



# Letting Go Into Stillness

**I**n the *Tao Te Ching*, a Chinese philosophical text written around the 6th Century BC, author Lau Tzu wrote:

*Without going outside you may know the whole world.*

*Without looking through the window, you may see the ways of heaven.*

*The farther you go, the less you know.*

*Thus the wise know without travelling:*

*See without looking;*

*Work without doing.*

Approximately 2,600 years later, countless people confined to their cells experience this same sense of internal discovery. By being with inner stillness, their world opens up. We are reminded of this now – as autumn cools new growth and softens the brightness of the sun, something magical is happening within. Nature is turning inward and nurturing and storing energy ready to burst forth in the spring. Letting go of what is no longer needed and storing reserves deep inside, the inner flame glows deep. In the practices the Prison Phoenix Trust loves to share, you too may experience a gentle letting go into the vast experience of stillness – a place that can nourish, energise, and heal you, all within, all without effort or control.

### Making letting go a practice

Being present with the sensation of breathing in meditation and yoga is how we practise the skill of letting go. We come face to face with a choice: will we let ourselves be gripped by distraction? Will we try to control the experience? Are we wanting to make sense of it? If we choose to let go of all this and allow our breath to flow naturally, observing it in a relaxed, open way, then the whole world opens up.

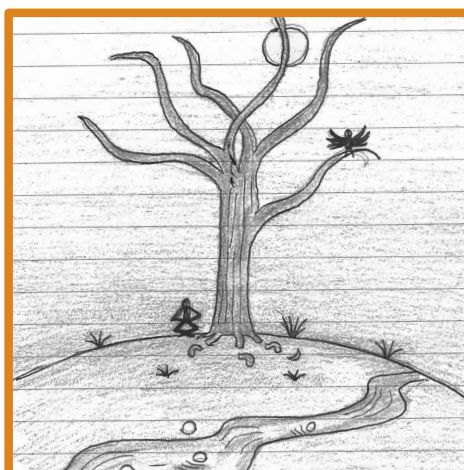
As the breath becomes our focus, we naturally soften our grip

on thoughts, desires and worries, and fall into a state of allowing everything to be as it is. Just as nature moves easily through the seasons, we see that we can flow through the challenges and pitfalls of life, and our sense of joy is restored. ‘Without looking through the window,’ we gain an immense awareness. We experience the essence of our own true nature, unflawed, just as it is. In *Meditation Corner* (page 3), you can read how Mike discovered his place of peace within, and on pages 4–5 there is a strong yoga

sequence that includes the practice of letting go when you breathe out. On the back page you can learn about a simple posture – home pose – offering immediate inner sanctuary.

### Having patience

Letting go is an act of allowing, not forcing. Some days it might not happen, whereas on others the stars will align and perhaps old grudges and habits might effortlessly start to drop away. Or, maybe things just won’t bother you anymore, just as a friend from inside writes in our letters pages. Another letter-writer, explains how by focusing on the breath and practising free-flowing yoga he loses track of time.



Artwork from HMP Birmingham

### Journeying together

Each morning at 8.30am all of us as a community meditate together. Some of us are actually in the Prison Phoenix Trust office, some are practising at a different time, but everyone who practises is included. All those who meditate or practise yoga living and working behind bars are together. The line, ‘Without going outside you may know the whole world,’ describes the journey we go on together in stillness. Beyond understanding, separation melts away. The truth is, you already take part! You can find out more on page 7.



*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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**“What should the yogi have to fear?  
Trees, plants, and all that is inside  
and outside, is He Himself.”**

Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism

# Prisoners' Letters



## From HMP Stafford

I have had quite a bumpy couple of months. I continue to try to use this time in prison to excavate and rearrange everything, but in doing so I have discovered that a lot more was there than I anticipated. I have found the isolation from friends, family and nature very challenging, but it has also given me opportunities for a kind of spiritual development and metamorphosis that probably wouldn't have been possible. I no longer really see me coming here as a mistake: it is part of my journey and it has opened me up to many interesting and rather extraordinary experiences.

## From HMP New Lane

I find meditating in jail a bit difficult sometimes, but mostly I get the staff to light my incense and I drift away from all the noise and set my mind free. I have been meditating in the garden area surrounding the wing. There are some nice shrubs and flowers to focus on, watching the circle of life through the seasons. From green shoots sprouting through the flowers, followed by leaves dropping off. This reminds me that life is constantly changing and that things

never stay the same. Yoga complements my practice. I have noticed things I used to worry about no longer bother me. I feel privileged to be a part of the ever-changing cycle of life. When I first started meditating in the garden, it made some of the guys laugh at me, but over time that has stopped.

## From HMP Barlinnie

It's good to have someone who does not want anything from you. Thank you. Most of my life, friendships came with a price. Not friends as I found out. You said you have to look deep inside yourself. Yes, at times it is just by closing your eyes.

## From HMP The Verne

Since practising yoga and trying to meditate to escape the thoughts that dog every day, I have noticed how concentrating for short periods of breathing helps me focus on the task in hand and allows me to feel more relaxed, gaining some inner peace.

One reason I have tried meditation is I have found I am better able to cope with the daunting prospect of my sentence. I can calm my mind and slow the pace of my revolving thoughts. The pace of

thoughts increases exponentially, especially at night whilst trying to get to sleep – unless I can calm my mind. I trust yoga and meditation will help me sleep through the night, then maybe my whole wellbeing will improve.

*Writing later in July:*

Due to the 23-hour-a-day lock-up and lack of gym time together with limited outside exercise,

I was concerned I would gain weight, lose muscle tone and become less fit. I began a regular morning exercise routine including yoga postures and focusing on breathing. I have remained the same weight as before the pandemic when I was attending the gym three times a week, working and taking regular outdoor exercise. I must add I am also careful of what and how much I eat.

## From HMP Hewell

I keep records of what I do and for how long, so I can do yoga positions in free flowing movements. I lose track of time as I focus on my breath more. The meditation I find more difficult. I do at least five minutes a day and one day 30 minutes. When it's shorter I feel disappointed in myself but still go back, to it the next day and just keep going, accepting doing it for how long I can.

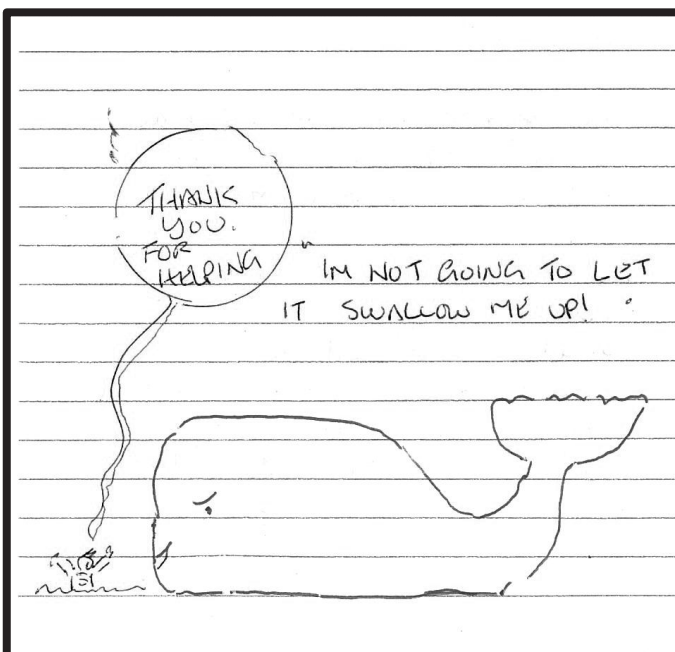
I've also started to count and focus on my breathing when doing everyday things like when sitting reading, watching TV and eating. I find it helps me concentrate more on what I'm doing. And breathing to the point of full vessel seems to have helped my asthma.

## From HMP Bure

I have not long left in prison and I do not know where I will be going. I would be worried and have my head all over the place but I am calm and at peace. That is where my yoga and meditation come into play and it has helped and is still helping me with my time. Control of the breath helps so much as it is a very big part in everything. A lot of people have heard of you on National Prison Radio and have found it very helpful as they have never done yoga and meditation before.

## From HMP Mountjoy

I have read *Peace Inside* cover to cover several times over and have begun a regular meditation practice. I find my mind wandering a lot, but I try to gently bring my focus back to my breath. It's early days but I find myself looking forward to these times of stillness. I tell myself that I'm giving my overactive



Artwork from HMP Barlinnie



brain a break for those minutes that I'm allowing it to relinquish control after a lifetime of overthinking. I'm starting to realise that for all my thinking I had lost touch with my needs and also my emotions. I'm determined to use my time here constructively and to reconnect with myself, to just be, rather than trying to be any particular way. The yoga classes here have restarted. I did a wonderful yin yoga class. The teacher is an empathetic and kind lady. Prison is such a dehumanising experience. Compassion is refreshing.

#### From HMP Birmingham

In this difficult time it was amazing to know that there is support and love

offered to me. I have always been open-minded regarding spirituality and inner peace, but I have never explored it. Now, I have nothing but time and your book has allowed me to explore this wonderful side of life. I have suffered with anxiety and mild depression for many years and feel grateful to have your support. At first meditating was difficult, but then I found myself extremely calm, without even trying. Meditation is now an enormous part of my life and I know it will be for my future. I cannot wait to leave prison and be in nature again. This journey of self-exploration has only just begun for me. My only regret is that I did not explore this sooner, but that now is the right time.

#### Writing later in June:

When I feel anxious or have negative thoughts I tune in to my spiritual side. I have been feeling more positive and energetic. I wonder if this will continue, although I have no expectations as I focus on the here and now. In court waiting in the holding cell for my hearing, I sat feeling very anxious and sad, so I started to meditate. I really like your quote: "When the student is ready the teacher will appear".



## Meditation Corner

### Making Peace With Noise

 By Mike

**I** can remember from my time inside that finding a quiet time to meditate was almost impossible. Early mornings and ear plugs were the only way I could tune out of the noise of the wing.

When I was released, I went on a quest to find the quietest spot I could.

In my search for this illusive peaceful place, I tried many secluded places. I tried the beach – the waves were loud. The forest – the wind in the trees was noisy. Every shrine room I visited, someone was breathing, or the sound of birds calling was just loud enough to be irritating.

However, it was one time in the forest when I realised I was on a fool's errand. I was miles away from another human being, secluded amongst the trees, and I sat down on a stump to meditate. At first, I noticed the noise of the trees rustling gently in the wind, the birds and squirrels moving about, and the ants I accidentally disturbed that were crawling up my legs. Frustrated, I was about to give up on my

quest and leave when from somewhere deep down inside myself, a knowledge bubbled up from the depths: *peace comes from within*. I smiled. Peace has nothing to do with my surroundings.

#### Allowing things to be

I was reminded of this episode in the forest recently when I sat down to meditate and almost immediately music started to play. At first, I tried to ignore it, wilfully concentrating on the breath. Then I began to get irritated by it. I realised that I was taking the wrong approach. Instead, I began to listen to the sounds, gently letting them wash over my ears and trying not to identify them as pleasant or unpleasant. Just sounds.



Stilling the mind isn't so much a thing that you can do, especially by trying. Instead, a quiet mind is what happens when you stop trying to do anything. What I find most useful is to begin relaxing the body, softening the belly, releasing any tension from the jaw, and dropping the shoulders. The noise in my mind, the constant chattering, will last for a while. I just let it do its thing. It is the same as the music: I try not to follow the thoughts or identify with them. Then in no time the chattering becomes just a background hum. I am concentrated on the breath, my mind still chunters along, like white noise.

I can find peace now even in noisy places, and even when it's quiet, I'm at peace with my noisy mind!



# A Strong Practice For Letting Go

 By Victoria

**T**his is a strong physical practice to ground and build resilience for the colder months ahead. The physical challenge is to work mindfully in the stronger postures. The mental challenge is to work with the out-breath, using it to shed thoughts or habits that no longer serve you. Breathing out is just like the autumn breeze, helping you to let go of your 'dead leaves,' whether that's a grudge, or self-criticism, or something you might not be able to put into words. Allow that to just happen, without trying.

## CAUTION

**Practise on a non-slip surface, modify or opt out of any poses that might aggravate an injury or ongoing condition.**



### 1. Shoulder rotations

Circle your right arm backwards x 5 then forward x 5. Repeat on the left side.



### 2. Side stretch

*Breathe in*, raise your right arm. *Breathe out*, side bend to the left. Repeat on the left. Repeat x 5.



### 3. Chair

*Breathe in*, raise your arms. *Breathe out*, bend your knees and move your hips back as if to sit down on a chair. Hold x 5 breaths. (Option: hold a towel taut between the raised hands and soften shoulders.)



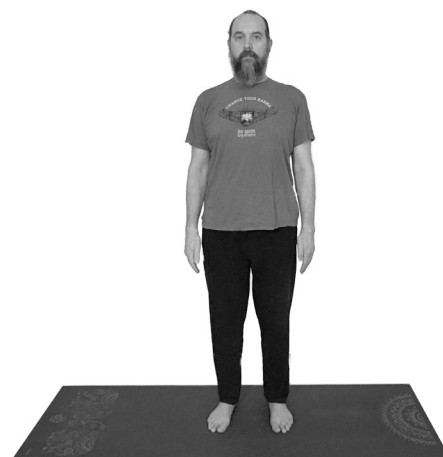
### 4. Double angle

Take hands behind your back. *Breathe out*, forward bend halfway. *Breathe in*, lift arms away from your back, gaze down at your mat. Hold x 5 breaths.



### 5. Tree

Wiggle fingers, let the leaves fall away, and focus on the idea of letting go with the out-breath. Hold x 5 steady breaths. Repeat on left side.



### 6. Mountain

Stand steady and strong like a mountain. Hold x 5 breaths.



### 7. Three-leg dog

Come into downward dog, raise the right leg, press equally into both hands. Hold x 5 breaths. Lower leg then repeat on left side.



### 8. Lunge with twist

From hands and knees step right foot forward, straighten left leg into low lunge. Raise right arm, twist to the right. Hold x 5 breaths. Return to hands and knees. Repeat on left side.



### 9. Dolphin

From all fours, rest on forearms and interlace fingers. Tuck toes and lift the body into a low plank.



### 9b.

*Breathe out*, raise hips up and back into forearm dog. *Breathe in*, return to forearm plank. Repeat x 5.



### 10. Home

Rest here. Take 5 sighing breaths.



### 11. Boat

Balance on your sit bones, lift lower legs parallel to floor. Engage stomach muscles, lift the chest, lengthen the spine. Hold x 5 breaths.



### 12. Seated forward bend

Leg muscles are engaged. Use a towel like a strap to ease tension in the shoulders or hamstrings. Hold x 5 breaths.



### 13. Rest and consolidate

Try 10 to 30 breaths here. Every out-breath is a chance to invite stress to drop away like autumn leaves. Take as much time here as you need, try to stay awake but resting.



### 14. Meditation

Sit comfortably upright, bring your hands together. Focus on your out-breath. Count ten out-breaths. Try three rounds of ten. If your mind wanders, kindly come back to the counting starting again at one. Notice how it feels sitting without expectation or desire for an outcome or experience.

**“Be like the tree, and let the dead leaves drop.”**

Jalālād-Dīn Mohammad Rumi, 13<sup>th</sup> Century Persian Poet

# Design A Poster For Us

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**W**e need your help to spread the word about our service. You have the best way of inspiring others so we'd like you to design a poster. The winning entry will be used in prisons throughout the UK and Ireland. Thank you.



## Heading

Your own words about why someone might find it helpful to get in touch (e.g., 'Can't sleep?' 'Stressed out' 'Feel all alone?' 'Want to stretch your mind and your body'). Think about what made you reach out.



## Image/content

You can either draw something yourself here or describe what we should include, such as a photo of someone practising yoga in a cell, or a beautiful sunrise, or whatever you think will capture attention. Alternatively, perhaps there is a quote you like, or even your own words describing how our service of yoga and meditation in general has helped you.

### RETURN YOUR DESIGN

Use the template here as a guide and send it back to us at:

Prison Phoenix Trust  
PO Box 328  
Oxford  
OX2 7HF

# Our Community Is Your Community

## United by the breath: The power and purpose of meditating together

**A**s soon as you engage with your breath in meditation or yoga, you immediately tap in to something greater than yourself – something you were already part of, even if you weren't aware of it.

This experience is open to all faiths, races and genders, and people inside and out. Everyone is united by their breath in a powerful energetic connection. We don't need to make sense of this. We only have to breathe with all our attention in a gentle way and the experience unfolds all by itself.

Every day at 8.30am the Prison Phoenix Trust meditates together with everyone in the prison community who chooses to join us. If you can't make this time, it doesn't matter; there is a timelessness within this experience. This idea might become clearer the more you practice, although it's fine if it doesn't!

Our community includes all of you living and working in prison, along with our friends and supporters. When you next connect to your breath, allow this energy to lift you and carry you along. You will be doing the same for others.



**“If you are lucky,  
the silence may also blossom some time  
into a deep experience  
and bear visible fruit.”**

Sylvia Ostertag, Rin'un Roshi, poet and Zen master

## Easing Yourself In: How to get started with meditation

 By James

**M**editation: Whether you have tried it before or it's something new to you, the thought of sitting in silence and focussing on the breath when there are so many distractions, can be, well – distracting!

They can lock the locks but they can't stop the clocks. I'm now a “free” man. Through The Prison Phoenix Trust I learned to meditate and it helped me not only get through my sentence, but has been a source of peace since facing the challenges of life once released.

Of course if you decide to give meditation a try, what works for me isn't the right way for everybody. I experimented – starting with very small sessions – 1, 2, 3, 5 minutes. Eyes open. Eyes closed. Eyes closed on the breath in – eyes open on the breath out. Counting breaths. The “square” breath technique (breathe in for a count of 4 – hold for 4 – breathe out for 4 – hold for 4 – repeat).

There are no rules apart from the ones you decide. Struggle to breathe through your nose? Breathe through your mouth. Sit or lie down. You choose. If you fall asleep – so what? Try stuff. See what works for you.

If none of that does the trick – what I noticed sitting in my cell was that if I just sat, bottom on the chair, feet on the floor – and looked – and listened – it made it easier to not notice the thoughts in my head. I just sat, and absorbed all those sights and sounds like that WAS the meditation, which of course it was – to me at least.

If you like a challenge, allow me to offer one. Try meditation – for however long or short you want – but every day for one month. If it does nothing for you, you can put it behind you. So – meditation. Worth a try? Beats sitting round doing nothing!

### A little poem...

I'm led here on my purple mat  
After doing the seated cat  
Yoga starts my day  
In a joyous way



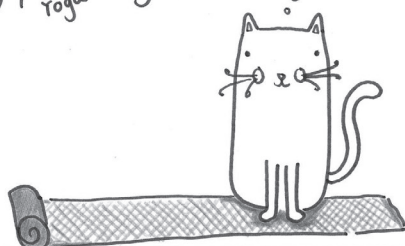
I mix up my poses  
Like i'm lying on a bed of roses  
Yoga makes me smile  
Sometimes I just lay for a while



Somedays I feel blue  
But I can hold the tree pose like i'm stuck in glue  
Yoga is in my heart  
To me it is a piece of art.



Whatever my day, I yoga away...



Anon

# Home Pose

## A simple way to restore yourself

 By Chris

**T**his pose is all about looking after ourselves and recharging our batteries in a way that is healthy and effective. If we're lacking in sleep or struggling with stress and worry, it's tempting to lean back into damaging habits. These things ultimately leave us feeling worse. Home pose is a simple way to care for ourselves, offering a rest-stop from the difficult aspects of our lives and a genuine way to restore our inner spark.

### Instructions

- Kneel with the tops of your feet flat on the floor
- Lower your torso so your forehead is on the floor. Have knees together or wide apart, whichever is most comfortable
- Allow your arms to rest gently either alongside the body with palms up
- or reaching out in front, palms down
- Relax, let go and notice the rise and fall of the breath

### Something to be with...

It's great to simply rest and notice the breath in this pose, but you might also be with the following ideas when you practise:

- Folded up, as small as you can be, you're like a snail going into its shell
- With your chest and belly resting on your thighs, your spine is relieved of the weight of your back
- Your lower back gets a rest from any tightness and pain
- With your arms by your side, your shoulders can let go of any stress they carry
- With your forehead resting down, your neck no longer supports the burden of your thoughts
- Each breath spreads and opens your back ribs, finding space to open your heart

### Be and breathe...

You could also try silently repeating these words with the breath:

Breathing in: *Take time.*

Breathing out: *Just be.*

Breathing in: *Be and breathe.*

Breathing out: *Be loved.*

### TIPS

Using pillows, towels or books can help you rest into this pose more comfortably. You can place these:

- On the floor to support your forehead
- On the back of your legs if you struggle to rest back fully onto your heels
- To support your upper body if your belly doesn't reach your legs

### CAUTION

**This practice is not suitable if you have knee injuries.**



*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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PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF  
registered charity no. 1163558

