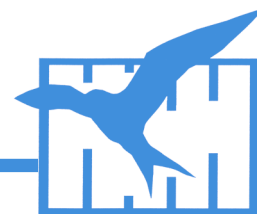


Newsletter, Autumn 2020



TRUE YOGA

Yoga's become big in the last ten years and there's loads of eye catching imagery around it. If you've never actually practised yoga, you could be excused for thinking it's all about making the perfect body, or becoming some kind of human pretzel. Or maybe you think it's about seeing how much pain you can tolerate, pushing yourself to uncomfortable extremes. Some may take yoga to be a vehicle for out-of-body experiences. There's also the idea that you should suppress all your emotions and only radiate peacefulness and calm. Or that yoga will make all the troubles in your life go away.

Hard to pin down

But really, you can spot true yoga not by what someone does on a yoga mat or the shape of their body, but rather HOW they are doing what they are doing in everyday life. The letter from HMP Wandsworth on page 2 is a perfect example. First of all, like so many of the letters we receive from people inside, he is full of gratitude. Second, he's got a sense of humour, as you can see in his poem (opposite), which starts when the postman

delivered him one of our books. Third, he's no longer tied in inner knots by some pre-conceived idea about what yoga is. And finally, he's a little hard to pin down: it seems like he's saying yoga's not for him, but then we see he's got the essence of yoga, right there at the tip of his nose!

His yoga may look different from the one you practise. But if it includes using your breath, body and mind with awareness; if it means you are putting thinking and your sense of self on the back burner as you focus instead on your breath (see meditation corner, page 3); and if it brings a sense of joy and appreciation for what you can do, rather than frustration at everything you can't, that's true yoga. We salute our friend in Wandsworth and everyone who is finding "Their Yoga."

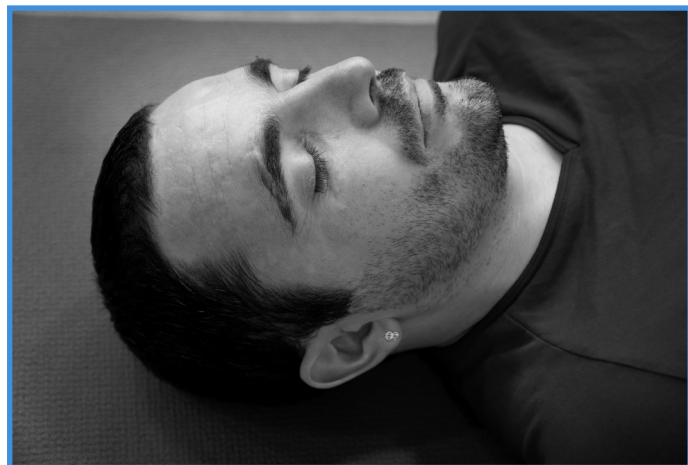
My Yoga

*My heart was beating wildly when the postman I did see
Pass to me so mildly a parcel just for me.
I felt like pulling out my hair a frown upon my brow,
As I sat here in my wheelchair not knowing what or how.
So I gently eased the throttle peg as I drove towards my bed,
Lifting up my lifeless leg to put behind my head.
Twas then I noticed from the book I needed to lay flat.
It must have been a silly look, twisted up like that.
I tried to do a yoga pose and found the one to do.
The one where I can use my nose, the one on page 42.
So breathing in deeply, breathing in slow,
Exhaling out meekly, it's the only one I know.
So thank you for the yoga book. It truly is a must.
I now know on what page to look, so thank you Phoenix Trust.*

From HMP Wandsworth



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



Breathing in slow...

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.

"We all need to create and give life to our own Yoga and have our own personal style and relationship. Then it feels more like a voice or companion, just for you."



~ R, HMP Coldingley

"The poses are helping manage the anxiety and the physical issues that go along with being in such a confined space day after day."

~ Mandy, HMP Downview

From
HMP Swaleside
January



I have reached new heights on my journey of self discovery. I practise yoga every morning at 6:45 am followed by a 20 minute sit. But I am also mindful in everything I do from brushing my teeth to eating my dinner to writing this letter. I can't believe I never saw it before. The world really is a beautiful place, and I feel privileged to be a part of it for however long. I even appreciate my cell now. I see it as my temple. I've always been somewhat of a clean person but now even more as my understanding of how precious I (and everything) truly is grows. I see a divine hand in everything around me.

I've also learned that my thoughts are not me, and if they are not beneficial to me in some way then I dismiss them as quick as they appear.

I've also stopped vaping recently. I say I've stopped, but it gave me up really. I once read that after dedicated practice, habits give you up, and now it's actually happened for me.

I'm still at the beginning of my journey but I've already learnt so much. There's much more out there to learn and I'm determined to stay on the path.

May

I've had a lot going on what with family being ill with Covid-19. Thankfully they've both made a full recovery.

I still managed to fit in daily sits and yoga, until yesterday when I broke two ribs. I was standing on my chair trying to get paperwork from on top of a cupboard when I fell off and landed on my side. So for the moment at least, yoga is out of the question, which I'm gutted about. I still manage to lay in the corpse pose though. So I'll continue to do that until I feel able

to start the asanas again.

I'm determined to stay connected to the "bliss" as I call it. I don't think anything could deter me now. I've tasted true serenity. Even drugs (of any kind) can't compare because they all have had comedowns. I don't even take antidepressants any more. I have started vaping again but that's only because of lockdown and its associated boredom. I plan to quit again when we're let back out.

From
HMP Wandsworth



Thank you for your most welcome letter and the yoga book. This

is usually very helpful to most people but I will have to give it to our yoga teacher. I usually attend the Tuesday afternoon classes on C Wing, but as a disabled electric wheelchair user with no lower body movement or feeling, I find there is little to benefit me in the book.

I do meditate and use breathing exercises as best I can. I only have one good arm (my right). My left is weak and failing, along with my neck and shoulders (I use a headrest for support). I began my sentence in 1980 but over the subsequent years was treated for acid reflux and heartburn. This was in fact a misdiagnosis – I was already suffering with Scheurmann's Disease of the spine and arthritis. I later found out that Type 2 Diabetes had gone untreated for over 20 years so complications set in. My body is shutting down and I thought I could do something about it by way of yoga, but alas this is a pipe dream, so please forgive my ignorance. (See front page article).

From
HMP Littlehey

I've been having a tough time - but I'm not here to indulge in self-pity, and others are on the same journey here. Never been inside before, never expected to, and I'm nearly 60. I've been plagued with these demon thoughts - the past, trial, people outside, loss. Through three remand prisons on the journey here - not been able to get any mental health support. I've had to find my own ways to cope.

Now, with the pandemic lockdown just when I should have got that support, instead I'm classed as at Covid-19 high risk and quarantined. It's been eight weeks so far. No cell phone. Lots of us in the same boat.



Prisoners'

So the copy of *Peace Inside* you sent me was very welcome. I had been meditating already for several months. Many years ago I was taught mindfulness of breathing by a Buddhist group. It helped me at a time of bereavement. But I had not practised for at least 15 years, until jail.

The book has got me back onto the straight and narrow, and is one of the best of its field I have read. I like some of the key messages – particularly, keep it simple, don't expect perfection, forgive yourself for these distracting thoughts, recognise them and let them go.

Love and peace to all inside and outside during the pandemic. You are not alone.



From
Portlaoise Prison

Your book *Peace Inside* was a

fantastic read. In a two man cell it can be hard to do yoga and some people joke me but I love it. I find yoga a great help - it keeps me well in myself. I found the book a great help – people telling their own true stories about life and time spent inside.

I find meditation hard right now. There's lots of banging day in, day out. I am trying my best.

From
HMP Downview



I've been transferred to a different establishment – very unexpectedly and at short notice (as these moves often are). It was just one day before full lockdown commenced. Since arriving I have spent 23 hours, sometimes more, per day locked in my room. This is very challenging and I am managing as best as I am able. Thank you for all the teachings that are helping to get through this difficult situation. Your yoga sessions have been enlightening, empowering, and a lifeline to help me cope in prison.

The breathing, the attempts at meditating, and the stretches and poses are helping manage the anxiety and the physical issues that go along with being in such a confined space day after day.

I hope you and your loved ones are all well and send good vibes outwards. Here's to staying positive and moving forwards while sitting still.

There are so many more parakeets and other birds flying around here. My room has a window with no bars and a view of trees and a field. Squirrels play in the yard

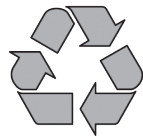
Check out the yoga and meditation column each month in *Inside Time* and tune into our radio programme 3 times a week on National Prison Radio.

Letters

below in the early morning and evening. After 19 months of bars and the view of a grey wall, with a postage stamp of sky, this feels like freedom.

From
HMP Northumberland

Over these past two months it's been nice to just wind down and relax listening to your CD. I didn't believe yoga would help with anything but I gave it a go and I'm so glad I did. The exercises are great and the breathing at the end just tops it off. I'm currently making PPE gowns and masks for the NHS in the tailor workshop we have here – it's so good to give something back. I was getting really stressed and anxious with all this news of coronavirus but yoga helps take the mind off it and improves my mood.



From
HMP Northumberland

I'm still reading the book you sent me. I do the

yoga and meditation every day as I've always got an hour at night. It's been a little struggle at the moment while this Covid-19 is still ongoing as my mood has been low recently due to early lock ups at 5 o'clock. It's during long nights that my mind does overtime. It doesn't help having another prisoner in the same cell as he just makes things worse. But I always put on your CDs and read the book. I still manage to keep myself fit. I work in recycling every day where I have fresh air about me, which is good. I'm constantly thinking about my children – if they're okay and safe, what they're up to. I love and miss them so much always. They are my world.

From
HMP Lindholme

Thank you for getting me interested in myself again. The *Freeing the Spirit* book you sent has opened numerous corridors inside. I now have an interest in yoga and meditation and I'm slowly becoming aware of how much benefit I'm getting from reading and trying things. I've also started to work out and my faith has improved immensely.



Due to all this I feel so much better inside and people are noticing this change in me. My self esteem, being responsible for my health and awareness, my defects of character I'm slowly addressing. My conscious contact with everything has improved. I'm now more grateful for what I have and the positive people around me. Taking responsibility for my actions has made me aware of how many amends I need to make but though some may frighten me, I know it's the correct thing to do.

So it's safe to say today I'm in a good place. Tomorrow and the day before – there's not much I can do about either. I'm living more in the day which helps me appreciate the here and now so much more.

Free Handouts

Many prison staff have been printing meditation and yoga handouts from our website, to give to prisoners. Ask them if you'd like to have the handouts.

Meditation Corner

The New Normal

This year you would be hard-pressed to miss the dramatic rise of new words related to Covid-19 that have appeared in the news and are part of our everyday conversations now. 'Pandemic' is one of the words that comes to mind, along with 'unprecedented', 'social distancing', 'uncertain', 'essential' and of course 'the new normal'. Without us even noticing, all these words can be isolating and unsettling. Before you know it, your mind may be working overtime to try to understand what they all mean. You will doubtless come across many other terms within prison – 'lock-down' comes to mind straight away. You certainly can't avoid these words. Even if you switched the telly off, someone on the wing will probably be using them, speaking loudly and trying to attract attention. We need a way to tolerate, rather than avoid dramatic language.

Some people recommend a peaceful spot for meditation away from disturbances. What I'm going to suggest



By Jason

here is different, and will work equally effectively with noise and talking in the background.

You need to be upright, have a straight back and be relaxed but attentive. Try to be perfectly still, but don't attract attention. Have the eyes gently open so you are aware of things around you. Breathe normally, silently and start to focus on the out-breath. Silently count ten natural breaths and then start again. You may find the mind being attracted to a voice or a sound, or perhaps something will come up in your mind. How about the word 'unprecedented'? Maybe you notice that just before your mind stepped in, this moment was already there before your thoughts made it appear. Return to your breath and let this drop away for now. See if something else emerges – perhaps 'the new normal'. With just the breath ebbing and flowing, 'the new normal' seems neutralised amongst the endless potential for freshness and change. Perhaps all

this is happening during 'lock-down'. Return to the breathing and feel the air silently leave your nostrils – there are no restrictions or lock-downs in this moment. Finish after 5 or 10 minutes, or longer if you wish.

When you return to your activities, maybe you will find it easier to accept the drama that goes on all around you each day. Prisons can certainly be intense places, but it is possible to spend a little time each day experiencing everything unfolding just as it should. Unflustered, effortless, without judgement – perhaps you will find these words and phrases are more helpful as life's endless dramas keep unfolding.



Moving to Become Still



By Selina

You may have heard good things about meditation. That it helps with anxiety, negative thinking, a spinning mind, detoxing, better sleep and all sorts of great benefits. Perhaps you've tried it, but sitting still focussing on your breath for even a few seconds seems too hard. Yoga is a thousands of years old practice designed to help.

The physical postures of yoga reintroduce us to feelings in our bodies. Many people have spent a lifetime avoiding uncomfortable feelings. Breath by breath, yoga teaches a way to befriend the body again with techniques to be able to stay longer with feelings of discomfort.

As you move through the movements below, notice feelings in your body – tightness of muscles, aches and pains, limited movement, the joy of releasing tension through a deep stretch, maybe even moments of peace and stillness. There is no right or wrong. Your experience is your own. Be kind to yourself as you stay present with any and all feelings. 'With humility (an open heart and mind), we embrace the sacred study of yoga.' This is the key as described in ancient yoga texts. Wherever, whoever and however you are, humility is all that really matters. So let's begin. (Remember to breathe in and out through your nose.)

1. Mountain



Stay for 5 breaths.

2. Forward Fold



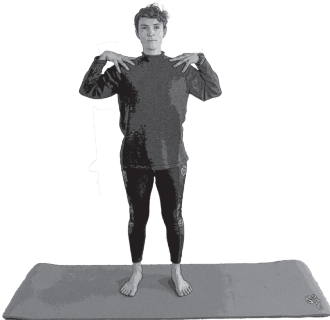
Stay for 5 breaths.

3. Hip Circles



Slowly circle your hips 5 times in one direction, then 5 in the other.

4. Shoulder Rolls



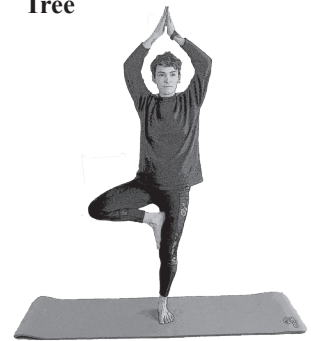
Make 5 big circles with your elbows, then do 5 in the other direction.

5. Neck Stretches



Stay for 5 breaths in each position.

6. Tree



Hold for 5 slow breaths. Repeat on other side.

7. Down Dog

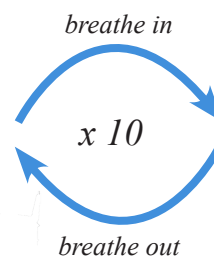


Stay for 5 breaths.

8. Cat



9. Cow



10. Forward Fold



Stretch forward as far as you can. Hold for 5 breaths.

11. Twist



Sitting upright, twist gently, holding for 5 breaths. Repeat on other side.

12. Cobbler



Stay for 5 breaths.

12. Sitting



Having focussed your attention on these movements with your breath, you've prepared well for seated meditation. Sit upright in a way that's comfortable now and be still, tuning into the breathing, for 5 minutes.



Spotlight on Stretched Flank



By Victoria

This pose offers a wide range of benefits. It energises, builds lower body strength, creates openness in the upper body, and improves concentration and balance.

How to do it

There are three stages to every yoga posture: moving into the pose, being in the pose with the breath, and coming out with poise and control. Be focussed and present in each stage.

1. Step your feet 3 to 4 feet apart, toes facing forward. Turn your right foot 90° to point away from you, then turn your left toes in slightly towards the other foot.
2. Bend your right knee towards a 90-degree angle. Keep your shin perpendicular to the floor. Make sure your knee doesn't go out farther than your ankle, to protect the joint. Make your stance wider if needed. Check that your kneecap stays in line with your right foot.
3. Raise your arms to shoulder height, palms face down. Lean to the right and rest your right forearm on your right thigh. Reach up with your left arm then stretch it so that your inner arm is close to your ear.

Lower arm is engaged - don't slump

Keep knee directly above ankle



Keep upper chest and shoulder from rolling forward

Diagonal stretch from foot to fingertips

Wide stance helps with balance and steadiness

4. Look straight ahead, or up towards the left palm if your neck feels okay.
5. Take 5 breaths here. Notice where the in-breath feels open and free (maybe in the left ribs along the left flank). Use each out-breath to relax where you notice tension

- (maybe in the shoulders, ribcage or inner thighs.)
6. Reverse the steps mindfully until you're standing upright again. Take a few breaths here, standing still. When you're ready, repeat on the left side.

Finding Your Own Way

From a former prisoner

A prison officer said to me once, “It was you who put yourself in here.” She was right, of course, but her words did not help me in finding some sort of strategy for coping in prison. It can be a challenging time, with strong emotions running out of control. Most prisoners will experience a head full of fear, anger, vulnerability, insecurity and depression, and it can be quite overwhelming.

The first thing to accept is that these feelings are completely normal for someone in your position. Just because you are a convicted criminal does not mean that you are no longer a human being with very human feelings. The question is, how do we cope with all this turmoil? Is there a strategy that we can employ on a day to day basis to make our time “inside” a little easier? The answer is yes.

The real challenge is to find a way of coping that suits you, and this can be achieved, to some extent, through trial and error. If your strategy doesn’t work, then you have to try something else. The one that failed for me was to cut myself off from everybody else, to be independent and isolated, both physically and mentally. For me, that one just didn’t work. So I abandoned it and tried another route, in a desperate search to finding a way of dealing with what lay before me.

Just Normal People

Perhaps the most obvious place to search is in religious groups, and meditative practices. In my own quest, I found the Sunday morning church service very rewarding. Although I have no religious belief whatsoever, I went to every service and it became an important part of my personal strategy in prison. I went for various reasons; firstly, on our wing, it was the time for cleaning out the cells and I preferred prayers in the chapel to toting a mop and bucket; secondly, the chapel was a place of quiet tranquillity, a refuge where we prisoners could feel at peace with the world. We were able to meet with volunteers who had come in to play guitars and sing songs. Just normal people from the “out” who did not punctuate every sentence with the word “f*!king”! As we sang the Christian



“Finding a way of dealing with what lay before me...”

hymns the tears would fall from my eyes and I knew that this was part of finding my own way.

In recent years meditation and yoga have become more fashionable and have great benefits in calming the mind and helping us to focus more clearly on the unpredictability of prison life. In many prisons today there are comprehensive courses in meditation, yoga and pilates. You may well find that these practices become a central part of your own survival strategy. Meditation and yoga do have the advantage that you can carry out the practices in your own cell. (That’s if you are in a position to bribe your cell mate to turn off the television! Half an ounce of tobacco for an hour of quiet, that was the price that I paid).

A way out of prison

Another consideration for finding your own way is the pursuit of some physical activity. Although the facilities are limited, most prisons offer a chance to go to the gym. Just lifting weights for half an hour can clear the head of all the mundane, boring repetition of prison life. The benefits of exercising the whole body can form an important part of your survival technique. The anxiety, fear and apprehension will fade considerably after a session in the gym and you may well return to your cell feeling uplifted and

optimistic. I saw that many times, and it was a blessing for me to be able to see that in others, rather than being preoccupied with myself.

As my sentence continued, the prisoners around me became much more important, and the “me” began to fade. I discovered that focusing on myself and my problems was not the way forward.

Running was always an important part of my life, and in prison even more so. I never missed a session in the exercise yard. I ran around the perimeter, doing as many laps as I could in the time. When I got back to my cell I would have a wash in the sink and put the details of the running in my diary. “38 laps today a P.B.” (personal best). This, for me, was my first saviour, a way “out of prison”, a way of coping with prison life. I was finding my own way.

There are many other ways of coping with a life behind bars, and maybe you know more of them than I do. My advice is to have an open mind and try them all. It will probably be a combination of things that show you the way. You may not recognise their true value at first, but with perseverance the route to your survival will become clear. If you’re lucky, it may continue after your release. I hope that you can find your own way.



Returning to my True Nature

From HMP Ashfield



Since I last wrote I've been moved to a different jail. I'm just coming to the end of 14 days quarantine during which I've had a lot of time alone. This has been a surprising bonus.

I hope you are well and not too isolated. I guess you are an expert with Skype and Zoom, but nothing can replace a proper conversation in person. Depending on one's nature and habits, solitary time can be a bit of a challenge to deal with.

These last few days have been a great time for contemplation, reading, prayer, meditation and yoga! Being on my own has been great – panic attack in the wee hours? No problem – a bit of yoga, followed by breathing has come to the rescue a few times. I'm doing three sessions each day, using the diagrams on page 40 of *Yoga Without Words* as my template I augment them with strength sessions, using warrior as the foundation, and have now mastered tree, inasmuch as I don't fall over anymore!

My early morning session, just before dawn, is accompanied by a distant owl, whose hoots come a little before the start of the dawn chorus. When the light appears, I can even see some grass and flowers from my window. So different from Winchester, where all I could see was a strip of sky.

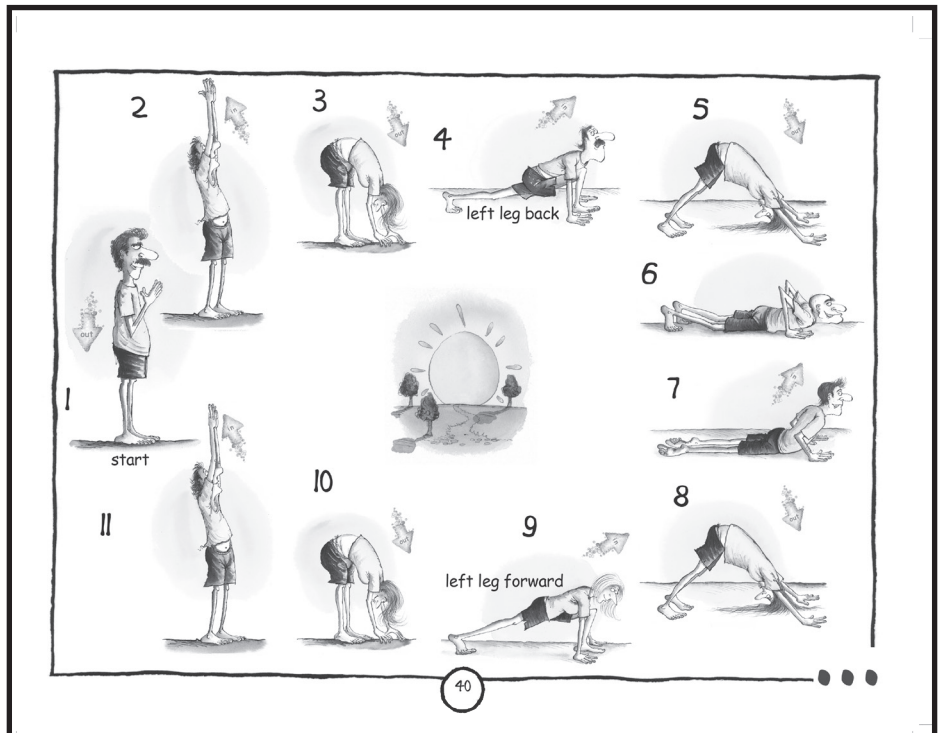
I've had some of my property returned, including my paua shell (the inside of it is coloured like a rainbow). I have

placed this on my shelf and move it into a different position each day. It's my little piece of home in my cell, as well as a bit of nature indoors. Staying connected to nature reminds me of my own humanity. I'm not just a cog in the prison machine.

We are all ok here, and managing well. We are all on our own journeys,

sometimes wrestling with things alone, and sometimes giving mutual support. Faith is the foundation and the breath is a great helper towards finding peace.

Thank you for all your encouragement to keep returning to the breath. It has literally saved my sanity and more.



Page 40 of *Yoga Without Words*. Do this five times on each side to start, and include any other yoga moves you like for a yoga session like Clive's

Christmas Cards



Our Christmas cards come in packs of ten, drawn by a friend at HMP Grendon (144 x 103 mm). The inside is left blank for your own message. You can see the design 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.

The Breath: Profound and Simple



By Sally

We all know how to breathe. It's the first thing we do when we enter the world and the last thing we do when we leave it. Breathing keeps us alive. Breath *is* life.

But there's more. How we feel affects the way we breathe. Think for a moment about how your breathing changes if you get a sudden shock or feel anxious or scared. The beauty of the breath – the real gift – is that the reverse is also true. As yoga students will already know, you can change the way you feel by changing how you breathe. It is as simple as that.

The first thing to do is to get to know your breath. When you wake up in the morning, as you move through your day, watching television, going to work, or exercising in the gym, notice how your mood and emotions change. Pay attention to your breath. Notice where it is. Does it feel shallow and fast, high in the chest, or maybe slow and deep in the lungs? Are you breathing through your nose or through your mouth? Get to know your breath just as it is.

Let us start by practising breathing consciously, sitting, standing, or lying down.

- We will practise sitting down (though you can do this later standing or lying down). Sit on the edge of a chair, your bed or on the floor. Breathe in and out, through

your nose if you can. Your eyes can be closed, or open with your gaze lowered.

- Sit with your back straight and your arms and shoulders relaxed. Let your hands rest on your knees or in your lap.
- Notice your natural breathing. You may be able to feel the coolness of your breath as you breathe in and a warmer breath as you breathe out. Just notice the in-breath and the out-breath. Do this for a couple of minutes.
- Now place one hand gently on your belly. Imagine you are breathing into your hand. Notice the rise and fall of your breath, feeling the breath under your hand.

- Now start to lengthen your breath: count to three as you breathe in, and to four as you breathe out. Keep the breath down low in your belly if you can.
- As you count, pay attention to each out-breath. Notice as it fades away. There is no need to hold your breath or strain.
- After a few minutes, let the counting go. Return to normal breathing.
- Take a few moments to notice how you feel compared to when you started.

Practise this for a few minutes every day. Remember you can do this whenever you like. All you need is your breath and your attention.



**“When the breath wanders the mind is unsteady,
but when the breath is still, so is the mind.”**

~ The Hatha Yoga Pradipika

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.

Prison Phoenix Trust Newsletter
PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF
registered charity no. 1163558

