



Conquer from Within

As I walked up Castle Hill to Edinburgh Castle at the start of a week of teaching yoga in Scottish prisons, I came across a small painted stone by the path. On it was the message – Conquer from Within. That stuck with me as I prepared to share the teachings of meditation and yoga with those at HMP Castle Huntley, HMP Perth and HM YOI Polmont and a number of yoga teachers over the coming days.

To practise in prison – and out, takes an inner strength and determination. Clive wrote about this in his letter to us on page 2. *'Keeping my mind from wandering is a challenge, as is the discipline of sitting still and doing nothing. I have always been very active, both physically and mentally.'* We all develop habits to keep us from being present with our inner world. For many it's just too painful. Whether that's being very active, turning to drink and drugs, watching endless TV, or all sorts of other distractions.

Don't be deceived! Meditation and yoga may be quiet, but they are powerful. Those we meet in person or through letters tell us time and time again how these were often an important part in breaking free from their own deep-rooted patterns of destructive behaviour.

The difficult part is getting started and the determination to keep going. Clive writes he has 'worked' his way through the exercises. Yes it is work. We have to commit, follow the practices through and keep going day after day. But it's worth it.

To start with it takes trust. Often people are encouraged by their peers, or reading the letters in this newsletter. Or they notice others seeming happier, or less angry and volatile, or that they sleep better. They also want to try something that might help them too. So what place does conquering have in all this? Our habits may

be so ingrained that they are just the pattern of our lives. This may have even started in childhood. When these habits are detrimental to our health and freedom in life, many make a determined commitment to turn to yoga and meditation to do something positive, or to get greater peace of mind and a good night's sleep.

How does any of this have the power to transform lives by enabling such great changes that someone's lifelong habits drop away? Through meditation Matt at HMP Barlinnie says how he was able to choose his reaction to a situation putting him in a more powerful position than *'I would have been in, if I had allowed the emotion to lead my reaction.'* By having the inner strength to commit to daily practice through the physical postures of yoga or by being aware of each breath in meditation, like Matt, we start to respond to things in a different way. We start to notice we have space to make more choices instead of being caught up in the emotion.

Yes, we have to have inner strength to conquer habits by getting started with doing something different. We have to have the determination to commit to showing up for ourselves and practising each day with a sense of purpose.

That's the 'conquering' part. That's where the effort is needed. In the practice itself we let go of forcing, relax into it and allow yoga and meditation to do its thing.

By getting on with practising each day, like working through the physical postures on pages 6&7, the actual changes just happen and we can let go of the effort. A bit like trying to get to sleep. The harder we try the more difficult it might be. We can't conquer sleep, just like we can't conquer yoga and meditation, but by getting into a routine of winding down before bedtime, relaxing our minds and bodies, we may slip into sleep without noticing.



Artwork by Clive - HMP Haverigg

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.



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

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“The strongest of all warriors are these two - time and patience”

Leo Tolstoy

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 Haverigg

It's hard to explain, but I think all the recent changes to my routine, and the need to 'socialise' again have all been a bit overwhelming. Breathing and saying the Rosary have helped, but some of the extra 'mindful' activities given to me to do are also helpful. Oddly enough, simple activities like cleaning the smokery and filleting fish are very 'settling', and working with the bees was sheer bliss! I look forward to the present anxious time passing and being able to sleep for longer than three hours at a stretch. This is obviously a temporary set-back; I'll be like a rock and let the water and mud flow around me.

From HMP Dartmoor

With respect to writing to someone on a regular basis, I think that would be very much appreciated. My personal support network is quite small and they have busy lives, which these days often leaves them little time, especially to write a letter, which I hasten to add appears to have become a skill lost to past generations. I am enjoying using the additional knowledge contained in the book *Becoming Free Through Meditation and Yoga*, and have found it particularly useful in improving my form in each of these poses. Meditation, as it always will be, is very much a work in progress. Keeping my mind from wandering is a challenge, as is the discipline of sitting still and doing nothing. I have always been very active, both physically and mentally.

From HMP Stafford

One of the most important things that I've learnt is that in all my attempts with meditation I've actually been lying down, I didn't think that I need to literally SIT, so that's been a great help. Just to grasp the proper way instead of just getting comfortable and lazy. No wonder I've not been achieving the results I so desire. Also now, in queues and any other waiting

moments, I find myself counting the out breaths. I used to really dread and hate waiting or queuing for anything, luckily, I have my face mask otherwise everyone would wonder why I had this smile across my face these days whilst waiting; so it's rubbing off on me, all be it slowly.

From HMP Forest Bank

I tried a couple of other yoga positions, one of which ended disastrously with me toppling forwards into my wardrobe. However, all was not lost as I found a Mars Bar I'd lost a few days before. The lesson there is that every cloud does have a silver lining, you just have to look hard enough. The beauty is in the world around us, we just have to look. The beauty in my situation is that I've got this opportunity to better myself. Also, 95% of the people I've met in jail have been actually decent guys that just made mistakes. All of them have the power to have a positive impact on this world, there's beauty in that.

I'd like to be known for being a good person, I want to be able to have the self-respect that I can once again hold my head high. To take this situation and turn it into a positive and be known for something other than this stupid situation I got myself in. Hopefully if that happens then maybe I'll be someone my kids can love and respect.

Anon

Since starting I am really enjoying the benefits of regular practice. I am feeling a lot healthier due to stretching and much more mobile. It has been a life saver while in lockdown. In the small cell for two weeks, it was great to practice yoga every day.

From HMP Barlinnie

The experience that I'm having in here is certainly difficult and challenging for many reasons. Unfortunately, the visit last Friday was cancelled due to staffing problems, so I was unable to see them. This provided me with an interesting opportunity because I was

so so very disappointed. As soon as I was told of the cancellation, I did some meditation and just tried to feel how I was feeling (if you get what I mean). I tried to separate my emotions from my actions and potential reactions and when I was feeling tearful, I was kind to myself. I concentrated on my breath and remained calm. I was able to recognise that I was very sad. Very sad indeed. And I was able to recognise the reason for my sadness. I was also able to choose my reaction to the situation which put me in a more powerful position than I would have been in if I had allowed the emotion to lead my reaction.

From California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation - USA

Another highlight for me is the fact that we can go outside at night. Actually, all minimum-security facilities offer night programming, but I have just never had the privilege until now. It used to be a dream. For years I wished I could go out and smell the night air, feel the night breeze blow against my face. I used to look out from my small cell window at the moon and the stars and just wish and dream. Now here at Lancaster, I can finally experience the sky. I get to see colourful sunsets, wild cloud patterns and all that others take so readily for granted. I go out every chance I get.

Life on Release

Working on Myself

I'm glad to say I'm now content and at one with myself. Happy in my little house with my son most days and nights. I operate my business through Facebook and Messenger, which is ideal as it's free advertising. I simply post pictures, 'before and after' pictures. This always drums up interest possibly leading to work, which it usually does. Summer is my busiest time as people like home and garden improvements, so I find myself building fences, sheds, decking, patios and mono-blocking.

and fences. Seasonal grass cutting too. In winter I'm indoors laying laminate floors, boxing in pipes, painting and papering and building 'stud' walls. Yes, it's been a hard journey, but I'm blessed to be able to say I've come out the other end a better man. I have recently worked on myself after being released as a person. As a result, I have grown as a person. Practising yoga has certainly contributed to building me to become a better man. Having this as a tool delights me and enables me to take 'time out' from what life throws at me. I now practise at least twice per week for at least an hour. Afterwards I feel

refreshed, reset, and ready to go! Thanks so much for 'listening'. I am to expand my business by buying two vans and take it from there! Due to the pandemic the funds to do this are simply not there at this time. We can only work, save and hope.

Each Day is a Test - from HMP Birmingham

I discovered your charity through the prison newspaper. You were kind enough to send me some books and a CD on meditation. We also exchanged a few letters. You have no idea how much this meant to me. I am now out of prison and have

been for about 5 months now. Since leaving I have struggled on occasions to remain positive as the negative impact on my life and my families life was so enormous. When I have a negative thought or a flash back to those challenging times, I focus on my breathing and meditate which usually heals my irrational thinking. Each day is a test but as each day passes, I am feeling more and more like the person I deserve to be. Your support has helped me immensely with this. I am sending this email as a huge thank you for your love and support in my darkest days!

Meditation Corner

Keep it Simple

 By Mike

If you keep putting yourself in the same conditions, you will get the same results. If you put yourself in positive conditions, you will get positive results

This was the first piece of advice that was given to me at the beginning of my spiritual quest.

Being a creature of simplicity, I love this short clear way of thinking. I don't have to over-think things. I just have to look to see if what I'm doing is positive or negative. It's as black and white as that! For the last 11 years I have been following this advice in every aspect of my life and it has never let me down. Obviously there have been some mistakes along the way. Some choices were made that ended up not entirely how I was expecting them to, but easily changed, and lessons learned.

Quite often, and especially in the beginning, choosing the next right thing to do has been painful. Often feelings of loneliness and grief would come up. Moving away from my old criminal and using friends led to loneliness, and the grief of losing the lifestyle lingered for a long time. It has also brought a whole heap of joy, new friends, and opportunities that would have never presented themselves before. It all boils down to choice...

My cycle to work has been testing, navigating kids on their way to school on a cycle path. With a sense of shame, I was getting frustrated with these kids, slowing me down and getting in my way. I quickly realised I was choosing frustration, and this of course had negative consequences.



Artwork by Dwayne - HMP Leicester

My frustration was spreading in every direction, mostly towards myself. So instead of allowing myself to feel frustrated, I chose to have fun, weaving in and out of them, challenging one or two of them to a race. Smiling rather than frowning.

It wasn't an instant fix. I had to keep reminding myself to choose to smile and play for a few weeks until it became a habit. The more we practise, the more sensitive we become to our choices, and their consequences.

I imagine we can all look back on our lives so far and find at least one thing we regret. The point is that right now we have a choice to take action and to try our hardest to not have to regret anything else ever again.

So choosing as best we can the way we act, the way we speak and the way we think, simply put, will lead to more and more happiness.

Reconnecting With My Family and Myself

Pete first encountered yoga and meditation while serving a 12-month sentence in HMP Edinburgh. He initially went along to the classes in the gym as an alternative to being locked in his cell on a Friday afternoon. But what he discovered was a set of tools to calm his mind and look after his body that he came to enjoy and rely on during his time in prison. The knock-on effects on the direction of his life were profound.

“The yoga & meditation classes helped me reconnect firstly with myself and then my family. Well before I got to the end of my sentence, I had learned to avoid reacting to challenging situations and instead to stop, think and respond with care. I trained as a peer tutor in literacy & numeracy and worked in that role in every part of Edinburgh prison. Thanks to yoga and meditation I came to understand that it wasn’t up to me to judge people given that they had already.”

On release he began volunteering with a charity that supports people coming out of prison and helping young people find work. He kept working in this field and then, after setting up a charity to bring the voice of people who had been prisoners to Scottish Government policy makers and politicians, was recognised as a key stakeholder in the Scottish criminal justice system.



Artwork by Drew - HMP Lowdham Grange

One of the positive contributions to the Scottish justice system his charity brought about was change the language used in Scotland to define people who had been in prison as ‘people with convictions’ in place of ‘ex-prisoners’ or ‘ex-offenders’ thereby avoiding stigma and giving voice to the common humanity and value of individuals who had been imprisoned *“If asked how my time in prison was, I would say my time inside was incredibly positive. That wouldn’t have been the case if I hadn’t been introduced to yoga and meditation.”*

A 52 Challenge Journey at HMP Dartmoor

Life in here at this time is depressingly predictable. For some weeks now we have been subject to ‘red regime’ (lockdown) largely due to the staff shortages. Not so much during the week but most weekends. So it was not unexpected when, on Friday, we were advised that we would only be out of rooms for limited periods. As it happens, the gym opened on Saturday morning for our wing. So with best intentions I completed 30k of my plan on the Saturday in two hours. Spending the rest of the weekend ‘locked away’ was not ideal and I felt a little cheated.

On the other hand I had time for quiet reflection, I decided two things from this point. The first, is that I could still support the 52 Challenge over the weekend by doing additional yoga and meditation sessions. This worked well, very calming, and was able to project my thought on being outside, on the hills or coastal path.

The second thought, was around an old philosophical adage, ‘it’s not so much about the arrival or destination, but the journey’, which is important in reflection. I thought about what the 52 Challenge was really about, when Suzy promoted the event. For some weeks, I had focussed on training hard, increasing my strength and stamina and mental endurance. All the time thinking about covering 52 miles over the weekend. Then I realised that both the 52 Challenge as a concept, and my training efforts had succeeded. The 52 Challenge had succeeded in getting me involved, motivated and feeling good. I’m sure Suzy did well and hopefully enjoyed and her completed her challenge without too much pain. A little pain always comes with these events.



Artwork by Sean - HMP Leyhill

“The 52 Challenge got me involved, motivated and feeling good”

HMP Dartmoor

The Positive Power of Collective Energy

Together we did it! *“The greatest joy comes from the positive power of collective energy. Together we can achieve amazing things. Thank you to ALL you amazing 52ers for being part of something special.”* Suzy. Together we challenged ourselves and felt part of something greater. Through activities and financial support. In the process we raised a total of £6,398 (with donations still coming in), enabling us to produce our first yoga and meditation DVDs. Available on request in the coming months.

Sanjay at HMP Highdown ran 5 miles followed by 5 miles of rowing



Jill & Graham walked for 5 miles x 2 and 2 miles x 5

Clive at HMP Dartmoor completed his challenge by changing course

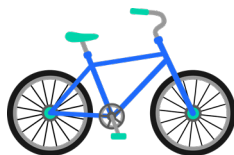


Larry at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation ran 5.2 miles

Beth did 52 sun salutes with her yoga studio

Anita sold yoga art

Andrea raised funds by cycling 52 miles on an e-bike



Warren at HMP Stocken meditated



Victoria's yoga students began their 52 challenge in March doing 52 sun salutations

Selina walked 52 miles from The PPT office

Kaye walked 5 miles

PPT staff and trustees shared 52 yoga poses

Craig at HMP Bristol did 26 reps in the gym x2



Penny, Shola and Jo meditated an extra minute for 52 days

Dan hosted his own meditation evening with 6 taking part

Frank led a yoga session on his wing at HMP Hewell



19 people attended 52 minutes of meditation hosted by The PPT

Suzy ran 52 miles in 2 days!



Martyn cycled 52 miles around 5 prisons

Sunflower Salute

 By Victoria

This is an uplifting sequence to help raise energy levels. It celebrates the joy of nature in full bloom during the summer months by following the life cycle from seed to majestic sunflower.

Repeat steps 1 to 7 of the sequence up to three times. Each pose represents the sunflower's journey from dormant seed, opening beneath the soil in Home pose, breaking the shell in Cat, your limbs in Downward dog are the roots reaching down for nutrients and in Swan pose the young shoot grows towards the sunlight. The standing sequence echoes the strong growth to the development of the magnificent bloom and opening of the leaves.



1. Home Pose
Rest here for 3 breaths



2. Angry Cat
On hands and knees breathe out, tuck chin and tailbone under, rounding your spine.



3. Happy Cat
Breathe in, lift chin, gently arch your whole back in the opposite direction.



4. Downward Dog A
Breathe out and lift into an upside-down V shape with knees bent and ears in line with your upper arms.



5. Downward Dog B
Breathe in and gradually straighten the legs and stretch your arms and back of your body.



6. Swan
Breathe out as you come to kneeling. Breathe in leaning back lift your chest and chin. Breathe out and return to Home pose and repeat steps 1-6, or move onto step 7.



7. Table
Breathe out, come on to hands and knees with your spine neutral, take 3 breaths.



8. Squat
Breathe in as you stand. Breathe out into Half Squat with your feet apart, knees bent and hands together.



9. Extending Mountain
Breathe in, stand tall, arms out sideways. and look up as your hands meet.



10. Prayer Pose

Breathe out, lower your hands back to your heart and bow your head. Repeat 8, 9 and 10, up to three times.



11. Rest

Sit with eyes closed or open, and take 30 natural, relaxed breaths. Notice where you feel the in-breath, and how your body releases tension on the out-breath.

“Turn your face to the sun and the shadows follow behind you”

Maori Proverb

Caution: Don't try this if you:

- Have ongoing back pain
- Suffer from eye problems or headaches
- Have high blood pressure or heart problems
- Knees or wrists are painful
- Are pregnant

TIPS

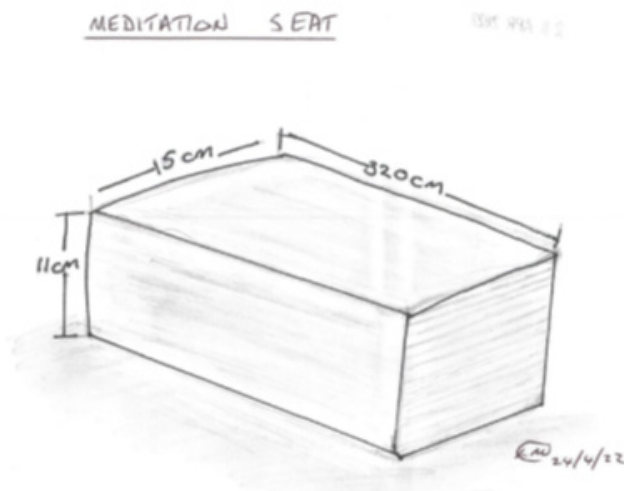
- You can choose to do the floor and standing poses together as a flowing sequence or split them up, according to how you feel.
- Practise on a non-slip surface, be kind to your knees and use a folded towel as padding.
- Take care when transitioning from the floor to standing.

Meditation seat - a tip from a friend

We were recently sent a letter from someone in prison with a great tip on how they made their own meditation seat. We thought this could come in handy for those who practise meditation and need a little boost. This can help with your posture whilst meditating, and general comfort.

“The seat is made from the end flaps of boxes. Simply stick them together to the dimensions that best suit. The above size works for me allowing a folded towel for a bit of comfort. I also covered mine in papier-mâché and then painted it to look like it's made of wood.”

From HMP Littlehey



Freedom Inside

 By Selina

There is a shared feeling of calm, joy and connection at the end of a meditation and yoga class. People often say how they even forgot where they were. You may also notice this after practising on your own. There are things that help this:

1. Soften your face

You may notice when you feel tense you grit your teeth or frown. By relaxing the jaw and creating a little space between the teeth, along with gently lifting the corners of the mouth, the whole body and mind can feel more at ease.



2. Creating a circle

This hand position helps create a feeling of connection. Both during meditation and afterwards.

By practicing yoga and meditation we may start to feel more part of the world.

Caution:

Check with mental health if meditation is appropriate, especially if you have PTSD, depression or are experiencing flash backs. If you feel overwhelmed, hold off solitary practise until you feel more stable.

Get in touch with mental health support, or write to us at for guidance.

TIPS

- Breathe steadily. Observing your breath just as it is without judgement.
- Start by counting your breaths. In 1 and out 2. Count up to 10 and then start again. 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.

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. In the last months we have recieved funds in the memory of: Mrs Mary Elspeth Batstone

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