

Newsletter, Winter 2021

Bright Inside

When I set out on a walk hoping to see a herd of deer, something inside me guided me to walk a different direction. I did. There they were on

the horizon. Keen to get closer, I startled them. So I stopped, stayed still and breathed slowly. Allowing them space without pressure. To my surprise (and joy!) they turned and walked towards me.

It's much like this with our inner light, we need to step back to allow it space to shine. A correspondent shares how he now has hope for the future free from the chaos and anger that ruled his life before. He now loves writing haikus (a Japanese style poem of three lines). 'STOP! Take a step back'. Enjoy this in beautiful simplicity on page 3.

So how do we do this stepping back. Breathe. But focus on it, lightly. Notice it. Observe. Be curious. When aware of the ebb and flow of breath when practicing meditation or yoga - silence, peace and even joy break through. You don't have to think about this or chase it. It's better that you don't. A bit like me trying to see the deer! Let your thinking, analytical, critical, judging mind get out of the way and just be with it.

It's getting darker outside. For some it may feel pretty dark inside too. However that feels, there is this light within everyone. Even when it feels like darkness and anger have taken over. Many have experienced this first hand and share this on these pages, giving others hope and a nudge to give it a go.

If you try and force any expectation, this experience can elude you. It's an exercise in trust, patience and letting go of trying to achieve anything. We might desperately want to experience

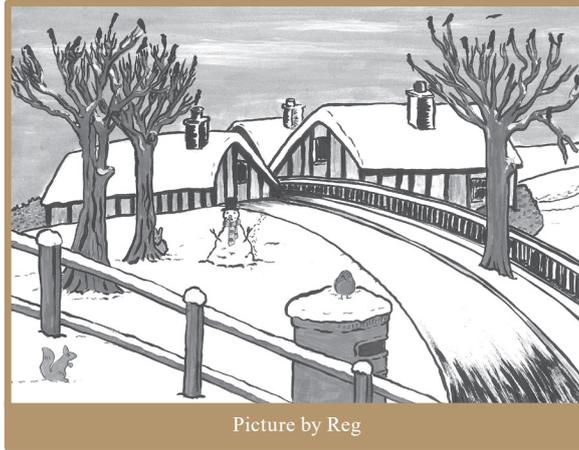
the sense of perspective, calm and peace others are keen to share, but feel inadequate. We've given up, it's out of our reach, dark thoughts or memories are flooding in, or it's another thing

we think we can't do. Write to us when that happens. We can help and don't judge. We love helping. We know how hard this is, but how the rewards are vast. Individual guidance from one of our letter writers allows that space to express in confidence what's going on for you. How to keep practicing in a way that's most appropriate.

If you question if you are part of this community at all, remember you are always part of this. Before

you even decided to practice. Just like the light. It's there. With you no matter what. Another friend inside writes how reading about others experiences in this newsletter gave him the determination to stick to meditating. Mick just blasted his fears out of the water running the London marathon to fulfill a dream he thought was over when he was inside.

Many in our community have had their lives knocked off course. One prisoner (page 2) felt he'd lost his spiritual self many years ago and now feels rejuvenated by practising yoga and meditation every day and connecting with nature. So just keep going with a gentle discipline of regular practice and in its own time your sense of silence will emerge naturally. Silence may feel out of reach in the noise of where you are. The noise of thoughts, the noise of others needs and even the noise of the body and mind's resistance. One friend inside, (whose preference to be unnamed, we respect), hits the nail on the head when he writes how it's not easy as there's always something threatening your peace. Read in Meditation Corner on page 3, about how to relax into a sense of ease and balance.



Picture by Reg

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

“Visibility these days seems to somehow equate to success. Do not be afraid to disappear—from it, from us—for a while, and see what comes to you in the silence.”

Michela Coel, writer

Letters

Confidential, not judgemental. Thank you ALL for your letters. We publish these extracts to help encourage others, but only when we have your written permission.

From HMP Wymott

August

I read *Peace Inside* and wow what a revelation to see that I am not alone in wanting to use my time inside well, and focus on mending my ways. I have been focussing on the breath for a month now each morning and what a difference it's made to my outlook – I'm so grateful. I'm now starting to implement some bits from *Becoming Free* – yoga has given me the tools I so desperately needed to cope while in prison. I have noticed how much more relaxed I can be in my down time. For that I have meditation to thank. I take at least half an hour each morning around 7am and sit how you taught me on my chair and I feel set and ready for the day, which due to covid is mainly in my cell. I use some time in the evening to do some light yoga. I find the wind releasing pose very helpful if I've had a heavy meal a couple of hours before, and floor twists and the sun salutations have improved my body's suppleness vastly.

October

I agree to use of my writing for the newsletter. It was reading other prisoners letters that gave me the determination to stick to meditating. With yoga I am now much more supple than I used to be which has helped my health improve. My time inside is passing easier with each practice.

From HMP Garth

August

I found the front page of the summer newsletter particularly useful when it talks about doing things without expectation. One of the hardest things to come to terms with being inside has been coming to understand that I have very little that I can control, and very little I can change. In my previous life I was committed to making effective

change for other people, and being able to act in meaningful ways.

I have had to learn to let go of those things since they would be a constant source of frustration. Meditative practice has meant that, step by step, I have been able to step back from my obsessive need to push myself and punish myself, and to reassess where I am and what I want. I find it helps me to be in my own space, and it is allowing me to think of this time of incarceration as something more like a monastic retreat. Somewhere that I can reflect and review, and make the changes I need to make.

I'm finding joy in isolation, keeping myself to myself and letting go of the compulsion to try to be involved in the world around me, allowing myself to just focus on me.

September

I am hoping to get engaged in education as it re-opens post-covid. It may also reduce my risk of avoidance. I feel that the isolation and removing myself from other people has been a necessary step, as I may have been using dealing with other people's stress, worry and issues to avoid having to deal with my own. It will be an interesting process trying to find the balance between looking after myself and allowing space for personal growth and slowly re-engaging with other people, but on a more sustainable and healthy basis.

I'm exploring some breathing that encourages a deeper and more centred breath. It's helping with a deeper and more relaxed meditative state.

Anon

Do you think most of the time we don't realise when we're mean to others? When I identify a thought I'm having or a behaviour I don't like in me, I try to see myself from the bench - the restless me is in the river, and the restful me is sitting on the bench, just watching... And it might sound silly, but what I think is - you don't see a rock having a tantrum in the middle of the river. In spite of the current, the rock stays put. It might get a lot of water, it might be moved eventually... But it does

everything calmly.

I'm not saying we should allow everyone to treat us badly, but when "problems" arise, they're always going to bring an opportunity with them.

But patience and self-control do not come automatically. As you wrote, they are honed by self discipline and awareness and understanding. You asked if patience is something I think about often. I noticed the idea of problems coming into life for a reason started to grow within me, even more so, what they said about recurrent problems. It means whatever you need to learn, you haven't learnt it, that's why you keep having problems, particularly similar problems - to teach you what you lack. One of my biggest flaws has been impatience. I remember that in my years at school I was always in a state of despair and anger because I had to wait and I didn't want to. So now I can see this whole experience, all the problems I had were there and are here to teach me how and why and where I went wrong. I needed to learn patience, self love and self respect.

Meditation has helped me, along with praying (which I think is also a form of meditation). Otherwise I wouldn't have stopped, taken a moment, and seen. It's not easy, because there's always something threatening your peace. This made me realise that meditation in any form is something that has to be done constantly, like eating or sleeping. Perhaps I wouldn't have learnt much if none of these problems had crossed my path. And yes, there are so many things I don't know - the trial being one of them, my nearest future, where we will be next year - but if I keep thinking about the past, and the future, when am I going to think about the present, which is where we are living.

June

Thank you for the book and CD.

I've taken a while to reply as I wanted to use the material first. I now enjoy both yoga and meditation every day. I am certainly much more flexible than I was and I tend to wake earlier



to do these things so that I can listen to the birds rather than the CD. Since coming to prison in May 2020 I've lost quite a lot of weight. I feel much healthier and a veg diet helps too. In September I will be 50 so I'm feeling rejuvenated to an extent. Flexibility is very important and I'm not far from the splits now lol!



July

At my new prison, it's a different world. You can walk on the grass barefoot, I feel connected to my spirit. You can smell the flowers – and there are a range here! I take a small pinch of lavender, it's great! The staff start to make you feel

you are human again. Mutual respect is abundantly evident. You can set aside the stress, anxiety, depression to start to focus on making your time useful and progressive. A real sense of becoming a better person on my journey to release. Many years ago I'd slowly lost my spiritual self.

From HMP Swaleside

Before I got in touch with the PPT I was lost, violent, had no strong faith and was a lost cause. Now I feel that I have hope for the future and I can lead a good, fulfilling life free from the chaos and anger that ruled my life before. At the moment we are only getting 90

minutes out of our cell a day. They are not running any off wing activities at the moment but they are looking at how they can bring these things back.

My creative writing course includes poems, stories, journal writing, character development and much more. I love writing haikus. Here's one I wrote - Summer

STOP! Take a step back

**Breathe in the summer fresh air
Feel it fill your lungs**

Thank you for all the entries to our poster competition! There's still time left to enter.



Meditation Corner

 By Padmakumara

Silence is an essential aspect of a spiritual life. We need silence in order for new life to emerge, new thoughts, new emotions, and new experiences.

The practice of silence has many dimensions. One way to help break this down is to think in terms of silence of the body, silence in speech, and silence of the mind or heart.

Silence can mean simplifying our movements. Relaxing into a sense of ease and balance, softening everyday actions so we can become present, here and now.

The form of silence of the body is the sitting posture of meditation, but how do we maintain that silence as we begin to move again?

Sometimes our bodies are uncomfortable. Try to identify between the discomfort you can or cannot be with. Maybe the mind/heart is doing most of the restlessness, not the body. Staying with the discomfort as it manifests physically then unlocks a richer mind/heart silence.



It is beautiful when this happens. On the other hand, if discomfort becomes pain and is likely to lead to injury it is important that we move. This, in its care and concern for ourselves, is beautiful in its own way, too.

There's also the silence of speech. When we come to sit in meditation, or in our yoga practice, we have the opportunity not to say something, not to offer our opinion or communicate. When we cease all this communication, we can see how our world is full of sounds: the weather, wind or breeze, rain, birds, other people. Letting go of the need to control, listening to what's there, taking an interest in our world. I'd encourage you to spend some time just sitting, perhaps in a chair, at ease, and listen with openness to what's around you. Immerse yourself in it.

Finally, there's the silence of the mind or heart. This is where real silence lies. But it's not easy to achieve.

It's easy for us to fall into considering things good or bad, interpreting our experience along the lines of our likes and dislikes, grasping the former and rejecting the latter. This fault-finding tendency applies to ourselves as much as others.

Of course, as we have such little control of our environment, other people, and over the majority of our minds, this fault-finding does little to help us rest in an acceptance of all that emerges in our world. In short, it is one of the opposites of silence. What a relief it is to put aside the chatter of what we like or don't like, and rest in what is. Open, simple, silent, as life unfolds from moment to moment.

Gradually, all the forms of silence we practise create a momentum. Silence can become a quality of our experience. The practice when this happens is to give yourself to it, feel it, know it, and let silence fill the whole of your body, your communication, your heart.

**“Out beyond ideas of rightdoing and wrongdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.”**

Rumi



The Way of the Warrior

A sequence for mental and physical health

 By Victoria

These are challenging postures that stretch and strengthen the whole body and challenge the mind. As you breathe in each posture notice how you feel.

The yoga warrior aims for balance and harmony, physically and mentally. Here, the battle is not with or against external forces. The yoga warrior's challenge is to work towards peace within.

By moving your body through the Warrior stances, you begin to develop a certain attitude—one of strength, focus, and calm determination. Can you settle into the steadiness and infinite space in each breath?



1. Mountain

Stand tall, steady, and strong like a mountain x 5 breaths.



2. Shoulder Circles

Circle the elbows x 5 backwards then repeat x 5 forward.



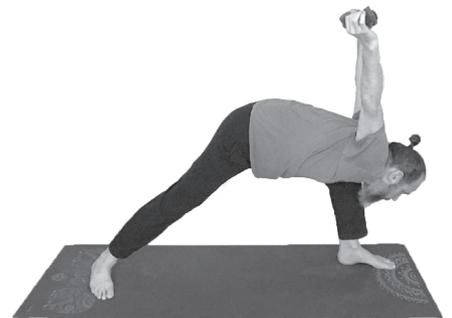
3. Warrior 2

Check your feet and knee alignment. Relax shoulders and look beyond the fingertips x 5 breaths to the right side. Repeat x 5 on the left.



4. Reverse Warrior

Start in Warrior 2 on the right side, raise right arm palm up, reach toward the left x 5 breaths. Return to Warrior 2 and repeat on the left side x 5 breaths.



5. Humble Warrior

Start in Warrior 2 on the right side. Clasp hands behind back, bend right knee. Bend toward the right leg x 5 breaths. Return to Warrior 2 and repeat on the left side x 5 breaths.

CAUTION

- Practice on a non-slip surface and clear the space around and behind you.
- Listen to your body and don't do anything that causes pain.
- Get advice from Healthcare if you're unsure.

TIPS

- For all Warrior poses keep the bent knee behind or aligned above your ankle.
- For Humble Warrior separate your hands or hold a towel to ease tension in shoulders
- Repeat the Hip and Shoulder Circle postures as many times as you like between the Warrior postures.



6. Hip Circles

Keep knees slightly bent. Rotate hips x 5 clockwise, then repeat x 5 anticlockwise.



7. Warrior 1

Step left leg back, bend right knee, hips face forward. Raise arms x 5 breaths, repeat on left side.



8. Warrior 3

Hands on the wall, step back into a half forward bend, upper body at right angle to the legs. Stand on your left leg, lift your right leg behind you. Hold x 5 breaths. Repeat x 5 breaths on the other leg.



9. Mountain

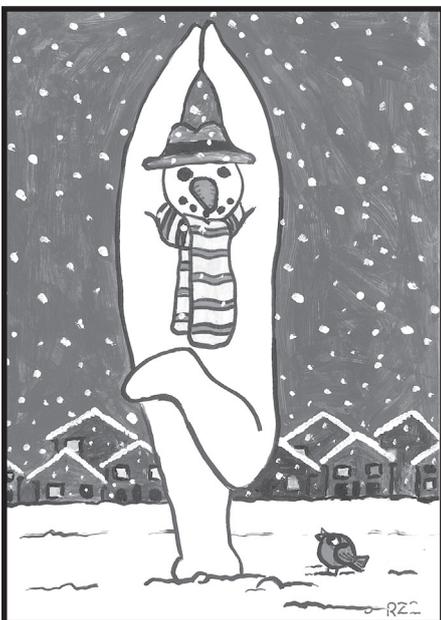
Return to standing, notice how you feel physically and mentally x 5 breaths.



10. Relaxation

Relax and rest on your back for 50 breaths.

Festive Cards



This year's card design is by our friend inside, Reg. 144 x 103 mm. They come in packs of 10. It is left blank for your own message. To order, send this form with payment to: The PPT, PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF. If your prison is sending payment for you, you still need you to send us the form.

The sale of these cards goes towards our work supporting people inside over the festive season and always.

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.

Life on Release

London at Last

By Mick

In the build up to the marathon, lots of people had donated to the Prison Phoenix Trust and that was a very heartwarming and humbling feeling. Also, my wife and kids had all decided to make the marathon the focus of their weekend and headed up to London with me.

Sixteen miles into the race, my right calf started to cramp. I was about to stop when a Guernsey based athlete whom I knew suddenly came up behind me and encouraged me to carry on - an amazing coincidence as there were 45,000 runners. So I did not stop and managed to carry on running eventually leaving her behind me. I managed to hold off the first stretch stop till the 20 mile point. Funnily enough, she appeared again at mile 24 - and again she got me moving! She was like a guardian angel that kept

showing up just as I needed her. But it was the crowd that really got me through - they just would not allow me to stop and let out massive cheers each time I got moving.

I was told by the prison doctor that my running career was over due to arthritis - I also had no guarantees of getting out until 2022. But my yoga teacher thought otherwise. I chose the hand of hope instead of misery. In 2021, I completed the London Marathon in 3:21:45 and enjoyed two years of training as a free man in the build up. This was a personal victory over one of the worst types of difficulty - prison. Prison was a turning point from which I grew stronger and a learning point from which I gained knowledge of my inner self - who I really am and what I really like. Prison was a spiritual experience because I chose to make it so and the hand of help was always there. Running the London Marathon was a spiritual experience because I chose to make it so. The two

are inextricably linked. As I ran through the streets of London, I would often well up into tears - just because someone said "go on Mick". It was the love that we all need - to know that you're alright, you're not judged, everything is ok - we are all one part of the same family. We are impressed; we are proud of you; be proud of yourself and of who you are - you are a good man - these were the overwhelming messages from those amazing crowds.

Those feelings welled up inside of me as I ran the streets - and it made me cry. It was deeply healing and very necessary for me. With pain there is gain. I never knew how much I needed that run until I ran it.

Mick raised over £2,000. This enables the Prison Phoenix Trust to provide free resources and one to one support to around 125 people living behind bars.

The Right Path

By Paul

I first came into contact with the Prison Phoenix Trust at a detention centre for young offenders when I was 15 years old. I remember going to a yoga class just to get out of my cell and meeting this smiling lady in bright coloured clothing, beckoning us to take a seat on one of the mats spread out on the floor. I remember the sincere warmth and love from this woman and that brief time disrupted the harsh reality of having lost my freedom.

Yoga gave me great strength when I was inside. I always used to appreciate the letters. I, like many other men in prison, did not get many visits and a letter went a long way.

Meditation is like most things that are good for us - we have to put some

work into it, it's not an instant fix, but it certainly helps us to find some balance and most importantly for me, peace with oneself.

I spent a great deal of my life in and out of prisons until I eventually got what is essentially a life sentence (an IPP). Not having a date of release is one of the most difficult things I have ever experienced. Having a set date of release gives you a goal to aim for. I just told myself I would change when I first went in as an IPP, I was not going to suffer any more even if I went over tariff. If I was given the chance to get parole I would not go back to prison again. It has been 9 years now and I remained true to myself.

I grew up in prison. I spent most of my formative years in there. When I eventually came out aged 36 I had to learn to do things I had avoided all my life, like going to work, learning to live

in society as it is and not choosing my own way out when things become too tough. One of the most difficult things was to accept other people as they are. My attitudes had to change because they were causing me to suffer. Even though I was free physically I was still imprisoned by envy, jealousy and by being judgemental.

Most of the people I see today who made it (in that they got careers, got married, got a mortgage) took the right road when they left school and stayed pretty much on it until they obtained their goal. I wanted to come out of jail and start at the top of a road I never walked down. It dawns on me today that I can't have what I want in any hurry, and I have to accept that others are further down this road. But regardless of whether I get what I want or not, it's the journey that is life, and I'm tired of the view from sitting behind a cell door.

A Shared Experience

 By Jo

Welcome Jo, our new Chair of Trustees. Trustees are responsible for the board level running of the charity. All of ours give their time voluntarily. We have a fantastic mix of people with different experiences and areas of knowledge. Jo is a qualified yoga teacher who has taught in prisons. A former Prison Phoenix Trust staff member, Jo also has experience of running other charities.

Why is yoga and meditation important to you?

I can't imagine my life without yoga. It is what keeps my feet on the ground and my eyes, ears and heart open to the world around me. For me, the physical discipline of yoga is a meditation in itself. A place where we meet ourselves honestly and learn to accept ourselves just as we are – and in so doing, discover the support that is there and has always been there. The physical movements and breathing practice lead naturally into silence, so that we can 'let go' into the practice of meditation. It can be challenging of course, but as we learn to trust the ground to hold us and the breath to sustain us, there are unexpected gifts, moments of peace and glimpses of an easier way of being!

Why is yoga and meditation so helpful to prisoners?

You don't need any equipment other than yourself. Yoga is a practice that anyone can do, whatever age, body shape or level of mobility, and in a small space. Yoga and meditation help you

to be with yourself, to view yourself with compassion and to extend that understanding to the people you are with. In the intense and challenging environment of prison, this can be life changing.

What is your happiest memory of a prison yoga class?

I treasure the shared experience of the quiet that could settle towards the end of a class. The transition that a class would go through. After the banter, the challenges, strong postures and stretching, that moment of quiet, together, was precious. Often someone would say that they'd finally managed to relax for the first time.

What are you most excited about doing in the next three years?

Finding ways to support more people in prison. It was heartening to read a letter from the Director General of Prisons, Phil Copple, recognising the Prison Phoenix Trust's work and the part that we can play in supporting the wellbeing of prisoners and staff.

We're in direct contact with prisoners or staff in every single prison in the UK and Ireland and a lot of forensic hospitals and a p p r o v e d premises – but

we want to reach more. I know we can do this. I'm excited about the creative ways we are extending our work, so that more people can benefit. Ideas like the new prisoners' initiative - a postcard which will go to every new prisoner with a simple yoga practice and our contact details so they can get in touch. Like our radio programme, *Freedom Inside*, which has been a lifeline for many prisoners, and the handouts which give a series of yoga practices to do in cells. The value of yoga and meditation is becoming more widely recognised within the prison community, and the Prison Phoenix Trust is well placed to meet this need.

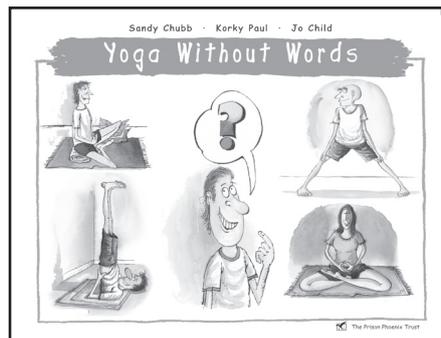


Giving the Gift of Yoga and Meditation

We give out books and CDs freely to anyone in prison who wants them. This festive season, why not encourage a friend to order one of our books?

Our book *Yoga Without Words* is designed to help someone start a daily yoga and meditation practice. There are almost no words, just pictures.

Have your friend fill in the form to the right, or write to us at the address listed. We are happy to hear from anyone and we will always write back. Tick the box to get our newsletter every three months.



Yoga Without Words

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

The PPT
PO Box 328
Oxford
OX2 7HF



Name: _____

Prisoner Number: _____

Prison: _____

I would like to receive your newsletter

The Gift of Silence

Meditation guidance

 By Selina

Prepare for something important to you

Take time. Tidy space around you.

Turn off the TV. A short yoga practice can help settle your mind and relax your body.

In meditation practice you try to breathe entirely through your nose. Blow it first.

You can't shut out all the noise, but you can do things that will help you relax and not be so bothered by it. The more you practise meditation, the easier that will get. So just get going as best you can in whatever environment you have.

Sit like a mountain

Get into a comfortable and solid position. You can sit on a chair or sit or kneel on the floor on a folded pillow, or blanket, or both.



Feel the solid ground beneath you. Try to have your back straight as best you can.

Tilt your head. Eyes softly gazing downwards. Palms facing up. Left hand on top. Thumbs touching to create a circle. You're ready for something precious.

Focus on your breath

Bring your attention inwards to the feeling of your body as you breathe. Whatever it is like. Just stay with it. Let go of any expectation. Allow your body to breathe. Just observe. Like standing back and watching deer with kindness and curiosity.

Start for just a minute, then gradually build this up to a maximum of 25 minutes. It requires patience and persistence. There are lots of ploughed fields at the moment, waiting for Spring growth. You can do the same here. Prepare the ground, plant the seeds and patiently tend to regular practice.

If troubling thoughts flood in, be aware of the solid ground. Expand your vision to more of your space you're in. If it overwhelms you, hold off solitary practice until you feel more stable. Get

CAUTION

Check with your mental health team if this is appropriate for you, especially if you have PTSD, depression or are experiencing flash backs. Do not practise under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

TIPS

- Breathe steadily. Observing your breath just as it is without judgement.
- Start by counting your breaths. In 1 and out 2. Start again at 10. When this becomes too distracting, lightly focus on just the feeling of breathing.
- When you are distracted. Don't worry, just be kind to yourself about it and return to your breath.
- Write in confidence to one of our friendly, kind letter writers for help and guidance.

in touch with mental health support or with us at the Prison Phoenix Trust for guidance.

“Focus not on that which is breaking down, but that which is breaking through.”

Anon

The Prison Phoenix Trust is a small charity and relies entirely on donations. Every year around 5% of our income comes to us as legacies. We are hugely appreciative of this way of giving. If you are able to remember us in your will, any sum, however small, is much appreciated. In the last year, we have received funds in memory of:

*Tigger Ramsey-Brown
William Wexler
Philip Oakeshott
Elizabeth Dowd*

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