



Newsletter, Spring 2021

Blossoming Friendships

Many of you write and tell us how small acts of friendship have big impacts on your lives. But, perhaps it might be that having someone be kind to us makes us be kinder to ourselves. We might feel more comfortable with the idea of simply sitting and being with ourselves in silence, and then *that* transforms our lives. Perhaps it's all one and the same. Perhaps we are one and the same.

Helping each other

Kindness often comes in the form of a gift, and we receive countless letters from you describing how such a gift changed your life. Perhaps it was a yoga book, or a listening ear, or even the suggestion that you write to us for guidance (as discussed in *Not Alone* on pg6). These gifts are often given by strangers, compelled to share what they hold valuable, because they recognise themselves in others. With these acts of kindness grows a sense of community, friendship, and love. "I sense a camaraderie which I'd never experienced on the outside," says a letter writer at HMP The Verne.

Feeling connected

When practising meditation or yoga, this feeling of being part of something greater than ourselves can start to blossom. We start to feel that, rather than alone, we are together. We sense no real separation from others, physically, emotionally, or spiritually. A writer generously explains this in his piece on pg7, *A Community of Spiritual Warriors Together as One*.

This experience is especially treasured by those who have felt cut off from others, whether because of living arrangements or a feeling of being emotionally separate. Being connected to the spirit through our breath can change this. Not in a forced way. It just happens. It's also of great comfort to know that even those

who don't discover this sense of connection are *still* connected, they just aren't aware. The barriers we put up over the years, even when as strong as ramparts and even if we don't know they are there, can melt away when we are ready. This happens without conscious effort, just a quiet patience and a commitment to sit in silence. Without expectation, one day you might just notice these barriers to separation have dissolved on their own accord and a warm glow of connection in their place.

Even if when you practise you feel tense in the body or restless in the mind, keeping going, and being kind and friendly to yourself about the experience, fosters a feeling of acceptance. Just being with things as they are. Little by little, it's this acceptance that starts to dissolve feelings of separation and allows friendship to blossom. Like a cherry tree in spring time that has been dormant over winter.



Artwork by a former prisoner of
HMP Canterbury

Change through stillness

This is not a thing to learn, or try to achieve, or be better at. By sitting in stillness with the breath in meditation

or moving with the breath in yoga, the petal inside each and every one starts to unfurl all on its own. Whether we want to share our experience with others or not, the compassion flowers all the same. People might notice our behaviour changing and ask about it, or they might simply find our blossoming peacefulness rubs off on them. It doesn't matter where or who you are, everyone is equal in their quiet, inner stillness, blossoming like the spring. One and the same indeed.



*Love from Selina – and Lucy, Gabrielle,
Sally, Jason, Victoria, Chris, David,
Laura & Padmakumara.*



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, CDs, newsletters, free taster workshops

CONTENTS

Page 2-3 Prisoners' Letters
Page 3 Meditation Corner
Page 4-5 Rise and Shine
Page 6 Not Alone
Page 7 Life on Release
Page 8 Alternate Nostril Breathing

**"The new dawn blooms as we free it.
For there is always light, if only
we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it."**

From *The Hill We Climb*,
by Amanda Gorman,
US National Youth Poet Laureate



Prisoners' Letters

From HMP Eastwood Park

Mood swings...It's been awful, but life is always changing, right? I can see when I start feeling down. The problem is to stay up, but they have given me helpful recommendations. I was ahead on the yoga, but I have to admit (sadly) as soon as I felt blue, I stopped it again. I have made a poster saying: GET UP AND DO YOGA. I put it on top of my door, that way when I wake, I can see it, smile, and feel motivated to do it. Focusing on breathing still helps me to sleep, so I am not stopping it. And I am sticking to my simple meditation.



From HMP Swaleside

I am making great use of the book *Freeing the Spirit* and the *Clearing The Head* CD. I am now into a daily routine of morning meditation and late morning yoga and I am really feeling the benefits. I'm far less stressed than I have been in the past and my wife has seen noticeable improvements in my attitude and general behaviour. My sleep is also improving, which is something I've always struggled with.



From HMP Whatton

Have any other people written to you about the meditative quality of running? I am a keen distance runner. I love the simplicity of running. I find I can clear my mind and leave my troubles behind as I focus on simply putting one foot in front of the other while also focusing on my breath coming in and out in rhythm with the pace of my run; focused and controlled. I always finish my runs feeling calm and centred. Not to mention the feeling you have done something good for your body and the natural high one feels with the body's release of endorphins!



From HMP Lindholme

October

I genuinely feel like a different person over the last couple of months. I am plagued by borderline personality disorder and ADHD, but since I have been practising I am a lot calmer and my moods and emotions have never been so stable, but most of all I am starting to notice other people's emotions. For the first time I am fully aware of my surroundings and other people matter.

The world don't seem so evil and sadistic no more. My eyes are fully open and the world, it truly is a beautiful place with a lot more good than bad. I have changed the way I see the world and my world has changed for the better.

November

I struggle with meditation. I can't sit or lay still or clear my mind. It's really bugging me. I suffer from ADHD so I'm very fidgety, but I have started getting up at 5am to practice my yoga asanas and meditation, which seems to help clear my head when I'm a bit sleepy! I've only just started so will see if it continues to improve. If it wasn't for the bars I'd have such a beautiful view of sunrise through the trees. Ducks or geese fly over most mornings. I'm coming to love the asanas part of yoga. It's a positive, refreshing start to the day.



Earlier in December

My meditation has improved. When it was time to finish, I kept going and it felt like I could sit for days. My mind was clear. Then out of nowhere I just welled up and cried. It was a strange experience and I couldn't understand why. My mind was clear and my attention was on my breath. Afterwards I was up and about and my mind was still clear and I felt euphoric.

Later in December

I am slowly starting to not fidget as much in meditation. I managed to sit for 15 minutes last week without a twitter. To think around seven months ago when I first gave yoga a try listening to National Prison Radio, it would lead to where I am still practising and meditating.

I have always been a spiritual person but never had the courage to admit it. The circles I have been in would judge me, but I embrace it now. I am slowly starting to feel more confident in my body. Just being me. I am learning something new about myself, or rediscovering something I always had. I just kick myself for not starting sooner.



From HMP Stocken

I have experienced inner calmness and peace when meditating when stressed or I needed to relax. Yoga has made me less stiff and more flexible. It helps lessen my back pain and other problems. It helps me get a better sleep, helping with my insomnia. I also use it for warming up for an activity. I find the *Yoga Without Words* book easier to follow along to and helpful with the breathing techniques.



From HMP Eastwood Park

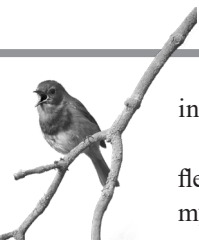
I'm a great believer yoga helps and meditation heals the body and mind. I like to think of prison as a blessing, to have time to rediscover myself and think about what I really want in life. I've always been a spiritual person, but I lost my way before coming into prison. I feel like I've "woken up". Meditation helps me ground myself and relieves me from panic episodes. The yoga relaxes and energises. I do, however, miss the group sessions that used to be held here.

From HMP Stafford

I am writing having just completed an asana sequence from the *Freedom Inside* CD. I have done this many times now. I must know the poses by heart but still I always put the CD on. I find Sally's gentle instruction very calming and focusing.

I've only been in prison for seven months and this is my first sentence, but already I've noticed what a huge difference yoga can make for me in here. I did a little yoga on the outside but it's only in the last few months that I've really done it 'properly' – giving everything to it and trying to do some every day.

Blessed are the days when I get to do a sun salutation out on the yard with the sun shining down on me. There is something incredibly sacred about a sun salutation in actual sunshine. I feel like I'm tapping



into an ancient wisdom.

I've noticed changes in my body. My flexibility and balance has improved, also my core strength and posture. I didn't realise how hunched I used to stand.

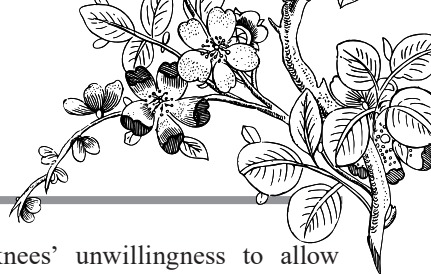
Emotional energy has a way of sneaking up on me in prison. Suddenly I can feel overwhelmed with frustration, despair or even just agitated boredom. I have learnt that a good 40 minutes of yoga can clear out almost any difficult feelings. It's quite magical.

After yoga I feel like myself again, like all the mist and fear and doubt has been washed away. What could 50 years amount to when I'm noticing small changes after a few months?

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to get into meditation so easily. I feel some resistance and discomfort. I think part of this is due to my expectations of what 'meditation' should feel like. Part is due

to my knees' unwillingness to allow something even close to a half lotus. I know kneeling or using a chair are viable alternatives but I just feel that if I could sit in lotus, I would be able to commit better. Maybe this is pure fantasy.

Prison is a horrible place, but the opportunity to practise yoga is one of the things that makes it more real. When I am fully engaging with my breath, letting go of thoughts and all the material around me, I start to disappear. I am ushered by birdsong through my open window out into the natural world. I am one with the mountains, the rivers, the trees and all the energies of the world. In those brief moments of total immersion, I exist outside of time. I am not just this body nor the thoughts it holds. Once again I am whole. My only hope is that tomorrow it lasts a little longer.



Meditation Corner

Form an orderly queue please...

By Jason

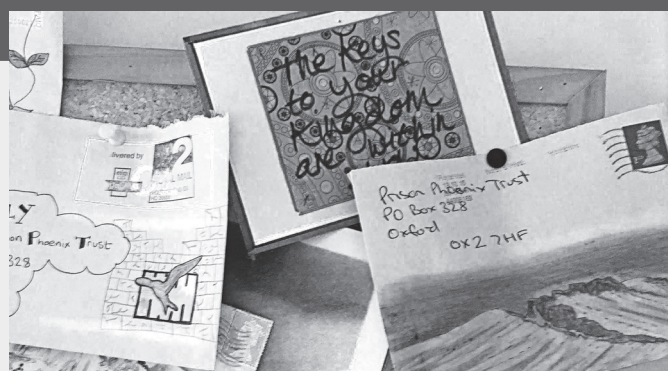
At the PPT we meditate each morning from 8:30 to just before 9:00, but this morning, meditation wasn't easy. I was cold from my cycle ride in and my mind kept wandering and feeling concerned over things.

When meditation ended, I started the day by looking at your letters, and especially those who have written for the first time. I imagine these as people queuing at our office waiting to receive help. There are all sorts of things on their minds: some want to sleep better, nearly all are anxious about something, and some just want to try meditation and yoga because there is nothing to lose.

They all need to be heard, with patience and care. Most come away with a newsletter, book, CD, and advice on how to meditate, and then it is time to be with the next person. Of course, all this activity happens via correspondence, and so it must be my mind that imagines these letters as people. Perhaps then, it was also my mind that felt the meditation wasn't easy this morning... or that the cycle ride was cold... or so many other things that create an *opinion*. I'm exhausted already!

How to quieten the mind

The mind is usually desperate to calculate an answer and feel in control, but you can try this practice now to help you feel less attached and bothered by the busy and distracting



workings of the mind. You can sit or stand up, but try to be upright, relaxed and perfectly still. Lift your chest a little and drop your shoulders. Now, focus on your exhalation as the air leaves your nose. You may wish to count each out-breath silently, until you reach ten, and then return to one again. You may find that your mind wanders (like mine did earlier today) but as soon as you notice, return to counting the breath. Keep doing this for at least five minutes, being as patient and tolerant of your thoughts as you can.

Meditation in action

Now, as you go about your normal activities, see if they are any easier. For me, in the office, this means answering prisoners' requests for help without imagining anything else. Then, it's time to move on, without thinking any further – very much like returning to the breath during meditation. Perhaps you have a letter to write, the TV to watch, a meal to eat or a person to talk with. Whatever presents itself, give it your full attention and move on without another thought. Without even thinking, life will become that much easier.

Rise and Shine with the Egyptian Sun Salute

 By Victoria

There are many different sun salute sequences but this one is great if you have limited space or don't have an exercise mat. It mobilises the spine, warms up joints and muscles, and gets your energy flowing.

The sequence below is half a round. To complete one round, pause for a couple of breaths then repeat the sequence moving to the left first in **6.** and **12.**



1. Inhale, stand with feet hip-width apart.



2. Exhale, palms together in front of your chest.



3. Inhale, reach up, lift your gaze, bend slightly backwards.



4. Exhale, bend knees into a midway squat, hands together at chest.



5. Inhale, sweep arms out to the sides then up overhead as you stand tall.



6. Exhale, bend to the right.



7. Inhale, back to centre.



8. Exhale, bend to the left.



9. Inhale, back to centre.



10. Exhale, bend forward from the hips. Head and arms hang loose.



Artwork and poem from a prisoner at HMP Lindholme

Morning World

I say Morning World as I open my eyes,
Morning to the birds singing in the skies.
It's 5am and I'm up and about.
It's my favourite time of day when the mat comes out.
I have this kick ass CD from the PPT.
The first thing in life to motivate me.
I sit, lay and stretch. The whole experience, I give it my best.
I used to hate the world and everything in it.
Now I rise at 5am and say Morning World with a loving spirit.

**Caution: Don't try this if you have a trapped nerve, herniated disc, etc.
Get advice from Healthcare if you have ongoing back pain.
Listen to your body and don't do anything that causes pain.**



11. Inhale, stand with arms pointing forward at shoulder height.



12. Exhale, twist to the right.



13. Inhale, back to centre.



14. Exhale, twist to the left.



15. Inhale, back to centre. *Exhale.*



16. Inhale, open arms to the sides. *Exhale*, relax shoulders, turn palms upward.



17. Inhale, reach up, bring palms together, lift your gaze, bend slightly backwards.



18. Exhale, bend knees into a midway squat, hands at chest.



19. Inhale, stand with hands together at chest.



20. Exhale, hands back to sides.

Farewell Sally...

After ten wonderful years as our Yoga Coordinator, Sally is retiring. Many of you have enjoyed her enthusiasm at taster workshops for prisoners and staff and her calming voice on our CDs and radio programme. Sally says she will miss travelling to prisons and the challenge of starting new prison yoga classes. She is still teaching yoga and meditation at HMP Eastwood Park and can't wait to be back when things open up again.

... and Welcome Chris!

After first learning about the Prison Phoenix Trust in 2011, yoga teacher Chris ran the Brixton Yogathon in south London to raise funds. Since 2015 she has taught regular yoga classes to women in HMP Downview, men in HMP Brixton and men released on licence at Tulse Hill Approved Premises. She also covered occasional classes at HMP Coldingley and HMP Holloway before it closed.

“You don't have to be bendy or super-fit to enjoy yoga. Whatever's going on in your life, yoga and meditation can lift your day and help you find a little peace.”

Chris, our new
Yoga Coordinator

Not Alone

From a prisoner at HMP Stafford – to those who are alone

Pace inside, something that I had never considered for myself. I read *Peace Inside* and instantly became drawn to the idea of yoga and meditation.

I have been consumed by so much trauma, depression and anxiety. I was never able to talk to anyone about my thoughts and emotions. I have made many wrong choices and made even more mistakes. Lockdown has put many things on hold, especially opportunities to talk to mental health services, which I relied on this heavily because I was beginning to reveal everything that I had hidden since childhood.

I began trawling through the bookstand on the wing and found a book that I read many times because the stories and letters in it pulled at my heart strings. I finally realised I'm not alone. I assumed being a prisoner made me less of a human being but now I can see that I still matter.

Later I found *Peace Inside* and began to religiously follow the yoga postures and meditation techniques. It has allowed me to realise that even people outside of prison are imprisoned by many things in their lives and they are fighting many personal battles, just as prisoners are.

I am engaging with meditation because I have found the strength to switch off my prison sentence. I have taken down my daily calendar because I realised that constantly counting down the days to release was giving me no benefit. Instead it was making me more depressed because release seemed so far away.

I am allowing meditation to heal me, focusing on my breath which has made me feel free from pain for the first time in a long time.

I now know that my day of release will come by itself and I no longer need to wait for a day to pass by and tick it off on my countdown calendar.

Peace Inside has gifted me yoga and meditation to gain strength and an inner freedom away from worry and regret. I now see that I can use my sentence to still remember regret but to practise meditation to heal those wounds, learn from the mistakes and make time inside a lot more positive. It has allowed me to open up my heart and mind and use these practices as a key to unlocking all of the negativity that has troubled me since childhood.

I am slowly starting to like who I am and I am convinced that yoga and meditation is bringing me a more positive attitude on life and on a future beyond the gates. In time I may even forgive myself for all the mistakes that I have made.

If you are lost, have no hope or feel alone, read *Peace Inside*. It may save you just as it has saved me.



For your own copy and a letter from us, return to:

Prison Phoenix Trust, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF

Or share our details with someone else who might benefit from your kindness.

Name:

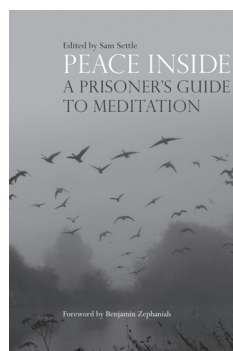
Prisoner number:

Wing:

Address:

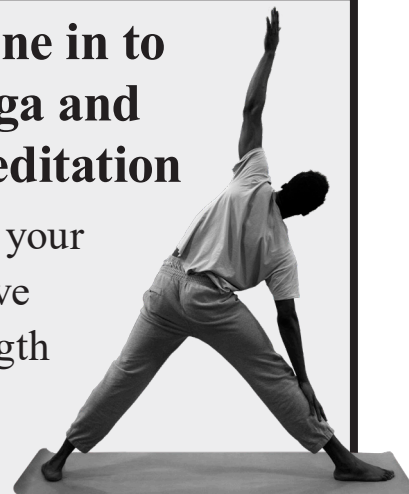
.....

☐ I would like to receive your newsletter



Tune in to yoga and meditation

On your wave length



Freedom Inside our 12-part yoga and meditation series is on air again this year. You can tune in on National Prison Radio, a channel found on in-cell TVs in the majority of prisons in England and Wales.

Each session starts with conversations between former prisoners and people currently serving time, about how meditation and yoga help them transform hopelessness into hope, and find strength for everything life presents.

You can practice along with the programme on Friday afternoons at 3pm and on Sundays at 8am and 5pm.

“It’s one of the few things that keep me sane in here.”

“It’s crazy to think how when I first tried yoga on National Prison Radio seven months ago, it would lead to where I am now. Still practising and meditating.”

National Prison Radio

Life on Release

A community of spiritual warriors together as one

By a former prisoner

Sitting here, writing to you from a tiny Irish village at the bottom of a mountain, I'm acutely aware of the sense of community that I still feel with you all. It's been 25 years since the PPT began guiding me in prison, and though the road hasn't been easy at times, the staff and volunteers never judged me. They always supported me, and showed me that I mattered.

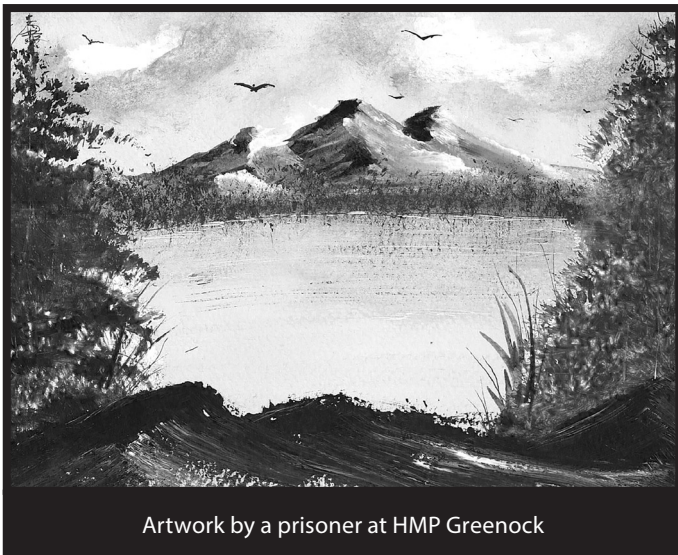
Kind-hearted people, experienced in life, teach us tools of self-discovery so that we can face our inner challenges in the hope we won't make the same mistakes. Though who can look back in life and claim to have never made a mistake? The problem with mistakes is that people tend to carry on judging themselves long after. Not only do self-judgements accumulate,

they also perpetuate. It's in transcending self-judgement we become pro-active, and that cultivates optimism.

This is what the PPT shows us. By providing a friendship that is founded on love and non-judgement, the Prison Phoenix Trust has offered us a community that directly challenges the angst in ourselves that has obscured the spiritual beings that we are.

Like many of you, I broke the law and answered for it. Yet during one of those endlessly lonely nights that crush, I came to the realisation that although I cannot change the past, I can look at the present as an opportunity. We can begin a journey of exploration in the least known terrain of all: one's inner self. Each of us are trailblazers in a land whose depths, treasures and rewards are infinite. And it all begins with that first letter to the Prison Phoenix Trust. Perhaps like me, your hands were shaking. Perhaps like me, the tears were flowing. It's a curious paradox with inner freedom that it's often something traumatic that is the catalyst for great evolution. And when you receive that first reply, perhaps for the very first time you'll be shown love, patience, and respect from a person who genuinely cares. Your whole world can change in an instant.

The writer was moved to write this article reflecting on how it feels like everyone is in prison now. It took him a few years to disentangle himself from the criminal justice system but for some time now he has lived a more settled and spiritual life. He gives credit to the love he was shown inside when he kept in touch and discovered for himself the transformative ways of yoga. He's a teacher himself now, guiding others all over the world to be free from suffering. Thank you!



Artwork by a prisoner at HMP Greenock

Letting life unfold

By a former prisoner

Life continues to unfold as autumn takes its turn on nature's stage. I am looking out at the trees shedding their leaves. Autumn has always been a reflective season for me, even as a small child. What can I shed? I just had a conversation with a friend, about many things, including forgiveness, love, and letting go. Letting go of all the things we cannot control.

It was my brother's birthday recently and I had been feeling unmotivated to buy him a gift, because I was unsure of something suitable. I had got myself in such a state and my brain had filled with critical thoughts of myself, "I'm

such a let-down," etc. I did manage to order a gift but it would arrive late. On the day, I spoke to my sister and she reminded me gifts weren't the priority. Just being there for our brother was the most important thing. So I let it go, all the worry and critical thinking, and accepted that I would see my brother (empty handed) and that was good enough!

Twenty minutes later, a man left a parcel on my doorstep. He smiled as he walked back to his vehicle. It was my gift for my brother and it had arrived in time!

When we take ourselves out of the way, things just work out. I realise I have a tendency to worry and be fearful of situations not in my control. Stepping out of the way to allow the Universe to

just do its thing is probably the simplest thing we can do, but yet I keep tripping over time and time again.

Lots has been unfolding personally and I am allowing it to more and more. When I do that, things work out and often in better ways than I first wanted them to. Going into child pose is helpful with stress and flashbacks. Each night I light a candle or incense for all those in prison and for those who are supporting them.



Alternate Nostril Breathing

A cleansing, balancing breath for the spring

 By Sally

Breath can balance our internal energy, known as 'Chi' in Chinese medicine or 'Prana' in yoga. This leaves us feeling refreshed, emotionally and physically, as though we have given ourselves a spring clean. It's great for this time of year, when nature reminds us of new beginnings.

To prepare

Spend a few moments clearing clutter in your room or making your bed, to set the mood. Blow your nose before you start.

How to sit

You're going to sit for five to ten minutes, so get comfortable, whether on a chair, your bed, or the floor. Try to keep your back upright, without tilting the head or neck. Relax the shoulders and tuck the chin slightly. If you're on a chair or the bed, try to keep your feet firmly planted on the floor.

How to direct the breath

The movement of breath is controlled by directing it in or out of one nostril while closing the other. Do this by holding your right hand to your face and take turns between using your thumb to close your right nostril and your ring finger to close the left by gently pressing it closed. You can either fold your first two fingers into the palm of your hand or rest them on your forehead.

The practice

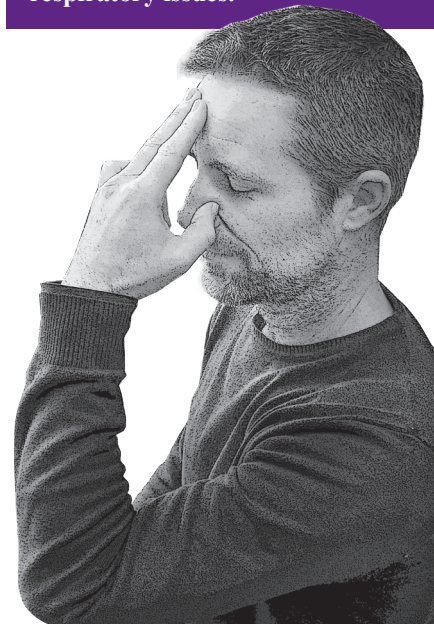
- Before you start the first round, take three sighing breaths: breathe in through the nostrils then out through the mouth, making a sighing sound ('ahhh' or 'haaa').
- Now, lift your hand into position and follow the instructions for one round.
- As you follow each step, remember to keep the breath gentle and steady, without holding it.

One round

- Close the right nostril (thumb) and breathe in through the left
- Close the left nostril (ring finger) and breathe out through the right
- Keeping the left nostril closed, breathe in through the right
- Close the right nostril (thumb) and breathe out through the left

Practise five rounds, then work your way towards three sets of five. Always start and finish on the left side.

Caution: Do not try this if you have a cold, bunged up airways, sinus problems or respiratory issues.



TIPS

It might help to visualise the breath moving back and forth in an arc.

Don't overfill your lungs breathing in or empty them too much breathing out.

Focus on relaxing and find your natural rhythm, not breathing too fast or slow.

The cleansing qualities of this exercise should leave you calm, but revitalised.

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. 1163558

