow and don't change and have no interest in looking at themselves. The only way you can grow and change is by stopping, taking a step back and looking at where your thoughts have led you.

When I was in prison I was in a dormitory and I would go into the bathrooms to meditate. When I first started doing it, people would take the piss a little bit. But I maintained that discipline of going in there each morning and doing my meditation.

I always loved getting up before the prison officers woke us up. It made me feel like I was in control. It's different when you're out, because you have far more distractions. But it's important to keep it up – even if it's just ten minutes in the morning or the evening. It can make such a profound difference to your life. And there is life, after prison.

The meditation was always a grounding for me, and a real hope for the future.

After prison I went to rehab for eighteen months, because I knew there were issues I had to deal with. I was fortunate to get a job four weeks after leaving prison – they wanted a woman and they wanted an ex-user. Taking those steps within enabled the carpet to roll out before me, because my

life had changed – I had become good. I knew what "good" meant.

It's difficult to come out with a conviction. But there is hope, there is employment, there is a future. I can guarantee that because it's happened with me. I was head hunted for my job because they wanted me – they wanted someone with my background. My experiences as a drug user have been beneficial – I train people who work with clients so they can treat them with respect and with dignity.

I had a lot of guilt and shame about my son. That I'd gone to prison and he was in Cornwall and I wasn't there for him. But our relationship healed. There is a place for guilt and shame, but you don't have to strap it to your back. You can just feel it and let it go.

It doesn't matter

When you come out of prison you're a baby again. It's all so bright and colourful and there's new phones and there's new this and there's new that... But it's really not important. Even thinking, "What do people think of me?" People really don't think of you very much. Everybody has their own stuff. It's very rare that people are thinking about you or me. They've got their own lives. It doesn't matter.

Just drop it, take a breath, start afresh. You'll get some knock backs, but so what? Do it again.



1. Bark, the herald angels sing 2. Twirky 3. One that's deep-pan, crisp and even 4. The elf-abet 5. A mince spy

This newsletter goes to prisoners and prison staff, and to many friends who offer us their encouragement. We receive no statutory funding, but rely wholly on individuals, groups, grant making trusts and faith-based communities who understand the value of meditation and yoga, silence and the breath in empowering individuals and society to heal. Two important ways that friends can help are remembering us in their will and setting up a regular donation. Any support you can offer is greatly appreciated.

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