



Newsletter, Summer 2021

Being As You Are

What's it like to do something without trying to achieve anything? It's not very often in life that we do something without having an end goal or any expectations. We go about most things with the idea that they should be done in a particular way, or take us to a certain place, or make us feel one way or another.

Yoga and meditation give us the chance to let go of all this. As we practise, we invite everything to be just as it is. We can't get it wrong, we can't get it right. If nothing happens, that's OK. There is no judgement. No expectation. Whatever your experience, it is the right experience for you.

Many who take part in our meditation and yoga classes or write to us remark how their practice is the one time they don't feel judged, either by others or themselves. We all have an inner voice – sometimes it might seem wise, other times unkind – but meditation allows us to notice this voice, and then take a step back from it. It might still be there, but it's not taking all our attention.

Finding focus

Although simple, starting a meditation practice might not feel easy. Sitting with the 'noise' of our minds can be difficult.

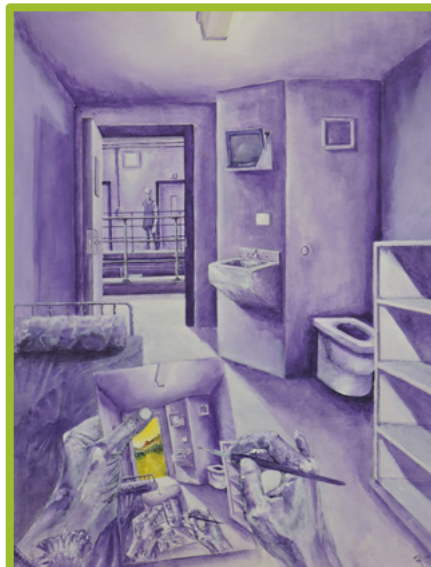
A prisoner from HMP Eastwood

Park wrote in to share how she can anchor her thoughts by following her finger around a square (see pg 2 for instructions) and in *Life on Release* (pg 7) you can read about how cold showers might help settle the mind.

Giving an activity all your attention can be meditative and centring. The formal practice of yoga includes many things – the physical postures being the most familiar – but holding a

single point of focus is also part of the practice. We call this *dharana* and on pg 6 an artist inside explains how he uses focus to prepare for a day at his easel and then how having his attention entirely on his work takes him into, "a bubble of tranquility".

It goes both ways: focusing on our everyday activities and seeing how this settles our mind can help us trust that the mind will eventually settle in meditation, and sitting to meditate helps us find focus more easily in our daily lives. You could try the walking meditation practice featured on pg 8 to see how the mind can quieten during an activity.



Artwork by Steel Door Studios, featured on pg 6.

Sharing your experiences

Please do write to us and share your experience of being 'just as you are', whether this is in your meditation practice, everyday activity, or while doing a particular task. Tell us what helps you focus or what you find difficult. Even if you feel you have nothing to share, write to us about that! This can often be the key to unlocking the vast potential that lies ahead just waiting for you to tune in to it, a place where the divine experience has no separation from everyday life.

A prisoner describes this feeling of discovering a place of no separation within himself on pg 2, writing, "I love how it feels when I can slow everything down. Peaceful. Free!"



Love from Selina – and Chris, Gabrielle, Jason, Mike, Lucy, Padmakumara, Victoria, and all our letter writers

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 and weekly classes.

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"One of the hardest lessons in life is letting go. Whether it's guilt, anger, loss or betrayal. Change is never easy. We fight to hold on and we fight to let go."

Mareez Reyes, poet

Prisoners' Letters

Anon, HMP Stafford

Things are much the same here. The lockdown drags on and only 45 minutes out a day is hard. I still enjoy the blessings of a south-facing window that allows fresh air and sunlight into my space. My yoga practice has been a bit hit-and-miss, but my meditation has picked up. I enjoy kneeling best as I feel more grounded than when sitting in Burmese or an attempted half lotus. Sometimes in the morning I sit on a chair as that feels nicer first thing. There are many distractions in my cell, and sometimes I long for a single cell, but I would have to put up a huge fuss, and would probably lose the direct sunlight. So here I am, begrudgingly making the best of things and doing what I can, and forgetting to have gratitude more often than I would like.



Anon, HMP Eastwood Park

I find this helps me in distress or panic attacks. I am sending it to you to tell others that need to calm down: Follow your finger around a square breathing in and out slowly and watching the square until you feel calm. It does work, I've done it a lot since I heard about it.



**Anon,
HMP Ashfield**

Now. Yoga. I'm too self-conscious to do it until my current pad mate is out, so 30 minutes is the maximum alone for yoga. Meditation is 'easy' because I sit on my bed each day at about 5am, until the shipping forecast at about 5:25. I do the 'on your bed' yoga exercises

when I wake, which is quiet and a lovely way to become conscious. My great achievement is to be able to stand in tree pose – without falling over! – for about a minute (I count 'gorillas' because I don't have a watch now). And being able to put my socks on while standing on one leg – I couldn't do either of those things a year ago! That might not sound like much of an achievement, but believe me when I say that it gives me a huge sense of satisfaction and even hope! It's funny, but getting into yoga has been one of the greatest supports to getting through time behind my door. I love how it feels when I can slow everything down. Peaceful. Free!

Anon, HMP Hewell

Thank you for your letter and the two books. They have helped me to maintain a routine each day to the point where I have a set time, usually over lunch when we've all been locked up, and look forward to doing the practice.

I started by doing 15 minutes per day which rapidly increased to 35 minutes as I lost track of time and focused on my breath more. The meditation I have found slightly more difficult to get back into. I do at least five minutes per day and one day did 30 minutes. When it's a shorter span of time I feel disappointed in myself but still go back to it the next day and just keep going, accepting doing it for as long as I can.

What I've found though is that I've started to count and control my breathing when doing everyday things, like reading, watching TV and eating. I found that helps me concentrate more on what I'm doing.

**Anon,
HMP Stafford**

I can see now which position is used isn't really important, but it is just about choosing what is comfortable and what will best facilitate practice any given day.

I like your inclusion of the terms to 'drop the mind' and 'drop the body'. I'm



unsure if I've heard them before, but they seem to describe the experience and what we gently aim for very well. It's funny as I wrote to you about my problems with lotus hoping for and anticipating a reply that recommended certain stretches or tips and tricks to get my knees lower, but what you sent was much better. My attachment to lotus was a kind of vanity, and I feel I will be more wary of that now in all my yoga and meditation practice. Sometimes it's easy to be seduced by the aesthetic of yoga and meditation, but to engage from that angle and focus on the ends rather than the experience does seem to detract from it.

Anon, HMP Eastwood Park

Letter 1

I was sent a yoga mat four-five months ago, but have had little use out of it because I was struggling to get out of bed, cell, or even to shower. I used to practise yoga religiously for about a year when I was still living in America. I can't say exactly why I stopped, as I really loved the physical and mental benefits I received from it. Then I would always tell myself to start again and another day, week, month then years went by. Then I received the Prison Phoenix Trust CD and printed illustration book. It excited me to possibly delve back into this practice again. I've always been more passionate about holistic lifestyle living, and it's a part of who I am.

But, initially, I found it difficult to just begin because I didn't know where to start. Previously, I always attended classes where I was guided through each session. Then, one day, I finally put on the CD and started doing Sam's guided practice. Since then I haven't missed a single day. It's my favourite thing to look forward to.

I now practice other asanas in a playful practice to work on strength, flexibility and breathwork. Admittedly I keep craving more though! I initially felt my life was falling apart when I came to prison, but now I feel like the saying 'everything happens for a reason' is beginning to make sense. I have been



praying for guidance for quite some time and I've recently started feeling as though yoga is something I'm really going to make part of my life. I am now grateful for this time I am spending here working on myself and deepening my spiritual and health practices.

I can't tell you how excited I am to feel this way and really feel like I'm on the path I'm meant to be on. After feeling so lost in my life, it's like a blanket of love and contentment!

Letter 2

It's been quite some time since I wrote, but soon after I received the last letter I took a bit of a mental turn on the down slope, meaning I just stopped my yoga and meditation altogether. It's been a bit of an uphill struggle the last couple of months. Needless to say, I haven't

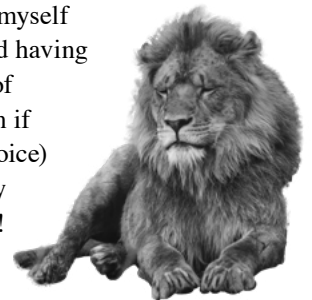
written because there would have been nothing to say as I felt 'blank'.

I do thank you for the CD and book you sent. Finally a couple of weeks ago I thought to myself, 'I can do this,' and put the new CD on. I only got 20 minutes through before stopping. Part of me was disappointed I didn't finish, but the kind side of myself was happy and glad I even made the effort at all – no matter if it was 5, 10 or 20 minutes! I suppose being kind to yourself is something a lot of people in prison probably struggle with. It seems far easier to be critical and harsh – but I can physically and mentally feel the effects of those actions.

In just getting back into a small yoga and meditation routine I have noticed for the first time in my life I'm starting to have regular, consistent sleep! Wow. What a difference it makes in my day-to-day.

I've been plagued by sleep and insomnia issues since I was a young child, so it's been my norm my entire life. I now understand all these benefits people speak of for getting adequate sleep. I really do think my yoga and meditation have played a vital role in this.

I know lockdown has had quite a negative umbrella over it, but even in prison I think lockdown has had enormous positive impacts on ourselves and others if we let it and choose to remove that umbrella and see the light! Focusing on myself internally and having the practice of solitude (even if it's not by choice) has been very introspective!



Meditation Corner

How writing a diary can help your meditation journey

By Mike

Over the weekend I was unpacking boxes of books from my recent move and came across my early meditation diaries. With a sense of curiosity, I started to read through this rather large collection of well-used notebooks, which I began writing when I was in prison.

It felt uncomfortable reading them because I have changed so much since those early writings. The notebooks contained memories of my time inside: meditating using a folded pillow as a seat, the quiet times in the early mornings hearing the birds singing the day in, the strange looks from the night staff doing their cell checks first thing in the morning... All this and more came flooding in, bringing back fond memories of the beginner's mind and the simplicity of just following the breath.

What I find most interesting is that there are threads that I'm still working with now. One of those threads is my inner critic.

As I began to meditate this morning, I kept a nervous ear out for that familiar roaring voice, but instead it was more like a squeak, barely noticeable. It's no wonder I've not paid much attention to it lately.

I now have the freedom from the voice that tries to hold me back, a freedom that allows me to be fully myself.

Keeping a diary of my meditation experiences adds another layer to my journey. I am often surprised by what comes up. Also, being able to look back gives me a clearer picture of where I have been, where I am now, and where I might go. Here are some suggestions for writing your own diary:

Writing about your experience on the cushion

- Take notes of how long you stayed focused for, or how long you were distracted, and what those distractions were.
- Note the sensations in your body and any feelings and emotions that arise.
- Where did you notice the breath? Did that change?
- Most importantly, write down any reflections (thoughts about yourself) that came up, however silly they may seem.

Writing about your experience off the cushion

- Note any changes in your daily life that you've noticed as a result of your practice.
- Write down how any of your usual interactions might have changed.
- During the rest of your day, notice if you paid more attention to the breath.
- Describe how you feel.

You might also find it helpful to write to us to share your experiences, so if you aren't already, then please give it a try.

Greet the Day

 By Chris

This series of upper body movements is both uplifting and calming, and can help get you ready for meditation. Do this either standing, sitting, or kneeling. You can practise indoors or outside in the fresh air.

Rest position



Start and finish the set of sequences with hands resting on one another. If you are kneeling, have the tops of your feet flat on the floor. You can place a folded pillow behind the knees and a rolled up towel under the feet. This position helps relieve sciatica and keeps the knee and ankle joints mobile..

**“Only when you
can be extremely
pliable and
soft can you be
extremely hard
and strong.”**

Zen Proverb

Sequence 1.



1. *Breathe in*, hands together at chest.



2. *Breathe out*, reach hands forward.



3. *Breathe in*, take arms wide.



4. *Breathe out*, hands back together at chest. Repeat x 5.

Sequence 2.



1. *Breathe in*, reach hands together above the head.



2. *Breathe out*, circle the arms down and behind.



3. *Breathe in*, reach arms together above the head.



4. *Breathe out*, hands together at chest. Repeat x 5.

Sequence 3.



1. *Breathe in*, interlink fingers, take arms above the head.



2. *Breathe out*, side-bend to the left.



3. *Breathe in*, back to centre.



4. *Breathe out*, side-bend to the right.



5. *Breathe in*, back to centre.



6. *Breathe out*, hands together at chest.
Repeat x 5.

Sequence 4.



1. *Breathe in*, take arms wide.



2. *Breathe out*, twist to the left.



3. *Breathe in*, back to centre.



4. *Breathe out*, twist to the right.



5. *Breathe in*, back to centre.



6. *Breathe out*, hands together at chest.
Repeat x 5.

Meditation in Action

Steel Door Studios shares a meditative approach to art



Artwork by Steel Door Studios

An artist inside, Steel Door Studios, was finding the solitary existence of extended pandemic lockdown an enormous struggle. He's found his meditative approach to art a way to be with his thoughts, feelings, and emotions. "How lucky I am to have my own art studio (a 7' x 7' prison cell) and a large amount of time to just create."

My daily routine consists of a fair degree of preparation. You may think it is just a case of simply picking up a paintbrush or finding a spare half hour to fit in a spot of creativity. Though that may well be the case for some folk, for me it's a methodical approach in which I spend at least 30 minutes just 'pencil sharpening'. A term I use in the metaphorical sense as it's the time when I begin to centre myself for the day's work. Laying out my equipment, setting up the easel, freshening the water pot, arranging my palette, even choosing what music will suit the piece I'm working on. I'm quite literally organising and decluttering my mind simultaneously. There's also a physical routine which is part of my structured approach. It's not uncommon for me to spend 6-7 hours standing at the easel, so stretching out properly is

essential, especially the lower back as after standing for that amount of time it can become very tight and compressed. Shoulder and neck rolls are also employed as is stretching out the hand muscles. I often do some sketching as well to get the creativity flowing.

Being part of a bigger picture

Being an artist is very much a journey of mindfulness and so much more than the craft. It's a way of seeing the world and engaging with people. It's also about observing and connecting with yourself. How you feel at that particular moment in time. How my breathing affects the control of my tools. How to recentre after an interruption or somebody disturbing you. How to acknowledge the lovely summer breeze upon my face without allowing my mind to drift into distraction and fantasy about a walk on the beach. Even if the mind is in chaos at the start of my day, I have learnt to take solace in standing before my easel and acknowledge the serenity on offer in this space.

Dissolving into the work

Once I begin to paint, I could be in a studio anywhere in the world, my 7' x 7' concrete cell and steel door no longer has any relevance. I'm just a guy on a specific day of a specific year creating a little bubble of tranquility in which to share a little of my life's journey. Throughout the whole day mindfulness and single-minded concentration continues to play its part. If I have a specific thought that's distracting me, I will acknowledge it and take a moment to scribble it down without pondering over any merit it may contain, that's for later. This enables me to seamlessly reapply my focus without forgetting what might be an idea of note, or maybe even a new piece of work. I learnt a long time back about the futility of attempting to stop my thoughts, it's an unwinnable exercise.

Listening to my body

Finally, I remain aware of my own body speaking to me. If I feel thirst I drink, hunger I eat. If my back begins to ache, I soften my knees until once again the ache returns with more demands and I accept my aging body is asking me to call it a day. Although my approach to art and creativity might not be yoga or meditation in the traditional sense it does have similar aspects and for me it offers a wonderful way to find peace and tranquillity in what is, in essence, a pretty hostile environment.

"One who offers his actions to the divine, having let go of attachment, is not affected by misfortune, as water doesn't cling to a lotus leaf".

Bhagavad Gita, ancient yogic text

Life on Release

My extreme chill-out routine

When I got sent down, I was angry: angry at the system, angry with myself, and a feeling of helplessness that I couldn't look after my family. I also had to go through detox without any real support.

As I lay on the top bunk that first night, I couldn't help thinking that this time next year I would still be here, with more time to go after that. Everything was new and although I thought I could hold my own, the fear of what may come might be something you can relate to when you take yourself back to the memories of those first few nights.

A bumpy start

During a visit to the detox clinic, I noticed a newsletter from the Prison Phoenix Trust and for the sake of passing time, I picked it up. After reading it, I decided to pocket it and took it back to my pad, not realising it was freely available.

I decided to give meditation a try – just for a minute or two each day at first. I thought meditation was supposed to be about clearing your mind of thoughts and sitting like some monk, but my thoughts wouldn't shut up for more than a few seconds and so I thought, *this isn't for me, it's for hippies and old white people*.

But I did persevere and started to find it made me feel calmer. I was released in 2017 and although it was great to be out and be with my family, life wasn't easy. Finding work was tough with a criminal record and I could no longer do the same job.

Things turned around and I managed to do the same thing but working for myself. It took a while, but I continued to meditate. I eventually built up the courage to start a local class I developed called Relaxercise – a blend of Tai Chi and yoga and finishing with a guided meditation.

Discovering The Iceman

I was often asked how to quieten the mind and just focus on the breath. Without being an expert myself I could only say what worked for me. Of course, what works for one might not for the next – if we are going to embark on something new, we have to try and find something that works for us personally.

Often the people that asked were geezer types – gym-goers like me. I did some research and came across a guy called Wim Hof – The Iceman.

This man can sit in the snow for hours and just meditate. His own personal story is both tragic and incredible, but he developed a technique of breath control through learning to be in cold water. He realised that when he got into freezing water, his body went into 'survival mode'.

If you have tried meditation but struggle with constant thoughts that can distract within seconds, The Iceman recommends giving a cold shower a try. If you can build up the courage to immerse yourself into a proper cold shower, starting



small – 30 seconds – you will find that you don't have anything else on your mind other than to breathe. If you have ever jumped into cold water, you will know that it can take your breath away and you feel shock. The trick is to get in, focus on your breath, trying to breathe fully in and fully out. Time it if possible and try 30 seconds. You might notice that there is nothing else going on but the effort to stay in and breathe. If you can do that, then you will have proved you can meditate.

Science has now confirmed that cold showers boost your immune system, make you feel empowered (as you have achieved something that isn't easy).

Sitcking with it

If you can do 30 seconds every day for a week and find it's not for you then you've lost nothing apart from trying something new for a week and let's face it, you have 30 seconds free each day! If you find you enjoy the challenge, maybe up it on week two to 60 seconds.

I have been doing it for a while now and many who I have suggested it to are doing the same. I admit every morning I still feel terrified as I get in, but I do up to four minutes a day now. I always feel better for it, like when I go to the gym. I always follow up with a warm shower and it's the best shower I have ever had – my reward.

Being forced to focus on the breath in that cold water means I know how to translate that to focusing on the breath when all I have to do is sit. Too easy! Might be worth a try? Of course, if you have a medical condition that might make this a risk, check with your GP before trying for the first time. Good luck and enjoy the challenge.

“Power is within us all. Anything can be overcome by going within.”

Wim Hof, Dutch extreme athlete known as 'The Iceman'

Footsteps to Freedom

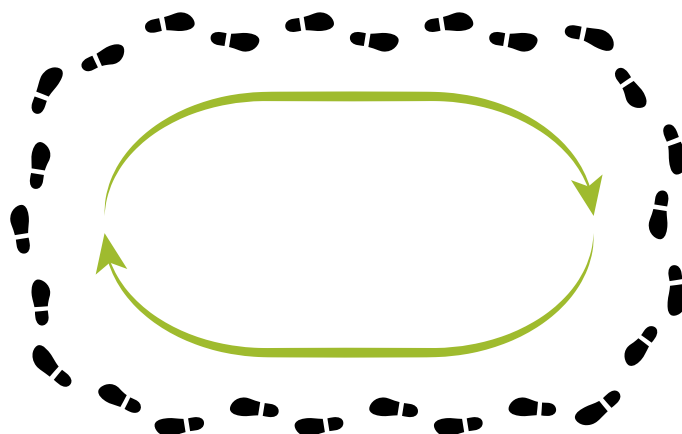
A walking meditation you can do anywhere

 By Victoria

If the idea of sitting still and meditating seems daunting, then walking meditation is an ideal way to start. It brings meditative awareness to a regular daily activity and can be practised anywhere: out on the exercise yard, along a landing, on your way to healthcare, or in a smaller space like your cell. There's no need to do anything fancy, most people won't even notice that you're meditating. Try for a few minutes every day and it might form part of your daily routine, like brushing your teeth.

How to do it

- Bring your hands to the chest, left over right, as pictured (the right hand is in a soft fist, with fingers resting over the thumb).
- Softly gaze at the floor a short distance ahead. .
- Walk at a normal pace. If you're doing circuits, go clockwise. If possible, walk around the edge of your chosen location,



TIPS

- If your mind wanders, kindly bring your attention back to walking and the breath
- Don't worry about timing or number of laps
- If you want to try adding a seated meditation, then start with five minutes of walking followed by sitting. Start by bringing your attention to just a few breaths, building up to 25 minutes.

ADDED BENEFITS

As well as calming the mind, walking meditation can:

- Boost blood flow and raise energy levels
- Improve digestion
- Inspire creativity
- Enhance balance



“Not all those who wander are lost.”

J.R.R Tolkien, author

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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